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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE THEME OF THE
NEGATION OF LIFE IN AMERICAN DRAMA
FROM WORLD WAR II TO 1958.

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE THEME OF THE NEGATION OF LIFE
IN AMERICAN DRAMA FROM WORLD WAR II TO 1958

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. A BACKGROUND OF PHILOSOPHICAL NEGATION	5
III. A BASIS OF JUDGMENT: THE CHARACTERISTICS AND SYMPTOMS OF LIFE NEGATION	22
IV. SERIOUS DRAMA IN AMERICA PRECEDING WORLD WAR II	42
V. THE PESSIMISM OF EUGENE O'NEILL AND AN ANALYSIS OF HIS LATER PLAYS	66
VI. TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: ANALYSES OF <u>THE GLASS MENAGERIE</u> , <u>A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE</u> AND <u>CAMINO REAL</u>	125
VII. ARTHUR MILLER: ANALYSES OF <u>DEATH OF A SALESMAN</u> AND <u>A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE</u>	179
VIII. THE PLAYS OF WILLIAM INGE	210
IX. THE USE OF THE THEME OF LIFE NEGATION BY OTHER AMERICAN WRITERS OF THE PERIOD	233
X. CONCLUSIONS	271
BIBLIOGRAPHY	289
AUTOBIOGRAPHY	302

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Critical comment pertaining to present-day American theatre frequently has included allegations that thematic emphasis seems to lie in the areas of negation. Such attacks are supported by references to our over-use of sordidity, to the infatuation with the psychological theme and the use of characters who are emotionally and mentally disturbed, and to the absence of any element of the heroic which is normally acknowledged to be an integral portion of meaningful drama. But such remarks made about our theatre parallel the remarks made about our society and our culture as well. Although this may be a wail heard in every age, it seems conclusive that these are trying times in which the usual practice of literature to examine man conceptually and man in his relation to God seems secondary to the examination of the likelihood of the preservation of the human race. Whatever our opinion about American theatre today it must be viewed in the light of the conditions that surround it.

The forces of sterility are moving actively in the world today. Doctrines of despair are persuading masses of people to quit struggling for "impractical goals", to give up responsibility as individuals and to become thoughtless, undifferentiated, uncreative units of large, will-less masses.¹

¹Samuel Selden, Man In His Theatre (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1957), p. 99.

If we may admit to consternation and bewilderment in our age, and if our resultant melancholia is enduring in a time unprecedented for material luxury, then it should be of interest to examine the characteristics of pessimistic drama and pessimistic dramatists.

The intention of this study is to determine the nature, extent and consequence of the theme of the negation of life as it is found in American drama from World War II to the present day. The objectives also include an attempt to show a relationship between this period and particularly the periods in American drama which precede it, to measure the content of negativistic plays against the systematized philosophies describing the constitution of negation and despair.

Subjective judgment is bound to insert itself in any analytical study of dramatic art. This can be especially dangerous in attempting to attribute a certain philosophy of life to any playwright. The first limitation, therefore, is one of curtailment of emphasis; plays themselves will be examined more than those who wrote them. The second limitation pertains to time and place; the subject theme will be sought and analyzed in plays written by Americans between the years 1945 and 1958 and produced in New York. Although many plays are written yearly in this country with only a relatively few appearing on Broadway, this limitation seems justified if we acknowledge that the leadership in American theatre still appears in that city. The final limitation involves the selection of the works for analysis. Since detailed examination of all serious drama written

since 1945 is too ambitious, comprehensive analysis will be limited to selected works of America's four major contributors in the dramatic field since World War II. These playwrights are Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and William Inge. To supplement this, less extensive analysis will be made of other playwrights for purposes of illustration and comparison.

Two other steps remain in the procedure; the first is a brief study and synthesis of the major philosophies of pessimism. Paramount attention will be granted to Schopenhauer whose negativism is both systematic and clearly stated, and to Nietzsche whose influence has been felt by innumerable leaders in the fields of literature, art, and politics. The final process is the examination of dramatic criticism pertaining to our theme and pertaining to the authors and plays analyzed.

It is not the intention of this study either to praise or condemn contemporary American drama for its employment of despairing themes. Much of our great tragic literature is both unpleasant and pessimistic in feeling, but this does not reduce its stature in our regard. No play is to be condemned solely on the grounds of its pessimism, for to do so would be tantamount to making happiness a prerequisite for successful drama. To do so would be to succumb to the litany of American optimism. Rather it will be interesting to find the extent of the affirmation of nothingness, the reasons given for its presence, and the playwright's acceptance or rejection of it.

It has been postulated that dramatic representation serves as an excellent key to the nature of man through history.

. . . the dramatist does not exist in a vacuum. He is a product of his times and is most effective and significant when he expresses and reflects the currents of thought and feeling that prevail in the society in which he lives.²

Whether the American dramatist in his pessimism is reflecting the currents of our thinking remains to be seen.

²Elmer Rice, "American Theatre and the Human Spirit," Saturday Review, Dec. 17, 1955, p. 9.

CHAPTER II

A BACKGROUND OF PHILOSOPHICAL NEGATION

For anyone setting out to describe pessimism the most logical course would appear to be found, first, in the types of pessimists, their characteristic behavior and their attitudes, and, second, in the discernible causes that brought them to this state. Such procedure, however, might lead to a generality so inclusive that one would succumb to the temptation of calling everyone "unpleasant," a pessimist, or a negator of life. In applying this standard to modern American drama the resultant list of candidates would be overwhelming.

It is the contention of this thesis that this period of drama contains enough significant material that can readily be identified as belonging to recognizable life-negation without the padding of peripheral philosophies, attitudes or behaviors. It is dangerous to assume that any modern playwright had a specific philosophy in mind when he wrote his plays; therefore, it is not the purpose of this chapter to connect O'Neill, Williams, or Inge with any systemized philosophy, but rather to attempt to make clear the nature of negativism as offered by the great pessimists that preceded them. The Iceman Cometh did not necessarily rise from the incantations of Schopenhauer. Its ill disposition might just as readily have risen from Scrooge's

uncooked potato. Nevertheless it would seem both appropriate and necessary to study the great negativists and to attempt to define terms prior to making a linking study of any segment of American drama.

Pessimism was not systematized to constitute a philosophy until modern times.¹ Before its systemization, however, great thinkers and writers had long dealt with its constitution, its presence, its causes and its relentless persistency in every age and every culture. Paul Siwek in his book entitled The Philosophy of Evil points out that pessimism is not a modern foundation at all, but is really found in antiquity. In the Iliad Homer says that man is the most unhappy of all beings, that his lot is to live a life of sighs.² Theognes drives the shaft even deeper in saying that "the greatest benefit of man would have been not to be born and once he had the misfortune to be born, to die as soon as possible."³ Euripedes in the Hypolotis states, "The whole life of man is full of grief, nor is there any rest from toil or moil."⁴ And Hygerius writing in the third century B.C. states, "Happiness is deceitful and death our real liberator."⁵ Many of the works of Pliny, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius reveal the full lamentations on the miseries and the nothingness of human life.⁶

¹Paul Siwek, The Philosophy of Evil (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1951), p. 150.

²Ibid., p. 146. ³Loc. cit. ⁴Loc. cit. ⁵Loc. cit.

⁶Op. cit., pp. 146-147.

The innumerable Oriental philosophies and religions also embrace pessimism. Stemming from ancient Indian philosophies of despair the Buddhist philosophy is perhaps the best known of the negative group. In the verses known as the Bhartribari we read the following words,

Man's life is limited to one hundred years; night takes up half these; one half of the remainder is absorbed by infancy and old age; the rest is passed in the midst of sicknesses, separations and adversities which accompany life, in serving others and in giving up oneself to similar occupations where is one to find happiness in a life that is like the foam that the agitation of the waves produces in the sea.⁷

But the modern Western world, despite the coming of the Age of Enlightenment in the Renaissance, also produced its own particular philosophy of despair. The real founder of philosophical despair is Arthur Schopenhauer.⁸ It is his discussions of this topic that will afford the clearest concepts of Life Negation. One cannot argue that his influence was greater than that of Nietzsche, Carlyle, Hartman, Fichte, Heidegger, or Sartre, but in reading his works, one can understand the care he took in communicating his ideas.

Schopenhauer made a business of pessimism. In his introduction to the works of this dark thinker, Will Durant prepares

⁷Op. cit., p. 146.

⁸Op. cit., p. 150.

his reader for the blunt attack of The World As Will and Idea.

He states,

Schopenhauer opens both eyes without pity and without fear. Let the truth be spoken mercilessly; let nature's law of career open to every talon and man's law of insatiable acquisition and periodical war be revealed to us; let the disillusionment of love be told and the thousand illnesses that punctuate our lives and the breaking of hearts and families in the strife of the young with the old; let death be brought upon the stage as brutally as in Elizabethan days and let us acknowledge its sovereignty over every organism and every mind.⁹

And the preparation is well needed. To Schopenhauer life is a painful combination of suffering and boredom. Suffering is essential to all life from the brute to man. It is not negative, rather it is the positive element of existence, while pleasure, satisfaction and happiness are the true negative ingredients, since they are but brief deliverances from the normal state of suffering.¹⁰ "I know of no greater absurdity than that propounded by most systems of philosophy in declaring evil to be negative in its character. Evil is just what is positive; it makes its own existence felt."¹¹ The "will" of the world is the continuance of life, the drive of self-preservation, the propagation of kind. This is assured in the scheme of things by man's enslavement to want. If want is not met, suffering results, but if want is fulfilled, then another form of

⁹Arthur Schopenhauer, The Works of Schopenhauer, Will Durant, editor (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1928), p. ix.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 205.

¹¹Arthur Schopenhauer, The Essays of Schopenhauer, edited by T. Bailey Saunders (New York: Willey Book Co.), p. 1.

pain more horrible than the first is effected, and this he calls ennui.

The striving after existence is what occupies all living things and maintains them in motion, but when existence is assured then they know not what to do with it, thus the second thing that sets them in motion is the effort to get free from the burden of existence, to make it cease to be felt, to kill time, i.e., to escape from ennui.¹²

Schopenhauer then attributes to ennui the "countenance of real despair" and even claims that,

It makes beings that love each other so little as men do, seek each other eagerly, and thus become the source of social intercourse. . . . In the middle class life ennui is represented by the Sunday and want by the six week days.¹³

Schopenhauer was doing more than describing boredom. He was categorizing all pain and evil under the terrifying and inescapable life force which he calls "will." And as Shakespeare's Jacques, he sees not growth nor realization nor eternal peace, but only that, "from hour to hour we ripe and ripe, and then from hour to hour we rot and rot." (Act II, Sc. vii)

To Schopenhauer the state of optimism described by Carlyle as man's only possession ("this world of his is emphatically the place of hope")¹⁴ is not only absurd, "but also a really wicked way

¹²Schopenhauer, The Works of Schopenhauer, p. 199.

¹³Ibid., pp. 199-200.

¹⁴Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh (Boston: Estes and Lauriat), pp. 122-123.

of thinking of the bitter mockery of the unspeakable suffering of humanity."¹⁵ To this declaration he adds that Christianity does not abide optimism, that the Gospels find the words world and evil as almost synonymous. Schopenhauer did not denounce Christianity, rather his interpretation of it was used to support his negation of life. He saw in the Christian ascetic one who saw the nothingness of this world, belonging only to this world, as opposed to the Buddhist saints who held no concern for this world and were willing to leave it to move into the eternal peace of Nirvana, of nothingness.¹⁶ In Christian asceticism he found the true presence of will renouncing. By this doctrine of self-denial, the origin of hermits, anchorites and monastic orders, man is able to thwart the ironic will. By fasting he destroys the want of living, he lessens his energies to promote life. "If children were brought into the world by an act of pure reason alone, would the human race continue to exist."¹⁷ And by sexual abstinence he destroys the will to prolong the miserable endurance of the human race. By his indifference to worldly things he mortifies the will to want or to need, and hence preserves his state of suffering in independent dignity.¹⁸

¹⁵Schopenhauer, The Works of Schopenhauer, p. 213.

¹⁶Edgar A. Singer, Jr., Modern Thinkers and Present Problems (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1923), p. 169.

¹⁷Schopenhauer, The Essays of Schopenhauer, p. 4.

¹⁸Schopenhauer, The Works of Schopenhauer, p. 239.

Schopenhauer's value as a pessimistic philosopher seems to lie in two major areas. The first is in the insolent attacks he made upon standard concepts and values, and second, is in the systematized thought with which he supported this insolence. If his writings were only diatribes against the disillusionment of life he would serve little except to improve his readers' images of gloom and lengthen their vocabularies of depression. But Schopenhauer seems honest. He tended to avoid the sensationalism of his own thesis, devoting all effort to convincing his reader that he must know the worst. He wanted no one to entertain the hope that hope exists. One must ". . . certainly arrive at the conclusions that this human world is the kingdom of chance and error, which rule without mercy in great things and small, and along with which folly and wickedness also wield the scourge."¹⁹ "From whence did Dante take the materials for his Hell but from this actual world, and yet he made a very proper Hell of it."²⁰ Characteristically Schopenhauer then stated that Dante was hard put to find source material for heaven.

Like other philosophical pessimists who followed him, namely, Von Hartman, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Carlyle and Sartre, Schopenhauer applied his method to common topics of pessimistic value. In his essays can be found his views on death, vanity of existence, suicide,

¹⁹Ibid., p. 211.

²⁰Ibid., p. 212.

women, art and even one short commentary on noise, which he described as the most impertinent of all interruptions.

Perhaps we can feel the full impact of Schopenhauer's dark outlook in these words from The Vanity of Existence.

In a world where all is unstable and naught can endure but is swept downwards at once in the hurrying whirlpool of change; where a man if he is to keep erect at all, must always be advancing and moving like an acrobat on a rope-- in such a world, happiness is inconceivable.

How can it dwell where, as Plato said, continual Becoming and never Being is the sole form of existence? In the first place, a man never is happy, but spends his whole life striving after something which he thinks will make him so; he seldom obtains his goal and when he does, it is only to be disappointed; . . . and then it is all over whether he has been happy or miserable; for his life was never anything more than a present moment always vanishing; and now it is over.²¹

On the subject of time he voiced the traditional laments of all ages. "No little part of the torment of existence lies in this, that Time is continually pressing upon us, never letting us take a breath, but always coming after us, like a task master with a whip."²²

In an essay titled Psychological Observations he described the insignificance of man.

What value can a creature have that is not a whit different from millions of its kind? Millions, do I say? Nay, an infiniture of creatures which, century after century, in never-ending flow, nature sends bubbling up from her inexhaustible springs; as generous with them as the smith with the useless sparks that fly around his anvil.²³

²¹Schopenhauer, The Essays of Schopenhauer, p. 21.

²²Ibid., p. 2.

²³Ibid., p. 42.

Again in his greatest work he restated a common pessimistic attitude toward death. "In the end, Death must conquer, for we become subject to him through birth, and he only plays for a little while with his prey before he swallows it up."²⁴

Schopenhauer cannot be blamed for all of the pessimistic literature that was written from the late nineteenth century to present day. It is quite likely that contemporary dramatists, novelists and poets have been more impressed by the fashionable and lyrical pessimism of Shelley, Byron, Muset, and Beaudelaire, or that their laments have found root in other periods, in other styles of suffering from Buddhist philosophy to Existentialism. One critic, Frederick Lumley, ignores Schopenhauer entirely when he names the three main sources of the school of pessimism: the philosophies of Martin Heidegger, the spiritual dilemma posed by certain catholic novelists, and "nightmare literature" of political refugees. It might also be argued that Nietzsche, whom we will examine briefly, found more followers in literature for his brand of pessimism than Schopenhauer, simply because his "gospel of gritting the teeth"²⁵ seemed like positive control in the face of negative life. It is also conceivable that many of the dramatists of pessimistic themes attained their debilitated outlook without any help from anyone. Just as it has been postulated that each of us has been greatly

²⁴Schopenhauer, The Works of Schopenhauer, p. 197.

²⁵Singer, loc. cit.

influenced by Freud, whether we have read him or not, so it can be said of Schopenhauer that he made orderly and somewhat reasonable the ageless doctrine that the evils of life overbalance the happiness it affords. Nietzsche, we know, found him essentially interesting even if he questioned his avowed pessimism.²⁶

Schopenhauer's philosophy does afford one consolation. Wherein he saw the world and will only as masters of men, he turned to "idea" for solace. It is through art that the driving force of will and its resulting suffering can be subdued. In truth, any beauty created by the idea of man, whether it be nature or art, is ". . . born of quiet, painless (that is, will-less) contemplation."²⁷ Nietzsche reiterated Schopenhauer's philosophy; though he ridiculed the spineless acceptance of the meaningless world, he tended to agree with him on its pitiful state.

Too bad! Once more the same old story! When we have finished building our house, we realize that we have inadvertently learned something which we should have known before we even started to build. This everlasting baleful too late--the melancholy of all that is finished. . . ."²⁸

But if both contemplated the world and found its image tormenting, it was Nietzsche who struck out against it with courage. If God be dead, then man must fight for himself alone. He must

²⁶Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil (translated by Marianne Cowan) (Chicago: Gateway Editions - Henry Regnery Co., 1955), p. 92.

²⁷John Stokes Adams, "The Aesthetics of Pessimism," a dissertation in philosophy, University of Pennsylvania, 1940, p. 2.

²⁸Nietzsche, op. cit., p. 226.

create a man so steeped in courage that he will defy the Godless system and himself become God on earth. For his strength he cited the ancient Greeks.

But the Greeks overcame the gloom of their disillusionment with the brilliance of their art; and out of their own suffering they made the spectacle of the drama, and found that "it is only as an aesthetic phenomena" as an object of artistic contemplation or reconstruction "that existence and the world appear justified." Pessimism is a sign of decay, optimism is a sign of superficiality; tragic optimism is the mood of the strong man who seeks intensity and extent of experience even at the cost of woe and is delighted to find that strife is the law of life. "Tragedy itself is the proof of the fact that the Greeks were not pessimistic."²⁹

Schopenhauer, too, found tragedy to be the best of all consolation--the knowledge of the negation of the will.

The techniques of tragedy, according to Schopenhauer, is to propel the heroes into a frightful struggle and plunge them into immeasurable woe; but precisely these sufferings reveal to them the nature of the world, and enable them besides to sense the nothingness of all life on earth, and teach them to deny the Will What the hero atones for is indeed inherited sin, in the deepest sense, the guilt of existence itself--and tragedy is the clearest reminder of the fact that life is an oppressive dream, out of which we have to awaken. The hero in the tragedy suffers, because suffering is the way of the world.³⁰

Nietzsche, then, could argue that he was not a negativist, that his philosophy of life and its pain was met with courage, that in fact, he found consolation in evil and release in a refined and

²⁹Will Durant, The Story of Philosophy (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publishing Co., 1933), p. 442.

³⁰Adams, op. cit., p. 23.

vicarious cruelty. It was Nietzsche who taught the exertion of the will and Schopenhauer who taught its negation.

A systematized philosophy of pessimism has found many disciples in the hundred years since Schopenhauer's entry into a second nothingness. Edward von Hartman (1842-1906) is credited with elevating the school to a position of great popularity, and since then Heidegger (1899-), Kierkegaard and Sartre have contributed their theories and illustrations to the pessimist idea. Along with the philosopher have been innumerable writers and other artists who have either borrowed the idea or created one similar to it, and out of the total expressions have come the isms we recognize as darkness, negation, pain and decay--Nihilism or nothingness, fatalism, sadism, masochism, dadaism, and existentialism.

The last and most noted of the isms was propounded by Jean Paul Sartre in France. Existentialism really came into its own after the disillusion of World War II, just as the Dadists and Surrealists had their heydays after World War I.³¹ Its foundation came from the philosophy of an articulate pessimist, Martin Heidegger.³² Again it is Lumley, examining the trends in modern drama, who interprets the French philosophy as one of total life negation.

Its distinction from Nietzsche and Schopenhauer thought lies in Sartre's charges of responsibility. Man is what he makes of

³¹Frederick Lumley, Trends in 20th Century Drama (Fairlawn, N.Y.: Essential Books, Inc., 1956), p. 145.

³²Loc. cit.

himself and is completely responsible for what he does. No other power outside of nature exists, no god is present to intrude. Man is free to choose for himself and thus to choose for all mankind. It is this very freedom that is man's curse. "Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist and as a result man is forlorn because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to. He can't start making excuses for himself."³³

If Sartre pictures a universe without purpose and allows no man any support external to himself, he is at least dignifying the persistence and courage of the human race in face of meaningless and nothingness. In this respect his thoughts seem closely aligned with Nietzsche, differing only in the motivations for human assertion. To Nietzsche, courage and power were the counter agents of decadence of life, while Sartre sees both courage and a sense of moral responsibility as man's solution to unbearable life. The kinship of both philosophies to Greek stoicism is apparent. To accept despair and to pass through the hour of great disgust (Nietzsche), courage is the chief virtue.³⁴

Paul Tillich, noted German-American theologian, says,

Today it has become almost a truism to call our time an "age of anxiety". . . anxiety is the existential awareness of non-being. Non-being threatens man's ontic self-affirmation, relatively in terms of fate, absolutely

³³Jean Paul Sartre, Existentialism, translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), p. 27.

³⁴Helmut Kuhn, Encounter With Nothingness (Hinsdale, Illinois: Henry Regnery Company, 1949), p. 110.

in terms of death. It threatens man's spiritual self-affirmation, relatively in terms of emptiness, absolutely in terms of meaninglessness. It threatens man's moral self-affirmation, relatively in terms of guilt, absolutely in terms of condemnation. The awareness of this three-fold threat is anxiety appearing in three forms, that of fate and death (briefly the anxiety of death), that of emptiness and loss of meaning (briefly, the anxiety of meaninglessness), that of guilt and condemnation (briefly, the anxiety of condemnation).³⁵

The avowed acceptance of Sartre's philosophy by American playwrights might be difficult to assess, but the word existentialism has appeared frequently in the criticism of our writers, especially Anderson and O'Neill, and may well be a salient force in our contemporary plays. The definitions and explanations of existentialism are many, and one might question the presence of this theme in American drama if he would accept Kuhn's explanation of it. "As this world deprived of ultimate meaning and cohesion crumbles there rears itself behind it more real than Being the origin of all negations, Nothingness."³⁶ But it is Sartre himself who says that man is nothing else but what he makes of himself, man is condemned to be free; and then adds, ". . . we do not believe in progress, progress is betterment. Man is always the same. The situation confronting him varies, choice always remains a choice in a situation."³⁷

³⁵Paul Tillich, The Courage To Be (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), pp. 35-41.

³⁶Kuhn, op. cit., p. xiii.

³⁷Sartre, op. cit., p. 52.

If the word nothingness affords semantic difficulty in our critical analysis certainly the above description by the philosopher himself lends a picture into which much American drama fits neatly. If the absence of the heroic is a characteristic of the negative drama then we might find some difficulty in using existentialism as a philosophical example, for in The Flies the praise of order is countered by Sartre. Jupiter delights in the order of subservient, whining mortals, yet he is unable to intimidate the existentialist hero Orestes into submission. This might be called a form of true heroism, even if it is the heroism of a most discouraging sort, for in any conflict in which the outcome can never be in doubt the defiance of the hero may be admirable, but it can never be witnessed with optimism. Vehemence is a small substitute for hope, and eventually despair is bound to win out. It is in Existentialism, therefore, that we find a modern amplification of the Schopenhauer doctrine--a universe without purpose, man the victim of a greater Will, the world of false promise, the heaven above it, a false vision. If modern writers seem to reflect this extreme pessimism, at the same time they seem to neglect the stoic self-affirmation that Sartre recommends.

Pessimism and negation of life whether based on spontaneous thought or a systematized philosophy have been apparent in dramatic literature throughout the ages. The ancient Greek drama has already been mentioned as evidence of this, with Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, Oedipus Rex, Orestes, serving as good examples of extreme

pessimism and distaste for life. Perhaps Shakespeare's characters of despair have worded their depressions better than any other. This is not to say that Shakespeare was a pessimist, but only that he wrote about people who were pessimists, just as he wrote about people who were great optimists.

MACBETH: Life is but a walking shadow. (Act V, Sc. 7)

JACQUES: . . . and so from hour to hour we ripe and then from hour to hour we rot and rot; and thereby hangs a tale. (Act II, Sc. vi)

OTHELLO: It is silliness to live when to live is torment. (Act I, Sc. iii)

LEAR: As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods. they kill us for their sport . . . this great world shall so wear out to naught. (Act IV, Sc. 1)

MEASURE FOR MEASURE: Reason thus with life--if I do lose thee, I do lose a thing that none but fools would keep. (Act III, Sc. 1)

The infesting of pessimistic philosophies can be found in many periods of literature: the Sturm and Drang of the eighteenth century in Germany, the expressionist period of the early twentieth century and the period following World War I in Europe, the pre-Revolutionary period of Russian literature at the turn of the century and even the great counter-action in the realist period brought on by the industrial revolution and scientific objectivity. Pessimism and despair have seemed to lend themselves more aptly to the poet than to the dramatist, as reflected in certain works of Arnold, Milton, Wordsworth, Byron. Shelley in "Ozymandias" spoke of the mocking sight of the

ruins of the mighty king and symbolically told of the nothingness of the world.

. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

In "The Garden of Proserpine" Swinburne found morbid consolation in the belief:

.
That no life lives for ever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

The Italian Giacomo Leopardi, perhaps the greatest pessimist of all poets, wrote in "Memories":

. Phantom-shapes, naught else,
Are glory and honour: prosperity and joy
A mere desire; life is without all use,
Unprofitable woe.

And Leopardi concludes in another poem "To Himself,"
"Scorn all that is, for all is vain, vain, vain."

That life is a wretched jest, as Voltaire called it, has been the subject and theme of writers of all literary forms. Drama alone offers more than sufficient example within the foundations of the modern period. Even to the casual reader, the names of Chekhov, Tolstoy, Kaiser, Hauptmann, Strindberg, Gorki, and at times Ibsen, seem synonymous with despair and depression. Whether they were pessimists or not is of little concern to this dissertation, but it is significant that they reflected the discouragement and the protest of their generations.

CHAPTER III

A BASIS OF JUDGMENT:

THE CHARACTERISTICS AND SYMPTOMS OF LIFE NEGATION

In order to create a basis for judging the presence of this theme in modern American drama, three qualifying steps seem necessary. The first is to make clear what is meant by theme as distinguished from thesis. The second is to define the term, the negation of life, and the third is to give characteristics and symptoms of life negations by illustrations from other dramatic literature.

A theme of a play as it is used here refers to a subject or a topic of discourse. Walter Kerr borrows from one of the other arts in describing it as "a melody constituting the basis of variation, development or the like in a composition or movement."¹ In some plays readers will have difficulty defining theme because of the variations and multiple reflections that may come from a single theme that an author has in mind. There are primary themes and secondary themes just as there are primary plots and sub-plots, but each is distinguished from a thesis in that a thesis is a position taken by an author or a proposition which he hopes to prove, either by argument or by emotional appeal. It is easy, especially in the argumentative

¹Walter Kerr, How Not to Write a Play (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), pp. 60-61.

type of play or the propogandistic piece to mistake the two, but in this study theme refers to topic or subject and the argument proposed by an author relative to this subject will be his own thesis.

The second definition is perhaps more controversial, for to define negation of life with any less detail than the multitude of volumes put out by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hauptmann or Fichte would seem presumptuous. However, for the purpose of our analysis negation of life will be defined as:

An attitude or doctrine avowing the complete absence of value, meaning or purpose in life and acknowledging the traditional pessimistic concept that pain and evil outweigh happiness and good.

As discussed in the second chapter this would seem to corroborate the findings of our major philosophers of negativism in the Western world, and though it would fall far short of the detail of Schopenhauer's Word and Will or Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra it should find little argument with them.

The third step is long and detailed, and perhaps most beneficial, because it moves from philosophical concepts and takes into consideration those symptoms that help identify negation of life within the dramas themselves. It must also be noted that each characteristic or each type of negation that will be listed here does not necessarily exclude the others. Many of these overlap. In some cases the protagonists, or non-heroic pessimists, may well answer the description of each of these types. One will see in reviewing them that Hamlet might well be classified as a character of despair, a character of stasis, in that he lacked change or a

desire for change. For a large portion of the play he is a man of exhaustion, of death-singing, of escapism; in fact, excepting several avowed decisions to avenge his father's murder, Hamlet acts the part of a complete negativist during most of the play. The purpose of the analyses, therefore, is not to create appropriate boxes in which to place American playwrights or their characters, but rather to help identify certain qualities that make for negativistic themes.

The first of these qualities shall be called merely despair. This term could be the all inclusive one since despair is the resultant of any deep pessimism. Despair as it is used here means without hope, and without meaning. There is no way out of the future. God denial is one of the characteristics of despair, for seldom does the person of religious fervor ever sink into its greatest depth. The play No Exit by Sartre is a good description of despair or hopelessness, because suicide is shown as no way out of despair or of guilt, and the characters are condemned to stay in their existence of meaninglessness, emptiness, and boredom through eternity. The courage of despair, however, is a self-affirmation despite meaninglessness and this, as we have seen, constitutes existentialism. Paul Tillich in his book The Courage to Be points out that, "The anxiety of meaninglessness is the anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings . . . emptiness is aroused by the threat of non-being."²

²Paul Tillich, The Courage to Be (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), p. 47.

With the broad term of "the empty life," one could examine a vast store of our recent Broadway fare, or examine the decade's best representatives in Death of a Salesman, A Streetcar Named Desire, or Long Day's Journey Into Night.

The second term is a more narrow characteristic and symptom of life negation. It is stasis, or lack of change. It is the quality of non-purposeful or non-directional living. It's real rise comes from Chekhovian tradition of Russian inertia or suspended animation in which the characters were examined in still life over a given period of time.

Our plays of the Chekhovian tradition open in a timeless twilight, announcing at the outset that nothing will change. Characters move in longing, recoil in inhibition, freeze into paralysis. They dart at the universe in feeble exploration, make faint-hearted protest, resign themselves to final frustration. The curtain falls on the twilight we knew at the first, on a world in which the promise of action has never existed, a world of perpetually suspended animation.³

The very dullness of the life reflected in the drama frequently characterizes the drama itself because as Selden points out this ". . . is one theme that has no value whatsoever since its essential nature denies the whole idea of theatric effect."⁴ To Chekhov this was a common social error of his age and he was specifically concerned, as he clearly announced, with "disappointment,

³Kerr, op. cit., p. 101.

⁴Samuel Selden, Man In His Theatre (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1957), p. 52.

apathy, nervousness, limpness, and exhaustion⁵ of his people. Politically one might say that Russia has long ago thrown off Russian inertia, ". . . only we continue to cling to it in our literature."⁶

Perhaps our greatest exponent of this theme was O'Neill who seemed to capture Chekhov's skill in suspending characters for a given period of time. Chekhov's play which best illustrates this is The Three Sisters, while O'Neill's play of the Strange Interlude seems to reflect the same comment. One of the dangers of reporting this theme is that where change is not present conflict often is absent and hence the essence of dramatic action will be lost.

Exhaustion is another characteristic of negativistic drama. Its symptoms are resignation, a deterioration of the individual will, moral decay. Schopenhauer, in an essay called "Psychological Observations," stated,

The noble, in other words, the uncommon, element in the drama--nay, what is sublime in it--is not reached until the intellect is set to work, as opposed to the will; until it takes a free flight over all those passionate movements of the will, and makes them subject of its contemplation. Shakespeare, in particular, shows that this is his general method, more especially in Hamlet. And only when intellect rises to the point where the vanity of all effort is manifest, and the will proceeds to an act of self-annulment, is the drama tragic in the true sense of the word: it is then that it reaches its highest aim in becoming really sublime.⁷

⁵Kerr, op. cit., p. 101.

⁶Loc. cit.

⁷Schopenhauer, The Essays of Schopenhauer, p. 45.

The completely exhausted character, on the other hand, submits to the world will his own will, and the ultimate resignation brings about stasis. The term as it is used here is not to be mistaken for physical exhaustion alone, though this may be a characteristic of it, but includes moral and mental exhaustion as well. Walter Kerr says that we have restricted our character types today to two--the exhausted and the immature. Serious activity is nil.⁸ Had Shakespeare chosen to shove Hamlet one step further into irresolution, he would have created a man to total inaction. That Gorki and Tolstoy and Chekhov had no hesitancy when it came to shoving can be readily seen. Sean O'Casey paints a heavy picture of exhaustion, both moral and mental, in his play Juno and the Paycock, and though it is ringed by a revolution of action its characters are revealed in their total negativity by final and complete exhaustion.

The fourth characteristic borrows a term from the Greeks, threnodism--which literally means the "singer of death-songs." Death is seen as the great liberator. Dramatic characters who have become enamored with this are shown by their creators to be pre-occupied with death. This singer is alienated from Nietzschean courage. He does not choose to remain in the world of despair but mistakingly sees death as the complete and final liberator. This is the anti-Nietzschean theme, the romanticist's escape concept

⁸Kerr, op. cit., p. 104.

and as Radoslov Tsanoff says, "A pessimist is a man who is ripe for death."⁹ The period of post-Napoleonic drama illustrated this well in the number of "Blau Blume" poets who resorted to suicide as a means of eliminating despair. Again, although one can go to Shakespeare for examples of those who find death welcome, the motivations preceding these cravings must also be examined. Hamlet finds death welcome because he has been forced to give up those things which he loved in life. Macbeth welcomes death with open arms but does so with a fight. Lost love prompts the final decision to embrace death in Romeo and Juliet, and Othello welcomes it because of his own strong-willed deception. The dark mystery, romanticism, and even the heroism that surround this type of threnodism are vastly different from the character who seeks death because of Schopenhauer's ennui or the release from the tedious life. The latter lives and dies in negativistic drama. Life that showed no value to begin with can afford only a perverse sensation exploited in the sheer enjoyment of doing something--even approaching death.¹⁰ The stasis and finally the death of Robert in O'Neill's Beyond the Horizon will illustrate this well.

The next characteristic of life negation may be found in the word escapism. As used here it is meant the desire to remove one's self by any means from the forces of evil and of despair. Its characters find solace in living in the past, or again, they may quite literally attempt to escape from their environments. In this

⁹Tsanoff, op. cit., p. 351. ¹⁰Selden, op. cit., p. 71.

sense it can be called the "go away" drama. The retrograde movement of such characters will at the onset omit the heroic element, and hence can be found more frequently in the present non-heroic age than in ancient illustration. Perhaps the ultimate of escapism would be the escape from life to death, but there is a sufficient amount of material dealing with those people who attempt to escape within the reaches of this world for it to be considered separately here. Again, one may turn for example to Chekhov and to The Three Sisters, ladies who find Moscow as the symbol for their escape. Just as the inert Robert is trapped from the beginning and decays with his farm, so do the sisters somehow know that Moscow will never be reached. Both Beyond the Horizon and The Three Sisters are plays that deal with people devoid of any purpose other than self-preservation. Although they are characterized by the absence of real struggle they both illustrate the yearning in the soul of the bored, the disappointed and the non-creative in trying to find a real haven in which to lose themselves.

Another kind of negativism stems from moral and spiritual cynicism. Part of Schopenhauer's doctrine was that suffering grew with the increase in intellectual powers.

As suffering only increases with the evolution of organization from the primitive cell to the creation of man, so it will always increase with the progressing evolution of the human mind. Rousseau advised the return of the primitive age, utopia! Humanity must always go on, even in spite of itself, toward the darker and darker future.¹¹

¹¹Siwek, op. cit., p. 164.

Here again the theme can vary widely. It can be merely the thesis that all religion is but opiate and false counsel as advocated in the more recent Marxist drama of Soviet Russia. Or it can be in the graphic picturing of the struggle between order and individuality as seen in the works of Sartre. Though this might seem to be of more modern concern was it not Faust who found the ultimate pain of frustration in search for greater knowledge? O'Neill who has often been accused of this cynicism himself once wrote to George Jean Nathan,

The playwright of today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it--the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfactory new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with.¹²

Spiritually cynical drama may go further than just an atheistic concept or an anti-Christian concept in terms of moral code. It may mean that the characters do not believe in anything. An example of this can be found in the O'Neill play Strange Interlude. Because the characters themselves do not believe in anything, they cannot really want anything and hence the stasis factor mentioned earlier exists. As Krutch says, "The life of each is over before the play begins."¹³

¹²Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918 (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1957), p. 92.

¹³Ibid., p. 104.

It is a logical step to move from moral and spiritual cynicism into the category of nothingness or the complete absence of the meaning of life. Here we return to the Schopenhauer doctrine, to nihilism, to the Vedanta belief of a non-existence of reality, to Nietzsche's protest against the nothingness of the world and his protest against Christian morality being the weak's method of governing the strong, and finally to Akosmism advocated by Fichte which denied the reality of the external world as readily as any other world. Whereas Pantheism admits no other reality than nature, Akosmism, taking one step further, declines to admit any reality at all. Tillich again points to this as one of our strong anxieties today. He calls it the anxiety of meaninglessness or the loss of ultimate concern wherein the emptiness is aroused by the threat of non-being.¹⁴ In Tolstoy's Confessions we read,

. . . the truth is that life is nonsense. I had lived, worked, gone forward and had reached an abyss with nothing in front of me except disappearance, and yet I could neither stop nor retrace my steps nor close my eyes so as not to see that outside suffering and absolute death there was only emptiness complete, annihilation.¹⁵

Another characteristic of negation of life drama can be found in the absence of the heroic. Shakespeare may have written plays about people of despair, but he also endowed most of them either with positive action or with heroism. It is to the modern

¹⁴Tillich, op. cit., p. 47.

¹⁵Siwek, op. cit., quoting from Tolstoy's Confessions, translated by Zoria in 1897, p. 49.

play one must go for prime examples of this characteristic. Elmer Rice writing in the Saturday Review stated this belief:

The tragic hero as protagonist has almost ceased to exist . . . the heroes of the drama today, if they can be called heroes, are bewildered creatures floundering in a mass of self delusion, self pity and frustration drugging themselves with wishful phantasies, destroying those closest to them with a surfeit of a dearth of love.¹⁶

And Henry Popkin in writing for the Kenyon Review seven years earlier deplored the death of the hero in our current theatre, and contended that our playwrights had developed a neurotic distrust of virtue. His choices for exemplification were the knaves in Lillian Hellman's plays--people submitted not for our admiration but for our study.¹⁷

Still another characteristic is the conscienceness of lack, unfulfilled want, as the kernel of suffering. Here again a portion of the Schopenhauer doctrine is repeated. While Faust searched for knowledge it was Don Juan who searched for love and Nero who searched for sensation. "In all three cases the object of search measured by the intensity of desire is inadequate, and so the thing searched for is ultimately in search itself. Furthermore, all three cases are

¹⁶Elmer Rice, "American Theatre and the Human Spirit," Saturday Review, Vol. XXXVIII (Dec. 17, 1955), p. 40.

¹⁷Henry Popkin, "Theatre Letter," Kenyon Review, Spring, 1950, pp. 331-333.

figures of despair.*¹⁸ In the book entitled Reckoning With Life George A. Wilson states,

For those who anticipate the goal of rest, peace or accomplishment find that anticipations of any plateau's stopping or peak attainment end in disappointment. Then comes pessimism with its eloquent wailings to the effect that man is ever-seeking and never at rest, always struggling on blunderingly, blindly driven by an inner hunger, yet never attaining, never reaching the haven of satisfied desire.¹⁹

It might be pointed out that dramatically there is more potential, at least, in the searching character than in the character who admits from the start that there is nothing within him. Hence, Yank in The Hairy Ape is dramatically more exciting than any of the characters in Strange Interlude. Despair in our day has been a topic of great interest to many of our social and cultural writers. Rieseman's contentions for causes of mass frustrations are well known to most readers, and more recently Bernard Rosenberg in a book Mass Culture in America states,

Before man can transcend himself he is being dehumanized; before he can elevate his mind it is being deadened. Freedom is placed before him and snatched away. The rich and varied life he might lead is standardized. This breeds anxiety and the vicious circle begins anew. For as we are objects of manipulation our anxiety is exploitable. The mass grows; we are more alike than ever; and feel a deeper sense of entrapment and loneliness.²⁰

¹⁹George A. Wilson, Reckoning With Life (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), p. 185.

²⁰Bernard Rosenberg and David White, editors, Mass Culture, The Popular Arts in America (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957), p. 5.

Frustration is a much used word in describing many of the characters in contemporary serious drama.

Time as a force of evil is another characteristic of life negation and strangely enough it can work in two directions; either time as a heavy burden upon us or time running out; both afford good material. George Kernodle wrote an article on this theme entitled "Time Frightened Playwrights" in which he states;

The man of today cannot rejoice in his day, he cannot cast off a recurring nightmare of time. He goes to the theatre to forget the past but the latest playwrights are even more obsessed by time than he . . . a vision of the twentieth century heading straight for destruction, insanity, suicide . . . time has ceased to be a mere setting for human history. It is an active force, a force of evil. It seems to be going faster and faster always bearing man nearer some frightful finish. Caught in the vortex he looks back with anguished nostalgia to some blissful age of confidence and leisure.²¹

Innumerable dramatic offerings both in the comic and the serious have dwelt with this theme. Cavalcade by Coward in 1931 is one of the better examples. We could also include The Madwoman of Chaillot, Merrily We Roll Along, Time and The Conways and even Mary Chase's very delightful play Harvey. But Bernard Rosenberg points out the other side of time and its source for frustration. When contemporary man finds that his life has been emptied of meaning, that he has been trivialized, that he has been alienated from his past and from his work and from his community, possibly from himself,

²¹George Kernodle, "Time Frightened Playwrights," American Scholar, Vol. XVIII, (October, 1949), p. 446.

he finds that "he has an unprecedented amount of time on his hands which as Venderhaag has pointed out he must kill lest it kill him. Society abhors a vacuum and quickly fills this one with diversion."²²

The next category may be dealt with in some cases less seriously than all other categories, because it frequently embodies insincerity. Nevertheless it is quite important to recognize today the fashion of despondency or romanticism of despair. Its most common form is morbidity of youth made popular. Paul Siwek points out this youthful infatuation with despair:

One generally admits that young people are very much inclined to pessimism. Why? Because for lack of experience of life they do not face things realistically enough, therefore, they are too exacting. At each disappointment they are irritated, they rebel. The fact that Schopenhauer published his theory of pessimism when thirty-one years old, Hartman when only twenty-six, is not a simple coincidence.²³

Much earlier Will Durant had put into the foreword of his works of Schopenhauer,

Could cynicism be more fashionable now in the midst of wealth than it was in the nadir of poverty and universal desolation, than it was in the days when Byron cursed life . . . and Shelley welcomed death.²⁴

Youth may have to answer the attack through the ages that it tends toward depression and is rather delighted by it all. Currently the Western world is undergoing the artistic, and not so

²²Rosenberg, op. cit., p. 7.

²³Siwek, op. cit., p. 185.

²⁴Schopenhauer, The Works of Schopenhauer, Introduction, p. x.

artistic, protests of angry young men, as an examination of our representative drama will reveal.

Hand in hand with the fashion of despondency closely associated with youthful negativists is the despondency of old age. So cognizant are we now of this malady that ever increasing study is being made in the field of geriatrics. One might simply dismiss this by saying that the problem exists today more abundantly than before because of the increased age span of our people and the social adjustments necessary for taking care of them. But both useless and frantic old age has been dealt with for years in dramatic literature. Pressing time and lost youth could be called the central themes of both King Lear and Dr. Faustus, for it is Lear who refutes the wisdom of old age and seeks to fill his terrible vacancy with childish fancy. And Faust's bargain is not only prompted by a thirst for knowledge but also by a thirst for eternal youth.

The characteristic tendencies of this despondency, stasis and escapism, or going back in time, are more pronounced when the internal aging is given against a background of a formerly very active and ambitious life. As John Gassner points out, Hedda Gabbler is not so much the story of Ibsen's "new woman" as it is the depressing picture of an "old woman."²⁵ It implies that internal surrender is not the weakness of the old alone, but that aging can come even to the comparatively young, and the fact that Ibsen has given us a potentially dynamic woman makes her restlessness and futility and

²⁵John Gassner, editor, A Treasury of the Theatre (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), p. 41.

uncreative life even more painful. It might be said that this theme is so common in dramatic literature from Greek tragedy to the present that it is rarely attributed a primary theme classification, but frequently stays with the larger theme or larger protest. Rightfully one could not condemn a play as being negativistic because it contained a character of age who had crochety habits or a saddened attitude. But where the author is concerned with the tragic contrast of the early life, the ambitions and the idealistic state of the individual, he is certainly commenting upon the age problem. Strindberg's Spook Sonata, Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard, O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms, Odets' Awake and Sing, Saroyan's My Heart's in the Highlands, and especially Shaw's Back to Methuselah--all deal interestingly and differently with this matter. Almost always the time element discussed earlier is attached to this theme and is best expressed in the little scene from Capek's Insect Comedy, in which the Crysillis enacts the pitifully short journey of life. Like the Crysillis man is born with a bursting passion to do great things but time is short and too frequently the end prevents even partial realization of this passion. It was Kipling who observed, "Morning never tries you till the afternoon."²⁶

In seeking words to describe characteristics of such a state as the negation of life one could make an all inclusive list unbearably long. There are other characteristics not isolated from

²⁶Rudyard Kipling, "A St. Helena Lullaby," in An Oxford Anthology of English Poetry, second edition, edited by Howard Lowry and Willard Thorp, 1956, p. 1,231.

those given above which will serve as the basis of analysis but these seem to be also included in the main characteristics and symptoms which have just been listed. A few of these, however, should be dealt with briefly since to the reader they will seem as obvious and perhaps necessary inclusions.

Suicide is the first of these. Rarely, because of the basic drive of self-preservation can this be classified as a cause of depression in itself but is more likely an effect of a previous depression. Schopenhauer in commenting upon suicide stated that as soon as the terrors of life reach the point where they outweigh the terrors of death, a man will put an end to his life.²⁷ In all fairness this was not what Schopenhauer recommended despite his jaundiced outlook upon our span on earth. As he saw it, it is a negation of the cosmic will which can bring about the act of ending one's own life. Such belief has some stoic quality. Suicide itself may be an interesting dramatic event but it is secondary to the analysis of cause.

Another effect to be observed will be physical and mental breakdown. Again, this in itself will offer only incidental dramatic interest, but if it serves only as a main idea in the drama it can have very little value. Theophiles Lewis writing for The Catholic

²⁷Schopenhauer, The Essays of Schopenhauer, p. 30.

World in 1958 in an article entitled "Freud and Split Level Drama" pointed out that,

The germinal element of drama from Aeschylus down to George M. Cohan has always been free will (that is) . . . will engaged in the struggle with destiny or circumstance or opposing another will Taking free will out of drama relieves the characters of moral responsibility and they become marionettes of fate or determinism.²⁸

Total mental breakdown, therefore, eliminates this factor of free will and can become only an illustration or a case study or at best can afford interesting observations of people who are acted upon.

Another characteristic of a person immersed in total depression may be the desire to destroy. Again this characteristic may reflect a deeper cause but its reporting for dramatic effectiveness will obviously offer greater opportunity than the static drama or the characters of passive qualities.

Along with the desire to destroy may appear the quality of hyper-activity. At first glance it would seem unlikely that a negative theme or a depressing theme could contain this quality, yet O'Neill manages to get a portion of it in The Hairy Ape and Desire Under the Elms. Even the very static dramas of Chekhov contain moments of extreme hyper-activity, with characters who move from passive depression to neurotic agitation, from deep sorrow to uncontrollable laughter. Juno and the Paycock is an almost hyper-active, ribald

²⁸Theophiles Lewis, "Freud and Split Level Drama," Catholic World, Vol. CLXXXVII (May, 1958), pp. 100-101.

picture of low life. The comedy and the song blend gracefully with tragedy and the tears. The poverty of revolt torn Dublin and the people O'Casey has selected to represent it are not dissimilar to the garish crowd that comprise the depressing share cropper society of our own Tobacco Road. Frequently this hyper-activity will take on the quality of moral degeneration to be found in those who indulge in alcoholic, sexual or narcotic excesses.

The last of the listed qualities is that of the self-centered individual. Whether we are reading the unpleasant plays of Shaw, the black plays of Anouilh or the death plays of Ionesco, one quality seems to come through--the self-centered concern of the characters. In discussing pessimism in drama Clurman offers that "a large part of our program of optimism is dread in disguise. Our faith in life too often depends on our blinding ourselves to misfortune, making ourselves deaf to complaint." And then he adds that, "too often our pessimistic plays give off the sound of a baby crying because its candy has been taken away."²⁹ When the character becomes concerned only with his own neurosis, or his own unstable philosophy or his own misery he loses all possibilities of heroic acceptance. Selden adds the final indignation when he states, "In essence the

²⁹Harold Clurman, "Theatre," Nation, Vol. CLXXVI (May 9, 1953), p. 402.

man who fails to exert himself effectively for others ceases to be effective to himself. Spiritually he is dead."³⁰

These then are the qualities and characteristics to be sought in examining drama to determine the presence and the kind of philosophical pessimism. Again, no pretext for absolutism is made but these qualities should serve in helping to identify the theme.

³⁰Selden, op. cit., p. 43.

CHAPTER IV

SERIOUS DRAMA IN AMERICA PRECEDING WORLD WAR II

In the introduction the limitation of this study to the years following World War II was justified, in part, on the contention that a marked difference existed between the kind and degree of pessimism expressed in the plays prior to and following the war.

That there has been a clear-cut demarcation of our national role in world affairs with World War II, just as there was a distinct boundary in the same affairs with World War I, will create little argument. It might be said without extravagant license that this nation experienced like differences in practically all other areas of social, economic and political significance. A war of the immensity of the last one must be acknowledged as an historical peak. Ideas, events, and attitudes tend to lead up to it--and then away from it--and art, entertainment, and literature may logically be included in the processes.

It would seem necessary, therefore, to examine the tone and the temper of the theatre in the period preceding our starting point and to note the significant differences in the ideas and philosophies of playwrights who wrote in the Twenties and Thirties from those who were our serious writers after World War II.

Major critics generally agree that a very clear division between worthless and significant American drama comes with the

conclusion of World War I. The fact that happenstance produced Eugene O'Neill at that time cannot completely eliminate other significant causal relations. Included in these would be the war itself, and the ascendancy to world power of our nation; the idealisms of Wilsonian World Federation and the war-inspired rocketing to new heights of technological development. Much has been written about the theatre both before and after World War I. In the latter case, political ideologies and social reforms, disillusion and escapism enter into it, just as they enter to a lesser extent into the previously conventional and commercial theatre. A careful assessment must be made of maturing American drama; of the growing theatre of intellectualism, of an independent movement by the various groups striving for better craftsmanship, of talented young writers seeking their expression in the dramatic form for the first time while forsaking more established and traditional forms in literature.

Aside from historical interest, American drama deserves no real significance by world measurement until after World War I. Such clear-cut demarcation, therefore, afforded much material for our better critics such as Krutch and Nathan and in more recent years Gassner, Brown, and Eric Bentley. Even technical criticism reflected the new power inaugurated by Robert Edmond Jones and the new scenic theorists. A growing American theatre through the Twenties and Thirties grew in form as well as in idea as attested by Gorelich, Simonson and Jones himself.

In the years immediately following World War I, American drama with its commercial attractions continued in the main the romantic, diversionary traditions that had proved profitable for half a century. It would be a difficult task to prove that with the close of the war the majority of American playwrights became socially conscious, serious minded and concerned with the major problems of the day. With the exception of the products of O'Neill, many of the plays of a serious nature were pretty poor plays by any standards. It must be remembered they came from a theatre that had lagged behind the English and European examples, a theatre that had inherited rather shallow standards. Perhaps John Gassner's comment best described the situation when he said, "Even during the war years American plays were about as modern . . . as a horse drawn wagon is today."¹

Nevertheless, it was an age in which some effort was being made to bring a serious accounting of where we had been and where we were going. It was the age of fervent patriotism, romantic escape, and occasionally violent and unsubtle experimentation in both new ideas and new forms. It took some serious reflection on a misspent war, some new awakening to European theatre objectives and a real depression to bring American drama to attention. This was not accomplished overnight. Coon, in his book Triumph of the Egghead, points out that whereas the Twenties were significant as a period of escape, the Thirties were significant as a period of revolution.

¹Gassner, op. cit., p. 772.

This revolutionary period he calls the third great period of intellectualism, referring, of course, to the social reforms and policies of Roosevelt. But before Roosevelt and the strong social revolution there had been the equally strong matter of a world of idealism created and destroyed.² Although some of the themes that came from World War I strike us as being somewhat dated, they were, nevertheless, themes which were used by our foremost dramatic writers of the day: the promise of new freedom for mankind, the concern for those who might be called the malefactors of great wealth, and the growing responsibility that must come with a nation destined for economic mastery of the world.

Along with all the escapist and diversionary drama that is recorded in our theatre annals, there was a growing movement to make use of this drama as a means of propaganda and persuasion. What Price Glory by Anderson and Stallings appeared in 1924 and marks the first of the real American anti-war plays. One year earlier Elmer Rice had warned of the depersonalization of man and the enslavement to the new world of automation in The Adding Machine. In 1925 Howard Lawson wrote his provocative and highly controversial play Processional in which he stabs at the irresponsible new world leader for its failure to further the great revolution for human kind. In this one work he attacks the holders of great wealth, the munitions makers, the politically unscrupulous, and, intentionally or otherwise, moves

²Horace Coon, Triumph of the Egghead (New York: Random House, Inc., 1955), pp. 134-171.

pretty much down the path of the newly risen Bolshevik movement. Paul Green graduated from his infatuation with simple folk plays of his Carolina region to telling plays of protest in Abraham's Bosom in 1926, one that keynoted the strong racial concern in the nation; The Field God, a sombre play about the dilemma of the southern farmer; and finally Johnny Johnson, an expressionistic satire on the anti-war theme. Also in this so-called escapist period were the novels and plays of Upton Sinclair. His highly controversial Singing Jailbirds of 1925 followed John Howard Lawson's shotgun technique of hitting at all the evils at once. And through it all, O'Neill sounded the solemn requiem for the eternal despair of man.

Along with these highlights of this new drama came the beginnings of a new and violent theatre of the common man. Typical of this would be the Workers' League or Workers' Theatre rising out of the agitation of local communist groups. So obscure and so artless were most of these works that they go unrecorded except for incidental mention by our historians. Typical of them, however, was the play called Unemployed produced by the Workers' Theatre in 1930.

In many ways the ten years following World War I required greater courage on the part of our serious dramatists than the more inflamed period of the devastating Thirties. For example, between 1922 and 1927 the purchasing power of American wages increased 2 percent annually³, so that the post-war age saw the living standard

³Donald Sheehan, Making of American History (New York: Dryden Press, 1950), II, 615.

soar and the so-called Red scare fall. Communism at this point had little show against Capitalism. Too many workers owned the new wonder--a Ford. It was most difficult for a serious minded playwright to find much appeal with drama that did not reflect the roaring and the driving life around him. And so he turned to higher matters; to the guilt of being "world bankers," "exploiters of foreign labor," "imperialists," and finally "world leaders" refusing to lead.

But after 1929 it was a different matter. Suffice it to say that our nation and our playwrights began to feel the pangs of hunger and the pangs of conscience simultaneously. So much of this is reflected in our literature and our art that it has been properly lumped for discussion under the period title "Thirties" by such critics and writers as John Gassner, John Mason Brown, and George Jean Nathan; the falling of the Thirties opened up the floodgates of new ideas for both the conservative and the radical, the patriot and the communist.

Frances Perkins said that Roosevelt described his New Deal as meaning "that the forgotten man and the little man, the man nobody knew much about, was going to be dealt better cards to play with."⁴ As Earl Browder, Whittaker Chambers, and Father Coughlin described it, it meant something else. Roosevelt had been viewed with concern by certain property owners as being a little left of center, but in truth the real radicals who saw hope in the Red flag were provoked at his

⁴Frances Perkins, The Roosevelt I Knew (New York: The Viking Press, 1946), p. 166.

tepid social revolution and were infuriated at his mild political revolution.⁵ Borrowing a term from Charles and Mary Beard's book America In Mid-Passage, the outgrowth of the whole national upheaval reflected a new era of "humanistic democracy." In the dramatic 100 days of furious legislation after Roosevelt's first inauguration, this term was made real for the liberals, and deadly for the conservatives by Home-Owners' Loan, the Bank Reform, the Securities Act, and the long list of alphabetical fantasia: TVA, TWA, RFC, NRA, AAA, etc., etc.. It is not hard to appreciate the wealth of dramatic material both topical and challenging which emanated from this. And the playwrights of the Thirties faced with a nation wounded and a world tottering followed the pioneering of their more experimental predecessors of the Twenties.

The social and political upheaval brought about by the great depression produced a tumbling theatre of protest with the same rapidity demonstrated by our social and economic legislation in government, and with the fearless and sometimes foolish devotion to new ideas came equally fearless experimentation with new dramatic form. The isms from mild symbolism to over-seasoned expressionism worked their way into American theatre and rode side by side with the continuing and traditional commercial theatre of Broadway. The new concept of the epic theatre patterned after a European revival found expression in the movement. Traditions in dramatic arts were challenged.

⁵Ibid., p. 322.

It was the period of Freud, Marx, Roosevelt, Father Coughlin, and Wheeler, and as it vacillated between world concern and stringent isolationism, so did the playwrights vacillate between leftist propaganda and righteous indignation against the rise of Nazi tyranny.

Exemplary of this is the analytical book written by Anita Block entitled The Changing World in Plays and Theatre which deals primarily with the ten-year period between 1930 and 1939. In this she points to a myriad of movements and trends all clearly discernible in the works of most of the playwrights of established reputations as well as in the lesser writers of more violent propagandistic pieces. She reports the changing contemporary drama in ways of thinking, the changing sexual standards, the conflicts within the individual and their psychological significances, the social conflict, the zealous move to the left on the part of previously conservative individuals, the plays against war, and the plays promising a total and new social order.⁶

If the artistic merits of the period have been doubted, no contemporary critic has doubted the audacity of our writers of the Thirties who seemed to find common ground in two respects: first, their war waged against the illusion of security of a nation thrust into world leadership, and secondly, the vehemence with which they protested the illusion.

⁶Anita Block, The Changing World in Plays and Theatre (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939)

It has often been stated that the theatre makes a poor reporter of news or events because of the tremendous time lag required by commercial production. An idea born into the mind of the playwright may not find realization for two or three years, even if the idea is motivated by significant and changing world events. Add to this another year or two for commercial testing and rewriting and it is easy to understand the nature of this delayed response. But in the Thirties attempts were made to overcome even this. Ben Blake in his book The Awakening of the American Theatre published in 1935 gives an account of the growth of the free theatre and the propaganda theatre in the early Thirties. Included among the many splinters of the previously mentioned Workers' Drama League which was founded in the Twenties in New York City were a group of impromptu dramas known as AGITPROP Theatre. These were plays of almost negative values artistically, but were effective weapons for reflecting current events unsympathetic to leftist movements.⁷

Their foundations were artistic in declaration, but their practices were too frequently political. They strove for "new theatres" supported by the little man. They sought to shatter form and convention in theatrical art while shattering form and convention in our government as well. This movement sprang from different sources supposedly, but somehow one gets the impression from reading Ben Blake or Anita Block that there was organization behind the whole procedure. The plays sponsored by these groups were not all propa-

⁷Ben Blake, The Awakening of the American Theatre (New York: Tomorrow Publishers, 1935), pp. 15-21.

gandistic plays, but the emphasis of their work was certainly in this direction. Whether the founders and authors were idealists of the day or whether they were skilled agents of the Communist party is of little interest to this discussion. Suffice it to say that they were considerably left of Herbert Hoover, and simultaneously critical of the tepid New Deal.

The grass roots of the ACITPROP (Agitation-Propaganda) play came from a group known as the Prolet-Buehne, a German speaking theatre group. They staged their simple plays and recitations at unemployment rallies, labor meetings and anywhere their brand of protest would be received. Propaganda, after all, is most effective when the recipient feels the same way as the giver. Since they gave their works in German frequently the emotional effect produced was more vital than the logical argument. Their materials ranged from racial brutality to capitalistic greed. Their methods were direct, hard-hitting and primitive. Blake tells us that "class-conscious working men felt their hearts warm to a theatre that for the first time presented with sympathy and understanding themes from their own lives."⁸ And the themes--invariably the need for revolt--rested upon despair, futility, and degradation. Even O'Neill must have felt a tinge of admiration for the audacity and directness of these well-schooled pessimists. No fog, sea or night-enclosing symbolism here; the ACITPROP writers used stock and ready symbols, such as the high hat to mark the capitalist, and the hatless, open-throated shirt

⁸Ibid., p. 17.

to characterize the down-trodden worker. Even the economy of their dialogue must have evoked some envy.

FIRST WORKER: I am hungry.

SECOND WORKER: My family is hungry.

THIRD WORKER: I want a job.

FOURTH WORKER: I want a job.

FIFTH WORKER: Won't somebody give me a job?

FIRST WORKER: I am hungry. Why can't I have food? I see lots of food in restaurants. I am cold. Why can't I have a coat? I see many coats in clothing stores.

(CAPITALIST comes in and sits.)

CAPITALIST: (Picks up phone, listens, laughs.) There isn't anyone that can have a better yacht than I. I have got to have the best little yacht in the world. I want special attention paid to the bar. On one side-- (sees the workers)--what is that damn noise out there? I can't talk.

SERVANT: Master, master, it's the unemployed complaining.

CAPITALIST: Unemployed complaining? What have they got to complain about?⁹

These plays in a short time expanded to greater length, but their pioneering efforts were instrumental in the later rush of radical propaganda. The technique was not new. John Howard Lawson had introduced this short-jab, rhythmic dialogue several years before in this country. The ethics were not new either; the immensity of misery, the emotional appeal, partial truth, the "stacked card" devices--all were designed primarily for the labor audiences of the moment. What was new was the quantity of the work.

The second group of unpleasant plays came from the Federal Theatre under the leadership of Hallie Flannegan. This group is even more familiar to us than the earlier AGITPROP groups. "The Living

⁹Ibid., pp. 18-19.

Newspaper" was a type of play designed to dramatize the social and political situations of the day and the offerings of this group were the most remembered. Like radio's "March of Time," they were structured to produce a series of quick, hard-hitting scenes made fluid by a skeletal script and made dramatic by their day-to-day reporting.

Typical of this was Triple A Plowed Under written by the editorial staff under the supervision of Arthur Aurenst and produced March 14, 1936, at the Biltmore Theatre. The story unfolds within 26 scenes which are written to give the impression that a massive argument is taking place and that by an inductive method, some general proposition will be found for the cumulation of evidence making up the play. The revelation of conditions of the country at that time, particularly of the sad plight of the farmer, is almost a model for complete depression. That their reporters were reporters of despair cannot be argued, but through commentary and through implication some positive action is called for.

If today we accuse the Federal Theatre project of fostering plays of overstated sordidity and of polishing in dramatic language the Communist propaganda of the day, we must admit, at least, that they were active plays, negative in subject but undeniably positive in thesis. Ross Scanlon in his dissertation on persuasion in drama states,

In line with the tendency to approve the elimination of propaganda, writers customarily speak of art as the "reflection" of the society in which it is created. This

conception implies a fairly complete passivity on the part of the artist According to this aesthetic philosophy one thing is denied him: the desire to change life.¹⁰

But to the leading dramatists of the Twenties and the Thirties who dealt with serious protests a desire to change matters was paramount. One of the most popular topics in the areas of political, social, and economic concern was that of war. Many of these dramas, and there were many, were of course motivated by a deeper political philosophy, rather than by a humanistic concern, but in addition to the continued chant of the communists, there were many plays filled with what Clurman calls "the heroic pessimism"¹¹ in which the author tried to show the necessity for an alteration of a national course to avoid doom rather than to sensationalize himself by merely reporting the doom.

A strange paradox persisted during the period that separated the two wars. On the one side was a strong feeling that two of the basic foundations of our foreign policy dating from Washington's presidency were fast becoming obsolete in the growing complexity of international relations. These foundations or principles were the freedom of the sea and the avoidance of entangling alliances. Even the Monroe doctrine set itself upon a philosophy of isolation and this philosophy persisted without serious interruption to Wilson's

¹⁰Ross Scanlon, "Drama as a Form of Persuasion" (an unpublished dissertation, Cornell University, 1937), p. 5.

¹¹Clurman, op. cit., p. 402.

concept of world order. But Wilson offered only an interruption. Isolation predominated until Pearl Harbor.

In view of this national feeling and in view of the wasted horror of World War I, it is not surprising that the Twenties should find the anti-war dramatists at work, but it must be noted that not all of the rebellion was over what had happened; much of the concern was directed at what was feared was about to happen, World War II. This was the great war that the disillusioned idealists saw coming. This was the war prophesied by Wilson and exploited by the pacifists writing under the banner of the Workers' Drama League as early as 1926.¹²

The second part of the paradox, that we should engage in war, came at a much later time and perhaps was not really apparent until just before the outbreak of hostilities in Europe in 1939 and 1940. These were the dramas that advocated the moral necessity of American intervention, and though admittedly late, required considerable courage from playwrights facing a nation bent upon neutrality. A Roper poll conducted as late as 1939 showed that of those questioned 29.9 percent said "no war no matter what conditions prevailed" while only 2.5 percent were for intervention. Of the balance, the majority wanted war only if attack came from outside.¹³

The neutrality law of 1936 was signed as an expression of popular demand. The pacifist pressure was rampant even in the face

¹²Blake, op. cit., p. 10.

¹³Sheehan, op. cit., p. 686.

of lend lease and the draft, and yet with all of this feeling, the thinkers of the nation realized that we were moving carefully and continuously toward war. The Communist struggle in this was equally interesting. Part of their protest had already been expressed in their attitude toward American imperialism. Even while the Russians were invading Finland and making their pact with Nazi Germany, their American representatives were loudly protesting against Roosevelt's increased naval budget, his loans to England and France, and all of his defense legislation. Defense, they maintained, was immoral, it was inciting a war, and too many misguided Americans believed the argument. But when in 1941 the Germans invaded the Red homeland, the propoganda of the Reds shifted and a call for action took hold.

With only a casual examination of the content of those plays concerned with war written between 1920 and 1940 one can see the shift in motivation from plays of horror and repugnancy, meant to shock the viewer into support of all legislation that opposed intervention in European affairs, to those plays that finally acknowledged that moral indifference or moral selfishness could no longer be countenanced in the face of a greater moral wrong.

Plays against war are certainly not new. From The Trojan Women and Lysistrata to the present day they have offered good material for protest writers. Nor can it be said that the approach to this subject was vastly different from the reactions that had followed major wars throughout history. What distinguishes the anti-war drama

in the era following World War I from similar drama prior to that time can best be explained by phrases used by Anita Block: "grandeur illusion" and "creeping mockery." These phrases referred primarily to the failure to fight "a war to end all wars." Miss Block further distinguished the approaches to the anti-war plays by showing that in the main they attempted to preach by four different methods: one, strip the veil of glamour from war by showing the new mechanized carnage; two, shatter the hero myth--the common soldier is but a pawn; three, show that no side can win--basic values are destroyed despite the outcome; four, probe into war causes--seeking to abolish war by reason rather than by emotion.¹⁴

Of over 60 plays of protest and propaganda nature examined for this study, 20 were concerned with the war theme. Of these, 12 were anti-war plays of varying merit, while 8 were plays advocating intervention or nationalism. With the exception of What Price Glory written in 1924, no distinguished anti-war play appeared until the rumblings of world conflict were sounded once more in the middle Thirties.

With 13 million people unemployed, with social revolution taking place, with all of the Marxist doctrine being aired thoroughly, domestic drama seemed to have greater appeal than any corrective or probing drama concerning the national guilt complex of World War I. But with the Fascist rise to power, with the tri-Axis Treaty, with the revolution in Spain, the bombing of defenseless Abssynia, and

¹⁴Block, op. cit., pp. 302-351.

finally with the ravings of Hitler himself, the American playwright jumped full force into the war issue. Such plays as Peace on Earth by Sklar and Maltz, Bury the Dead by Erwin Shaw, Paths of Glory by Sidney Howard, Johnny Johnson by Paul Green, Key Largo by Maxwell Anderson, Idiot's Delight by Robert Sherwood, and The World We Make by Sidney Kingsley, all appeared between the years 1933 and 1939. But after the course of events were seen to be inevitable through the tyranny of the Fascist nations, Robert Sherwood turned to the thesis of the necessity for national pride and intervention in There Shall Be No Night, a play supposedly written within a three weeks' period. In addition, Maxwell Anderson wrote Candle in the Wind, and others included: The Moon is Down by John Steinbeck, Margin for Error by Claire Booth in 1939, Watch on the Rhine by Lillian Hellman, and American Landscape by Elmer Rice. All of these plays took place between 1938 and 1941. That they were sorrowful themes and frequently pessimistic does not alter the fact that they were also plays in which a positive course of action, one way or the other, was advocated. A call to national pride was made once more.

Along with the violent plays of pessimism, protest, and correction such as the dramas written by John Wecksley, Sinclair Lewis, John Howard Lawson, Albert Bein, and Mark Blitzstein, were a scattering of plays of the true negativistic theme.

Although O'Neill's leadership in this respect could not be questioned, other writers of good reputation began to ponder the more universal themes of man's predicament in a world unfriendly

toward his existence, of man subservient to the forces of heredity and environment, of man made will-less without control of his destiny, without the ability to fight the life forces imposed upon him by the psychologists and sociologists. It has been recognized before that the presence of the theme has been apparent in almost every period of literature in almost every national expression, but certainly in the 1920's in this country, if not in Europe, there was little besides O'Neill to make it seem characteristic of the age. Owen Davis had written The Detour and Icebound in the pessimistic vein and Patrick Kearney had written such a play in A Man's Man in 1925, but compared with the usual fare of escapist drama, romantic and melodramatic pieces, and the previously mentioned dramas of violent protest, there was little in the serious line of theatre that could be called truly the negation of life.

In the Thirties, however, the truly negativistic plays began to appear. The causes for this rise cannot be determined easily. In all probability it was a combination of the normal discouragement that settled upon the uneasy state of the world and the culmination of the social and psychological forces previously referred to.

Although it may be questioned that this does not constitute the main theme of Hotel Universe by Phillip Barry, nevertheless, the play shows what might be called the ravages of neurotic lives and questions strongly man's ability to cope with both the forces outside of him and those working within him. It is interesting to note in this play that Barry employs the same device that O'Neill used to

bring about the revelation of the futile lives of his characters, that of confession. S.N. Behrman, one of the leading lights of high comedy, implied the disintegration of civilization and of mankind in such plays as Wine of Choice, Brief Moment, and End of Summer. Lillian Hellman pictured the destruction of human values by greed in The Little Foxes. Undoubtedly, the leading light in the mid-thirties in the theme of a disintegrating America was Robert Sherwood who wrote, along with certain successful comedies, light melodramas and biographical pieces, such plays as The Petrified Forest and Idiot's Delight. Maxwell Anderson, during the same years, sought to find the missing ingredient of modern tragedy by attempting to picture the modern problems and the modern dilemma in poetic language. But where Sherwood, Anderson, Howard, Rice, and Paul Green had vacillated between dramas of heroic protest and irrefutable discouragement, it was not until Clifford Odets entered the American theatre that the real frustration and emptiness of modern America found its real spirit. Odets, at the time of his early writing and even later, was more than suspect of being Communist in his sympathies, and much of his work reflects the hard-hitting, brutal, persuasive tactics of many of his predecessors in the early part of the decade. But more than being a political propagandist or a radical extremist, Odets was filled with the burning desire to create memorable images of suffering man. Unlike his predecessors he seems to be less concerned for the how and now of revolution than he is for the static depression of the old people, the frustration and early death of the

young people, and the cruel destiny of a world approaching dehumanization.

Despite the acceptance of Odets as a rising figure in American drama, and despite the favorable reactions to the excellence of his plays, American critics were quick to note that he was giving strong impetus to the movement in the direction of negativistic material in dramatic art. Joseph Wood Krutch in the first edition of his American Drama Since 1918 noticed this tendency in the final years of the 1930's. He observed,

Certain recent playwrights of artistic pretension . . . had been marked by a sort of deliberate despair, and there was some danger that the American playwright might escape a convention of unmeaning optimism only to fall into another of almost equally factitious gloom.¹⁵

Later he concluded, "The particular type of unhappy ending for which admirers of the new drama had the greatest respect . . . presented a picture of utter frustration which resulted in a dissonance, not even by implication resolved."¹⁶

As a counter to the growing pessimism in the country and in direct opposition to those writers who prophesied a rather dismal future for the Western world, the eternal optimists continued with their diversionary works. Frank O'Hara points out that You Can't Take It With You received the Pulitzer prize for 1939, "an honor bestowed upon its authors Hart and Kaufman for their dramatization of the national urge to be cheerful."¹⁷

¹⁵Krutch, op. cit., p. 49. ¹⁶Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁷Frank O'Hara, Today In American Drama (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 249.

But if we are able to find examples of unmitigated despair in both the Twenties and the Thirties, it is necessary to restate the point that the general character of the dramas of sordid and gloomy theme was one of protest and call to action. It is this fact alone that seems to distinguish the nature of pessimism before World War II from that of the period selected for this thesis. Even O'Neill, the eternal champion of despair, seemed more concerned with positive action in many of his early plays than he did with the four plays which constituted his last published and produced works. In this regard it is significant to point to a remark made by the usually accurate and discerning John Gassner. In his comprehensive text Masters of the Drama he says of O'Neill's psychological, morality play Days Without End, "The implacable decrier of conventional religious consolation had at last written his farewell with skepticism and inner conflict."¹⁸ Several years later in another work Gassner was to call The Iceman Cometh ". . . the most relentlessly depressing drama written by any modern playwright."¹⁹

Concurrence in this distinction between the two periods can be found in the writings of many of our present-day critics who deplore the absence of not only the heroic but of any meaningful discussion in our theatre. Harold Clurman, for one, has in several

¹⁸John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York: Random House, Inc., 1954), p. 660.

¹⁹Gassner, Treasury of the Theatre, p. 788.

articles discussed the growing pessimistic theme of our current American theatre. In one he stated,

The decline of the satiric spirit begins with the Fifties. Our hopes were dissipated, rebelliousness was first frowned upon and then squelched. Social criticism seems to lack a base and the building of positive values appears to lack support in social realities. What new affirmations are made seem to turn inward, are always on a personal level as if to say, "Please mind your own business and let me mind mine."²⁰

In the same article he appeals to the American playwright to try to find the line that was lost somewhere after the Thirties and Forties. "The so-called cynicism of the Twenties was creative; the solemnity and some of the immature sloganing of the Thirties and Forties were still creative . . . we must go back and find out what it was and what happened to it."²¹ Gassner himself states vividly the thesis that

. . . the strong difference between the two post-war periods appears to be related to the respective position of the intellectual after 1918 and after 1950. After World War I, the intelligentsia made war on Philistia, as it had done before 1914. After World War II, Philistia began to make war on the intelligentsia.²²

Elmer Rice in an article appearing in the Saturday Review in 1955 points to the absence of the heroic elements in our current drama as opposed to that of previous periods. ". . . even the pessimism of the late nineteenth century sprang from anger and

²⁰Clurman, op. cit., p. 377. ²¹Ibid., p. 378.

²²John Gassner, The Theatre In Our Times (New York: Crown Publishers, 1954), p. 452.

impatience with man's mistakes and follies, rather than from lack of faith in his possibilities."²³

From a more distant view the picture remains the same. Harold Hobson's all inclusive statement concerning the nature of the distinction between the two periods seems worth inclusion here.

The great upsurge of American drama between 1920 and 1945 was due to a tremendous pride in America on the part of American authors and public

A great deal of this pride was based on the conviction that America was a revolutionary and progressive country. Until the outbreak of war in 1939, the average American assumed as a matter of course that his country was the leader in social change. He never forgot that America was founded in rebellion, and that the Declaration of Independence was a revolutionary document. These things meant an enormous amount to him; he felt himself to be in the vanguard of social development.

Since 1945 America has had to face the fact, the disconcerting fact, that revolution has taken the wrong turning. It no longer works for free enterprise and the American way of life. The revolutionary flag has passed back from the New World to the Old, and America is not yet accustomed to having lost it. It sees itself with difficulty as the world's foremost conservative. It has become uncertain of itself, and of its mission in the world. When its own view of right could be identified with the revolutionary trends in society, America was happy, confident, and creative; now that this situation has completely passed away, it is ill at ease.²⁴

As we analyze the selected works of our leading dramatists following World War II we must realize they inherited the same conflicting and bewildering philosophies and teachings that began to influence the works of our playwrights of the Twenties and

²³Rice, op. cit., p. 39.

²⁴Harold Hobson, The Theatre Now (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1953), p. 120.

Thirties. In fact, the questioners of the free spirit--Darwin, Marx, and Freud--had been midified and expanded by others to the extent that Selden pictures:

Man trapped by his inheritance and environment, man snared by his glandular secretion, man bound by his sex cravings, man crushed by machines and by the society he has created around him--this they [the playwrights] view. So our theatre is filled with the wail of yearning but lost people.²⁵

That Williams, Inge, and Miller are the reflectors of our national temperament may be no more rational than to say that they are simply the followers of O'Neill, Anderson, and Odets. The cause and the source of their outlook are subject to anyone's speculation. Suffice it to say, they are the representatives in a period of drama markedly different from the periods which preceded them.

Perhaps the most accurate description was offered recently by Granville Hicks in critical commentary about the attitudes of the writers Leslie Fiedler and Norman Mailer.

Rebellion in the Twenties and Thirties, intemperate as it often was, was spontaneous. Rebels were not free from self-consciousness, but they were more interested in what they were against and what they were for than in how they looked. The noisy negativism of Fiedler and Mailer is, I am sure, a significant comment on the intellectual atmosphere of the Fifties and Sixties²⁶

²⁵Selden, op. cit., p. 63.

²⁶Granville Hicks, "They Needn't Say No," Saturday Review, July 2, 1960, p. 14.

CHAPTER V

THE PESSIMISM OF EUGENE O'NEILL AND AN ANALYSIS OF HIS LATER PLAYS

In selecting a play of O'Neill's to determine the presence of our theme, *The Negation of Life*, two conditions are immediately apparent. First, that no other American writer affords such a vast volume of material that approaches the depressing or the negativistic area. Almost every play contains some elements of cynicism, frustration, or despondency. Secondly, it will be noted that the bulk of his work was accomplished prior to World War II. However, we may justify our selection of O'Neill's works for analysis on two grounds: his tremendous influence on other playwrights of our day and the fact that at least four of his major works were both published and produced following World War II.

Even a casual examination of every play from *Beyond the Horizon* to *Long Day's Journey Into Night* will support the contention that O'Neill was anything but optimistic. One notable exception to this, however, was his warm and human comedy, *Ah! Wilderness*, written as even the author himself admits as a kind of breather in between more arduous, demanding, serious, tragic plays. Earlier he had declared,

"Sure, I'll write about happiness if I can happen to meet up with that luxury"¹

With O'Neill negative themes have been a portion of his writing from the start. Beyond the Horizon, for example, was written in 1918 and illustrates every one of our criteria for life negation: despair, Chekhovian inertia, exhaustion, quantitative inferiority of human happiness in comparison with human misery, escapism or a desire to move away to some distant place, moral and spiritual cynicism, absence of the heroic, frustration, time running out, and even in its conclusion a certain romanticism of despair. Yet, we have acknowledged that O'Neill perhaps is the one exception to the current change that apparently has come over writers of the period following World War II. Where Rice had turned from morbid social drama to lighter comedy, and Paul Green from corrective expressionism to the most blatant of heroic pageantry, and Maxwell Anderson from political satire to heroism and drama of hope, only O'Neill remained constantly and consistently isolated in morbidity and despondency. That O'Neill is as much of our time as he was of the time of early American serious drama cannot be denied, and some detailed consideration must be given to certain of his works. I have chosen for analysis two of the later plays, The Iceman Cometh and Long Day's Journey Into Night.

Little argument will be created by the statement that more

¹Barrett H. Clark, Eugene O'Neill; The Man and His Plays (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1947), p. 96, citing an interview recorded by Malcolm Molan in the Philadelphia Public Ledger, Jan. 27, 1922.

has been written about Eugene O'Neill and his plays than any other American playwright. Every critic has concerned himself at one time or another with an attempt to fathom the depths of O'Neill thought, and to pass judgment upon the craftsmanship of America's number one playwright. He has been both championed and damned by responsible criticism from the first. In recent years, especially since the appearance of The Iceman Cometh, new appraisals of the three-time Pulitzer Prize winner and Nobel Peace Prize holder have been made by critics writing both for periodicals and for more lengthy publications. Perhaps more is known about his life than any other American writer. O'Neill himself had laid bare his past, his own feelings, his frustrations, and since his death comments by biographers based upon observations of his family and his close friends have completed the picture for us.

Part of O'Neill's stature is derived from the fact that he was a prolific writer. His works span four decades of tumultuous American living, and touch the fifth. These are decades in which his country was involved in two major wars, moved from a secondary power into world leadership, experienced radical social and economic revolution, struggled in the disillusionment of an age not yet ready for peace, and sought adjustment to Darwinism, Marxism, and Freudism. Because of his bewildering and persistent skepticism and pessimism more concern has been made about the forms and the ideas of O'Neill than about his philosophy or the basic themes of his plays. It is certainly not the purpose of this study to get into

the controversy of the craftsmanship of O'Neill as a dramatist. One cannot attack him simply by saying that he inherited the new school of naturalism, that he was a student of Strindberg and Chekhov, and that finding his milieu he continued until death ceased his pen, for O'Neill was an innovator and an experimenter. He was a leader as well as a follower and if the heavy and oppressive naturalism of European theatre seems to permeate Beyond the Horizon, The Iceman Cometh and others, so does his own innovation and experimentation with expressionism, with the use of the masks, with the use of asides, with inter-connected dramas, show that he was not in any sense regimented by one major movement in the theatre. He has been called a symbolist, a naturalist, an expressionist, and proof for each of these titles can be found with one or more of his major works.

A generally accepted axiom in literary criticism is that to study the works of a man one must first study the man himself. Of his personal life little has been left uncovered. Every drama student is familiar with the early sea background, with the prolonged alcoholic benders, with the stay in a T.B. sanitarium, and of the general family upheaval of the young O'Neill. All of these influences can be seen readily in his plays. But these are only surface. Also familiar to us are the dramatic influences rendered especially by Strindberg, Chekhov, and Ibsen--this O'Neill tells us himself--and finally by the influence of the writings of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and other philosophers of pessimistic leanings. With

all of his personal background and his philosophical study, the conflicting values of a staunch Irish-Catholic faith ride side by side tormenting and troubling a man who found that life was a panorama of despair. In his own family relationships the tragedy that O'Neill faced was not the lack of love but the lack of communication of love. "In a sense this was the theme of so many of O'Neill's plays--man's agonizing loneliness, his feeling of not belonging, of wanting and not wanting to belong, of being cursed to remain alone, above, and apart."²

In his recent biography of Eugene O'Neill titled The Curse of the Misbegotten Croswell Bowen does more than just attach the mystical or supernatural concepts to the O'Neill legend. In this book he points out that O'Neill possessed an inner drive--a drive which Freudian analysts have called the death instinct. Was this the result of a guilt feeling stemming from the realization that he was the substituted child for a brother named Edmund who died as an infant; or was it an outgrowth of the mixed feeling of love and hatred that he held for his family, the disdain and love that he held for his father as an actor who had prostituted his art; or did it stem from his own frustration in being unable to express with poetic language that which deserved the poetic? Or was O'Neill the Threnodist too much enamoured with the philosophies and the

²Croswell Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959), Preface, p. ix.

movements of his time? Pressed to state his fundamental scheme of life, a creed or a philosophy, he replied,

People talk of the tragedy in my plays, call it sordid, depressing, pessimistic--the words usually applied to anything of a tragic nature. But tragedy, I think, has the meaning the Greeks gave it. To them it brought exaltation, an urge toward life and ever more life, it roused them to deeper spiritual understanding, it released them from the petty greeds of every day existence. When they saw tragedy on the stage they felt their own hopeless hopes ennobled in art.

O'Neill then goes on to explain what is meant by hopeless hopes.

. . . because any victory we may win is never the one we dreamed of winning. The point is that life in itself is nothing. It is the dream that keeps us fighting, willing, living. Achievement in the narrow sense of possession is a stale finale. The dreams that can be completely realized are not worth dreaming. The higher the dream, the more impossible it is to realize it fully. But you would not say, since this is true, that we should dream only of the easily attained. A man wills his own defeat when he pursues the unattainable, but his struggle is his success.³

This paraphrasing of the Nietzschean philosophy can readily be seen in many of his plays. But where Nietzsche wills power and striving, O'Neill's characters too frequently are unable to rise to such height and will little beyond resignation. Bowen leaves little question of the philosophical influences on O'Neill himself.

There is no doubt that O'Neill was steeped in the writings of Schopenhauer or along with those of Nietzsche. He discussed their work in an introduction he wrote to Benjamin DeCessares' Litanies of Negation. "They mixed," he said, "despair and rhapsody." He told DeCessares that Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra had more influence on than any other book he had read up to 1927.⁴

³Ibid., p. 143. ⁴Ibid., p. 168.

At one time O'Neill had a somewhat platonic love affair with a girl who served as a teen-age model for Muriel McComber in his play, Ah! Wilderness. This person, who goes unnamed, stated to Bowen that in her association with O'Neill he read aloud a great deal to her with works of Nietzsche and of Schopenhauer.⁵

Whatever factors were responsible for O'Neill's embracing of pessimism, his basic philosophy can be seen in the themes of practically every one of his plays. The debilitating drive of excessive pride stems from his early one-acter called Ile. The theme of not delonging rises early again in the sea play Bound East for Cardiff. The best example of suicide comes in a play entitled Before Breakfast written in 1916 in which the wife speaks uninterruptedly while the husband commits suicide in the next room. Frustration and irony can be found in the play The Straw based on O'Neill's experiences as a T.B. patient. In Mourning Becomes Electra O'Neill exemplifies what Schopenhauer declared to be the true sense of tragedy, ". . . that it is not his own individual sins the hero atones for, but original sin, i.e., the crime of existence itself."⁶ In The Great God Brown, often considered O'Neill's intellectual masterpiece, an oft-quoted passage may summarize O'Neill's attitude completely. "Why was I born without a skin, God, that I must wear armor in order to touch or be

⁵Ibid., p. 39.

⁶Edwin A. Engel, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 256.

touched. Or rather, Old Graybeard, why the devil was I ever born at all?"⁷ George Jean Nathan in talking of The Hairy Ape describes it as ". . . despairing humanity gazing blindly at the stars."⁸

Whatever period of O'Neill's writing one may choose, whether the early sea plays, the later explorations into sex, love, and the frustrations of mankind, or finally into his utter despair period, the latter stages of his writings, one will always find the permeation of negativism. Perhaps one exception to this in his serious dramas might be the rarely produced play Lazarus Laughed which seems to illustrate the Dionysian creative pagan, the Nietzschean yea-saying man, as opposed to the masochistic life-denying spirit of a morbid Christian or a will-less atheist. But with this exception all of O'Neill's serious plays hammer steadily at the theme of the absence of meaning and the despair of existence. Edith Isaacs writing in Theatre Arts in 1946 states,

No one will need go far in seeing or reading O'Neill's plays to discover that he was deeply involved with German thought from Nietzsche to Freud, perilously involved, indeed, because he was so much more sensitive and contemplative than profound, more honest and sincere than judicial, more adventurous than affirmative, and they will note with a sigh of regret that he has absolutely no sense of humor.⁹

In the many investigations of his life all of his examiners

⁷Eugene O'Neill, The Great God Brown, Vol. X, Wilderness Edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), Prologue.

⁸George Jean Nathan, "The Theatre," The American Mercury, Vol. LXIII, December, 1946, p. 718.

⁹Edith J.R. Isaacs, "Meet Eugene O'Neill," Theatre Arts, Vol. XXI, October, 1946, p. 585.

have noted in varying degree his preoccupation with the sordid theme. It is not the purpose of this paper to pass judgment on the complete past pessimism of the playwright, but it will be noted that the many tragic circumstances of his life are readily reflected in what he wrote.

THE ICEMAN COMETH

The Iceman Cometh is no exception. The setting sets the mood and serves as a perfect background. "Harry Hope's is a Raines-Law hotel of the period, a cheap ginmill of the five-cent whiskey, last-resort variety situated on the downtown West Side of New York."¹⁰ Into this setting come an assortment of derelicts who expose their misery and decadence for a nearly three-hour drama. Drab as the background may be, these characters do not lose themselves in it nor are they permitted to fade into its dreariness. But O'Neill has painted them so adroitly that their blackness makes the very background seem light in comparison. He gives us no relief. Not one normal or insipidly happy individual intrudes. Even when we suspect that contrast or change will be afforded by the unusually bright and positive Hickey, we are only deluded, because Hickey motivates no change--only serves to deepen the despair of the group and later he himself is foremost of the disillusioned people.

That O'Neill was as familiar with this setting and with these people as he was with the ships and the salt that served as background

¹⁰Eugene O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh (New York: Random House, 1946), p. vii.

for his sea plays has been verified by O'Neill himself. Again in Bowen's book we learn that there was a dive in New York City that O'Neill habituated in his early life which was officially called the Columbian Saloon.

About the middle of 1915 Eugene found his own barroom headquarters, four blocks south of the Columbian Saloon, at the Golden Swan, more commonly known as the "Hell Hole." There he was to have his last long fling--a full year of it--at the kind of life he had led before his stay at the satatorium. Thirty years later he was to re-create that establishment on the stage, as Harry Hope's saloon in The Iceman Cometh.¹¹

it is interesting to note that O'Neill waited nearly twenty-five years to write about this setting he experienced in 1915. In the meantime he had completed plays of depressing themes with settings in a New England farm land (Beyond the Horizon, Desire Under the Elms), a West Indian jungle (Emporer Jones), seas, ships, and docks (Moon Over the Carribes, Ile, The Hairy Ape, Anna Christie), to name a few. In many of these plays and in others, his characters had sunk to low depths, but except for his own fog-shrouded life which he was to tell in Long Day's Journey Into Night he had never completely explored the possibilities of the lowest place of human kind. Perhaps the "hell hole" served admirably for his final reporting of the degradation of his fellow men. Certainly its completeness rivals well the morbid quarters of Gorki's The Lower Depths. So effectively does O'Neill hold us within the confines of these quarters that the immersion into daylight, brave but unrewarding, by a few of the

¹¹Bowen, op. cit., p. 69.

characters seems strangely out of place and abnormal. Had O'Neill chosen to symbolize still further by making these quarters subterranean he would have added little to our belief that this was truly hell itself.

As for his people O'Neill affords ample variety. We see and hear intellectuals, professionals, would-be artists as readily as the uneducated, the uncouth, and the inexpressive. Ages are varied, nationalities are varied and backgrounds are varied. No one is exempt from the evils of alcohol, but where alcohol serves as one unifying agent, this is far from being O'Neill's main theme. A more constant and reliable unifying force is the common desire of all to escape from whatever realities their worlds represent.

Yet this is no problem play, no theme with a corrective motive or one that points to a solution. It is strictly the reporting of negativism and when hope spurred on by an urge to change inserts itself into the setting, the author labels it as cruel and dispatches it with suddenness. O'Neill cannot be said to have used this play as a means of advocating a hopeless life. But certainly he does little to recommend the necessity of its alteration.

A detailed examination of the characters does much to show how completely O'Neill has covered each area of life negation. He describes Harry Hope, the proprietor of this saloon, as "a sinner among sinners."¹² The author affords him a kindness when he makes him a man who although on the surface is hard, bitter, and unforgiving,

¹²O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh, Act I.

inside is very soft and desirous for companionship. One has the feeling as he goes through the play that O'Neill has intended some sympathy for this man, even to the extent of his rather wistful name. He is reluctant to give credit, but always does. He is easily offended, but ever forgiving. His sordid collection of humans that he keeps in his stable of debauchery look to him with show of personal warmth, but the real value they find in him comes from the fact that he is their supplier.

Poor, inept, and victimized in the same way that his customers are, Harry Hope is in no sense a real villain, but his weakness, his own inability to face reality, makes him not one better than any of his friends. Harry Hope's great pipe dream is the disillusionment of being able to improve his lot; to continually look forward to that time when he may resume his political influence in his neighborhood, to seek once again the alderman position, and finally to feed upon the popularity of the people he sustains with his cheap liquor. This last quality eliminates any human virtue that we might find in him, because his motive is not one of kindness but one of seeking recognition. It is Harry Hope who has the bizarre experience of freezing in the middle of the street when exposed to this area referred to as the out-of-doors, and who runs cringing back into the sanctity of his small shop. Like the others, he would never acknowledge his lot as being one of despair or without hope, but attempts to fortify himself by living in the past and by referring to the future when his fortunes will improve. He delights in explaining his apparent absence of will as coming from the untimely death of his

wife several years prior to that. In the climax area of the play, however, even this is proved fraudulent by the realization that Harry Hope never loved his wife, nor enjoyed her companionship. Like many others in the drama, he can be identified as a character of exhaustion; resigned, will-less, and resentful of change.

Of the dozen habitués of Harry Hope's bar none stands out more clearly as a figure of despair than the articulate and vindictive Larry Slade. Slade represents both the idealist and the intellectual. He is disillusioned in love, disillusioned in ideal and faced with the meaninglessness of life. Perhaps he, more than any other, realizes his situation and refuses to meet it with any self-affirmation. For O'Neill he plays the role of the chorus making commentary upon the sort of life revealed to us. While the others attempt to delude themselves with false hopes, his pride or perhaps his arrogance, lifts him above even this. Through him O'Neill gives us the best description of the place.

It's the No Chance Saloon. It's Bedrock Bar, The
End of the Line Cafe, The Bottom of the Sea Rathskeller!
Don't you notice the beautiful calm in the atmosphere?
That's because it's the last harbor. No one here has to
worry about where they're going next, because there is
no farther they can go.¹³

In addition to his role as a commentator on the lives about him he also serves as a philosophical spokesman.

As the history of the world proves, the truth has no bearing on anything. It's irrelevant and immaterial, as the lawyers say. The lie of a pipe dream is what gives

¹³Loc. cit.

life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us, drunk or sober. And that's enough philosophic wisdom to give you for one drink of rot-gut.¹⁴

Whether this is a reflection of O'Neill's own philosophy is difficult to tell but his continual infatuation with the nothingness and complete absence of meaning of life, with his refusal to consider suicide, his negation of the will to live, give him an image almost of Schopenhauer himself.

Another of the characters that O'Neill includes in his group of degenerates is the frail and forlorn gentleman by the name of James Cameron who is appropriately called Jimmy Tomorrow because of his vain attempts to remain neat and orderly for the greater days ahead. One suspects that this neatness and this order were too much for a man who is unable otherwise to reach maturity. He seeks in alcohol and in this company some form of security. He fails to face issues, he continually speaks of tomorrow, but his hope and his determination are mere delusions with which he equips himself to make life bearable. He represents one of the clear characteristics of life-negativism, frustration through the consciousness of lack. Jimmy Tomorrow likes to think of himself as a perfectionist. But realizing his own limitations, he fails to face up to reality. His name of Tomorrow is a pitiful justification for the continuation of his life.

O'Neill shows him no mercy. Even in the climactic portions of the play when opportunity apparently presents itself for Jimmy

¹⁴loc. cit.

Tomorrow to realize a re-birth, we are convinced that the substance is not there, and the one-time correspondent from England is doomed to return to the den to relive the empty promise of always doing better tomorrow.

Two members of this strange company represent the one-time orderliness and glory of the military. They are Cecil Lewis the English Army officer from England, and Piet Wetjoen, the Boer. Lewis represents the standard concept of the professional militarist who lives in past glory, and who has found in final admission to have been in truth a coward and a prude. Wetjoen and he had been at one time deadly enemies across the lines in the Boer War and Wetjoen now represents something of an ego expansion for the disillusioned Lewis. Wetjoen, opposite in physical appearance, is slovenly, disillusioned, a man of muscular strength now wasted away. But both, by maintaining their mock war, assume a stature that they know is not rightly theirs. O'Neill represents with them the true irony of the unheroic. Though they symbolize a profession which would seem in itself to be heroic, both have proved to be totally spineless, without value and without purpose--even when both are goaded into fighting we realize their insignificance by the fact that they are physically unable to carry out anything that marks a fight.

Hugo Kalmar is the typical alien radical. O'Neill inserts him into his play to show his own mark of derision for those who carry themselves under the banner of political revolution to conceal their own ineptitudes and insecurities. Kalmar is the closest

thing we have to the present non-conformist but he is as dated as the cartoon pictures of the bomb-carrying anarchists of the 1930's. Since he is outdated and since he is no longer in demand by even the most radical of his forces, Hugo membles his indignation with the stock phrases about revolution and a new world. Like all the others he is an escapist but his escapism does not go to the past. His escapism is into an imaginary future that he fully realizes can never exist. Like Chekhovian characters he talks of the coming change, of the coming realization, but his own inertia is as traditional as that found in The Three Sisters.

Dissipated youth has its representative in a character by the name of Willie Oban, an ex-Harvard graduate. He covers his own internal weakness with the pretext that he is driven to this company by the disillusionment which he found in the realization of his father's dishonesty. Like Jimmy Tomorrow, Willie Oban is convinced that any time he so desires he may return to his rightful status in the professional world, but like Jimmy Tomorrow he is deeply aware of the total absence of force necessary to bring this about. Oban would like to be thought of as an intellectual, a man whose principles rise above his concern for his own bodily comfort or his station. But Oban is only a shell of intelligence. With him O'Neill has cast the mold for the "angry young men" who find the fashion of despondency attractive and comfortable.

Among the others, the bartenders, the muscle-men of the bar itself, the natty negro, Joe Mott, the three young streetwalkers

who demand that they be called "tarts" instead of whores, O'Neill shows us at once the seamier side of life and character and those with perhaps more real value than their intellectual superiors. One might say they were born to despair and to moral degeneration and because of this are more honest about it. However, they have taken the theme of high hopes and maintained them with sham equal to that of the other occupants of Harry Hope's Saloon.

Only two disturbing elements shatter the decorum of this despondency. The one is in the young and weak character named Parritt who seeks out a former acquaintance, Larry Slade, to serve as a father-confessor for his treason toward his Mother. Parritt affords some of the small melodrama that the play receives from O'Neill. But at the same time O'Neill makes every use of him for illustration of real guilt complex. In fact, Parritt serves as something of a contrast to the group in that he, apparently, is the only one not addicted to alcohol. At the same time he is unified with the group in seeking to forget and seeking to find comfort in a world that will never move forward. His is the only overt act of final despair when he takes his own life after finding neither solace nor companionship.

Perhaps the most interesting and tragic figure of the group, one who is surrounded with almost a mystic aura, is Theodore Hickman, affectionately known as Hickey. It is Hickey who comes to celebrate his birthday once a year at Harry Hope's and with his coming spirits enliven, not because Hickey brings with him hope

for a future, but because he brings a fat wallet which can contribute a rather steady flow of free liquor. In him they see a symbol of success, a man who apparently finds solace in their company, and in exchange for the free whiskey they bestow upon him the title of honored guest. Each in his own heart feels that he could do as Hickey--celebrate, forget for a time, and then return to his successful and productive place in the world.

For a while O'Neill refuses to disclose the mystery of Hickey's motivation. We are led to believe that this is something of a lark for a man who is jolly, infatuated with the world, and affectionate toward his annual party guests. But even in him O'Neill reverses hope to eventual despair and through him he strips naked each of the characters and cruelly faces them with their utter degeneration and worthlessness. O'Neill has proved himself a master craftsman by this one reversal. The people in the bar look forward to one thing only--to Hickey's visit.

This O'Neill builds deftly and at the very height of celebration when Hickey makes his long awaited appearance he shatters the one bright spot in the entire story. Hickey, it seems, has reformed. Not only has he reformed but he has taken upon himself with missionary zeal the task of encouraging each to give up his life of desperate despair and to return to a useful and healthy place in society.

To those of us who have listened for two acts to each of the characters' assurances that a new day is possible for them, this

seems like the force necessary to bring about the change. However, it is hard to believe that O'Neill intended to fool us. By this time we are well aware that each is hopelessly entangled in the net of alcoholism and belongs to no society other than this society of the damned. Each taunted by Hickey to make a new life for himself breaks under the strain. Jimmy Tomorrow is persuaded to make one more attempt at resuming his role as a writer for a newspaper, but Jimmy Tomorrow cannot make the city editor's desk. Joe Mott screams his intention of becoming his own boss, of having his own place, and rising above the motley crew of whites with whom he has associated. Both Lewis and Wetjoen, antiques of a by-gone war, spit their hatred at each other and leave the place to show that the heroic is not dead. Willie Oban is given money to redress himself in order that he might resume his place in the legal world, and even Harry Hope, that sinner among sinners, is goaded into taking that tour around the district to begin his climb back up the political ladder.

In the final act all return. Their momentary determinations to prove their abilities to find the new life or to resume the old are shattered. They are beaten men, low in spirit and resentful. Even the whiskey does not seem to take effect. Earlier when we witnessed them in the lowest states of intoxication, and heard their pitiful bickering they did not appear as low as they do now in crawling sobriety. Hickey for the final time has shattered their confidence. He has destroyed the dream.

Before dismissing the discussion of the individual characters

in The Iceman Cometh it might be well to see where O'Neill stands in this party. It is probably that O'Neill knew many of these people personally who served as models for the assortment that he so skillfully put upon paper. But somewhere in the group must be a representative or representatives of the young O'Neill himself. Author identification through character is an enjoyable pastime for critics and has been for many years, but in a play of this nature, it would seem both tactless and senseless to attempt to identify any one character as being O'Neill. However, we are interested in what O'Neill has to say, in what O'Neill thinks, and hence we must go to our two most vocal participants in the play, Larry Slade and Theodore Hickman. From Larry we receive the articulate cynicism so evident in previous works of O'Neill and indicative of his own thinking and philosophy best revealed in the second play to be analyzed, Long Day's Journey Into Night. It is Larry only in this group who substantiates what we well know--that this is a society of men living in a "pipe dream," that their shallow beliefs in a brighter future and in worth-while lives are their only means for clinging to life, that these dreams are their private property and should not be shattered, and that the wasting of life itself is no great loss; life is nothing.

Early in the play Larry quotes two lines from the poet Heine, "Low, sleep is good; better is death; in sooth, the best of all were never to be born."¹⁵ Further he shows his superiority in the

¹⁵Loc. cit.

group by refusing to engage in his own pipe dream. In a sense he has found the peace that Hickey tries to force on the others. It is the peace of knowing that there is no pipe dream, that no hope exists and that one might as well live with his destiny. At the end of the play he re-affirms his belief. "Be God, there's no hope. I'll never be a success in the grandstand--or anywhere else--life is too much for me. I'll be a weak fool looking at the two sides of everything until the day I die. May that day come soon."¹⁶

Of the regular habitués it is only Larry Slade who shows any grave concern for the others. One of the characteristics of this play by O'Neill is the self-centered quality of each life. In this respect O'Neill has stacked the cards, since each of these persons is constantly in some degree of intoxication. But again, the exception is Larry who manages at odd moments to show some affection and some concern for those about him. This realization of his, that each man's life is the concern of us all, is the burning inside of him that he cannot quell. Even the suicide of the pitiful Parritt whom he has rejected and despised throughout the play touches some of the sympathy and some of the warmth of O'Neill himself.

In this connection it is interesting to note that Bowen reports that O'Neill attempted suicide as a young man while on one of his prolonged benders, a fact substantiated by O'Neill in his family diatribe Long Day's Journey Into Night. Only this act, however, draws

¹⁶Ibid., Act IV.

any similarity between the spineless and shallow Parritt and the author of this work.

As previously mentioned, Larry serves in the capacity of a commentator. We are more prone to take seriously his words than any other words in the play. That we must associate ourselves with one of the prize negativists in all theatre history seems rather demanding, but no other character offers the possibility. Again, it is only Larry who is able to see through the diabolical efforts of Hickey to shatter the dreams that preserve these people. He warns them of this plan, he discourages their facing reality, he damns Hickey for his cruelty. Only he is immune to the plot since he has long ago given up reality or any pretense of rebirth.

Larry is almost a professional negativist and comes closest to the teachings of Schopenhauer than any previous O'Neill character. In addition to fully realizing that pain and misery are predominant in the world, he carries the theme further by advocating no resistance to it. Like Nietzsche and Schopenhauer both, and to an extent like the later teachings of Sartre, he acknowledges that we must try to find a way to bypass the realization. For him and for his company it is alcohol. One might wonder that a man so negative, a man who possesses not even the element of a "pipe dream," would continue living. But again, like Schopenhauer, Larry does not advocate his own suicide. He welcomes death, he looks forward to death, but he intends to accomplish it in a rather false asceticism by denying the will and gradually destroying the body. If this seems strange

to the viewer he need only review Schopenhauer's essay on suicide to follow this rather distorted logic.

Since O'Neill makes Larry both the intellectual and the philosopher in the play, he serves as the only real contestant against the disturbing Hickey. Where the others show discomfort and even move toward the possibility of giving physical violence to the salesman, it is Larry who apparently holds firm in his ideas and champions the cause of the pipe-dreamer. Hickey tries to sell him on one occasion by saying,

You'll be grateful to me when all at once you find you're able to admit without feeling ashamed that all the grandstand foolosopher bunk and the waiting for the Big Sleep stuff is a pipe dream. You'll say to yourself, "I'm just an old man who is scared of life, but even more scared of ~~dy~~ing. So I'm keeping drunk and hanging on to life at any price, and what of it?" Then you'll know what real peace means, Larry, because you won't be scared of either life or death any more. You simply won't give a damn! Any more than I do!¹⁷

This apparently touches home. It indicates that perhaps Larry himself finds his pipe dream in his philosophy because his only angry retort is, "You're a liar!"¹⁸

If Larry indicates throughout the entire play that he finds no comfort in belonging to the human race, at the same time his concern for the predicament of his fellows reveals in him the spark of the humanist. Nevertheless, despondency for him is a must. He states openly his neurotic distrust of virtue. He repeats time

¹⁷Ibid., Act II.

¹⁸Loc. cit.

and again his belief that a serious effort in life is worthless and without due reward. And in finding an audience among this sorry staff he attains his own real sense of belonging. Perhaps this is what O'Neill is trying to tell us in the whole play, that each man should find some way of belonging, and that this should not be violated no matter how low it may seem. Were this all that O'Neill told us, were we able to find some motive other than the self-centered motive for each, we might be more concerned about the outcome of the individuals.

As for Hickey, perhaps no other character in all of O'Neill's plays has received the pre-entrance build-up that this man has. He attains almost the stature of a demi-God by the time he makes his appearance. To those in Harry Hope's Saloon he represents, first, a prolonged handout and, secondly, something of the symbol of themselves, for Hickey is a man who leads an apparently normal and productive life most of the year, returning only annually to engage in his pastime of drinking and carousing with his friends. This represents to them, again, the breaking of the routine, the momentary chance of elevation of status in that they are the concern of someone who is comparatively successful.

Hickey's one deep sorrow is the obligation he must bear because of a forgiving wife. But this time when O'Neill brings him before us he has a greater and deeper sorrow within him. Hickey has murdered his wife, a fact unknown to his colleagues, and realizing that he must soon go away for good, he takes this opportunity as a last effort to shatter them from their lethargy of dreams. As a

supreme example, he does not touch whiskey. As time goes on a pall falls over the expected celebration. Each is forced to face reality. Each is forced to prove his contention that life can be successful, and this each resents. The prostitutes battle among themselves, the men grow petulant and uneasy, and as each is forced into leaving the saloon and taking up a new life the hatred grows deeper.

But Hickey is a master psychologist. He knows that no one can return to any other life because each is beyond rejuvenation. His motive is not a motive of evil. What he attempts is to bring them what he considers final peace. But with their delusions gone he feels they can settle down to a contentment of their lives. Hickey states,

Oh, I know how you resent the way I have to show you up to yourself. I don't blame you. I know from my own experience it's bitter medicine facing yourself in the mirror with the old false whiskers off, but you forget that once you're cured.¹⁹

Fortunately, this crew represents a rather small segment of any society. But a larger theme may be implied. Were this same clinical approach made to all people who are suffering from stasis or despair, who retreat from reality, who find escapism in some form of non-productive dream, the social chaos would be staggering. This Dionysian insertion into any life that may have contentment falls short of any purpose that could even be construed as being near the Puritan ethic. Such critics of our modern society as Packard, Kluckho'm, and Reeseman have pointed out the desirability in modern

¹⁹Loc. cit.

times for gaining early security, frequently at the expense of success and even ambition. To find a niche fairly high up, to abide in that niche, and to ride out the days without disturbance, according to them, seem to be a mark of the post-war American young man. Certainly, this accusation must be discouraging in itself, and is probably resented by members of the younger generation. No one likes to be accused of having lost his will. But if O'Neill is saying that meaningless life can only be enjoyed when one puts away his last hopes he is teaching us a pessimistic lesson. If he is saying that life can only be bearable if accompanied with pipe dreams, he is preaching a most unusual form of security.

In the last act of the play when the members of the damned crawl back to the saloon, Hickey addresses them.

Don't you know you're free now to be yourselves without having to feel remorse or guilt, or lie to yourselves about reforming tomorrow? Can't you see there is no tomorrow now? You're rid of it forever. You've killed it. You don't have to care a damn about anything any more. You've finally got the game of life licked. Don't you see that?²⁰

But low and will-less as they are they cannot see it. They need a two-way escape. Not only the escape of the dark barroom and the alcohol but also a means of escaping from this place itself, and that means is only in their dreams.

Two of O'Neill's statements disturb us relative to the values of this play. The first is in the line of Larry himself in Act I

²⁰Ibid., Act IV.

who, in describing these people states, "They manage to get drunk by hook or crook and keep their pipe dreams, and that's all they ask of life. I've never known more contented men."²¹ O'Neill seems to be advocating that contentment should be left alone, that it is not a matter of value attainment whatsoever, but rather the act of being able to live in a world of this sort. More perplexing are the instructions he gave to the cast of this play, in attempting to clarify the extraordinary behavior of the habitués of the saloon and the meaning behind their deeply troubled words: "Revenge is a subconscious motive for the individual's behavior with the rest of society. Revulsion drives a man to tell others of his sins It is the furies within us that destroy us."²²

It is true that in this play a considerable amount of revulsion occurs. Each man seems to fluctuate between the boasting of his capabilities and the confessing of his own sins of a lethargic and wasted life. The revenge, however, seems to be all Hickey's. Hickey may represent the last pressures of conformity in the puritan sense. At the same time he may represent a strong nonconformist in attempting to find contentment for them with what he calls the peace of confession. This is extremely reminiscent of the Dadists following World War I who destroyed not only the conformity that surrounded

²¹Ibid., Act I.

²²Bowen, op. cit., (citing Eugene O'Neill's explanation to the cast of The Iceman Cometh), p. 30.

them but refused to put in their place any values of their own.

Without moving far into the analysis of the current popular non-conformists, the "beats," we may find some similarity in the preachings of this play and in their refusal to adhere to productive life.

In summation, O'Neill has given us in The Iceman Cometh two strong characteristics of life-negation. The first is the delineation of his own experience with Nietzschean and Schopenhauer philosophy. It is a sad, morbid, depressing tale, without hope and even without a lesson. He reports with great detail all of the characteristics of negativism. Secondly, he has refused to point them up to us as an undesirable course of action of philosophy.

Perhaps more disturbing, however, than his mere reporting of pessimism and the life of nothingness is the second point. Had O'Neill corrected for us or had he shown that one who lives and dreams alone lives within misery, he might have afforded a more moral conclusion for the story. Perhaps even if the men themselves had made a serious effort to change, to find a more gratifying way of life, and in seeking had fallen, this, too, would have helped. Or even had O'Neill taken his master Threnodist and moved him in a direction of some realization of his own flaw and his own delusion we might have gained from the play. But O'Neill chose to do none of these. He takes the low and shoves them lower. There is no rising in their character, no rising in their action, and with his central philosopher he refuses to have him budged by the lessons

that are played before him. Of all the plays that will be analyzed for this theme this will appear to be the most complete in reflecting the major philosophies of despair.

By the time The Iceman Cometh had opened on Broadway in 1946 the theatre world had worked itself into a state of real excitement. There had been an O'Neill drought for twelve years, twelve years in which not one of his plays had entered the Broadway stage and the serious theatre critics around New York were anxiously awaiting the return of America's major playwright. It is interesting to note that in the twelve years that separated Days Without End and The Iceman Cometh the world had experienced more activity and change than in any previous period of history. In our own country we had weathered the crisis of the great depression, social and political reforms previously mentioned had taken hold, the free world had been challenged and rose in a great war to defend against the tyranny of totalitarianism and finally, man had unveiled his great monument to his own folly above the blackened cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What did this mean to O'Neill? Or was the theatre world to expect so soon commentary of a different nature from a man who wrote mostly in the past?

To pretend that this play was a total surprise would have been most false on the part of the critics for prior to the play's opening they had a general idea of the story and the setting of O'Neill's famous barroom plot. They were also aware of the fact that it was written about an early stage of the dramatist's own life

and, therefore, could do little in terms of a commentary about World War II or the horrible prospects of the aftermath. Yet, it would seem reasonable with the maturing of a nation that one of its leading spokesmen might also mature somewhat in his thought. Was the new play to serve as a strengthening and an affirmation of life, a guide for the conduct of man sorely in need of right direction or was it to be more of the same nihilism that in the words of Joseph Wood Krutch was "more modish twenty years ago than it is today"?²³

The expectations were well rewarded. Not that the story nor the theme nor the characters seemed vastly different from those previously found in the play structures of O'Neill, but simply that O'Neill had written and produced a play and had once again re-opened the controversy between his staunch supporters and his equally staunch detractors. Further, this play of about four and one-half hours in length and seventeen characters in depth offered much for the critics to deal with.

The immediate newspaper response was mostly affirmative. Generally everyone recognized the O'Neill near hit or near miss to real tragedy. Some praised the poetry, questioned the theme or the plot development. Others acknowledged the emotional impact, but doubted that the poetic label would be deserving. Nearly everyone who saw the production again acknowledged that the craftsman O'Neill had written a drama both playable and dramatic, one that dealt with

²³Joseph Wood Krutch, Review of "The Iceman Cometh," Nation, Vol. CLXIII, Oct. 26, 1946, p. 481.

the tragic sense of life and dealt so well that if it was not poetic at least it was deserving of poetry.

Again, as had been the case for nearly twenty-five years, criticism was not to end with the journalists. New books dealing with American theatre invariable mentioned The Iceman Cometh as a landmark, pro or con, and seven years later, after the death of O'Neill, comment was to be revived again. And finally, with the appearance in 1956 of Long Day's Journey Into Night this tragedy of the barroom was again revived for comment.

Criticism shall always go on about O'Neill, and since this play is certainly considered to be one of his major efforts it will be included in any discussions. It is almost impossible to read any criticism of O'Neill through the years, whether in journalistic form or in more careful and studied analysis, without finding some discussion of the dramatist's philosophy of life and the nature of his despair. One of his staunch supporters, Joseph Wood Krutch, in evaluating the true tragic stature of O'Neill concluded that Strindbergian nihilism

. . . with its insistence that existence is merely painful and that from human life no conclusion is to be drawn except that men are pitiable creatures, is in some respect the very antithesis of the tragic spirit. For the tragic spirit is always sustained by the conviction that to be a man is a terrible privilege but a privilege nevertheless The Iceman Cometh . . . seems to suggest that the tension has relaxed somewhat and comes dangerously close not only to misanthropy but to mere despair.²⁴

²⁴Joseph Wood Krutch, "O'Neill's Tragic Sense," American Scholar, Vol. XVI, No. 3. (Summer, 1947), p. 289.

Eric Bentley, a critic who has frequently acknowledged the historical value of O'Neill, but just as frequently denied him the place of greatness, was even more outspoken. "O'Neill's formula . . . is; all good forces are those of love and life, all bad forces are those of hate and death . . . The Iceman Cometh portrays only the forces of hate and death."²⁵

Richard Watts, Jr. in the New York Post on the morning following the opening perhaps did more to pinpoint the real negativism of the play than any other critic. That he did this while defending the author's theme is real critical irony.

He (O'Neill) is merely proclaiming the humanitarian doctrine that mankind being lost and lonely in a hard and bitter world is entitled to some sort of illusion to comfort it in exile, even if that illusion can be supplied only by alcohol and that the best intentioned meddler interferes with this right at his own peril.²⁶

Such reasoning might well be termed dangerous by Alcoholics Anonymous. Rosamond Gilder in Theatre Arts was less apologetic and described O'Neill's ultimate meaning as, "Blind, besotted, and misguided, man haunted by death lives by lies."²⁷

Kippo Phelan who was critical of the play as well as of the philosophy and who was inconsiderate enough to count the number of times O'Neill had used the phrase pipe dreams in his play (42 times)

²⁵Eric Bentley, "The Return of Eugene O'Neill," Atlantic Monthly, Vol. CLXXVIII (November, 1946), p. 66.

²⁶Richard Watts, Jr., in the New York Post, October 10, 1946.

²⁷Rosamond Gilder, "Broadway in Review," Theatre Arts, Vol. XXX (December, 1946), p. 684.

thought it little more than the religion of drink. "In his compassion, in his constant cry after God, O'Neill has steadily invented rather than learned."²⁸

In The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill by Edwin A. Engel, the author pinpoints the death-love of Eugene O'Neill.

In The Iceman Cometh there is neither poignant yearning nor feverish quest. In this painless purgatory, not love and peace, but peace alone is the central human need. And it is being satisfied for most of the derelicts from the opening curtain. O'Neill proposed three ways in which men can find peace: through dream, drunkenness, or death. Life is endured only with the aid of the pipe dream and the bottle. Deprived of these, men begin to die. But once they are reconciled to death, it, too, brings peace.²⁹

Edmund Gagey in reviewing the drama of the decade believed, "It is evident that The Iceman Cometh presents an O'Neill sobered by experience, a step further in philosophical disillusionment"³⁰

And finally, Eric Bentley, again in his review of the 1954 season, found the second production of The Iceman Cometh no greater than the first. Of O'Neill's infatuation with the theme he says, "As most of the characters represent the same thing why couldn't at least half of them have been omitted. Would the temptation be

²⁸Kappo Phelan, "The Iceman Cometh," Commonweal, Vol. XLV (October 25, 1946), p. 46.

²⁹Engel, op. cit., p. 280.

³⁰Edmond M. Gagey, Revolution In American Drama (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), p. 67.

too great to omit the other half too I saw nothing on Broadway this season that was more oppressively dull than The Iceman Cometh.³¹

Such criticisms, perhaps, do little but confirm what every extensive reader of O'Neill has already known--that O'Neill rarely wrote about the pretty side of life or the optimistic outlook for the human race. In the words of Crosswell Bowen, ". . . he came to believe that man is doomed, that free will or no, he moves inexorably to destruction."³² And which Brooks Atkinson a few years after O'Neill's death so nicely described as "infatuation with oblivion."³³

On the other hand, if O'Neill's right to picture the unpretty side of life is defended it will be necessary to seek whatever causal factors the author may supply. Perhaps it is traditional in literature that if an author writes optimistically or about the happier side of life in the ultimate of romantic tradition, he is never challenged to support his outlook; but let him write of the seamier side of life or that story which does not for some reason end happily or productively and we will accept it only after an explanation. Such bias may stem from our traditions in moral code or our traditions in religious outlook, or possibly

³¹Eric Bentley, In Search of Theatre (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), p. 2.

³²Bowen, op. cit., p. 18.

³³Ibid., p. 26 (quoting Brooks Atkinson).

may come from the traditional concept that "a human life is the rarest, most complex, most precious of all the prizes in the universe,"³⁴ and as such must not be rejected by an author without just cause.

Despite realism's replacement of romanticism and despite the absence of the heroic, our mass culture dictated to by the mediums of movies and television has been proliferated by the most blatant of escapist and pseudo-heroic material. For them, no explanation is necessary other than man's eternal appetite for escapism and entertainment, but material dealing with social, political and human problems must be put together carefully with cause a necessary part.

In The Iceman Cometh all of the characteristics of Schopenhauer despondency are present. Much more so, it may be added, than the defiant, somewhat heroic, willed power of Nietzschean philosophy. One might **describe** the play as a representation of pure despondency made fashionable, of romanticism, of despair, of morbidity **concluded** by a group of derelicts all of whom had been exposed to a recent reading of Schopenhauer, DeCessares or several plays of Chekhov, Strindberg, and Tollar. As previously reported, O'Neill offered "revenge" as the causal factor. At close examination, however, it would seem that revenge was much too salty a passion for the will-less group that O'Neill put together. At best their revenge is against Hickey, who may for a moment seem to represent meddlesome

³⁴Norman Cousins, an editorial in Saturday Review, June 11, 1960, p. 22.

society, but the ultimate revenge--Hickey's breakdown confession and elimination--seems less appealing to the group than their permission to return to the static world of pipe dreams and alcohol. The second portion of O'Neill's explanation pertaining to revulsion and confession is most revealing. In his mystic concept of the internal furies, whether they come from the supernatural or from the revelations of a psychological age, he does, at any rate, explain why so many of his characters in so many of his plays are preoccupied with this activity. Certainly in The Iceman Cometh we have an excellent example of a drama of open confession. In the Catholic concept of self-purgation through confession this would seem to be almost a moral approach to man's problem in the world. But confession, even in this traditional Christian sense, must carry with it a determination or a hope for change and rarely in O'Neill do we find confession serving in this respect. Confession is the very heart of Strange Interlude. It is almost a form of prayer in The Great God Brown. It is the ever revealing force in a later biographical drama of O'Neill's family, and finally it serves as a key to the whole story in the less fortunate play A Moon for the Misbegotten. It is interesting to note at this point that the four O'Neill plays which appear following World War II, The Iceman Cometh, A Moon for the Misbegotten, A Touch of the Poet, and Long Day's Journey Into Night, all find their key in varying degrees of confession, and all confessions are made in the company of alcohol. It is somewhat paradoxical that O'Neill's naturalism is manifested only by that which is anti-natural to man. It would be

stretching a point to say that O'Neill is showing that alcohol is a cause for man's misery in the world. One would be more inclined to say that it is a reflection and an outgrowth of misery, but one certainly may conclude that it is at any event a cause for revelation within his plays. Alcohol further assists in bringing out the heart of any confession which is the guilt complex, a theme which permeates all of O'Neill's drama, and secondly, if in our more conventional outlook we fail to appreciate the low level of attainment of these characters, we must nevertheless acknowledge that they all seek some recognition within the low level of their own society. In Modernism in Modern Drama Krutch points out that:

From the earliest one act plays of the sea down at least to Mourning Becomes Electra his most nearly heroic figures have always been those who like Yank in The Hairy Ape or Ephreim Cabot in Desire Under the Elms belonged to something larger than themselves which confers dignity and importance upon them.³⁵

But in The Iceman Cometh no heroic figure emerges from the play and the belonging certainly confers no dignity to any one of them.

That these men are products of their time is another dangerous assumption. On the surface one would think that they were more the products of O'Neill's philosophy. Although the play was written in 1939 and 1940, like all of O'Neill's later plays he chose to go back to an age more familiar to him. Nothing of the changing world of America is, therefore, reported in the conduct and the melodrama of The Iceman Cometh. That O'Neill lives in the past will be

³⁵Krutch, Modernism in Modern Drama, p. 118.

discussed at greater length at the conclusion of this chapter, but it is significant to point out that even in his last two plays, A Moon for the Misbegotten and A Touch of the Poet written during and after World War II, O'Neill totally ignores the consequences of the Thirties and the great conflict. To the end he adheres to the internal struggles of man, the larger and the more universal theme as he saw it. But his causes or his courses of action are even less clear than some of his major thoughts revealed in The Hairy Ape, The Great God Brown, and Strange Interlude. Were any of these plays large enough to include the heroic struggle of man striving after dignity, they might be elevated to a comparison of the Greek tragic theme, but such personages and such struggle is absent. On the other hand, were O'Neill chiefly concerned with the universal quality, it is hard to understand why he would ignore the complexity of the human predicament during the early Thirties and the Forties. Either he lacked the ability to cope with major crises or else chose to ignore them completely in preference for a continuation of the themes: faith versus despair, life versus death. Indicative of his disdain for modern problems was a comment he made during the rehearsal of portions of the first production of The Iceman Cometh.

I hope to resume writing as soon as I can, but the war has thrown me completely off base and I have to get back to it again. I have to get back to a sense of writing being worth while. In fact, I'd have to pretend The war helped me realize that I was putting my faith in the old values and they're

gone. It's very sad, but there are no values to live by today. Anything is permissible if you know the angles.³⁶

At another time O'Neill put more clearly his rejection of the problem of his age by saying, ". . . I feel full of hope these days. For noting the way the world wags I am sure that man has definitely decided to destroy himself and this seems to me the only true wise decision he has ever made."³⁷

Eric Bentley's statement about O'Neill that he ". . . felt his 'belonging' to his country so deeply that he took its errors to heart, and though admittedly he wished his plays to be universal, they all start at home; they are specifically a criticism of American life,"³⁸ needs more explanation than Bentley gives it, for had O'Neill truly been concerned about the problems of his country he would have written about more pertinent material than a bar in 1912, a summer cottage in the same year, and a farm house in 1923. Occasionally, he does show some concern for the loss of old values but they cannot be pinpointed much more than an occasional reference and a stacking of the cards against "Standard Oil Men." Bentley further admits the perplexity of O'Neill's thesis by saying, "The idea of big work lured him out into territory where his sensibility is entirely inoperative,"³⁹

³⁶Bowen, op. cit., quoting Eugene O'Neill, p. 311.

³⁷Engels, op. cit., quoting Eugene O'Neill, p. 278.

³⁸Bentley, op. cit., p. 221.

³⁹Ibid., p. 231.

and then adds, "If one does not like O'Neill it is not really he that one dislikes, it is our age of which, like the rest of us, he was more the victim than the master."⁴⁰

No one can deny the tragic sense of O'Neill in The Iceman Cometh, nor can he deny the emotional impact from the play itself, but when all of the characters re-enter the world of alcoholic dreams and the curtain falls, the philosophical negation is undeniable.

LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

"The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates."⁴¹ If T.S. Eliot is correct, this maxim seriously reduces O'Neill's artistic accomplishment in the last of his plays, Long Day's Journey Into Night. Written one year after The Iceman Cometh and probably revised several times prior to its official copyright, this drama of the O'Neill family reflects the same vein of life negation and despair apparent in other of his major works. That it is more economically constructed, that it is a more unified play, that it deals with characters both more plausible and more real, and that its impact exceeds that of The Iceman Cometh earns for it an equally careful examination of its philosophical content. And

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 234.

⁴¹T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent," Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), pp. 7-8.

finally, that it exceeds in the tragic sense the two other plays written in the same period of his life, A Moon for the Misbegotten and A Touch of the Poet, requires further analysis of its tragic value.

It is common knowledge that Long Day's Journey Into Night is an autobiographical play, one that the author created as such and one that critics and biographers readily recognized and anticipated. It is equally common knowledge that O'Neill requested that it be both unpublished and unproduced for a period of twenty-five years following his death. At the discretion of his widow, however, this waiting period was reduced to three years. Its power helped erase the criticism of the ineffective and highly sordid A Moon for the Misbegotten, a play which did not stand the trial of off-Broadway production. Even A Touch of the Poet, generally considered to be a theatrically effective play and one that was warmly praised by both book and theatre critics, did not reach the high level of Long Day's Journey Into Night.

The fact that the play is autobiographical makes it doubly interesting to a nation so aware of O'Neill's prime position in our theatre. The reality of this work becomes indisputable. What biographers had been saying in the late years of O'Neill's life and after his death was now substantiated by the departed artist himself. It is perhaps the most revealing of all personal confessions in dramatic literature, for like most of O'Neill's work it suggests

little and shows all; and the theme of the negation of life strides through the play with unmistakable certainty.

One might simplify such a philosophical discussion by saying that Long Day's Journey Into Night is a real life exemplification of Schopenhauer's description of tragedy, quoted earlier on page 15 of this study: struggle and woe for the purpose of revealing to the tragic characters the true nature of the world, ". . . to sense the nothingness of all life on earth . . . what the hero atones for is, indeed, inherited sin in the deepest sense, the guilt of existence itself"42 The inherited sin factor, long a strong element in O'Neill's plays--Mourning Becomes Electra, Strange Interlude, Days Without End--touches the Catholic influence in his life and restirs the conflict between Christian faith and paganism. In fact, had the resolution of this play found anything that approached atonement or salvation in the theological sense this family exemplification might have taken on larger and greater universal meaning. But O'Neill does little to let us forget that this is an isolated family, that the analysis of this family is totally subjective by one of its members.

As with The Iceman Cometh the conduct and the predicament of its characters do not seem to deviate from any norm simply because no norm is permitted to be shown. That this is a struggle, and a pathetic struggle, cannot be denied. But its conclusions seem more in the school of the Schopenhauer thought than in the yea-saying and

⁴²Adams, op. cit., p. 23.

affirmation of Nietzsche. It is more totally resigned and pessimistic than violent and Dionysian. At times in the play it is felt that the author is trying to expose the dark and evil forces of life in order to rally his family's fight against them, whether they are successful or not, but this affirmative struggle never quite comes off. Neither faith nor hope, neither strength nor desire, stand up to the irrevocable conclusions that he draws: that life is without value, that struggle is senseless. The affirmation and defiance that we find in Desire Under the Elms and in The Hairy Ape and in Lazarus Laughed is never apparent in either The Iceman Cometh or Long Day's Journey Into Night. It is almost as though the guilt that O'Neill had felt throughout his life had weighed heavier and heavier through the years, culminating in this final confession. Harold Clurman writing in Nation, stated this proposition:

The family's Catholicism is not so much a faith as a guilt. Because he feels guilt, O'Neill shifts between a self-pity which he despises and a burning blame which he keeps trying in his plays (and his whole work) to fight off. The accusation of his own guilt and obsessive desire to purge himself of it through blame nags at him: hence, the repetitiousness of phrases and scenes; it is a planned repetitiousness wearisome to the reader . . . but organic to the author.⁴³

In Long Day's Journey Into Night, whether one is reading the play or seeing it in production, this repetitiousness of guilt alternating from character to character builds into a frenzy of final conflict, denunciation and confession. In The Iceman Cometh the

⁴³Harold Clurman, "The O'Neills," Nation, Vol. CLXXXII (March 3, 1956), p. 183.

guilt and the resultant degradation seem to stem from the family of man, at least represented by seventeen varied characters in the piece, but in Long Day's Journey Into Night the family is real--one that we know something about and one that enables us to share in the common experience of what Henry Hewes calls, ". . . the hopeless feeding of life on old arguments and old offenses." It is as he states, "A family's collective failure."⁴⁴ This common ground that we feel with O'Neill's family thus brings about a more universal appeal than this society of alcoholics and misfits in The Iceman Cometh. It also brings about a more embarrassing witnessing of the family's strong feelings and confessions. Because the people are real, because worth is implied we, therefore, share somewhat in the same vital concern for the participants as we did in Chekhov's The Three Sisters or in Ibsen's Ghosts, and over it all one sees the bowed image of the author himself. "His chief, one might almost say his only, purpose was revelation of himself to himself."⁴⁵

A second value in tragic participation in this play as opposed to The Iceman Cometh can be found in the believability of the people themselves. Granted that this is enhanced greatly by our knowledge of the O'Neill family, nevertheless, it would stand the test were we not familiar at all with either the author or his past

⁴⁴Henry Hewes, "O'Neill: 100 Proof--Not a Blend," Saturday Review, Vol. XXXIX (November 24, 1956), p. 30.

⁴⁵Harold Clurman, "Theatre," Nation, Vol. CLXXXIII (November 24, 1956), p. 466.

family relationships. O'Neill is almost tender and remorseful as he stands each of the characters before us, and slowly but completely strips him naked. One cannot help but feel the combined love and hatred that O'Neill had for his father, even though he pictures him as a self-centered, materialistic, and greedy human. So, too, with his brother James, who is forced in the conclusion to cry his defiance at the world as he reveals the painful jealousy that he bears his younger brother. In the mother we find the character who is acted upon rather than acting; the character of loneliness, the character of maladjustment; woman, weak and innocent, wronged by those she loved and those who love her.

And finally appears the admission by the young Edmond, O'Neill himself, of his own despair in failure to find purpose in life and failure to find any ease for his guilt. O'Neill at once pictures himself as Schopenhauer's character of "fashion of despondency," of Schopenhauer's character of "death-wish" and "longing for oblivion." O'Neill does more than acknowledge this. He further shows the frustration of a poet who knows that he lacks the poet's tongue. As in The Iceman Cometh illusion plays a strong part. In Long Day's Journey Into Night alcohol and pipe dreaming are only secondary illusions. It is the illusion this time of family relationship and the faith that is implied with it.

Practically every critic came away deeply moved by the play's emotional impact and by the late author's personal confession.

Practically all of them saw the undertone of philosophical pessimism and life negation.

Brooks Atkinson: Scene by scene the tragedy moves along with a remorseless beat that becomes hypnotic as though this were life lived on the brink of oblivion.⁴⁶

Robert Coleman: It is a vivid, harrowing study of twisted, frustrated and hate-ridden people.⁴⁷

Gilbert Seldes: . . . the primal cause is the primal curse . . . they were misbegotten.⁴⁸

Stephen Whicher: Man can live by illusions, O'Neill says, and he can live by faith which is probably the same thing, but ultimately neither is any good.⁴⁹

Richard Hayes: . . . it may well be the saddest play in our literature for this stage.⁵⁰

In dramatic techniques as well as theme there are both similarities and differences between The Iceman Cometh and Long Day's Journey Into Night. Perhaps the favorite device of O'Neill is the use of the confession to bring about his theme and develop his plot. In both plays these come usually as an outgrowth of argument in which the major conflict is built almost to a peak and then is made anticlimactic by the startling confession of one or both of the partic-

⁴⁶Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: Tragic Journey," The New York Times, Nov. 9, 1956.

⁴⁷Robert Coleman, in the Daily Mirror, November 8, 1956.

⁴⁸Gilbert Seldes, "Long Day's Journey Into Night," Saturday Review, Vol. XXXIX (February 25, 1956), p. 15.

⁴⁹Stephen Whicher, "O'Neill's Long Journey," Commonweal, Vol. LXIII (March 16, 1956), p. 615.

⁵⁰Richard Hayes, "Waiting for Hickey," Commonweal, Vol. LXIV (August 24, 1956), p. 516.

ipants. This was true when Hickey faced the occupants of the Hell Hole with their own shortcomings and challenged them to better things. It was at this point that the rising action in the drama really took hold, but just as the play was about to terminate in physical conflict between the two forces, suddenly confession enters, and the play settles to a new plateau. In Long Day's Journey Into Night confession is not only the chief revelation of the real characters being played before us, but is also the core of emotional impact. In the last act one of the most bitter scenes of the play has Jamie confessing to his younger brother who is about to enter a sanitarium that he is partially responsible for his own brother's grief because of a burning jealousy within him, that filial love is present but that it is secondary to his hate.

What I wanted to say is, I'd like to see you become the greatest success in the world, but you'd better be on your guard because I'll do my damndest to make you fail. Can't help it. I hate myself. Got to take revenge. On everyone else. Especially you . . . I'll be waiting to welcome you with my old pal stuff and give you the glad-hand, and at the first good chance I get stab you in the back.⁵¹

Again, as in *The Iceman Cometh*, these confessions are lubricated with alcohol. Although it does not seem an essential portion of the character, it is nevertheless the handiest device that O'Neill has on hand. Stephen Whicher in *Commonweal* describes it: "As the night and the fog close in, the characters struggle toward honesty, helped on by whiskey, which O'Neill uses here as elsewhere

⁵¹Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), Act IV.

as a kind of truth serum. What they reach is a hopeless resignation, helpless love, and a longing for death."⁵²

In further comparing the two plays it is evident that O'Neill sets up both character relationships and situations to help systematize his own philosophy of despair. Although confessions and arguments are the most obvious devices employed for this purpose, other O'Neill techniques are just as easily discernible. In both plays we find the mood of setting doing much to anticipate the morbid proceedings and the pessimistic conclusions that are to follow. In this respect O'Neill is a master of detail, just as he has been accused of overstating main points in the theses of his dramas, he has also been accused of over-describing characters and over-describing setting. One must admit, however, that a scenic artist can find little trouble in ascertaining the playwright's mental picture of the arena for his tragedies, and he does this with not only the objective description of the physical characteristics of the settings but with mood detail that leaves little doubt of what is to be expected. A portion of the opening description of the living room of James Tyrone's summer home illustrates this.

Against the wall between the doorways is a small bookcase, with a picture of Shakespeare above it, containing novels by Balzac, Zola, Stendhal, philosophical and sociological works by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Engels, Kropotkin, Max Sterner, plays by Ibsen,

⁵²Whicher, loc. cit.

Shaw, Strindberg, poetry by Swinburne, Rossetti, Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Kipling, etc.⁵³

Kipling's romantic heroes of the mystic East must find strange companionship on these shelves.

Where the general feeling of the setting of The Iceman Cometh is one of degradation, filth and darkness, the setting of the Tyrone summer home is by comparison palatial and joyous. O'Neill opens his play in the morning, "Sunshine comes through the windows at right."⁵⁴ In fact, the whole play opens on a rather joyous and sensually delightful note. There is physical attraction about its people, they have an appetite for breakfast and the fog is gone, but the word fog makes its entry only for the first time, and to show the instability of this contented and affirmative atmosphere O'Neill warns of what is to come by putting it against a background of the morbid darkness and the mysticism of the sea. Just as he used the phrase pipe dream innumerable times in The Iceman Cometh, O'Neill lets the words fog and fog-horn serve as a staccato symbol throughout the entire production. O'Neill readers will be aware that he found continual use of mood and mystery symbol about the old davia sea and the fog that descended upon it. In this script he employs the words fog or fog-horn no less than 31 times.

There are other similarities between the plays to bring about

⁵³O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night, Act I.

⁵⁴Loc. cit.

the philosophical intent. The frequent quoting of poetry of despair by the inhabitants of both settings perhaps does much to replace O'Neill's own poetic inadequacies. Another similarity is the emphasis upon the illusions of life. This has been the prime quality of the theme in The Iceman Cometh as we have observed, but the illusion of love, the illusion of family relationship, the illusion of faith, are more subtle illusions that O'Neill brings out in the latter play. Whereas the faiths espoused in The Iceman Cometh seem almost like liturgical chants to the religion of drink, the faiths of Long Day's Journey Into Night strive for greater purpose and for greater dignity. The consequence of their eventual lack of success makes the work seem more tragic to us.

The last similarity of the two works in connection with the philosophical theme comes in the saturation of pain and suffering throughout the plays. The occasional release in The Iceman Cometh stems from short bits of humor, sensual delight and surges of melodramatic action. To an extent this is true in Long Day's Journey Into Night: the dope addiction of the mother, the wracking cough of the tubercular Edmond, the guilt and despair of the drunken Jamie, and the frustration of a lost art by a man who realized too late that material values are meagre comfort.

Part of the differences between the two plays has already been noted--the first being the worthiness of the characters and our concern for them in the O'Neill family as opposed to the almost impersonal qualities of the habitués of the saloon. There is a stronger

sense of tragedy in the second play, as well. A stronger realization of the basic flaws in each family member which will eventuate his downfall; and finally, a stronger feeling of the forces of fate that work toward the sorrowful conclusion. Whereas, The Iceman Cometh tries to hammer home its point with the illustrations of life at its lowest in the Gorki-Hauptmann tradition, the twisted family of O'Neill moves more gradually and more eloquently toward the culmination of its suffering. "Inexorably the long day moves into night; time has found you out and brought all your pride to a thought of dust; a curtain falls forever between you and your true self and everything you want it to be."⁵⁵

Richard Hayes points out that both The Iceman Cometh and Long Day's Journey Into Night ". . . stupify with the potency of their pain, the massive concentration of their solitude and intent, no escape is possible from them into style, rhetoric, grace, or even meaning. One is fixed to these rigid structures in a terrible intimacy of torment."⁵⁶ It is evident in both cases that time itself will bring no relief or brighter vision, that life will continue in a fluctuation of temporary bright hopes and sensual enjoyment on one hand and remorse and guilt on the other. "But," Mr. Hayes continues, "The Iceman Cometh in its immemorial figures are 'mathematical demonstrations of nothingness' while the smaller, more human, more

⁵⁵Richard Hayes, "A Requiem for Morality," Commonweal, Vol. LXIV (February 1, 1957), p. 467.

⁵⁶Hayes, "Waiting for Hickey," p. 515.

personal family of Long Day's Journey Into Night 'sits in ceremonial postures of horror about one of the tables of eternity'."⁵⁷

In the case of The Iceman Cometh cold analysis might ascertain that coupled with the basic weaknesses of character are the strange social factors that are employed. One might almost say that this is a temperance play, but in Long Day's Journey Into Night social accounting is almost incidental. O'Neill makes little pretense that his family is the victim of any age or any society. He contends a more universal problem. "Is there really, as O'Neill believed, a heart of darkness within the human soul which some find and some do not."⁵⁸

Unfortunately, for the tragic values of the play, O'Neill has failed to find sufficient of the heroic in himself or in any members of his family to really bring about complete tragic quality. His characters in the classical sense are far short of regality and in the modern sense are non-representative of any society. They are not struggling to overcome the evils of their age, they are not the "little man" struggling to find a place of dignity in the world, and in fairness to O'Neill he conscientiously avoids placing himself in an heroic structure. He may solicit our sympathies for his pathetic bewilderment and possibly for the youth he had to experience, but he is not saying, live with me and my valiant struggles and feel cleansed of your own sins. Richard Watts, Jr. in his review strove hard to

⁵⁷Loc. cit.

⁵⁸Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Rediscovery of Eugene O'Neill," New York Times Magazine, October 21, 1956, p. 75.

justify the label of tragedy by a rather illogical misuse of the word heroic. He stated, ". . . because all four of its chief characters are almost heroic figures in their frank weakness, they achieve a genuinely tragic stature."⁵⁹ Such logic would open the gates to heroic tragedy for practically every one of our contemporary melodramatic soap operas in the field of television and radio.

Earlier it was stated that O'Neill had practically systematized his philosophy of despair in the course of these later plays. To exemplify this in Long Day's Journey Into Night one can see every characteristic of philosophical pessimism. O'Neill's threnodistic delights are pointed out by his mother in the second scene of the second act.

Such morbid nonsense! Saying you're going to die!
It's the books you read! Nothing but sadness and
death! Your father shouldn't allow you to have them.
And some of the poems you've written yourself are
even worse! You'd think you didn't want to live!
A boy of your age with everything before him! It's
just a pose you get out of books!⁶⁰

It is true that Mary in this scene is confused in her panic and in her refusal to face the reality of her own son's sickness, but Edmond himself defends his serious longing for death by telling of his own suicide attempt in the last act. His father claims that "It was a game of romance and adventure to you. It was play."

⁵⁹Richard Watts, in the New York Post, November 8, 1956.

⁶⁰O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night, Act II, Sc. ii.

Edmond's reply is, "Yes, particularly the time I tried to commit suicide at Jimmy the Priest's, and almost did."⁶¹ O'Neill himself has substantiated this fact in interview and it appears in various biographical works. But to include the fact in his own play, and with a touch of pride connected with it, reveals more to us of O'Neill's compulsion for death.

Again the conflict enters between this pessimistic and anti-Christian thought and the pagan death-wish. Tyrone ends the argument by stating, "Don't start your damned atheist morbidness again! I don't care to listen."⁶² O'Neill suggests that even in the pitiful life of his mother this same controversy raged. In the third act as she is about to succumb once again to an urge for narcotics, she says, longingly, "I hope, sometime, without meaning it, I will take an overdose. I never could do it deliberately. The Blessed Virgin would never forgive me, then."⁶³

The other symptoms of life negation include the moral and spiritual cynicism, the weightiness of time, the unfulfilled want as a kernel of suffering, and the escapism by living in the past. Although there are more spiritual overtones to this play than can be found in the other three of O'Neill's last works, the factor of cynicism remains. Tyrone accuses both of his sons of false philosophies, gained by Jamie from Broadway loafers and by Edmond from his

⁶¹Ibid., Act IV. ⁶²Loc. cit. ⁶³Ibid., Act III.

books. The old O'Neill argument comes to the fore when he blames their rottenness on their separation from the church.

TYRONE: You've both flouted the faith you were born and brought up in--the one true faith of the Catholic Church--and your denial has brought nothing but self destruction!

EDMOND: That's the bunk, Papa.

JAMIE: We don't pretend, at any rate, I don't notice you've worn any holes in the knees of your pants going to Mass.

TYRONE: It's true I'm a bad Catholic in the observance, God forgive me. But I believe. (Angrily) And you're a liar. I may not go to church but every night and morning of my life I get on my knees and pray.

EDMOND: (Bitingly) Did you pray for Mama?

TYRONE: I did. I prayed to God these many years for her.

EDMOND: Then Nietzsche must be right. (He quotes from Thus Spake Zarathustra.) "God is dead: of His pity for man hath God died."⁶⁴

If O'Neill is acknowledging that the Catholic faith did not serve to sustain either him or his family, he is not defending the conclusions drawn by Nietzsche or Schopenhauer. For apparently, he finds little comfort in professional despair. Perhaps his greatest consolation, also a characteristic of the modern justification for inadequacy, can be found in the Freudian fatalism. It is his mother who expounds this belief in an impersonal tone when she states, "None of us can help the things that life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self forever."⁶⁵

⁶⁴Ibid., Act II.

⁶⁵Loc. cit.

All of the O'Neills find the opiate of the past the most encouraging contemplations in the play. The father tells of the pride he felt in his artistic potentialities in the days prior to the long runs of The Count of Monte Cristo. His mother finds happy memories when she returns to the early days in the convent and to the happiness she felt with her handsome young husband. To her the wedding gown is a symbol of purity and contentment and in one of the most pathetic scenes of the play O'Neill has her coming down the stairs in a narcotic trance carrying the gown across her arm. Jamie returns to his sensual conquests and his sophisticated days as an operator with the Broadway crowd, and young Edmond finds solace in returning to the sea and his days of contentment on his long voyages to other lands.

I was set free! I dissolved in the sea, became white sails and flying spray, became beauty and rhythm, became moonlight and the ship and the high dim-starred sky! The peace, the end of the quest, the last harbor, the joy of belonging to a fulfillment beyond men's lousy, pitiful, greedy fears and hopes and dreams.⁶⁶

Again, as in his previous plays, O'Neill does little to explain the why of such attitudes or such philosophy. It will be remembered that in Marco Millions certain characteristics of the anti-big business, anti-materialistic America theme were projected. In The Hairy Ape one saw the struggle of the small and insignificant individual against the regimentation of social strata. In Strange Interlude, as in others, sex, Freud, the insignificance of modern life are all by-products of the larger thesis. But in the story of

⁶⁶Ibid., Act IV.

his own family and his own life, O'Neill supplies little of the why.

At one time O'Neill in a mass interview was reported to have said that the stupidity of the human race was immense if it had not found the real meaning of life and then he quoted from the scriptures. "For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"⁶⁷ But in the grim business of cause and effect this does little to explain some of the discouraging behavior of his characters. True, in Long Day's Journey Into Night there is a certain pointing to the sins of the father being visited upon the son. As with the young law student Oban in The Iceman Cometh and in Desire Under the Elms father hatred is exposed in Long Day's Journey Into Night. There is also some indication that Jamie's frustration stemmed from socialistic leaning, but this is rather mild in its proposition. The whole matter of cause, as shown by O'Neill in this play, might be found in his philosophical conclusions--that the human being is a victim of greed, that he is a victim of his time and place, and that his morbid despair cannot be overcome. Joseph Wood Krutch saw the discontent arising from O'Neill's earlier days.

Here he is telling us frankly the outward and very special reasons that might be said to account for the somberness of his view of human life. To one kind of psychologist his personal life may seem, therefore, to explain his philosophy away. What appears as a tragic sense of life in his plays is then nothing but the maladjustment produced by a singularly unhappy

⁶⁷Life, Vol. XXI (October 28, 1946), p. 114.

childhood and youth. He was a man, understandably but merely sick. One whose morbid fancies may easily be dismissed by those who have had a "normal" youth.⁶⁸

That O'Neill is infatuated with despair is not hard to defend. That he was pleased with this infatuation may be more difficult to sustain. If Frank O'Hara's explanation that ". . . tragedy is the study of maladjustment--of permanent maladjustment" ⁶⁹ is simple but correct, then all of O'Neill's plays can be tragedy. The penalty for the dark outlook on life is a perpetual enslavement to this maladjustment. And despite the effort that O'Neill himself makes, the people who represent him in his plays seem to grow less and less capable of altering the stasis of their despair. In quoting Joseph Wood Krutch's article on O'Neill's tragic sense written six years before his death, we perhaps get our clearest picture of the explanation of O'Neill's negativistic leanings.

To the author himself [O'Neill] if not to his public it became clearer and clearer that his real interest was not sociology on the one hand or any specifically modern approach to moral problems on the other, but the eternal problem of man's paradoxical nature, and his predicament in a universe which seems alien, but to which he desires nevertheless, to be related. O'Neill's characters are divided into two classes--those who feel that they do and those who feel that they do not belong. And as he himself finally got around to saying, the only problems which interest him are those which arise, not out of man's relation to man, but out of man's relation to God.⁷⁰

⁶⁸Krutch, "The Rediscovery of Eugene O'Neill," Loc. cit.

⁶⁹O'Hara, op. cit., p. 13.

⁷⁰Krutch, "O'Neill's Tragic Sense," p. 285.

O'Neill sought to express this by taking us to the barroom, to the various farm houses and water fronts, to the tenement backgrounds, to visit prostitutes, stokers, outcasts, alcoholics, and the sick. He created for us what has been called the American drama's first real tough guy in his roughened characters in Anna Christie, Bound East for Cardiff, The Moon of the Caribbeas, and in the memorable Yank in The Hairy Ape. O'Neill even moved to the setting of Greek revival in one of his worthiest efforts, and in Mourning Becomes Electra attempted to capture the tragic blueprints from the great periods of the past, but in all of these his modern tragedy never quite arose above the spirit of despair from which it sprang.

. . . this may be the modern tragedy in its passivity, its despair, its longing, its undramatic reduction of human life to meaningless suffering and its agonized honesty. It strikes a keynote of our modern mood. If we are to write honestly, this is what we must face. If we are to work through to something more positive, this is what we must overcome.⁷¹

It is paradoxical that O'Neill who breathed so much life into the American theatre over a period of forty years should have so thoroughly negated life in the themes of these plays. One might rationalize that had the great playwright never seen the works of Schopenhauer nor of Nietzsche, nor have taken too seriously the fundamentals of Strindberg and of Chekhov, he might have afforded the inheriting playwrights of the generation following World War II a more positive outlook. On the other hand, to assume that the absence of these might have colored his works with greater affirmation is a piece of dangerous speculation; he might never have written at all.

⁷¹Whicher, loc. cit.

CHAPTER VI

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: ANALYSES OF THE GLASS MENAGERIE, A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE AND CAMINO REAL

For in man Will is manifest as desire, and desire essentially insatiate. Will is want, its basis is need, deficiency; we want what we want, what we lack, and this consciousness of our lack is the kernel of suffering.¹

Whether or not Tennessee Williams read and remembered Schopenhauer as did his predecessor in dramatic morbidity is not essential. What is essential is that the spirit of this quotation is manifested in the writings of the playwright from Mississippi. Both Mr. Williams himself and many of his staunch supporters might deny vehemently that he professes any philosophical connection with Schopenhauer, or for that matter any systematized philosophy of life-negation, yet one should find very little argument in the statement that the themes of Tennessee Williams are characterized by morbidity, by despair, and what is generally conceived as immorality. His consistent use of such material might be defended on the grounds that he is a modern reporter of a segment of life that may serve as a generality for all mankind, and being a reporter, is immune to the attacks of those who believe that his dim views of mankind are damaging. Realism in the so-called problem play has absolved many playwrights from both explanation and apology.

¹Tsanoff, op. cit., p. 273.

But if critics in our theatre today have recognized the able talents of Tennessee Williams, they have also been disturbed by what he has had to say. Almost without exception they have held some reservations about his limited theme and his philosophy, while openly praising his poetry, his melodramatic skill and his adeptness at the creation of memorable characters. The citation of a few examples will illustrate this.

William Peden: . . . it is as the poet of the blasted, the doomed, the defeated that he will be remembered.²

Fred Eastman: Mr. Williams is by no means an exception. He is a top bracket representative of those contemporary playwrights who have lost faith in God and man and in the spiritual forces that provided the dynamic for the greatest artistic and humanitarian achievements in the past.³

Frederick Lumley: In the plays of Williams the spiritual is rejected, nothing remains but animal motivations. The instinctive blind gropings to follow the system, to take what life offers before the realization of the futility.⁴

John Mason Brown: It would be safe to say that few writers, even in these times when many authors' sole faith is their belief in man's baseness and meanness, have held the human race in lower esteem than Mr. Williams, or found the world less worthy of habitation. From the time of his first success, it was clear that Mr. Williams was a spokesman for negation.⁵

²William Peden, "Broken Apollos and Blasted Dreams," Saturday Review, Vol. XXXVIII (January 8, 1955), p. 11.

³Fred Eastman, "Religion in Modern Drama," Christian Century, October 12, 1949, p. 1198.

⁴Frederick Lumley, op. cit., p. 186.

⁵John Mason Brown, "The Living Dead," Saturday Review, Vol. XXXVI (April 18, 1953), p. 29.

John Gassner: Self-delusion he realizes is the last refuge of the hopelessly defeated⁶

A mere accumulation of testimony, however, does little in the way of analysis of either the characteristics or the contributions of an author. Whether Tennessee Williams is one of our more controversial dramatists is questionable, but that he is one of our most successful cannot, at this point, be denied. His achievements are measured not only by the awards that have been bestowed upon him and by the acclaim which he has received from responsible criticism, but more especially, by the position he has attained as a dramatist of the people. Although some of this position can be attributed to the successful reproduction of his works in the medium of motion pictures, this by no means accounts entirely for his popularity or his fame.

The impact of his first two plays after World War II, The Glass Menagerie and Streetcar Named Desire was as phenomenal as the impact of the early works of O'Neill following World War I. The acclaim given to his work has been second only to the gigantic success of revitalized musical comedy and musical drama. The continued popularity of these two plays as subjects for study and subjects for little theatre and college productions has been complete. However, it is interesting to note that the leadership of this post-war dramatist, like the leadership of O'Neill, was won with plays of a tragic and a depressing character.

⁶John Gassner, "Tennessee Williams: Dramatist of Frustration," College English, Vol. X (October, 1948), p. 4.

Williams might rightly be called a folk dramatist in the Fred Koch--Paul Green tradition. His plays are regional. He writes with unmistakable authority about the South; the decay of a social order, the pitiful death cries of a passing age and the barbaric shouts of triumph of its replacement. And from this regional reporting he implies an expansion to include the universal predicament of helpless man, the spiritual emptiness of a bewildered and Godless age.

He creates with skill those who represent the shadows of a dying culture and holds them before us to view the tragic irony of their ineffectual struggle. Just as in the case with O'Neill, it is not difficult for us to attribute to Williams the mastery of a kind of modern tragedy. He is a naturalist in the psychological objectivity of his character creation, but he couples this with an unmistakable delineation of an over-powering fate. He writes with a language that is elevated, above natural expression, and he bears down with a full force of pity and terror. But when the sound and the image have faded we might question what is left. Kenneth Tynan observed this tragic incompleteness in A Streetcar Named Desire when he said, "Where ancient drama teaches us to reach nobility by contemplation of what is noble, American drama conjures us to contemplate what might have been noble, but is now humiliated, ignoble in the sight of all but the compassionate."⁷

Although Tennessee Williams admits that he is concerned chiefly with the hard facts of human existence it is hard to label him with

⁷Kenneth Tynan, "American Blues: The Plays of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams," Encounter, May, 1954, p. 17.

the title of complete negativist. Negativism contains a too-strong connotation of passivity and indifference. It is only by reviewing the strong and positive assertions of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche that this connotation can be relieved. Williams' writings contain too many examples of violent assertion by his characters to warrant the classification of quiet and katatonic despair, and conversely the poet-author displays too much tenderness on top of the brutality to say that he is an unfeeling naturalist or masochist. Despite the fact that he has created his victims with an interminable list of shortcomings and pathetic qualities, it cannot be denied that while he has created them this way he observes them with sorrow, with compassion, and even with gentleness. Just as O'Neill revealed his own pity for his brutes, his perverts, and his alcoholics, so does Williams reveal his concern for his "little bird-like women" of the South, for the lonely, for the malformed, and for the spiritually empty people whom he has assembled in his plays. Williams even displays a wholesome affection for the brutes, those who represent the other side--the non-traditionalists of the new and the bitter world. But despite this sympathy and despite the tenderness from the start he has asserted and reasserted the contemporary theme of the complete emptiness of meaning in life. It is this loss of faith and his failure to supply a new faith in its place that earns him a position among the foremost of our literary negativists.

It has been admitted above that what may seem to one man as negation may be claimed by another as only the reporting of evil for

the sake of its correction. Yet in the entire works of Tennessee Williams, from his early one-act plays through Camino Real and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, little is offered in the way of either hope or a course of action for overcoming the deficiencies of mankind. In practically every case, the modern hero or the heroine is doomed before he plunges into the battle. The hero is a weak and bewildered spectacle, he is like so many of O'Neill's characters--totally incapable of comprehending what is happening to him. He is in the throes of the will of the world and the incessant demand for existence, but is incapable of altering the general nature of that existence.

In examining Tennessee Williams' own statements, as well as the contents of his plays, one finds general support for two opposing views. On the one hand, Williams seems to be saying that this unattractive picture of life is the way things are, but that we must tilt our chins upward and join our hands in our mutual misery. He states this in an article written for The New York Times Magazine.

People are humble and frightened and guilty at heart, all of us, no matter how desperately we may try to appear otherwise. We have very little conviction of our essential dignity nor even of our essential decency, and consequently we are more interested in characters on the stage who share our hidden shames and fears, and we want the plays about us to say "I understand you. You and I are brothers, the deal is rugged but let's face and fight it together."

It is not the essential dignity but the essential ambiguity of man that I think needs to be stated.⁸

⁸Tennessee Williams, "Tennessee Williams Presents His POV," The New York Times Magazine, June 12, 1960, p. 78.

Williams may be sincere about this comment on the "togetherness" attitude toward the doom of fate, but his people in his plays are woeful models of such heroism. Laura is abandoned by the brother and told to blow out her candles. Blanche is wept for, but not defended. Alma finds no helping hand to guide her in an adjustment to the new world she is required to accept. In the same article Mr. Williams answered those who accused him of dwelling on decadence by saying, ". . . the theatre has made in our time its greatest artistic advance through the unlocking and lighting up and ventilation of the closets, attics and basement of human behavior and experience."⁹ This reiterates the theory of invulnerability on the grounds of realistic reporting, but it does not account for the obvious skepticism reflected in the conclusions of practically all of our author's works. It cannot be doubted that from the beginning Williams intended to hammer home his doctrine of despair.

On receiving the coveted prize and the Critics' Circle Award in 1945, Williams quietly predicted that the critics would like less the future works that he would produce for, he said, "In this play I've said all the nice things I have to say about people. In the future things will be harsher."¹⁰ And again, in the foreword to his highly controversial, depressing and experimental play Camino Real, Williams admits that the work is

. . . nothing more nor less than my conception of the time and world that I live in. And its people

⁹Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁰Time, Vol. XLV (April 23, 1945) (Williams quoted in interview).

are mostly arch-types of certain basic attitudes and qualities with those mutations that would occur if they had continued along the road to this hypothetical terminal point in it.¹¹

Whatever source Tennessee Williams found for his philosophical pessimism he enlarged it, illustrated it, and was faithful to it in his plays. But unlike O'Neill he has afforded no comprehensive view of total despair.

O'Neill the master negativist and threnodist afforded convenient niches for the various articles of philosophical pessimism. The ordinary problems of labeling were made easy by his final works. Just as Schopenhauer's philosophy of negation seems easily identifiable as compared with, say, Sartre's, O'Neill's devotion to negation is clearly visible in the breadth as well as in the depth of his works. This is true because of the author's own declarations, his willingness to discuss his philosophy, and his admitted adherence to thinkers of darkness. In addition, the characters within his plays indulge in open preachings of the various doctrines of despair. O'Neill was not satisfied to let us gain by implication the way of the world. He stopped his players in mid-action and had them discuss without reservation these same ideas. One might not be too cynical in saying that The Iceman Cometh is a series of sermons of negation preached by evangelists of varying temperaments and varying levels of intelligence, and if this appears to be counter-measured by any previous optimism or affirmative declaration by such plays as

¹¹Tennessee Williams, Camino Real (Norfolk, Conn: New Directions Books, 1953), Foreword.

Lazarus Laughed or Days Without End, his final autobiographical piece clarified the matter once and for all.

But Williams has applied man's loss of meaning more indirectly and more subtly. His characters are frequently filled with both virtue and happiness and unlike the characters of his famous predecessor are more often than not totally unaware of the occurrences about them. Kilroy in Camino Real might better be described as a "cock-eyed optimist" than a morose philosopher, and even Blanche gilds her tarnished soul with certain delusions of pride and affirmation. But although Williams is not satisfied to have his characters preach for him, the influence of O'Neill and the influences of modern greats, such as Ibsen, Chekhov and Strindberg who preceded O'Neill in social and philosophical drama, are apparent.

Montagu Slater in writing about Eugene O'Neill pinpointed this well when he discussed the literary heirs of the great American dramatist. He found not only the themes and the tragic leanings being inherited by the finest of our post-war playwrights, but even the characters themselves. Both Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, he argues, borrowed heavily from O'Neill's landscapes and portraits.¹² In way of illustration he pointed to the recreation of America's first real tough guy--Yank--in the more contemporary fashion of the equally barbaric and primitive Stanley Kowalski of A Streetcar Named Desire. For those who feel that this is an unfair comparison between

¹²Montagu Slater, "Eugene O'Neill," Nation, Vol. CLXXVIII (February 27, 1954), p. 174.

the didactic preaching of O'Neill and the more fragile representations of Williams, let them contend with Joseph Wood Krutch who points out that:

Miller and Williams, the two most widely discussed American playwrights of the moment, follow O'Neill and Anderson only as Sean O'Casey followed Synge. They represent, that is to say, the collapse of the reaction and illustrate as did O'Casey an irresistible pull in the direction of nihilism and despair.¹³

One might be deluded into believing that because of the tinkling poetry of The Glass Menagerie and the earthy and robust pulsation of life in A Streetcar Named Desire and the highly imaginative romanticism of Camino Real, Tennessee Williams held no firm belief with the dark meaninglessness of life and loss of faith of man. But a careful examination of the total works of this author will reveal how consistently and indelibly he makes clear the point of negation. Where O'Neill strove for the higher stimulations of tragedy and failed, Williams is content to take the undignified and the undeserving for his models. Again, it is Krutch in comparing O'Neill and Williams who says, "In Williams especially, life tends to appear less a tragedy than merely a mess."¹⁴

Other of our contemporary critics have chosen to analyze the influences of Sartre, of Nietzsche, and in the broader aspect the general tendencies toward frustration of our own age. Williams has been compared on a few occasions to Ibsen, on many occasions to

¹³Krutch, Modernism and Modern Drama, p. 124.

¹⁴Krutch, "The Rediscovery of Eugene O'Neill," p. 33.

Chekhov and more frequently to Strindberg. Kerr qualifies his own conclusions by labeling The Glass Menagerie as being a "quasi-Chekhovian" play both in form and in a theme that ends in universal frustration.¹⁵

However, as preparation for more careful examination of three of his most prominent works a brief comparison between Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams may help reveal the source of Williams' ideas and forms as well as differentiate those that are strictly his own. The similarities between the two are many. Both dramatists chose to deal with the past. In O'Neill's case, both setting and source of material came from the influences of his early days and the world he knew far better than the roaring and unpredictable years of his later life. In Williams' case it is his characters who tend to live in the past, who try to hold to the fragile traditions which have been by-passed by a cold and practical new age.

Again, both authors employ their talents for naturalism and realism by the creation of distinct images of despair. This applies not only to the people who inhabit the world they write about, but the settings into which they are cast. Just as O'Neill in The Iceman Cometh and Long Day's Journey Into Night cast his plays in settings of dark decor, so does Williams in all of his plays call for scenery of symbolic depression. The images of drabness are familiar to both.

Williams and O'Neill have displayed the ability for great character creation. Perhaps because of the proliferation of places

¹⁵Kerr, op. cit., p. 101.

and people and the far greater number of plays of O'Neill, he shows a greater variety than does Williams. But both employ in their works a predomination of characters who are alienated from the outside world. Both seem preoccupied with abnormality of one sort or another. O'Neill lived through three decades of criticism which included frequent reference to his characters of moral degeneration and Williams in half that time has been made equally defensive because of his subject material. It would be a generalization to say that O'Neill's degeneration seemed to focus on alcohol. This does not imply that the elements of the other deadly sins were not present, but as has been pointed out, the strongest symptoms of despair in the characters of O'Neill were brought to life through alcohol. Williams, too, has his drunks. Not one of his full-length plays which have been worthy of production has omitted the presence of one or more drinking scenes. But in Williams' case alcohol is overshadowed by sex. One would be hard put to prove that this was unique in our age, for American drama since World War I has reflected more and more the temper of the times, including the vast expositions of Freudian advocates. But certainly one must admit that much of our temporary literature is filled with the preoccupation of sexual experience, both as a reflection of inner beliefs and inner frustrations and as a motivation for dramatic action itself.

Like most other standards of human behavior the sexual standards are subject to change, but where this change has moved to the degree described by Robert Fitch as "the deification of dirt"

some concern for its position in our society must be shown. Robert Fitch in an article called "La Mystique de la Merde" ties up this brand of piety ("mud mysticism") with Freudian, anal-eroticism and defecation-infatuation. He then shows that this label fits some of our finest, or at least, most prominent literary talents of our age. Included in the group that he cites are Hemingway, Mailer, Pollock, James Jones, and some of the work of Eugene O'Neill. Their terminal symbol is the God-in-man sacrilege in which God loses all his identity and blends into man in the typically pagan tradition. As this occurs, he points out, the ethical requirement fades away and the doctrine of "God, the Womb of Undifferentiated Being" holds sway. The chief symbol of this cult is sex and perversion. Fitch then goes on to claim that:

. . . "the High Priest" of this cult at this moment is neither Hemingway nor Mailer. It is Tennessee Williams who . . . preached his gospel best in Camino Real, with its belly dancer, its Kilroy, its nude lady on the balcony, the heroic futility of its Byron, and finally, though continually, the street cleaners who went about to scrape up and talk to their tin cans--the bodies of the dead--like offal from an alley.¹⁶

One can defend Tennessee Williams' preoccupation with sex when he shows it to be the cause of greater evils. But when character and intelligence and moral conclusion are obliterated by this fixation, we suspect that he is arriving at a doctrine of total depravity--one of the most dangerous forms of negative philosophy in the hands of a skilled writer. One is, therefore, suspicious

¹⁶Robert Fitch, "La Mystique de la Merde," New Republic, Vol. CXXXV (September 3, 1956), pp. 17-18.

that Williams is less concerned with reporting what he calls "the nervous system of any age or nation,"¹⁷ than he is with the exaltation of obscenity and repulsion. One must admit that sex as a portion of his theme is handled almost with the fervency of a religious fanatic.

Though Williams is timely enough to caution us about the brutish tendencies of modern man, at the same time he seems to be preaching against the folly of higher and sacred love. He seems to be saying with Nietzsche that, "As long as love is naive, instinctive, frankly sexual, man is happy. Once it becomes conscious, intellectual, spiritualized he loses his peace of mind and develops a sense of guilt towards life in general."¹⁸ Again, it is interesting to note that in his treatment of the sex theme no character is wholly convincing in his declared guilt of sexual misbehavior. Rather the guilt of his people seems to come from the loss of prestige, position, and pride. Even the traditional sex sanctification standard in Christian morality is subject to mockery in The Rose Tattoo, and if one thinks for a moment that Blanche DuBois is plunged into despair because of her sexual promiscuity he need only review how she rationalized and defended her behavior the same way that O'Neill's degenerates manifested their faith in alcohol. One of her last acts was to offer her body to her reneging fiance with the proviso of marriage attached. Blanche bargains with morality to the end.

¹⁸H. Steinhauer, "Eros and Psyche: A Nietzschean Motif in Anglo-American Literature," Modern Language Notes, Vol. LXIV, No. 4 (April, 1949), p. 217.

It is in this respect that the influence of D.H. Lawrence on Tennessee Williams is easily observed. And Lawrence with his Germanic preaching and his avid devotion to Nietzsche, affirmed the pagan joy in life as manifested in the free expression of sex. Aligned with this were both the Nietzschean and Lawrence denunciations of the Christian hostility to life as expressed in the suppression of sex. Williams seems to expand this to the larger belief that progress comes only when power is allowed to dominate, when the strong conquer the weak; but he is not totally certain of this, just as O'Neill was not totally certain that the Christian concept was wrong. We can find this uncertainty in his repeated warnings that traditionalism along with its sensitivity and its refinement is being crushed by the impersonalized and raw man of the new age.

Along with these deeper abnormalities Williams' characters are figures of physical as well as mental deformation: Laura in The Glass Menagerie, Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire, the cancerous males in Orpheus Descending, and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and the grotesquely enlarged heart of the Protagonist in Camino Real. No major play of Williams is free from this characteristic.

Another similarity between the two writers is in their use of symbolism. Both O'Neill and Williams are foremost among our naturalists, yet both deal avidly with symbols of despair.

The final similarity can be found in the structural device of revelation through confession. This has been pointed out previously as O'Neill's chief source of philosophical dissemination, and though

Williams uses it to a lesser extent, each of his major plays contains a moment in which the downtrodden, the defeated, and the faithless empty their despair in words to another character in the play. Some of the most touching and tragic moments of The Glass Menagerie come when Amanda admits the hopelessness of the future and when Laura is forced to reveal her inability to face the practical world of the typing class. In A Streetcar Named Desire Blanche confesses the beginning of her downfall in the discovery of her young homosexual husband whom she drove to suicide. In Summer and Smoke Alma confesses her misplaced values and her willingness to part with morality. Finally, in Camino Real the sordid quality of all life is revealed in a fluctuation between accusation and confessions through all sixteen blocks of the play.

The basic differences between the use of the theme of negation by Eugene O'Neill and by Tennessee Williams have been suggested at the start of this comparison. Any generalizations made on the sum total of Eugene O'Neill's works are bound to invite controversy. But if we hold to the plays written and produced in the later stages of his life and compare them to the half dozen major plays of Mr. Williams, certain distinctions can be made. Although a philosophical or thematic investigation does not necessitate a comparison of literary talents nor the structural devices employed by the two authors, it must be pointed out that in our present-day judgment Williams excels both in language and in clarity. Both authors strove for the stature

of poetic expression, but from the present-day viewpoint, the images and the poetry of Tennessee Williams seem superior to those of his predecessor. Admitting the qualification of opinion, the current playwright seems better able to acquire a natural quality and to avoid contrived dialogue.

On the other hand, where both strove to express the tragic circumstances of man through language, it is perhaps O'Neill who is more successful in endowing his people with a touch of heroic stature. That he missed this level has been supported before, but Williams suffers in the comparison for two basic reasons. The first is that he deals with people so alienated from the outside, so greatly deviating from the norm, that their circumstances of depravity prohibit their rise toward any significance of universal worth. That Blanche DuBois may be more believable and even more pathetic and more worthy than, say, Nina Leeds, does not entitle her to serve as a representation of any more than a small segment of fallen womanhood in the South. O'Neill left little doubt about the direction of evil and the direction of good in his characters, while Williams though dealing with depravity does acknowledge that his people must be treated with both sympathy and condemnation. Unlike O'Neill, his stories are not clear-cut cases of evil or of despair triumphing over goodness and affirmation. He leaves some room for doubt. To use the words of Eric Bentley, his plays are not struggles between "the wholly guilty and the wholly innocent."¹⁹

¹⁹Eric Bentley, The Dramatic Event (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954), p. 92.

A second basic difference can be found in the indigenous quality of the people created by the two authors. Although O'Neill professed to aspire to a great American drama he was never quite able to shake the strong European tradition that had influenced him in the early years of this century. On the other hand, Williams seems to be totally American. Although there are overtones of Strindberg and Chekhov in his works, and although at times he writes with the fantasy and detachment of Pirandello, nevertheless, his plays are American in every way. They are American in their language, American in their setting, and American in their feelings. At no time are we allowed to forget that this is a criticism of a section of our nation, studied and mastered by the playwright. Even the strong Sicilian background of The Rose Tattoo does not obliterate the common American idiom that parades before it, nor for that matter is he wholly successful in obtaining the universal place of "nowhere" in Camino Real because of the strong and realistic imposition of the American Kilroy.

As previously mentioned, Williams seems less preoccupied with death and states his negativism more indirectly than does the more didactic O'Neill. But where O'Neill's threnodists sing their songs of death loudly and clearly, Williams' songs are muffled in faint gentility and indistinct tones. Nevertheless, the worthlessness of life and the ultimate release of this through death is equally stated by both authors.

One other basic difference can be noted in the selection of

people for subjects in their plays. Williams' chief characters are women. Whereas O'Neill divided his writing between the sexes, it is the heroines of Williams who have received the most attention. Part of this may be attributed to Williams' belief that it is the women of the South who have been most damaged by the insurrection of the new age. It is also likely that Williams found a ready contrast between the beauty and fragility of post renaissance and aristocratic Southern womanhood and the healthy but brutal male representative of the new age. Blanche, the traditionalist, is opposed to Kowalski the modernist. So it is with Alma, the moralist, versus John, the modern immoralist. So is the case of Amanda opposing her restless son and the unfeeling world they both inhabit. And finally, so is the case in Camino Real when the romantic grandeur of Camille fades before the ruthlessness of a young, twentieth-century gigolo. Whether there is deep attachment or psychological significance in the predominance of women in the Williams' plays cannot be determined. It is sufficient to say that this marks a great contrast between his works and those of O'Neill.

For this study, three plays by Tennessee Williams have been selected for a more detailed analysis: The Glass Menagerie, his first and in many ways his most touching and most human drama; the powerful and revealing A Streetcar Named Desire; and finally his most subjective work, one which has confounded the critics as well as its Broadway audiences, Camino Real.

Mr. Williams has been thought of as a poet of the theatre who has brought new light to the American stage through his sensitive language and powerful portrayal of human passion. We may also think of him as a disciple of O'Neill, a serious reporter of the problems of living and, finally, an eloquent confessor of real life negation. His subject is frustration; his predominant theme hopelessness; his dramatic action, cruelty and mutilation; his characters, the pathetic figures of despairing mankind floundering in a Godless world. Once more, an attempt will be made to discover the extent and the kind of philosophical life negation, to seek what explanations the playwright may offer for the state of the world and to determine what refuge he may recommend for those who suffer for the maladjustment of an age--an age of anxiety and disbelief.

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

The cynics who have preached the death of the American theatre from time to time have been silenced periodically by the emergence of playwrights worthy of world recognition. How many such artists have come forth since O'Neill started the series after World War I is questionable, but certainly when Tennessee Williams' play, The Glass Menagerie, appeared in the modestly successful season of 1945, one more such playwright was acknowledged. Critical acclaim was spontaneous and without reservation. A new and significant playwright with a tremendous talent for human revelation and for freshness in style was hailed almost without exception. It is safe to say

that no other play written in the period of this investigation received such affirmative support by the journalistic critics.

The fact of its negative outlook did not seem to interest anyone especially. Whether this was recognized or not as a play of pessimistic viewing seemed incidental to the merits of the piece. But as these critics wrote their reviews on April 2, the backbone of Germany had been broken, the eventual fall of Japan was imminent and a nation at war was beginning to think ahead to the promise of prosperity and peaceful existence. The year 1945 was not one of negation. Only two of the journalists invested any time at all in pointing to the philosophical depression of the work. Louis Kronenberger did so to sustain a point that a new playwright of Chekhovian quality had entered the scene. In this regard he mentioned, ". . . its mingled pathos and comedy, its mingled naturalistic detail and gauzy atmosphere, its preoccupation with memory, its tissue of forlorn hopes and backward looks and languishing self-pity."²⁰ Burton Roscoe was less poetic about his comment, but more direct in his identification. ". . . they are creatures caught in the most ordinary, but the most terrible of tragedies--that of trying to live when they have no sensible reason for their living. . . there is frustration everywhere in this dark tragedy."²¹ Mr. Roscoe might have saved this passage and applied it the following year with equal accuracy to our most blatant of all negativistic works, The Iceman Cometh.

²⁰Louis Kronenberger, New York PM, April 2, 1945.

²¹Burton Roscoe, New York World Telegram, April 2, 1945.

The high praise by the critics after Mr. Williams' first failure must have given him considerable pleasure. Five years earlier, his first major work, The Battle of Angels which was presented by The Theatre Guild at the Wilbur Theatre in Boston, was literally hooted out of that trial city and the reasons for its demise were the very characteristics which were revived several years later for such plays as A Streetcar Named Desire, Camino Real, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and Summer and Smoke. That it was a bad play was the general opinion of those who saw it, but that it was an evil play, one that preoccupied itself with unhealthy abuse of standard moral concepts, was a more damaging conclusion by the critics and city fathers. For this reason it was tucked away in the back corridors of the New York libraries.

In an edition of this first play, coupled with its revision, Orpheus Descending, Mr. Williams deals kindly and with good humor with this disastrous reception. In his introductory notes he states the reasons for his determination in keeping the play alive through its reproduction. He concludes these remarks: "So much for the past and present. The future is called 'perhaps,' which is the only possible thing to call the future. And the important thing is not to allow that to scare you."²²

In many ways this statement could serve well for a preparation to an experience with The Glass Menagerie, for in this work

²²Tennessee Williams, Orpheus Descending, with Battle of Angels (New York: New Directions Books, 1958), p. x.

he launches into the main themes of all his works that follow: the world of illusion in the past, and the loss of faith in present and future. The two characters he selected to start the momentum of this theme were masterful contrasts and at the same time pathetic compatriots. Laura represents the innocence, the femininity, and the fragile beauty of one segment of by-passed Southern womanhood. In a larger sense she is a symbol of all refinement and culture and tradition made passe in a world dominated by scientific coldness, by social revolution and by Freudian dissection. She is in Krutch's terms, the fading light of the renaissance, hopelessly out of communication with the undeniable power of modern mechanical man.²³ Amanda, too, belongs to this island, but though she is equally trapped and equally frustrated in an environment supposedly foreign to her we must temper our pity and pathos with a realization that here is another picture of southern womanhood of the past, a picture of "battered, ineptly designing, querulous--and pathetically ridiculous . . ." ²⁴ pseudo-aristocracy.

Analysis of theme might stop right here. It suffices to explore the central thesis of its author. The world is out of joint; new man, no matter how unworthy, must not be denied; the old must move back and be silent. Were Williams consistent in his thesis this might suffice, but unlike O'Neill he refuses to defend or attack

²³Krutch, Modernism and Modern Drama, pp. 123-125.

²⁴John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 741.

consistently. The first of the negativistic characteristics in this play can be discovered in the description of the setting.

The Wingfield apartment is in the rear of the building, one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living units that flower as warty growths in over-crowded urban centers of lower middle class population, and are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism.

The apartment faces an alley and is entered by a fire-escape, a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation.²⁵

The first impression of such a description must lead a reader to believe that he is about to be engaged in a combination of social discussion and spiritual depression. If any doubt remains, Williams takes time to add to the dark color by such phrases as "grim rear wall," "murky canyons of tangled clotheslines," and "dark tenement wall." His "cellular living units" are reminiscent of Gorki's simplified generalization of his setting for *The Lower Depths*, "a cellar resembling a cave."²⁶ Williams wants to give us more than just an impression of poverty. He is insisting on a mood in keeping with the coming poetic and dream-like despair. He is equally careful in describing his characters. Of Amanda he says:

A little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place She is not paranoiac, but her life is paranoia . . . though

²⁵Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie, Scene I.

²⁶Maxim Gorki, The Lower Depths, Act I.

her foolishness makes her unwittingly cruel at times, there is tenderness in her slight person.²⁷

And then he adds:

Amanda, having failed to establish contact with reality, continues to live vitally in her illusions, but Laura's situation is even graver . . . she is like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf.²⁸

Tom Wingfield, her son, is less complex in Williams' mind. He represents the new age. Of him he states: "His nature is not remorseless, but to escape from a trap he has to act without pity."²⁹

Even before the body of the play we are, therefore, introduced to several qualities of a negativistic theme. First, the apparent physical and material decay; secondly, the quality of exhaustion, of overwhelming opposition that tends to produce a quality of stasis about the setting and its people; and finally, a suggestion of the building energy to escape as seen in two respects. The desires of the two women are to retreat into the unreal reaches of the past, and the son's desire is to escape into the supposedly unknown world of adventure.

Again, the satirical combination that Chekhov affords us in The Three Sisters of reliving the days of the past but avowing to the days of a future elsewhere are reconstructed neatly in this American setting. On the surface one would accuse Amanda of being

²⁷Williams, The Glass Menagerie, Introduction.

²⁸Loc. cit. ²⁹Loc. cit.

unable to deal with any of the elements of reality, but it is Amanda who is willing to forsake much of her personal pride for the continuance of her kind--her daughter Laura. Tom Wingfield, though a modernist, is less able to cope with the realities surrounding him and seeks relief of his ennui just as Chekhov's sisters hoped to find it in Moscow.

The final character in the play, one who seems to adhere most to the stereotype of normality is the "gentleman caller." It is Tom who explains him to us for Williams in the opening of the play.

But since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long delayed but always expected something that we live for.³⁰

Since he is described as the most realistic character in the play, Williams intensifies the spiritual gap between the two ages by showing us that in such locked lives as these no compromise with reality can be made.

Williams' economy in telling a simple story with a few people was recognized and commended by most of the critics, for the play is based almost entirely on one minor incident--that of a would-be ensnared bachelor escaping from the noose of a foolish and disillusioned woman. By this economy Williams does not afford us as clear-cut a picture of all the qualities of life negation that, say, O'Neill afforded in The Iceman Cometh. For this reason some ambiguity relative to the final identification of people occurs, for

³⁰Ibid., Scene I.

Williams mixes both sympathy and hatred, optimism and pessimism, vitality and lethargy while using only four characters.

In addition this is the one play of Williams' that makes but little use of the sexual impulse and the sexual preoccupation. The decadence as shown us in the decadence of environment and age rather than the decadence of morality. Tom for all of his bombastic outbursts and yearnings for the life of a sailor is a far cry from the crude and intemperate Stanley Kowalski who was to follow him. Because of this he serves as a relatively mild antagonist, one who is almost victimized by circumstances. His guilt seems to be no greater than that suffered by any young man tied down to a widowed mother and a plaintive sister. True, he is accused of such reactionary habits as over-attending the escapist movies and reading "that hideous book by that insane Mr. Lawrence,"³¹ but apart from this he, too, seems to be acted upon rather than acting. It is only at the end of the play that Williams refuses to compromise and allows Tom to move into his escape--into further frustration.

I didn't go to the moon, I went much further--
for time is the longest distance between two
places . . . I descended the steps of this fire-
escape for a last time and followed, from then on,
in my father's footsteps, attempting to find in
motion what was lost in space . . . Oh, Laura,
Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am
more faithful than I intended to be! I reach
for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into
the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the
nearest stranger--anything that can blow your
candles out! --for nowadays the world is lit by
lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura--and so
good-bye. . . .³²

³¹Ibid., Scene III. ³²Ibid., Scene VII.

And so with little social preachment and only mild philosophical disapproval Williams bows his head to the elimination of the old ways.

Had this poetic and compassionate commentary on the desperation and frustration of an out-of-date age of enlightenment concluded with this passage little more could be said. But Williams chose to be more clinical, to speak more harshly and to labor the theme. Superimposed upon this picture of regret and despair came the harder images of degradation and nihilism--he gave us Summer and Smoke, A Streetcar Named Desire, Camino Real, and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

In the second scene of The Glass Menagerie Amanda stands before her daughter with tears in her eyes and a suffering stare on her face. Laura asks, "Has something happened, Mother? Mother, has something happened?" Amanda replies, "I'll be all right in a minute. I'm just bewildered--by life" ³³ None of Williams' frustrated women of the South states more clearly nor more completely her tragic predicament than this, yet Williams insisted on carrying out the theme and the idea and will probably continue to labor it as long as he writes.

The next such traditionalist to go down in defeat was the puritanical Alma in Summer and Smoke who evolved shortly thereafter into the most violent of the sufferers, the colorful and expressive

³³Ibid., Scene II.

Blanche DuBois. In A Streetcar Named Desire Blanche sings the same song of the noble past that Amanda does, and on the surface clings tenaciously to the world that has gone before. However, Williams has added an ingredient to her character that makes her distinctly different from the pathetic but valiant Amanda and decidedly more dramatic than the sane and reticent Alaa. This ingredient is not sexual devotion as it might appear, but is maladjustment to the extent of insanity.

As earlier suggested Williams affords us no new theme. He merely redecorates it, restates it, and embellishes it with new dramatic power. At times these additions become so contrived and the case so over-stated that little of the beauty and the lamentation of The Glass Menagerie come through. What does appear is the painful violence of a conflict between the two extremes of both forces; civilization versus the brute. If we are occasionally suspicious that the problem is over-motivated to the extent that Gassner points out, "Pelion is piled on Ossa in order to establish Blanche's psychosis,"³⁴ we must nevertheless note the strong paradox of the author, for when he deals with the inevitable outcome of this struggle over the "gap," he does so with pity and sorrow and at times an almost apologetic manner. ". . . he lifts his voice in a lamentation devoid of hope."³⁵ However cruel he may be in his creation, however

³⁴Gassner, Masters of the Drama, p. 742.

³⁵Harold Hobson, The Theatre Now (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1953), p. 126.

unhesitating he may be in stacking the cards against the defenders of civilization he does not relish their predicament of being trapped. Paul Engel in reviewing a recent collection of Williams' short stories makes the telling observation that, "All of the men and the women who are defeated have greater charm than those who survive."³⁶

Williams is not preaching against the foolishness of adhering to traditions. He pierces the armor of this illusion but he does not do so with delight. Rather he seems convinced of the growing bitterness of the world and its approach to nothingness. Since he is able to offer little in the way of hope or avoidance of this conclusion, like O'Neill, he earns the title of negativist.

Irwin Shaw, an avid supporter of Tennessee Williams' artistic works, finds Williams' conclusions stating, ". . . beauty is shipwrecked on the rock of the world's vulgarity; . . . the most sensitive seekers after beauty are earliest and most bitterly broken and perverted."³⁷ One may defend the artistic beauty of the writer, the masterful creation of character, and the compassionate representation of what he feels to be a great struggle, but one must also acknowledge that the end result is squalid defeatism.

These additions to the major theme of the "gap" can be narrowed under two main headings. The first of these may be identified

³⁶Paul Engel, "A Locomotive Named Reality," New Republic Vol. CXXXII (January 24, 1955), p. 26.

³⁷Irwin Shaw, "Masterpiece," New Republic, Vol. CXVII (December 22, 1947), p. 34.

as a strong statement of the pagan creed. The origin of this creed probably rests most completely on the Nietzschean doctrine with subsequent refinements and restatements by Lawrence, Sartre, and O'Neill himself. H. Steinhauer, cited previously, explains that the neo-pagan believes that man is faced with a choice between two

. . . "Weltanschauungen" which are diametrically opposed to each other and which allow no compromise. The one affirms life on this earth in all its aspects, with its joys and sorrows, its pleasures and pains. Life is desirable even at its bitterest; the very destructive forces in nature testify to her eternal fertility and creativeness. Dionysos, cut to pieces, will be reborn again; this is the central mystery in the pagan religion.³⁸

The essence of the contrast is the other-worldly conception best represented in Christianity. Nietzsche himself accused Christianity of the deepest crimes against the spirit of man and against nature herself because it condemned him to a life of gloom, to joyless asceticism and power mitigation. One of the proofs that Nietzsche offered was the guilt complex attributed to the natural power of the will through sex.

Williams has taken as his champion of the new force the barbaric and the uninhibited Stanley who stands at one side of the arena against his pathetic opponent, Blanche DuBois. Perhaps a weakness in the play is the fact that Blanche, degenerate before the fight begins, is no match for her opponent. Nevertheless, the pagan creed is well stated, and we we cannot accept its brutishness as our own representative of

³⁸Steinhauer, op. cit., p. 218.

the heroic, we must turn to only one other place and that is the ineffectual and debilitated woman who represents a fading generation.

Here, again, Williams supplies us with a paradox. Although the sides are cleanly drawn and the conflict well established, at times we are at a loss in identifying the right or the wrong. Part of this is due to Williams' unhesitation in creating Blanche as a person of pretense, as a nagging and somewhat snobbish female. Initially our sympathies tend to run to the disrupted household, no matter how low the inhabitants of that household may be, for Blanche sets herself up for a great fall by her delusions of grandeur and her superior attitude to her surroundings and its people. Irwin Shaw claims that Stanley almost wins us because we tend to believe in this age that what is natural is by necessity good.³⁹ It is only toward the end of the play that we realize Stanley is brutish, immoral, slouching and savage, that he is a member of the "surviving."

Williams, himself, identified his sympathies when Krutch quotes him as saying about his chief male character, "It means that if you do not watch out the apes will take over."⁴⁰ Perhaps Williams has understated it at this point for by the end of A Streetcar Named Desire we are fearful that the apes have already taken over, and that the virtues of the past have been rejected entirely.

³⁹Shaw, loc. cit.

⁴⁰Krutch, Modernism in Modern Drama, quoting Tennessee Williams, p. 129.

Stanley, himself, cannot be evaluated as a negativist. He is a prime example of Schopenhauer's complacent victim of the world of will. He is an animal of appetite, he creates as he destroys, and the unborn baby of Stella serves as a symbol of the continuance of his influence and his durability in a world remade. Just as Blanche is an extreme advancement over Amanda, so is the young Polish hedonist a strong enlargement of the more poetic and feelingful Tom. However, as hero material he makes but small contribution. His moral degeneracy and his innate weakness, being more of a slave to the world of will than even Blanche, afford him no right to superiority over his despairing opponent.

The neo-pagan theme looms large in this work and is dealt with objectively by the author. An extension of it to larger meaning is even more negative than the mere reporting of this as a personal story or as a fall of an outdated section of society. For the kernel of suffering brought about by the frustration of old values and ideals can be likened to our uncertainty of position as a national power in the immediate years following World War II. Whether Williams cared to extend this idea has never been ascertained, but it has been suggested at any rate by critics who have seen in this play the picturization of the re-evaluation of the American way of life; the immigrant versus the DAR, the revolutionist versus the conservative. Harold Hobson writing from England draws the comparison between the South in Mr. Williams' plays (particularly in A Streetcar Named Desire) and a degenerate, desperate and fading Europe. In the same article

he suggests that the America of happy and confident creation prior to World War II has found itself in a defensive situation in which its confidence has completely passed away and its new position of leadership has made it ill at ease. Revolution, as he states, has passed back from the new world to the old, and America is not yet accustomed to having lost it.⁴¹

The second addition to the restatement of this theme is the emphasis of brutality and moral degeneracy. Whereas The Glass Menagerie was listed as a dream play the whole mood and procedure of A Streetcar Named Desire is strictly nightmarish. Williams now shows a leaning toward garrish and sadistic images with emphasis upon sexual intemperance and physical violence. He employs fragile quality of both language and image, only to serve as violent contrast to the grotesque images. The comic relief reminiscent of the mocking humor in The Hairy Ape may misdirect our affections toward the very perpetrators of this brutality. Despite this, however, the weight of the images of cynicism and morbidity move the drama without relief and without purgation to its bitter conclusion. John Mason Brown in Saturday Review stated, "No study in disintegration to come out of our theatre has been more skillful or more unflinching, but its people though fascinating are too small spirited to be tragic. They do not grow by suffering, they merely decline. There is no exaltation

⁴¹Hobson, op. cit., p. 125.

in them."⁴² At no time are we ever deluded into believing that salvation or regeneration is a possibility for the old order.

Along with these images of brutality Williams increases the images of death. Now there can be no mistaking of his earlier declaration through Tom in The Glass Menagerie that war was a welcome relief for those who suffered from stasis and ennui, for war, even with death, enabled man to experience adventure. In A Streetcar Named Desire we see the other side of death, where Blanche says,

. . . I lived in a house where dying old women remembered their dead men . . . crumble and fade and-- regrets--recriminations . . . "If you'd done this it wouldn't have cost you that" . . . everything gone but the--Death--I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was a close as you are We didn't dare even admit we had ever heard of it!⁴³

As a sedative to the death image she turns to sex.

. . . the opposite is desire. So do you wonder? How could you possibly wonder? Not far from Belle Reve, before we had lost Belle Reve, was a camp where they trained young soldiers. On Saturday nights they would go in town to get drunk--and on the way back they would stagger onto my lawn and call--"Blanche! Blanche!"--The deaf old lady remaining suspected nothing. But sometimes I slipped outside to answer their calls . . . "⁴⁴

And at the end of the play, Blanche now betrayed to confinement in an institution offers her last image of the solace of death:

I will die--with my hand in the hand of some nice-looking ship's doctor, a very young one with a small

⁴²John Mason Brown, "American Tragedy," Saturday Review, Vol. XXXII (August 6, 1949), p. 129.

⁴³Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, Scene IX.

⁴⁴Loc. cit.

blond mustache and a big silver watch. "Poor lady," they'll say, "the quinine did her no good. That unwashed grape has transported her soul to heaven." And I'll be buried at sea sewn up in a clean white sack and dropped overboard--at noon--in the blaze of summer--and into an ocean as blue as my first lover's eyes!⁴⁵

A Streetcar Named Desire, therefore, is a not too subtle enlargement of a philosophy of the negation of life. It intensifies the struggle between the refinement of old worlds and the brutish impersonalization of new, and it does so with an intensity that marks the surrender of most degenerates who have lost their faith in themselves, in mankind, and in the cosmos. We might add, that unfortunately, this is no clever rendition of a passing fashion of despondency or a romanticism of despair. This is a more telling and more permanent morbidity stated by an author who feels sorrowfully about it but apparently offers no hope in any affirmative illusion. Modernism's overpowering fate seems to make mockery of Brunettiere's theory of freedom of volition and will and Williams echoes it without resistance. No guarantee for the kindness of strangers that Blanche depends upon is promised. Rather we are lead to believe that the world will endure with the medical charts and stud poker. All else will be left to fade away. Stanley in the final scene views the pathetic personal remains of Blanche as she is about to be led away and lowers the old world into the grave when he says, "You left nothing here but spilt talcum and old empty perfume bottles"⁴⁶

⁴⁵Ibid., Scene XI. ⁴⁶Loc. cit.

CAMINO REAL

In 1953 the highly successful combination of Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan inserted itself once again into the American theatrical picture. On this occasion, however, the reception afforded the two masters was anything but cordial and affirmative. Camino Real, a revised and expanded edition of an earlier one-act play entitled Ten Blocks on the Camino Real, baffled American critics to an extent not known before in this period. And its reputation as the number one major play of ambiguity was not relieved until the appearance of Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot a few years later. Anyone who has read the script of Camino Real will appreciate the consternation of the critics. It is highly free and expressionistic in form and equally free and undisciplined in idea.

Mr. Kazan who transcribed its theatrical qualities with his magic claimed that, "Camino Real is the most direct subjective play of our time."⁴⁷ And if he was correct it should enable us, therefore, to get our clearest picture of the philosophy and feelings of Tennessee Williams.

The author himself does not deny this. In the foreword to the play he admits his personal participation in its construction.⁴⁸ It is also in this foreword that Mr. Williams explained his indirect approach to whatever it is he has to say. He is, as a poet, dealing

⁴⁷"Tennessee Williams--Last of Our Solid Gold Bohemians" (quoting Elia Kazan), Saturday Review, Vol. XXXVI (March 28, 1953), p. 26.

⁴⁸Cf. ante, pp. 131-132.

with images and symbols and defends this approach by saying, "Symbols are nothing but the natural speech of drama . . . are the purist language of plays . . . a release of the accumulation of . . . a great vocabulary of images which all of us have in our conscious and unconscious minds."⁴⁹ This generality and justification, however, has failed to placate those who have been unable to understand what the author was saying or those who read into the play ideas that they found distasteful.

The general summation of the criticism might be concluded that for the first time the critics objected less to the form and the style of the play than they did to the theme of the drama itself. In their response to his previous works many critics pointed out the sordidity and despair of the material, but as has been seen, were willing to acknowledge that these ideas were relieved by the poetry and the fierce passion which the author had at his command. In this play, however, neither poetry nor passion seems to mitigate in the minds of such men as Nathan, Lewis, and Brown the debilitation and the depression of the ideas.

Part of this disapproval may readily arise from the frustration of being unable to understand what is being said in the drama, and the logical place to go for clarification was to the dramatist himself. Williams dismissed the necessity to explain the ambiguity and the half-truths by referring to his work as a piece of poetry which,

⁴⁹Williams, Camino Real, pp. x, xi.

in accordance with Archibald MacLeish's definition, does not have to mean to be. But plays, unlike poems are generally stories, and if they fail to contain an ordered series of events, deviate from what is expected of them. This insistence on clarification must have been trying to Mr. Williams for on a number of occasions he has been forced to deal patiently with the queries of the misunderstanding. In an article that appeared in Saturday Review entitled "Tennessee Williams-- Last of Our Solid Gold Bohemians," the playwright at one point denied that any message existed in the play.

Now if Camino Real purported to deliver a message, I would have had to be clear, but it doesn't, and I don't think the people who find it confusing in its present form would like it any better if it were clarified.⁵⁰

Earlier in the same article, however, he described what seems to be very much a message.

The theme . . . it is, I guess you could say, a prayer for the wild of heart kept in cages . . . is merely a picture of the state of the romantic non-conformist in modern society. It stresses honor, and man's own sense of inner dignity which the bohemian must reachieve after each period of degradation he is bound to run into. The romantic should have the spirit of anarchy and should not let the world drag him down to its level.⁵¹

Two of the ideas expressed in this strike directly toward the subject of this dissertation. The first is the question of success or failure in man's striving after a place in the world, and the

⁵⁰"Tennessee Williams--Last of our Solid Gold Bohemians," p. 26.

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 25-26.

second is the implication that the level of the world as it exists is extremely low. In the analysis which is to follow, some attempt will be made to substantiate what the author has said, to examine his conception of the time and world in which he lives, and third, to examine the contents of the play itself to determine the nature and the extent of philosophical negativism.

Tennessee Williams offers the key to Camino Real by quoting from Dante's Inferno, Canto I. "In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself in a dark woods where the straightway was lost."⁵² The plaza of the unidentified town that serves as the setting for the play with its one side of luxury and its one side of poverty may be the dark wood in life's journey or it may serve as Williams' "hypothetical terminal point" at the end of the road of life. Or, it simply may be, as suggested by certain critics, a materialistic view of limbo or of purgatory. Whether any meaning so definitive can be applied to this place is questionable in regards to what Sancho says about it in the prologue of the play, for the road that he and Don Quixote are taking is charted with these instructions.

Continue until you come to the square of a walled town which is the end of the Camino Real and the beginning of the Camino Real. Halt there, it says, and turn back, Travelers, for the spring of humanity has gone dry in this place and . . . there are no birds in the country except wild birds that are tamed and kept in . . . cages.⁵³

⁵²Williams, Camino Real, frontispiece.

⁵³Ibid., Prologue.

Whatever meaning this first image may have for the playwright it is not necessary to make a clear-cut explanation in order to understand the life that goes on within its walls and the intimations of the hopelessness of escaping from it. In Block Seven the sensitive Marguerite, the essence of femininity in a former world of charm, reflects this larger theme of futility.

JACQUES: I want to stay here with you and love you and guard you until the time or way comes that we both can leave with honor.

MARGUERITE: "Leave with honor"? Your vocabulary is almost as out-of-date as your cape and your cane. How could anyone quit this field with honor, this place where there's nothing but the gradual wasting away of everything decent in us . . . the sort of desperation that comes after even desperation has been worn out through long wear . . . !⁵⁴

And shortly thereafter when Lady Mulligan who represents a malefactor of great wealth questions the right of Marguerite and Jacques in the luxury side of the town she is answered by Gutman, the proprietor who has the general right of narrator and major domo.

GUTMAN: They pay the price of admission the same as you.

LADY MULLIGAN: What price is that?

GUTMAN: Desperation!--With cash here!⁵⁵

The first part of the theme, therefore, is the contention that among all classes and all kinds in the world, the common bond of desperation and futility endures.

The second portion of this theme is stated by Lord Byron adroitly placed in the play as an authoritative spokesman of

⁵⁴Ibid., Block VII.

⁵⁵Loc. cit.

romanticism. His simple statement that, "There is a passion for declivity in this world,"⁵⁶ seems to be verified by each character's simultaneous desire to escape and desire to degrade and plunge himself into further despair.

The third portion of the theme is offered near the end of the play by the American pseudo-hero Kilroy who states in the same rough idiom of Stanley Kowalski the bitterness of life, the diabolical intent of the world force, and the preponderance of suffering as opposed to pleasure. Kilroy the idealist, the romanticist, the modernist, who is intent upon living his life to the fullest concludes:

Had for a button! Stewed, screwed and
tattooed on the Camino Real! Baptized, finally,
with the contents of a slopjar!--Did anybody
say the deal was rugged!!⁵⁷

Taking these three examples the theme of the play is, therefore, no more perplexing than the theme of any other negativistic work. Life is quantitatively weighted toward pain; life is a series of frustrations leading to despair, and finally, life is made that way by some unseen and unfeeling higher power that overrides our best attempts to make it otherwise.

But Tennessee Williams is reporting a vague promise of some kind of redemption--a redemption that requires a hazardous, almost impossible venture through the wastelands of the desert and into and beyond the snow-capped peaks that lie across the forbidden way.

⁵⁶Ibid., Block VIII. ⁵⁷Ibid., Block XVI.

That it takes the courage of a romanticist to find this way is also implied. But implication does not serve to eliminate the vanity of existence. True, Kilroy escapes from Camino Real and accompanies Don Quixote through the arch-way that leads across the wasteland. But the perplexing question that bothers us is that what lies beyond the mountains is never stated. It may be salvation or more likely it may be nothing at all. All we know is that some affirmation, perhaps in a Nietzschean sense of gritting the teeth, has been encouraged; that Kilroy, despite the doubts, is willing to see it through with the advice that Quixote offers him.

Don't! Pity! Your! Self! . . . The wounds of the vanity, the many offenses our egos have to endure, being housed in bodies that age and hearts that grow tired, better accepted with a tolerant smile--like this! . . . Otherwise what you become is a bag full of curdled cream--leche mala, we call it!--attractive to nobody, least of all to yourself!⁵⁸

The weakness of this affirmation, however, is the same weakness that is to be found in O'Neill's doctrine of living by illusions. With its acceptance Williams is saying that life has no solid values, no permanency, no divine purpose. Man in his pitiful state must be careful to avoid the reality of life lest he lose the by-product of all illusion which is happiness. And with this line of reasoning our hero finds no saving grace or even promise of it in the trip across the unknown, but is redeemed only by the vague speculations of a romantic fool--Don Quixote.

⁵⁸Loc. cit.

Even the theme of love versus hate symbolized by the figure of speech that "violets in the mountains can break the rocks," is never made meaningful because of the implied impurity and illusion of love only. The romance between Camille and Don Juan is more a romance between pride and past glory than it is of true love, and the strange and humorous trysting between Kilroy and Esmeralda serves more as a satirical comment upon sentiment than it does to fortify the love thesis.

In seeking details of Camino Real's negativism as they correspond to our own criteria for this philosophy, Williams has afforded a vastly wider range than he has shown in the two plays discussed previously. A Streetcar Named Desire would seem to be mainly an enlargement of the dominant theme found in The Glass Menagerie with the addition of violence, degradation and brutality. Camino Real not only labors the same thoughts that Williams produced in these two works but adds other details to the picture of pessimism.

Since this is a play primarily of symbols, it would stand to reason that a greater use would be made of abstract images and pointed rhetorical devices. For all of his realism, Williams, like O'Neill, found great advantage in the use of natural symbolism. With O'Neill it was the sea, the fog, and those elements which connoted evil and depression. In The Glass Menagerie Williams employed both gray light and tinkling music to set the mood of his play, and in A Streetcar Named Desire an approaching summer storm obviously

foreshadows the violent crisis in the insecure life of Blanche DuBois. In Camino Real, however, a veritable shotgunning of such symbols is used; "the loud singing of wind accompanied by distant measured reverberations like pounding surf or distant shell-fire"⁵⁹; the "Terra Incognita . . . a wasteland between the walled town and the distant perimeter of snow-topped mountains"⁶⁰; the reddened sky, the dried-up well, the "faded blue" of by-passed nobility. The physical symbols, the symbols of action, symbols of names, so many, in fact, are used that it is frequently difficult for the literalist to find out where he is or where he is supposed to be going.

The old theme of "the gap" which served as the main topic of interest in the other two plays, also makes an appearance here. Just as Krutch analyzed this chasm which lies between the past and the mankind who believed he was created with an enduring soul, and the present modern who believes that man can be analyzed by chemical analysis, sociological role-playing, or psychological motivations only, so does Williams announce the regret of the passing of the old and the victory of the new. It is to be understood once again that Williams may not be pleased with the loss of traditionalism, of enlightened thinking, or of all the old values symbolized in the cultural and aristocratic South of old; rather we would tend to believe that he is mourning their passing, but if this is his conclusion

⁵⁹Ibid., Prologue. ⁶⁰Loc. cit.

then the significance that he gives to the age in which he lives is a significance of little worth. At any event, "the gap" appears afresh in Caminco Real.

One of these has already been stated in Don Quixote's faded blue of nobility to serve as a reminder of that which was at one time bright and foremost in the hearts of mankind. He further shows this to be a repeated process in each man's life as he passes from the period of idealism into the period of cynical reality. Each man, therefore, reflects the way of the world. And it is with Kilroy, the optimistic idealist, who loses gradually but surely his basic beliefs and his own dignity. First, he loses his emerald-studded belt with the word "Champ" on it; next his miniature golden gloves, and finally his heart of gold--and all for naught. Kilroy rationalizes his first loss and in so doing states the theme precisely.

This is not necessary to hold on my pants, but this is a precious reminder of the sweet used-to-be. Oh, well. Sometimes a man has got to hock his sweet used-to-be in order to finance his present situation. . . .⁶¹

As for his golden gloves he claims that he would rather "hustle my heart on this street . . . peddle my heart's true blood before I'd leave my golden gloves hung up in a loan shark's window between a rusted trombone and some poor lush's long-ago mildewed tuxedo."⁶² But his vow to retain the emblems of his past beliefs does little when the exigencies of the times are demanded. Kilroy, like Blanche,

⁶¹Ibid., Block III. ⁶²Ibid., Block IV.

must face the pagans and the pagans now possess the world. Williams leaves little doubt as to his opinion about Christ's promise of world inheritance.

There are other characteristics of the negative theme, some of which have been preached before in the other two plays, some which appear in emphasis for the first time. Where sexual expression was the dominant illustration in A Streetcar Named Desire all the sensual pleasures are paraded before us in Camino Real. This leaves little doubt as to Williams' concern about the secular rule of happiness being the highest good for the rank and file of mankind.

Again, as in the other plays, the characteristic of escapism is a dominant portion of the theme. In one of the most frenzied scenes of any of his plays he brings before us the most concrete symbol of escape he has yet afforded. This is the great airplane Fugitavo, unscheduled in arrival and unscheduled in departure, but the one means supposedly that people of the forsaken city can use for escaping the ennui and misery that they possess. Where Fugitavo goes no one is sure, but it is likely that it is escape through only more illusion, through more sensual pleasure, perhaps through death.

The characteristic of exhaustion is inserted by the author throughout the play. Gutman explains in Block Two that the lethargy exhibited by the players is really nothing more than a lack of moral or spiritual strength:

They suffer from extreme fatigue, our guests at the Siete Mares, all of them have a degree or two of fever. Questions are passed amongst them

like something illicit and shameful, like counterfeit money or drugs or indecent postcards-- "What is this place? Where are we? What is the meaning of-- Shhhh!"--Ha ha⁶³

And then as Gutman continues he shows their only means of overcoming their conditions:

My guests are confused and exhausted but at this hour they pull themselves together, and drift downstairs on the wings of gin and the lift, they drift into the public rooms and exchange notes again on fashionable couturiers and custom tailors, restaurants, vintages of wine, hair-dressers, plastic surgeons, girls and young men susceptible to offers⁶⁴

The romantic Jacques in viewing the meaningless of the lives of his fellow men adds his own comment and confession, "My heart is too tired to break, my heart is too tired to--break" ⁶⁵

Another characteristic of life negation, moral and spiritual cynicism, is found in Camino Real to a far greater extent than in either of the other two plays. For a moment in the early portions of this play we are deluded into believing that some strong conflict will arise between those who are roused by the strongest symbol of love that is possible, by "Hermano, the word for brother." As the word is spoken the crowd is agitated, the protest mounts, and the forbidden word seems to stir a promised sense of righteous indignation in the hearts of the people, but Gutman calmly disposes of this by showing that among all creatures even brotherly love can be dispelled when the greed of secular happiness enters in.

The word is said in pulpits and at tables of council where its volatile essence can be con-

⁶³Ibid., Block II. ⁶⁴Loc. cit. ⁶⁵Loc. cit.

tained. But on the lips of these creatures, what is it? A wanton incitement to riot, without understanding. For what is a brother to them but someone to get ahead of, to cheat, to lie to, to undersell in the market. Brother, you say to a man whose wife you sleep with!-- But now, you see, the word has disturbed the people and made it necessary to invoke martial law!⁶⁶

To overcome the agitation Gutman merely arranges for a festival and the hedonistic instincts of man overcome the all too latent forces of his ideals.

Throughout the play Williams makes use of these small bursts of indignation, the individual protest in the spirit of anarchy, in such a way as to show his own derision for the inept quality of man. Through Gutman he asks, "Can this be all? Is there nothing more? Is this what the glittering wheels of heaven turn for?"⁶⁷ And instead of answering affirmatively, spends the rest of the play piling evidence ever higher to conclude that there is nothing more.

Along with the moral and spiritual cynicism comes ever the conclusion that life is meaningless. Other characteristics of negativistic philosophy that can be seen readily in this play include time as a force of evil, or time running out, illustrated in the conversations of Marguerite and Jacques. Their sorrowful chatter fluctuates between reminiscences of the glories of the past and their desperate attempts to hold onto the last moments of life in the illusions of their pleasure.

⁶⁶Loc. cit. ⁶⁷Ibid., Block VII.

Williams is also infatuated more with the grotesque image than demonstrated at any previous time. The desecration of man both spiritually and physically is seen in the dissection of the dead Kilroy's body. The accounting by Byron of the burning of Shelley's corpse and the delirious activity of the streetcleaner representatives of the Grim Reaper himself--all of these approach derision to the point of humor, but never quite close enough to omit the appeal of revulsion.

And finally, death as the great reliever of mystery, death as the inevitable, is repeated throughout the play. In many ways this could be the simplified reporting of the entire theme. The whole play seems to be hinged upon the expressionistic fantasia of the facing of the final event of life. As Charles Glicksburg wrote in the *Queen's Quarterly*, "... ~~In~~ confronting the reality of death, he [Tennessee Williams] is lead inevitably to seek a reason for living."⁶⁸ Williams gives us no answer except a rather weak admonition that we must affirm love and not hate and that we should be content to rest in the romanticism of illusion.

In examining the causes of the state of things as he reports them in this fantasy, we can draw but few conclusions from what Williams has told us. One of these, however, seems to stem from the strong Schopenhauer doctrine of "becoming and never being," of the continual pressure exerted on us by the world will to keep going

⁶⁸Charles T. Glicksburg, "The Modern Playwright and the Absolute," *Queen's Quarterly*, Vol. LXV (Autumn, 1958), p. 470.

despite the uselessness of striving. This, expanded, seems to reflect existential belief that nothing outside of man can be of any value to him in clearing the air about the mystery of life or any value to him in assisting him toward a purposeful and meaningful existence. What is within him, as Williams sees it, are but two kernels: one of suffering, the other of romantic illusion, and unless the kernel of romantic illusion grows with the kernel of suffering man's painful existence will find no sedative.

Williams also finds that a second cause for man's misery in his world stems from his loss of freedom. This, in part, reflects again the loss of his dignity and volition in the new world of scientific objectivity, but a second portion of it is a loss incurred by an overindulgence in sexual emphasis and other sensual diversions.

Whether Tennessee Williams is reflecting the spirit of his age or his own interpretation of that spirit will be better seen in the perspective of future years. But on the surface Camino Real seems to be a strong and deadly portrait of our times. It is a bitter restatement of the belief that man has neither earned nor deserved anything but oblivion, that he has connived to destroy his own freedom and in so doing has destroyed the last vestige of his faith in life. It has been proposed in our age that the greatest cause of our post-war anxiety has come from a loss of freedom or at least from the interference of it, and that the scapegoats for this condition are our structured society, our traditions, our recognized

authority and finally, organized religion. In the satirical elements of Camino Real Williams drives hard at each of these areas and institutions, and despite the fact that the play has been classified as "bad" by most of the reviewers, he nevertheless, has made a strong impression with his pessimistic outlook. Kenneth Tynan dismissed it simply as a "phantasmagoria of decadence"⁶⁹ but others found it more complex and more dangerous. Richard Hayes writing in Commonweal said, "He never confronts the alternatives of his world with any genuine moral energy; in the last analysis, he does justice to neither reality nor romance, the imagination nor the fact."⁷⁰ Theophilus Lewis reviewing it for America magazine found it to be:

. . . life only as registered by the lens of a camera out of focus . . . making a commendable effort to dramatize the meaning of life, Williams resembling a barber shop agnostic apparently discovers that life has no meaning. Life as he portrays it is a runaway circus train with the crazy engineer at the throttle while the animals in the careening cars gut each other.⁷¹

George Jean Nathan said of it:

The author's aim probably was a kind of philosophical, emotional, impressionistic, expressionistic, symbolic and poetical charade picturing bewildered mankind's search

⁶⁹Tynan, op. cit., p. 18.

⁷⁰Richard Hayes, "Camino Real," Commonweal, Vol. LVIII (April 17, 1953), p. 52.

⁷¹Theophilus Lewis, "Theatre," America, Vol. LXXXIX (April 4, 1953), p. 25.

for values down the ages, and its discovery in defeat that all is dross save what lies romantically deep in the human heart.⁷²

But of all those who were both puzzled and depressed by Camino Real none was more outspoken than John Mason Brown. In Saturday Review of April 18, 1953, he poured out his distaste for the work and his disappointment in the author:

On the evidence supplied by Camino Real it would be safe to say that few writers even in these times when many authors' sole faith is their belief in man's baseness and meanness have held the human race in lower esteem than Mr. Williams or found the world less worthy of habitation . . . I can only say that I have never felt lonelier in my life, more inundated with frustration, more tempted to despair for the human race, or more melancholy about Mr. Williams' future. If Camino Real is an antidote for loneliness then so is a ride in a hearse, a week-end spent at Bedlam, or a swim in a stagnant pool filled with dead fish. The world through which Mr. Williams guides us is . . . the "Inferno" as rewritten by Mickey Spilane and "Paradise Lost" in a translation by Sartre.⁷³

It is not the intent nor the purpose of this study either to condemn or defend a writer for his selection of negativistic themes. It is sufficient in the study only to point out their existence. Camino Real is highly imaginative and by the author's own admittance highly ambiguous; yet despite its negativistic outlook it still contains an almost indistinguishable air of pity and regret. Life may not be worth the living nor man worth the trouble he has caused

⁷²George Jean Nathan, The Theatre in the Fifties (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 1953), p. 109.

⁷³John Mason Brown, "The Living Dead," Saturday Review, Vol. XXXVI (April 18, 1953), p. 28.

in the eyes of Mr. Williams, yet in those same eyes one can read the sorrow in man's predicament.

As Harold Clurman stated in his report on this play in Nation, Camino Real should be defended on the grounds that it intends to afford pity for the insulted and injured, the victims, the outcasts.⁷⁴

⁷⁴Harold Clurman, "Theatre," Nation, Vol. CLXXVI (April 4, 1953), p. 294.

CHAPTER VII

ARTHUR MILLER: ANALYSES OF DEATH OF A SALESMAN AND A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE

Arthur Miller would resent being called a negativist. Equal resentment would be felt by a veritable host of his critics and his public who have rightly found in him dynamic expression of the heart and the spirit of the so-called average American--the little man. But to mitigate this assumed objection, it is necessary once more to point out the difference between theme and thesis. To attempt to pin the label of negativist on Mr. Miller from a standpoint of his propositions and his advocations would be difficult to support in full; far more difficult than doing the same thing to Eugene O'Neill. But to show that he deals with themes illustrating life negation and despair is no task at all. Of his major plays produced in the American theatre not one is free from the tragic consequence of our age. All contain elements of human deficiencies in faith and all are surrounded by the consequences of despair, frustration and human breakdown.

Although he has given us fewer examples of his work than any other of the four major playwrights we are examining, it is possible to conclude by only brief examination that Arthur Miller does not work with subject material that is in the least way joyous. All My Sons and Death of a Salesman end in suicide; The Crucible is concluded by an execution and A View From the Bridge by a quick and violent death

of the hero. Only An Enemy of the People (which after all belongs to Mr. Ibsen) and A Memory of Two Mondays, which is dubiously advertised as a comedy, avoid the finality of death by the main character. This is not pointed out to lessen the stature of Arthur Miller, nor does it imply that Miller's personal outlook on life is a dreary one, but this study is designed to examine in American drama since World War II the presence of the theme of the negation of life, and Mr. Miller's plays and occasionally Mr. Miller himself afford excellent opportunities in this direction.

In determining the attitude of an author, three sources must be examined: first, what the author himself has to say about his own beliefs; secondly, what other people say he believes, and finally, what is revealed in the content of his works.

Arthur Miller is a dramatic idealist. Like Ibsen he believes in the utility of the dramatic form. Its value as a medium of instruction, enunciation and persuasion of ideas have afforded him a chance to respond to a rapidly changing society in the years following World War II. Each of his plays was begun he maintained,

. . . in the belief that it was unveiling a truth already known but unrecognized as such . . . and with the hope that man, isolated from mankind, would be better able to find a relatedness in a world. If only for this reason I regard the theatre as a serious business. One that makes or should make man more human, which is to say, less alone.¹

¹Arthur Miller, Arthur Miller's Collected Plays (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), Introduction, p. 11.

Miller has been conveniently designated as a social dramatist, which is to imply that he is more concerned with groups of men than he is with man as an individual. But Miller's intent as a dramatist is far more complex. One may see, along with several of our critics, an impressive list of social consequences in Death of a Salesman, All My Sons and The Crucible and dismiss completely the internal struggles of the individual represented in those plays. But although Miller acknowledges the social utility of these works he complicates the labeling by pointing to the pathetic dilemmas of individual man faced not only with society but with the mysteries of his own singular life. "To make one the many, as in life, so that 'society' is a power and a mystery of custom and inside the man and surrounding him, as the fishes in the sea, and the sea inside the fish, his birthplace and burial ground, promise and threat."² It is in this respect that he creates the first of many paradoxes, for in his brilliant introduction to his Collected Plays he leans first toward social instruction, and then again toward heroic manipulation of exhausted people. The merits of his attempts to find a truly modern and American tragic expression and the merits of his adherence to the dictates of the typically social problem play have tended to cause tremendous confusion among those who have critically analyzed his works.

Perhaps the greatest controversy that stems from this social-individual combination can be found in the rather fruitless dispu-

²Ibid., p. 30.

tation concerning the old argument of whether real tragedy can be written in this age. Just as O'Neill was badgered by the pointless arguments both for and against his tragic attempts, so has Miller in recent years been forced to listen to the same conflicts over his own works. No play written since World War II has been more subject to this argument than Death of a Salesman.

George Jean Nathan: Great tragedy is the tragedy of man's mind in strong conflict with the stronger faiths; minor tragedy that of mindless man already beaten by them.³

Albert Shea: It is the tragedy of an era in which individuals writhe unhappily in the toils of false values which they hate and worship in the same breath.⁴

Gerald Weales: Miller knows how to show two people working to hurt one another when the genuine impulse of each is to offer love. He is not satisfied with domestic tragedy, however; he attempts to reach beyond it to place the personal conflict on a moral rather than on a psychological level.⁵

Gordon W. Couchman: . . . Willy Loman's story is not tragic because the playwright himself despises Willy's values.⁶

Henry Adler: Because Miller narrows down the scope of the drama to the limitation of the pathetic victim of society--his plays become a tearing of heart strings, a call for sympathetic attention, so that we turn from them heart and nerves torn, depressed and not instructed,

³George Jean Nathan, "The Theatre," American Mercury, Vol. LXVIII (June, 1949), p. 680.

⁴Albert A. Shea, "Death of a Salesman," The Canadian Forum, July, 1949, p. 86.

⁵Gerald Weales, "Plays and Analysis," Commonweal, July 12, 1957, p. 382.

⁶Gordon W. Couchman, "Arthur Miller's Tragedy of Babbitt," Educational Theatre Journal, Vol. VII, p. 211.

stimulated, exhilarated by the purpose of life as we do from even the most catastrophic tragedy of Ibsen . . . he revises the theory of tragedy to take in the passive, the inarticulate . . . he [Willy Loman] is a suffering barnacle clamped to the hull of society.⁷

Eric Bentley: The tragedy destroys the social drama; the social drama keeps the tragedy from having a full tragic stature. By this last remark I mean that the theme of the social drama, as of most others, is the little man as victim. Such a theme arouses pity, but no terror. Man is here too little, too passive to play the tragic hero.⁸

Arthur Miller: The play was always heroic to me, and in later years the Academy's charge that Willy lacked "stature" for the tragic hero seemed incredible to me. I had not understood that these matters are measured by Greco-Elizabethan paragraphs which hold no mention of insurance payments, front porches, refrigerator fan belts, steering knuckles, Chevrolets and visions seen not through the portals of Delphi, but in the blue flame of the hot water heater So long as the hero may be said to have had alternatives of a magnitude to have materially changed the course of his life, it seems to me that in this respect at least, he can not be debarred from the heroic role.⁹

It would seem, therefore, that the only interest aroused by this purely academic argument is in the results gained by an analysis of Willy Loman himself. Whether Willy is a true tragic hero seems unimportant, and to settle this argument along with others that have arisen since neo-classical discipline held sway, critics have invented adjectival conciliation by calling serious dramas domestic tragedies, social tragedies, political tragedies, and any other

⁷Henry Adler, "To Hell With Society," The Tulane Drama Review, Vol. IV (May, 1960), p. 61.

⁸Bentley, In Search of Theatre, p. 82.

⁹Miller, op. cit., pp. 31-32.

arbitrarily devised term to placate the classicists. What is important, however, especially to this study, is how the tragic material is handled. It is generally acknowledged that tragedy through pity and terror and through the exemplification of heroic struggle against the overpowering quality of fate, serves as a purgation and an example; it must ennoble, it must emulate and for its practical purposes, instruct. Otherwise, it would seem that the pleasure derived ~~from~~ witnessing the death of a fellow human, kingly or not, could only be enjoyed by the sadists. By the same token, the dramatization of the fall of a man, individually or universally, would be a pessimistic picture.

Arthur Miller was enticed into writing an essay entitled, "Tragedy and the Common Man," when the old critical debate was shifted to his own play. In this essay he acknowledges that pessimism of "the pathetic" is achieved when the protagonist is, by virtue of his witlessness, his insensitivity, the very air he gives off, incapable of grappling with a much superior force.¹⁰ He acknowledges that pathos is the true mood of the pessimist, but decries the idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism. This argument, therefore, dismisses the qualifying presence of nobility or kingliness as being the only fit subjects for true tragedy and placed the qualification upon the capability of the hero, regardless of his station, in fighting that which oppresses him. We may conclude,

¹⁰Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," Aspects of Modern Drama (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1960), p. 230.

then, that by using the author's definition a careful examination of Willy Loman's ideals and his willingness to fight for them and finally his ability to fight with meaning will determine whether the play is one of moving heroism and hope or one of simply despair and negation.

A final testimony from the author himself assures the reader that Mr. Miller is not a negativist and further, that he does not believe that his plays reflect that philosophy. Of Death of a Salesman he says, "I am convinced the play is not a document of pessimism, a philosophy in which I do not believe."¹¹ His personal attitude toward life must be respected, but the end result of Death of a Salesman will be examined more fully.

Part of Miller's admiration for the great realist Ibsen came from Ibsen's meticulous building of plays upon factual bedrock. The amount of factual reporting found in Death of a Salesman is subject to opinion but the picture that Miller paints of a segment of the capitalistic system is hardly encouraging. Certain attackers of Arthur Miller have pointed to this "social fact" as just another cut of communist propaganda. This seems unfounded, however, when one realizes that the most successful individual in the play, the next door neighbor, Uncle Charlie, is a far greater capitalist than the commissioned Willy, for Charlie not only is successful and kindly and human, but he owns his own business. Social protest, however,

¹¹Miller, Arthur Miller's Collected Plays, Introduction, p. 38.

looms large in the drama. And the first area of negativism can be seen in the picture that Miller paints of our social system.

It has been suggested earlier that Miller presents a series of paradoxes in his plays. The first paradox is the broadest and most all-encompassing, and opens to question the real attempt that the author had in mind in writing the story. It hinges upon the question of whether man is responsible for his own undoing or whether he is a victim of a vast impersonal and materialistic society. Miller seems to be saying both. In the social sense Willy is not to blame. In the personal sense his values have been misplaced. Gassner's statement about Willy seems to fit one side of the author completely. "As the study of a little man succumbing to his environment, rather than a great man destroyed through his greatness, it is characteristically modern"12

Far more than O'Neill and certainly more than Williams he is a conventional dramatist of our time who has never shaken loose his roots in the depression and the revolution of the Thirties. Practically every critic who ever said anything about Miller has acknowledged his social concern and Miller himself has acknowledged that no man can be separated from the society that surrounds him and is within him. In All My Sons a social crime more so than a personal crime prompted the eventual downfall of Joe Kelly, and later in The Crucible the negation of a social right as much as the negation of an indi-

¹²Herbert J. Muller, The Spirit of Tragedy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), p. 316.

vidual's right served as the theme. But in Death of a Salesman the paradox looms large for if the emphasis is upon the downward trend of social right then the individual flaw is sacrificed for the thesis. Miller, in other words, is showing an unpleasant determinism opposing not a man of will, but a man of misplaced values and personal shallowness. Seen in this light the victim is as much out of control of his fate as was Blanche DuBois when she could not adjust to the barbarianism of a new age. On the one hand, therefore, Miller is showing us the society in which we live and the picture he paints of it is intentionally dreary.

Since Ibsen this has been the way most social dramatists have worked. Very little correction can be gained if a purely bright picture is painted of the social situation, but where an urge to change appears usually the individual represented as the victim in that society has the capability of changing or the society is capable of being adjusted. This type of affirmation is hard to find in Death of a Salesman. Miller himself claims that he has a positive outlook in that he is showing simply the wages of sin, and sin as he defines it is a damaging social action committed by an individual.

In other words when, for instance, in Death of a Salesman we are shown a man who dies for the want of some positive, viable human act of value, the play implies, and it could not have been written without the author's consciousness, that the audience did believe something different.¹³

¹³Phillip Gelb, "Morality and Modern Drama," interview of Arthur Miller, Educational Theatre Journal, Vol. X (1958), p. 190.

These are Miller's words and in this interview he went on to explain that the moral he was trying to draw by necessity came from a negative witness. ". . . the social solution (ridding world of poverty through science) of the evil in man has failed--and we are now left with a kind of bashful unwillingness to state that we still believe in life and that we still believe there is a conceivable standard of values."¹⁴

As a social dramatist Miller may be a correctionist and as a dramatist of the life of man he may not be a pessimist. But the course of action he advocates to overcome a social condition which is driving man further and further from control is never quite clear, and certainly we may conclude that Death of a Salesman paints a pessimistic social picture. Miller himself admits this.

I have seen the interior lives of people transformed by the decision of a company or of a man or of a school; in other words, it is old-fashioned so to speak and it is not meant simply to go on asserting the helplessness of the individual. The great weight of evidence is upon the helplessness of man. . . we are not in command.¹⁵

As for life under such determinism Miller's response was, "All I know about that really comes down to this--that we're doomed to live, and I suppose one had better make the best of it."¹⁶ This last statement could have been the expression with variations of Schopenhauer or Nietzsche or Sartre.

Just as philosophical pessimism has been examined in detail in the plays just analyzed so it will be of value to analyze the social

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 190-191. ¹⁵Ibid., p. 196. ¹⁶Ibid., p. 198.

pessimism which constitutes the negativistic outlook of Willy Loman. In so doing it must be conceded that the distinctions between personal flaws and social flaws are not always clear-cut. Further, it will be of benefit in such an analysis to measure the contents of Death of a Salesman against the statements made by the author in his previously mentioned introduction to his Collected Works as well as in other plays that he has written.

The first social flaw has previously been mentioned and can be dismissed rather quickly. It is the statement so often generalized in our current introspection, that man has created a social monster that has turned against him and wrested control from his hands. The Freudian wail that psychologically we are the by-product of so many drives and urges outside of our own willing blends completely with the more contemporary wail that our lives are enforced by organizations, institutions, and other social dictators. More and more man is being pictured by satirists as a flock-loving sheep incapable of separating himself from "togetherness." He is a "status-seeker" on the scale of mass accomplishment rather than a "status-seeker" in terms of his personal enlightenment and fulfillment. One of the depressing marks of this doctrine is the factor of loneliness, for man who violates so-called social laws will find himself estranged from the herd. Miller sees this so clearly that he contends that loneliness is socially meaningful in all of his plays.¹⁷

¹⁷Miller, Arthur Miller's Collected Plays, Introduction, p. 17.

With the exception of a few of his plays that emphasized social importance O'Neill discussed the tragedy of unrelatedness in a man-God connection. Miller, though equally concerned with morality discusses the tragedy of unrelatedness in a man-sociological relationship. Willy Loman is a depressing portrait of a declining figure in a social structure. Dismissing the fallacy of the values which he set for himself as a causal factor in this decline, we see him simply as a suffering individual on the verge of being displaced. And in seeing Willy being displaced as a salesman whose mind has wandered and smile grown weak, cannot we see also man himself being displaced by a greater and uncontrollable force.

The German expressionists of the World War I period saw this displacement as an outgrowth of scientific advancement--i.e., Gas, RUR--while our dramatists of today see the displacement as a matter of both the scientific and the social behemoths. Henry C. Link is credited with the biting statement that physical science undermined religion and morals by accident; social sciences completed the process by intent.¹⁸

If we seek illustration of this loss of control we can find it in no better place than the skeletal home of Willy Loman. Willy is a driver, a go-getter, a man with a tremendous urge to belong. His tragedy in the social sense is two-fold. First, he is fighting a system that he cannot understand, and secondly, he lacks both mental

¹⁸Henry C. Link, The Return to Religion (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), p. 100.

and personal qualities to overcome this system even if he understood it. Yet in his ignorance he fights on. He fights against the time payments on refrigerators that wear out before you pay for them. He fights against the encircling concrete towers that dwarf his own individuality and finally, and most pathetically, he fights against exhaustion. So committed is he to this struggle against the social force that he wills his sons into the same fight and his personal loss is doubled by their total incapability of waging even a token fight. Miller himself points to this.

I was trying in Salesman . . . to set forth what happens when a man does not have a grip on the forces of life and has no sense of values which will lead him to that kind of a grip; but the implication was that there must be such a grasp of these forces or else we're doomed. I was not, in other words, Willy Loman--I was the writer. . . .¹⁹

His phrase "forces of life" must be translated "forces of society" for Willy's loss of identity, his total frustration in being unable to find a sense of dignity, stems more from social antagonism than from his own inherent weaknesses. For those who will take issue with this on the grounds that the values were Willy's own and that the choice was his own, must remember that he inherited these values from an age whose chief culture can be described in materialistic symbols.

Miller's support of this can be extracted from an article written for Atlantic Monthly, in which the author posed what he

¹⁹Gelb, op. cit., p. 199.

considered to be the greatest of our modern themes. "How may a man make of the outside world a home?"²⁰ In this article he offers the opinion that the central theme in our modern repertoire is the alienation of man but that this idea usually halts at the social alienation. We are aware that we are estranged from our world, that our identity, our being, existed somewhere in the past but is no longer with us in the present and we are willing to ascribe too quickly the role of evil to time rather than to the right culprit.

Thus it is that there is now a certain decadence about many of our plays; in the past ten years they have come more and more to dwell solely upon the psychology with little or no attempt to locate and dramatize the social roles and conflicts of their characters. For it is proper to ascribe decay to that which turns its back upon society when, as is obvious to any intelligence, the fate of mankind is social.²¹

Willy Loman is one of the loneliest men in all dramatic literature. Were he more capable of being aware of the source of his loneliness we might feel less inclined to view him with a pity that turns almost to horror; but Willy is unaware. Like a blinded boxer he gropes to find his opponent. His pitiful plea for assistance is nothing more than a question: "What's the secret?" and he dies with the pathetic delusion that he has struck a blow. Willy never learns the secret nor does he have the vaguest idea of the brutality of this "life force" that his author is so aware of.

²⁰Arthur Miller, "The Family in Modern Drama," Atlantic Monthly, Vol. CIXVII (April, 1956), pp. 37-40.

²¹Ibid., p. 40.

The second social flaw that is illustrated in the drama is stated both in the text and in Mr. Miller's introduction, and from the standpoint of pessimism is perhaps our most controversial topic. Arthur Miller says,

The confusion of some critics viewing Death of a Salesman . . . is that they do not see that Willy Loman has broken a law without whose protection life is insupportable if not incomprehensible to him and to many others; it is the law which says that a failure in society and in business has no right to live. Unlike the law against incest, the law of success is not administered by statute or church, but it is very nearly as powerful in its grip among men. The confusion increases, because while it is a law it is by no means a wholly agreeable one even as it is slavishly obeyed, for to fail is to no longer belong to society, in his estimate.²²

Among others, Tom Driver of Union Theological Seminary struck hard at Miller's social observation by pointing out that in fact there is no such law but only a delusion that such a law exists.²³ Granted that to Willy Loman this may, indeed, seem to be a law, what is more alarming is that Miller apparently believes that our social emphasis has ridden almost to the heights of Communist depersonalization and state devotion. If such a law exists we have succumbed completely to the dark predictions of Sinclair Lewis and have severed our last concern for our relationships with God. Again, in this respect, Willy's sin is not so much a matter of misplaced values as

²²Miller, Arthur Miller's Collected Plays, Introduction, pp. 35-36.

²³Tom F. Driver, "Strength and Weakness in Arthur Miller," Tulane Drama Review, Vol. IV (May, 1960), p. 49.

it is being endowed with a limited talent and a failing durability. If one were to take Miller's indictment literally, then Willy's observation becomes more terrifying than pathetic. "Funny, you know? After all the highways and the trains and the appointments and the years you end up worth more dead than alive."²⁴

The second doubt that assails the thesis is the obvious supposition that if Willy Loman is deserving of death it is because he tried to locate himself in a niche that was alien to his talents and to his personality. Miller suggests this when he intimates that perhaps Willy Loman would have been better off as a man who worked with his hands than one who tried to work with his mind and his personality.

Perhaps the evidence is slim, but such condemnation of failure in society vibrates with the overtones of Marxism. Perhaps what the author is saying in the way of negativistic witnessing is that our inheritance from an increased socialized viewpoint has been the worst elements of the religion of dialectical materialism.

Directly allied to the social flaw of failure is the equally well-illustrated worship of success. Not since Babbitt in American literature has this god been so venerated as it has by Willy Loman. The connection with Babbitt is easily seen. Both are gadgeteers infatuated with the trinkets of a materialistic society ever seeking

²⁴Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman (New York: Viking Press, 1949), Act II.

to find recognition in high places and desiring to attract this recognition by material symbols. Babbitt's rise was made possible by a nation newly born into world power and into expanding economic stature. When Willy inherited his success worship it was already an established religion. Babbitt's readers enjoyed the satire despite the warnings of Woodrow Wilson and despite the interruption of the great depression, while we view Willy's passionate enslavement fully realizing that the possibilities of humor have dimmed considerably. Despite this difference, the promise of wealth and the values of material success are the same as in the hectic years following World War I. As Gordon W. Couchman observes, "Arthur Miller merely brings Sinclair Lewis up to date."²⁵

The creeds of this religion, however, illustrate the mental poverty and naivete of Willy Loman. He chants the mystic words "be liked and you will never want" and even suggests that the extent of salvation can be increased by being "well liked." Simple moral values and business ethics are to be found nowhere in his creed with the result that his formulae for success totally destroy the chances of his own sons in a demanding society even before they are forced to face it.

In summation of this first part, a portion of Miller's negation theme has a thorough social grounding. In part he is showing the debasing of life because of the existence of certain social pressures

²⁵Couchman, op. cit., p. 207.

and social concepts and secondly he is showing the eventual decay and death of the individual who fails to adhere to rightful laws of the new social age. On the evidence of the plays he writes he is concerned more with man in his relations to others than he is in man himself. He is a socially conscious writer who works graphically and sincerely but whose social theories tend to baffle us.

Most critical readers will agree with Joseph Wood Krutch that Miller writes on two levels. "Willy Loman is a victim of society, but he is also a victim of himself. He accepted an essentially vulgar and debased as well as a false system of values. His tragic guilt, and it was his not society's, was a very old-fashioned one. He was not true to himself."²⁶ In the purely personal respect Miller includes most of the characteristics of life negation in the theme of Death of a Salesman. Again, that he shows us a negative life does not mean that he espouses this as a way of life, but he does include in his play the essential elements of life pessimism: despair, exhaustion, futility, and finally death.

Miller leaves no doubt in our minds about the gloomy direction of his plays. Like Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire he has selected a setting bordering on realism but surrounded with the suggestive qualities of agitation, entrapment, and despair. His skeletal design in the mode of constructivism serves to suggest decay and even death.

²⁶Krutch, Modernism in Modern Drama, p. 125.

The play begins at a point of near collapse. In the first few minutes we are aware that our hero is an exhausted man ("I'm tired to the death."),²⁷ that he is deep in the frustration of failure ("No, no, some people--some people accomplish something."),²⁸ and that his mind has preceded his body in death. This revelation of the deplorable state of the present denies any suspense as to the outcome. It substantiates the germinal idea in the mind of the playwright. "The play was begun with only one firm piece of knowledge and this was that Loman was to destroy himself."²⁹

Even though Miller telescopes time, blends the frequently optimistic past with the present, he does so denying any relief from the finality of oblivion. In telling the story as he does he is restricted completely by the point of view of his main character. Like The Glass Menagerie the representations of memory fluctuate between happier, lighter scenes and the dreary and bitter events that have contributed to the downfall of the present. But unlike The Glass Menagerie the narrator is not permitted to stand aside and make comment but must be retained within the prison of life, enduring each moment with the other participants. In this sense we are permitted an objective view and the social conclusions that we draw as the play progresses are augmented by the conclusions that we are witnessing a misplaced, misspent and bewildered life.

²⁷Miller, Death of a Salesman, Act I.

²⁸Ibid., Act I.

²⁹Miller, Arthur Miller's Collected Plays, Introduction, p. 25.

It has already been suggested that Willy is bewildered because he was incapable of coping with the outside forces. He is also bewildered because what seemed to him a heroic effort has availed him nothing. Willy, like many of our previous tragic victims, has surrounded himself with false illusions which he has mistaken for sound ideals and because of these has brought ruin upon himself. So enslaved is Willy with his false values and illusions that he has become almost a god to himself and the factor of reality when finally forced upon him is more than he can bear.

The tragic outgrowth of this has been pointed out by Daniel E. Schneider in an unusual article in which he tries to show that the play is in reality a dream experienced by the unpreferred son, Happy. This outgrowth is that Willy Loman has carried his illusion to such an extreme that even his sons regard him not as a man but as a god--and finally as a god in decay. ". . . as a god he is therefore worshipped until he proved his own weak human quality--sex."³⁰ The culmination of this comes in the pathetic scene in the men's room of the Steak House. "Blow after blow descends upon him until symbolically castrated he is forced to his knees to pounding on the floor."³¹

The disillusionment of sex, however, is certainly no stronger motivation for the eventual disaffection of the sons than the motivations that arise from the realization that their father is a

³⁰Daniel E. Schneider, "Play of Dreams," Theatre Arts, Vol. XXXIII (October, 1949), p. 20.

³¹Loc. cit.

liar, an ineffectual braggart and a naive failure even among lesser men. Schneider then ties this conclusion to an external social theme. "A society that destroys fatherhood makes primitives (criminals) of its sons."³²

Further negativistic characteristics can be seen in the strong urge of escapism. Willy believes firmly that somewhere in the past life was right and worthwhile and that somewhere he lost the track.

In his ineffectual groping for explanation he returns to two solid symbols. The first is the symbol of man alone working against the limitations imposed upon him by nature only. This accounts for his recollections of the trees, of the freedom of space, and of the garden that he nostalgically recalls only in dreams. One of his last acts is to attempt to embrace the past through nature by scratching at the surface of hardened earth in order to plant a few packets of seeds. The second symbol is the embodiment of the law of success which he finds in his brother Ben who returns at his will to prompt him to go to Alaska. Perhaps his rejection of Ben's idea that life must be found with the hands, and diamonds brought from the darkness of the jungle, is the wrong turning point in his life but he is so convinced of his own illusion--of the equal challenge in the business world that he fails to find verification in this idea. Just as Amanda and Blanche found firmness in the past, so does Willy find lost affirmation in the days before the system took over. The analogy

³²Loc. cit.

stops, however, when we realize that both Amanda and Blanche are well aware of the gap that separates the comfort of the past from the horror of the present, but Willy Loman continues in bewilderment to his death.

In addition to escapism two other characteristics of negativistic themes are predominant throughout the play. The first is in the extreme self-centeredness of Willy Loman. What might be mistaken as true love for his sons on more careful analysis will appear as nothing more than his tremendous drive to continue his own life through them. So determined is he to perpetuate the Loman success story that he drives into them the same delusions, false values and unethical practices that undergird what he mistakes for his successful career. With this he becomes nothing more than a false god who attempts to create a man in his own image. Even his apparent love for his wife is shattered by a stronger feeling of obligation to her for his own sinning. In this respect he becomes in more ways than one the shadow of O'Neill's Hickey, a drummer with equal evangelistic leanings.

The second of these qualities of despair can be found in the death image. Frustration and futility, shame and exhaustion drive Willy ever deeper into the death wish. Miller suggests this intermittently throughout the play by hinting at past accidents, the presence of the little rubber tube on the gas heater and finally Willy's weak rationalization that insurance money will be the cure

of all evils. From the beginning the death pall hangs heavy over the entire play and its release in actuality comes as no surprise to us.

On two occasions in his Introduction Miller points to the inevitability of pessimism that was to permeate the life of Willy Loman. The first instance is something of a paradox for, as has been stated, Miller considers himself a man of optimistic leaning. Yet, in response to audience reaction to his play he writes, "I did not realize while writing the play that so many people in the world do not see as clearly or would not admit, as I thought they must, how futile most lives are" ³³ And the second instance comes when he states that the source of his play grew out of simple images.

It grew from images of futility . . . of aging and so many of your friends already gone . . . of ferocity when love has turned to something else and yet is there . . . of people turning into strangers who only evaluate one another . . . and above all perhaps the image of a need greater than hunger or sex or thirst, a need to leave a thumbprint somewhere on the world. A need for immortality, and by admitting it, the knowing that one has carefully inscribed one's name on a cake of ice on a hot July day . . . and always throughout the image of private man in a world full of strangers, a world that is not home nor even an open battleground but only galaxies of high promise over a fear of falling. ³⁴

All of these images are apparent in the full tragedy of this helpless man. Although almost to a man each critic extolled the great dramatic impact of one of our most capable dramatists of the twentieth century, this play revealed to them another in the un-

³³Miller, Arthur Miller's Collected Plays, Introduction, p. 34.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 29-30.

relieved series of those who write about the despair of our age and the apparent futility of life.

George Weales: Willy is so carefully conceived as a victim of self-delusion . . . that it is impossible to conceive of him as ever having the right dream.³⁵

John Mason Brown: The anatomy of failure, the pathos of age and the tragedy of those years when a life begins to slip down the hill it has labored to climb are subjects at which he excels.³⁶

John McClain: The world of Arthur Miller is a place of strenuous emotions, frustration, and general despair . . . (he writes) terribly significant plays about dreary people.³⁷

Euphemia Wyatt: In starkest reality Death of a Salesman is a picture of life without God . . . is the perfect example of the American drama of drab life . . . the drama of disillusion without the catharsis of faith.³⁸

William Beyer: Their (Willy's family) aims having been limited to their reach stunt their stature as men and the subsequent impact of their failure on us.³⁹

T.C. Worsley: He (Willy) is worn out. Worn out with traveling and with hoping and promising. The hopes have never materialized, the promises haven't been fulfilled, the travels are coming to an end. . .⁴⁰

³⁵Weales, "Plays and Analysis," p. 382.

³⁶John Mason Brown, "Even As You And I," Saturday Review, Vol. XXXII (February 6, 1949), p. 32.

³⁷John McClain, New York Journal American, Sept. 30, 1955.

³⁸Euphemia Von Rensselaer Wyatt, "The Drama," Catholic World, Vol. CLXIX (April, 1949), p. 63.

³⁹William Beyer, "The State of the Theatre," School and Society, December 3, 1949, p. 364.

⁴⁰T.C. Worsley, "Poetry Without Words," The New Statesman and Nation, August 6, 1949, p. 146.

Albert Shea: Here is greatness in dramatic art, and a grappling with the realities of our society that transcends the tragedy of a salesman who sought escape in realization of self-destruction.⁴¹

Richard Watts, Jr.; With the utter collapse of his world, there is nothing for him to do but die.⁴²

William Hawkins: . . . the salesman with all his dreams, lost shadows, has no alternatives to death for his peace.⁴³

Brooks Atkinson: As literally as Mr. Miller can say it, dust returns to dust. Suddenly there is nothing.⁴⁴

John Gassner: It is the culmination of all efforts since the 1930's to observe the American scene and trace as well as evaluate its effect on character and personal life.⁴⁵

Certain of the techniques which were used by Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams to clarify their pictures of despair have also been used by Arthur Miller. Although Miller toys with realism and lightenes his language by a certain poetic feeling he is less of a mystical writer than his two predecessors. Nevertheless, the factual reality to enhance the social significance in his plays has in no way lessened his concern for the minds and hearts of the people he has created to tell his stories and forward his thesis.

⁴¹Shea, loc. cit.

⁴²Richard Watts, Jr., New York Post, February 11, 1949.

⁴³William Hawkins, New York World Telegram, February 11, 1949.

⁴⁴Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, February 11, 1949.

⁴⁵John Gassner, "The Theatre Arts," Forum, Vol. CXI.

To most of us the social impact of Death of a Salesman is far less stunning than the human impact illustrated by Willy Loman and his family. If Willy is demented, misdirected, and foolish, he is also very much a human being and a human being in a pitiable dilemma. This may be subjective judgment but it is more likely that we will suffer vicariously with this representative of our society than we will with any of the creations of Eugene O'Neill and perhaps any of the creations of Tennessee Williams.

To heighten the predicament of life, Miller has made us ever aware of the relentless pressing of time, of the casting off of the old while the new arises. As has been observed, this quality of depression has been included in all of Williams' plays and in a great many of Eugene O'Neill's. Invariably accompanying this has been the resultant depression of looking to the past, and whether in reality or in illusion understanding that time moves from that which was good toward that which is evil and nullifying. On the surface, the technique of showing negation through stasis may seem to be missing in Death of a Salesman. This is because Willy seems to be a character of almost hyperactive passion. Despite his exhaustion he devotes unbelievable energy mostly in dream and introspection in attempting to find the answer and the meaning of life. When we meet him he is no longer capable of waging more than a token battle against the law of success, but he shifts his battle in his futile attempts to understand.

Miller shows the irony of wasted energy not only in Willy but in his sons as well who continue throughout the play to delude themselves into believing that a possibility still exists to overcome the forces that are pinning them. Even the placid Linda who responds all too knowingly to the tragic direction about her inserts her own deluded hope when she says to her husband, "It's changing, Willy. I can feel it changing."⁴⁶ The height of such illusion, however, is promoted more by the younger brother, Happy, than anyone else in the play. It is through him that the mad pretense is perpetuated. With bursts of terrific energy he stirs again the false promises of the rejuvenation of his broken brother, and concludes each optimistic period with the promise that soon he will be married and soon he will run his department. These small movements that Miller makes toward false hope are precisely the techniques used by O'Neill when his company of alcoholics look forward to their rebirth in the annual party with Hickey, and by Williams when the gentleman caller enters the scene in The Glass Menagerie, and by Elanche DuBois when she momentarily sees a possibility of adjustment through the marriage to a member of the new age. These techniques of highlighting despair are most masterfully represented by the best of all static writers in his plays The Cherry Orchard and The Three Sisters. The way splits between Williams and Miller, however, in relation to the antidote used by the people to overcome the realization of the nothingness of life. And in Williams the characters of desire,

⁴⁶Miller, Arthur Miller's Collected Plays, Introduction, p. 24.

usually in the form of sexual participation, seem to be the counter-agent to death, but for Miller the opposite occurs. Death seems to be the means of escape from frustrated desire.

But the technique that unifies all three writers in their picturization of human depression is the technique of confession. It is interesting to note that not one of the heroes who has served in the plays analyzed has been free from guilt complex. Although O'Neill is the most open confessor of the lot, Miller has subtly managed to inflict the sorrow of confession upon his salesman through the re-enactment of events of the past. Willy's mind no longer under his own control reaches back and lays before him his false values and the errors of his ways. Miller acknowledges this in his introduction when he says,

As I look at the play now its form seems the form of a confession, for that is how it is told, now speaking of what happened yesterday, then suddenly following some connection to a time twenty years ago, then leaping even further back and then returning to the present and even speculating about the future.⁴⁷

The real sorrow of Willy Loman's confession, however, is that he makes it in a language that has no meaning for him, that he wards off the realities of cause just as he manages to ward off the realities of life itself.

In the plays that followed Death of a Salesman Miller continued with the social theme and with the picturing of despair and frus-

⁴⁷Loc. cit.

tration. The Crucible written as a powerful commentary upon the encroachment of public panic into the conscience and belief of the individual must be acknowledged as one of our really great commentaries upon a specific problem of our time. Although it draws a moral conclusion through the desecration of individuals by the tyranny of sadistic group leadership, it, too, lacks the affirmation of faith. Miller shows well what will occur when conscience is sacrificed, when approval of the pack becomes an end in itself, and when the sin of public terror transforms to a dedication of evil. But as for the hope that is afforded us in our own time or a re-statement of a religious principle upon which to base this hope, Miller leaves it unstated.

It is in this play that Miller identifies the social theme of informing as it is related to our communist investigations of the early Fifties and the resultant pressure to dislodge the communist party from this country by the testimony of one man against another. The obvious analogy that Miller made between the Salem witch trials and our congressional investigation focused upon the evil of individual action supported by society that eventually served to undermine that society itself.

It is ironical that the author himself faced a congressional investigation in 1957. At this time he was cooperative and willing to talk of his own activities with the communist party and to admit his own delusions. But when called upon to assist in naming others Miller refused on the grounds that such action would be an anti-

social action and one that would be damaging to his conscience. In discussing this Richard H. Rovere observed that:

. . . today in most Western countries ethics derived mainly from society and almost all values are social. What we do to and with ourselves is thought to be our own affair and thus not in most circumstances a matter that involves morality at all. . . . a man's person and his sense of himself are disposable assets provided he choose to see them that way; sin is only possible when we involve others.⁴⁸

This equating of morality with strictly the social factor seems to be substantiated in the conclusions of most of Miller's works. In one of his last plays, A View From the Bridge, the consequence of one man informing against another even though motivated by an uncontrollable passion seemed of more concern to Miller than the self destruction brought on by the tragic hero. In this play Eddy was no more able to understand the consequence of his flaw or misplaced value than was Willy in Death of a Salesman. In a real way Miller stacked the cards against both Eddy and the moral of the play, for Eddy's crime in our normal concepts of morality was made so disagreeable to us that we were not willing to investigate the real thesis--that the law against informing among thieves is more sacred than the immigration laws of the United States. Quite apart from its moral significance or its conclusion we have again a play both decadent and pessimistic in nature.

⁴⁸Richard H. Rovere, "Arthur Miller's Conscience," New Republic, June 17, 1957, p. 14.

Perhaps more than in any other play Miller approaches in this simple story the most clear cut example of our theme of negation. So dubious is the social construction in A View From the Bridge we might be justified in believing that Miller was more preoccupied with the romance of despair and futility than he was with the social correction. For the first time the critics seemed aware that Arthur Miller was succumbing more and more to the theme of a despairing world through the brutality of man. Richard Hayes in Commonweal defended his right to report disease and mutilation along with any other writer who may choose these topics, but decries the fact that Arthur Miller in this play seemed to show no interest in shaping or transmutation. ". . . he wants the thing itself, suffering, indiscriminate and brutalizing. There is at the heart of A View From the Bridge no principle or order, no harmonious point; only a flux of pain washing intolerably over the intellect and the senses."⁴⁹

The accompanying piece, A Memory of Two Mondays, seemed nothing more than a study of the hopeless predicament of the little man in modern society. It is equally difficult to find any affirmation to the meaning of life in this dramatization of resignation.

⁴⁹Richard Hayes, "I Want My Catharsis," Commonweal, Vol. LXIII (November, 1955), p. 117.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PLAYS OF WILLIAM INGE

William Inge is the third member of the American triumverate of significant dramatists who wrote in the period following World War II. As of ~~this~~ writing it is debatable whether he has attained the position of Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller, but his four major efforts to date have been decidedly successful ones in the American theatre. His stature as a playwright certainly affords him comparison with his two predecessors. One of these was a close friend of his before he made his mark on Broadway with Come Back, Little Sheba. Williams wrote an affectionate and revealing introduction to The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, in which he described the work of Inge as "an unbroken succession of distinguished and successful plays" ¹, a description that would create little argument from the standard group of American theatre critics.

In the plays of William Inge the theme of life negation grows dimmer. In fact, only a casual memory of his work by students of contemporary American drama might bring no negativism whatsoever. Inge seems anything but a pessimist. Tennessee Williams applauds his talent for offering "the genial surface of common American life."²

¹William Inge, The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, with Introduction by Tennessee Williams (New York: Random House, Inc., 1958), p. ix.

²Ibid., p. viii.

Harold Clurman describes his attitude toward life as one of "cautious optimism."³ He has been described innumerable times as a true American dramatist, a mid-Western playwright who knows and loves people, a successful folk dramatist who has managed to break the barriers of regional simplicity. His "synthetic folk lore"⁴, as the imminent Eric Bentley describes it, has earned for him four Broadway successes and extremely favorable box office response in the cinematic world.

To support the philosophical affirmation of Inge and his use of themes of "goodness" in his plays requires little effort. To begin with he is primarily a writer of comedy--comedy in the conventional sense; small adventures and small incidents in domestic settings. He translates readily for Hollywood producers who have found the going less easy with Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill. The comedy he deals with is real. We have been trained to recognize it and understand it, and although its humor on some occasions impinges on our public morality, the suppressive laughter he draws seems on the surface to be less objectionable and more wholesome than, say, the bawdy outbursts from Tennessee Williams. What issues he raises are brought forth in our own idiom. We are not suspicious of any perverted intent as we may be with Beckett, Ionesco, or Adamov. Even when he deals with a half subdued summer sex orgy in the backyards of Kansas he does not rouse a fraction of the in-

³Harold Clurman, "The Theatre," Nation, Vol. CLXXXV (December 21, 1957), p. 483.

⁴Bentley, The Dramatic Event, p. 103.

dignation leveled at John Osbourne or Norman Mailer. Again, on the surface, his comedies seem much more concerned with human compassion than they do with human depravity.

In further support of his affirmation his theses seem wholly optimistic. With one exception he concludes each of his dramas with the feeling of settlement and of hope. And that one exception, Bus Stop, is so very much a comedy that its final scene of lonely quiet and despair seems nothing more than a masterful touch of sentiment to relieve the hilarity. Unlike Miller, he touches only lightly the social forces which drive against his people. There is only a vague reference to either the cultural or social gap that Williams uncovers in each of his plays, and the fatalistic factor of the diabolical force of world-will is implied only weakly if at all. Mr. Inge does not seem cynical about our middle class morality, he does not make a scapegoat of our conventional religions, and as for life itself, he seems to recommend that we accept it with pleasure.

If we accept these statements about the playwright from Kansas it will seem like contrived analysis to attempt to find the presence of negativistic material in his work. But although Inge may affirm and recommend life in his stories of the common man of America still he is concerned principally with the same anxiety, frustrations and nullity that Miller, Williams and O'Neill wrote about in their plays. This, of course, does not make him either a negativist or a pessimist. Most playwrights find material in troubled lives; trouble, after all, is the foundation of conflict, the prime dramatic element in any

play. But if Inge does not deserve the label of a negativist it can be concluded by examining his four plays that he does at least concern himself with the major theme of our age.

By way of reminder, the four plays written by Inge and produced on Broadway were Come Back, Little Sheba (1950), Picnic (1953), Bus Stop (1955), and The Dark at the Top of the Stairs (1958). All of these plays have deserved recognition to the extent of awards, including the coveted Pulitzer Prize awarded for Picnic in 1953. For the sake of discussion cumulative evidence offered in each of these works appears substantial to say the least.

Of the list of symptoms of life negation, loneliness and longing are most apparent for they serve in varying degrees in all four of the works.

All four plays are also concerned with both the frustration and the despair brought about by certain sexual qualities. In this subject Inge takes a back seat to no one, for sexual want is shown in each play as a symbol of life force and the basic drive of youth. At the same time it becomes the source of frustration and unrelieved guilt.

The negative quality of ennui is also represented in each work. In Come Back, Little Sheba it serves as the predominant mood of the play. In Picnic it is the marked object of evil against which the undeniable combination of youth and sex is inserted. In Bus Stop it moves only around the edges and is reserved as character traits for two of the participants. In The Dark at the Top of the

Stairs it is painted in full boldness in a man named Morris but who might better be named "enmui."

Although despair, the most extreme of the qualities, is used only slightly by Inge it is of interest to note the number of despairing people who are used to support his main characters. Sammy the young Jewish boy hides his despair from us in his few moments on stage, but before the conclusion of the play finds the facing of life impossible and ends it. The laughing and flamboyant professor in Bus Stop parades his disillusion before us until its own specter reveals the extent of his own despair. In Picnic despair is the feared eventuality for every character in the play until relieved by the mercy, romance and melodrama of William Inge.

Just as the lesser characters reveal Inge's concern for despairing man, the main characters offer fine examples of exhaustion, preoccupation with escape, and stasis. As O'Neill and Williams were quick to point to those who sought relief through escape so does Inge show this quality by the conventional means. With the exception of the previously mentioned suicide of young Sammy in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs the death wish does not appear. But other forms of escape are readily recognizable. In Picnic it is the somewhat symbolic escape from the drudgery of the world to the temporary relief of a picnic, and for Madge the distant train whistle that we hear at the play's opening foreshadows her own more permanent escape at the conclusion of the play. In The Dark at the Top of the Stairs the emotionally dead Morris gets up and takes a

walk, a simple act which is made meaningful by his wife's explanation that "something inside Morris did the same thing several years ago-- something inside him just got up and went for a walk and never came back."⁵ In the same play Rubin Flood the badgered and restricted husband and father finds the road a welcome relief from the conflict of his home life. The over-protected Sonny, a boy with Mother problems, reminds us of both son and daughter in The Glass Menagerie by finding his other world in attending movies and collecting vast quantities of movie star pictures. And Renee, his sister, disturbed by the eternal conflict between her parents, is too shy to find release in reality and escapes through the sedation of music. At this point it is of interest to recall that every play chosen for detailed analysis in this study makes use of the modern escapist's prime symptom, alcohol.

In both of O'Neill's plays, Long Day's Journey Into Night and The Iceman Cometh, it was the prime ingredient for release and eventually confession. The imprisoned son in The Glass Menagerie found it to be a more drastic but more effective means of escape when the movies seemed insufficient. Blanche DuBois found it and hot baths the only means of recapturing her grace and her ease when confronted with the environment of barbarism. And in Death of a Salesman Willy and his sons celebrate their last pitiful occasion together over double shots of whiskey. With William Inge it is the unmistakable means of escape for Doc in Come Back, Little Sheba and for the

⁵Inge, op. cit., Act II.

professor in Bus Stop. In Picnic the bottle is produced as a form of ludicrous humor, but its presence, we are led to believe, is a common ingredient necessary for the complete release desired in a summer celebration. In The Dark at the Top of the Stairs it barely intrudes, once as a childish means of attempting to approximate adulthood, but more significantly it is implied by Cora that in their financial straits Rubin may not have money to spend on a new dress for their young daughter but always has money "for a bottle of bootleg whiskey." In this argument as a final retort of anger Rubin maps out his escape route. "I'll go to Ponca City, and drink booze and take Mavis to the movies and raise every kind of hell I can think of. T'hell with you!"⁶ It may be argued that with all four of the authors the varying flows of intoxicants is no more than a simple injection of realism. Man drinks for social ease, release of tension and for courage stimulation, as well as for the darker motive of escaping from life. But it is significant that in all of these plays in which some elements of life denial exist alcohol plays its part for escape and illusion.

The sexual ingredient in all of these plays serves the escape characteristic in much the same manner but it helps reveal the theme in other ways as well and in ways more complex. It is through the use of sexual material in his plays that we find the key to Inge's comments upon mid-cult America and to his own form of mild negation.

In reporting life as he sees it Inge makes continual use of

⁶Ibid., Act I.

sexual experience. In this respect he is second to none of his predecessors. Williams reported sex in its barbaric form and in its role as a reducing agent for his lost heroine. Both Miller in his plays and O'Neill in his later plays found it less interesting as a psychological source of study. It is true that Miller's A View From the Bridge deals with incestuous jealousy, but he seems less concerned with this than he does with the basic loneliness of his hero and his indiscretion in the violation of a social law. O'Neill, too, will be remembered for an openly crude play, A Moon for the Misbegotten, but here again his theme deals more with philosophical despair than it does with sexual obsession. But Inge in his four plays constructs the sexual expression in all of its variations. Perhaps it is in connection with sexual hunger and sexual maladjustment that we find the explanation for Tennessee Williams' guarded praise for William Inge's characterizations. It will be recalled that he described his work as reporting the "genial surface" of American life. What goes on underneath, despite comedy, can hardly be described as genial.

In his first play, Come Back, Little Sheba, Doc is first seen as a quiet and reformed alcoholic who has rationalized his existence to the point of its being bearable. His rationality holds up until Marie, his young boarder whom he idealizes as a daughter, latently engages in lovemaking with a young and sensual athlete. In her illicit love practices he sees his own life reconstructed and is reminded that the overpowering sexual urge requires the heavy price of despairing life. It is this that motivates him to take up the bottle again and

to afford his author with a convenient piece of violent melodrama.

Sex in this respect becomes a symbol of regret and the living examples of this symbol are a loving but dreary housewife and a would-be doctor frustrated into facing the intolerable. The dullness of stasis that has descended upon them because of a sexual indiscretion before marriage induces an almost Chekhovian atmosphere about this play. This analysis recalls a similar statement about sex enslavement which has been forced upon man by world will as revealed in the writings of Schopenhauer.

Inge was not satisfied, however, to leave a simple moral conclusion that man must strive to overcome his sensual impulses, at least to the extent dictated by common morality and marriage laws. He decorated the theme by inserting the ominous images of the ageless phallic symbol. Eric Bentley in his commentary upon William Inge and Tennessee Williams in The Dramatic Event titles the chapter "Pathetic Phalluses."⁷ In this respect Inge has made the virile young Turk who seduces Marie not only an athlete but more particularly a javelin thrower. That this is accidental seems highly unlikely especially when we consider that javelin throwing in American track and field events has almost disappeared. If any further doubt exists it should be dispelled by Turk's own description to the naive Lola of just what a javelin is. Turk laughs at Lola's ignorance and says,

It's a big, long lance. (Assumes a magnificent position) You hold it like this, erect--then you let go and it goes singing through the air, and

⁷Bentley, The Dramatic Event, p. 103.

lands yards away, if you're any good at it,
and sticks in the ground, quivering like an
arrow. I won the State championship last year.⁸

In the final moments of the play Lola reduces the threat of the phallic symbol by recounting to her remorseful husband the innocent dream in which he, not Turk, picks up the javelin and throws it, ". . . clear, clear up into the sky. And it never came down again."⁹

In Picnic the significance of sexual fulfillment is more openly stated. Aided by a bit of alcohol Inge stages a dance in the second act of his play which ends more as a primitive fertility rite than it does an innocent evening's interlude. Both Hal and Madge are painted as stupid young people unable to find themselves in a world that affords too much competition, and in their longing turn to the only area in which they can find surety and confidence--their sexual union. Inge is skillful enough to make this a story of real and even gentle pathos, but behind it looms animal passion and the disturbing belief that sexual fulfillment is the principle answer to our universal frustration. Even the older people in the play cast aside their veneer of propriety and self-respect when the phallic symbol is raised. Rosemary, the schoolteacher, at one moment voices her surface indignation at this symbol in the following speech to young Ha.

You remind me of one of those ancient statues.
There was one in the school library until last year.

⁸William Inge, Come Back, Little Sheba (New York: Random House, Inc., 1950), Act I, Sc 1.

⁹Ibid., Act III, Sc. iv.

He was a Roman gladiator. All he had on was a shield. (She gives a bawdy laugh.) A shield over his arm. That was all he had on. All we girls felt insulted, havin' to walk past that statue every time we went to the library. We got up a petition and made the principal do something about it. (She laughs hilariously during her narration.) You know what he did? He got the school janitor to fix things right. He got a chisel and made that statue decent. (Another bawdy laugh.) Lord, those ancient people were depraved.¹⁰

And then at the next moment she is succumbing to her deeper urge by grabbing at the bewildered young man in an attempt to finish a repulsive dance. In this act she rips open his shirt, thus unveiling the modern symbol of virility and degradation made famous a few years earlier by the partially disrobed Stanley Kowalski. If this mark of life values in our new age is not an original with Inge at least it contains the virtue of clarity.

In The Dark at the Top of the Stairs the sex subject is revealed in three portions. First Inge illustrates the power of sex as a life force in the union of Rubin Flood and his wife Cora. As in Come Back, Little Sheba it is revealed that the sexual union was pre-marital and though to a lesser degree than in Come Back, Little Sheba it serves as a guilt factor shared by the couple. Inge suggests that Cora is a highly sexed and vibrant woman and that underneath her warm and gentle qualities as a mother this condition prompts both jealousy and regret. She is over-protective of her children, highly concerned for the social welfare of her family but her possessiveness

¹⁰William Inge, Picnic (New York: Random House, 1953), Act II.

again suggested by Inge moves to a point of degradation in a scene of implied incestuousness between her and her strange young son. The third treatment of the sexual topic comes as a total shock to the audience. Lottie who on the surface seems gay, carefree, and totally adjusted to this world breaks into the pitiful confession that her intimate relationships with her husband were disappointing and distasteful. Lottie's frigidity and her barrenness suggest to her the true emptiness of her life which unknowingly has sealed off all contentment and progression from her husband. Lottie says to Cora:

Why do you say me like that? Because I talk kinda dirty at times? But that's all it is, is talk. I talk all the time just to convince myself that I'm alive. And I stuff myself with victuals just to feel I've got something inside me. And I'm full of all kinds of crazy curiosity about . . . all the things in life I seem to have missed out on. Now I'm telling you the truth, Cora. Nothing ever really happened to me while it was going on.¹¹

In Bus Stop the barbaric image is skillfully handled by Inge to bring about his most volatile characters and at times his best humor, but apart from the sensuous comedy he illustrates yet another form of sensual degradation. This is revealed by the nymphomaniac tendencies of the witty and likeable Professor Lyman who finds life to be an unbearable jest that can be escaped in only two ways: mad excursions to far distant places, and attempts to regain the innocence and adoration of youth by his illicit pursuits. This is rather strong material for farce comedy even though the particular seduction

¹¹Inge, The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, Act II.

that we watch is an unsuccessful one. Inge comes dangerously close to soliciting more than sympathy for this man; he comes close to endowing him with admiration. We are certain, however, of one thing and that is that his life is both wasted and empty and that the shell of his philosophical joviality cannot long sustain him. Parallel to this enactment of perverted love is the more crudely stated affair consummated by Grace the lonely waitress and the driver of the snow-bound bus. Here, again, sex indulgence is shown as a means of attempting to overcome the emptiness of a lonely life.

Sex, therefore, is a constant ingredient in the themes of William Inge's plays. His use of it moves clear across the scale, from the open manifestation of real love, with its primitive aspects and its physicality, to sex as a means of diversion, protest and escape. Alfred Kagin in writing about the characteristics of our literary culture today pointed out that our new plays and novels employ the sex theme in a way uncommon before World War II. He submits that many of our present writers ". . . use sex exactly as a drunken and confused man uses profanity--as a way of expressing anger, irritation, exasperation and thus of breaking through the numbing despair of isolation."¹² Although this may be direct reference to the writers of our beat generation and their English counterparts in "angry young men," William Inge seems to find in the sexual event the

¹²Alfred Kagin, "Psychoanalysis and Literary Culture Today," Partisan Review, Winter, 1959, p. 48.

means of expressing his own concern for the loneliness and bewilderment of man.

Closely allied to sex subject matter is Inge's own particular concern for the male-female struggle for domination in the middle regions of American society. Robert Brustein in an article in *Partisan Review* sets the groundwork for analysis of this struggle by pointing out that, "The most popular form of the Fifties--created by almost every playwright with artistic aspirations--is the domestic psycho-drama, a pseudo clinical study of maladjusted heroes and heroines, usually in their family surroundings."¹³ In this discussion of American psycho-dramatists he points out that our distaste for Marxism as well as our distrust of old middle class morals and standards has forced the elimination of the leftist propaganda play of the Thirties and even the liberal message play of the early and mid-Forties. In its place a mild form of Freudianism designed for common consumption now holds sway and is affirmed by both playwrights and spectators alike. He designates William Inge as one of the leading candidates in psycho-dramatic competition.

The typical domestic psycho-drama usually involves two people in a family who grope toward each other but who seem unable to meet. Mystically an obstacle is removed--frequently in the form of an inhibition--and the two participants are finally united in understanding and compatibility. This basic opposition is the core of

¹³Robert Brustein, "Notes on a Suburban Theatre," Partisan Review, Fall, 1959, p. 601.

every one of William Inge's plays, but Inge fortifies the conflict with a thesis of his own. He proposes that the male who is sexually and physically aggressive is the loser in this reconciliation because his domination, his masculinity, his potential for heroism, and even his freedom, are sacrificed in the domesticating process. This theme has served for ages as a source of comic device, so much so, that its serious consequences can hardly be noticed. Inge usually starts the struggle by pitting an apparently defenseless female against an aggressive and confident male, but in each case he soon reverses the picture by showing that his heroines are the pivotal characters upon whom the male must depend. They serve as outlets for his disturbances, his sins and insecurity. In this last role they afford Inge his greatest opportunities for pathos. Like Tennessee Williams, Inge brings into the arena a crude, terrifying male who is highly sexed and not to be denied. Against this formidable opponent is the relatively quiet and somewhat traditional female who in the process of the struggle discovers that his weakness lies in loneliness and inferiority. Her next strategy is to extract from him a confession followed by a surrender from which she leads him kindly but firmly into the ante-room of domestic oblivion.

In an earlier article for Harpers Mr. Brustein saw this tragicomic struggle as a sinister representation of a declining heroic image of man. Inge, he claims, creates characters who seem to be "suffering in a pergatory of low pressured realism"¹⁴ but in the

¹⁴Robert Brustein, "The Men-taming Women of William Inge," Harpers, Vol. CXXVII (November, 1958), p. 52

naturalistic dirt and in his obedience to domestic love we find the eventual entrapment. "The pervasive surface theme of his work is that people find salvation from fear, need and insecurity only through the fulfillment of domestic love. For the men, however, this fulfillment is always accompanied by a sacrifice of a very curious order."¹⁵

It is at this point that Inge and Williams make their separation. For Williams shows the barbaric and domineering male conquering without loss of his own ways. He is the new order and woman who is of the old must surrender unconditionally in the union. Stanley Kowalski chooses to enter the domestic scene, but it is a scene of his own creation; not so with Inge men.

An examination of the four plays will reveal how persistent Inge is in offering this topic to his audiences. In three of the plays the leading male is young, physically strong and attractive, sexually potent, loud, aggressive, and infatuated with his own importance. Strong reasons are also apparent to suspicion that each of the young men possesses mental qualities less admirable than his physical qualities. Hal in Picnic is physically a Greed god, but at various times referred to as a "stud" and a "bum." Rubin in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs is described as a "good-looking man of thirty-six, still robust, dressed in Western clothes--a big Stetson, boots, narrow trousers, colorful shirt and string tie."¹⁶ Later in the play

¹⁵Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁶Inge, The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, Act I.

Lottie describes him on the first meeting with her sister Cora:

"And here comes Rubin, like a picture of Sin, riding down the street on a shiny black horse."¹⁷ Bo, the cowboy lover in Bus Stop, is as brash, rough hewn, and for a while insensitive as any creation in American literature. The only departure from the virile rustics is in the character of Doc in Come Back, Little Sheba. But Turk, the fast-moving javelin thrower, takes his place in the sub-plot. All of these characters excluding Turk end up on their knees in confession and the heroic image fades before our eyes. For this resolvment in Come Back, Little Sheba Doc himself takes the place of Turk, with his head in the bosom of Lola pleading with her not to leave him.

In Picnic Flo exchanges womanly assurances with her daughter Madge by pointing out:

A pretty girl doesn't have long--just a few years, then she's the equal of kings and she can walk out of a shanty like this and live in a palace with a doting husband who will spend his life making her happy.¹⁸

In this play Flo's major complication comes when she sees in Hal the potential of a domineering male who might disrupt the scheme of things. Allen, the refined and quiet one, ". . . is the kind of man who doesn't mind if a woman's bossy."¹⁹ But Hal on first meeting is recognized by Flo as a real sexual threat. In Bus Stop the dissipated Professor, Dr. Lyman, serves as a commentator about the man-

¹⁷Ibid., Act II.

¹⁸Inge, Picnic, Act I. ¹⁹Loc. cit.

woman relationship, recognizing that to attain true love something must be sacrificed and that something must be of themselves.

That is the gift that men are afraid to make. Sometimes they keep it in their bosoms forever, where it withers and dies. Then they never know love, only its facsimiles, which they seek over and over again in meaningless repetition.²⁰

In The Dark at the Top of the Stairs the internal conflict in Rubin comes from his enslavement to the domestic picture. In the first act he bluntly strikes out with the protest that ". . . in some ways I din wanna marry nobody. Can't ya understand how a man feels givin' up his freedom?"²¹ And in his subsequent dash from the house the bonds of his enslavement seem to be broken. In the end, however, Inge preserves the home and returns the untamed to the taming process. The symbol of his surrender is his deposit of mud-covered boots on the back porch.

Even if the traditionalism of an American folk lore hero is reduced in the plays of William Inge this seems but a mild form of negativism. But Inge touches on more conventionally pessimistic qualities. Partly through realistic representation and partly through symbols Inge proceeds to show the agony and the endless boredom of people who find little hope in the future and little means of communicating their despair to each other. In Come Back, Little Sheba Inge reveals the combined despair of misspent youth and an empty

²⁰William Inge, Bus Stop (New York: Random House, 1955), Act II.

²¹Inge, The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, Act I.

look toward old age. Quite obviously Lola's lost dog is in reality her lost life of the past.

LOLA: She was such a cute little puppy. I hated to see her grow old, didn't you, Doc?

DOC: Yeah. Little Sheba should have stayed young forever. Somethings should never grow old. That's what it amounts to, I guess.²²

And at the end of the play even though the morbid future is faced with stoic restraint no affirmation sufficient to change the static quality of their lives takes place. Almost as if driven by a world will which they cannot understand nor justify both Doc and Lola conclude that life, for some reason, must go on. Harold Clurman described their predicament: "The play is a picture of little, repressed people living with all their inhibitions, moral confusion, awry ideals, and profound isolation in a kind of middle-town heart-break house."²³ Despite its tenderness it is a play that runs down hill and Clurman maintains that in reality it could be called a form of suicide literature. Richard Watts recognized its negativism in his review when he wrote, "This dull and weary husband and wife, whose near tragedy comes when they look back on their past life and see that only dreariness is left to them. . . ."²⁴ At the end of this play we are not convinced that a new happiness of any permanence will

²²Inge, Come Back, Little Sheba, Act I, Sc 1.

²³Harold Clurman, "Theatre," New Republic, Vol. CXXII (March 13, 1950), p. 23.

²⁴Richard Watts, New York Post, February 16, 1950.

be found, nor are we convinced that Doc will be able to bear the nothingness of his life.

The sensationalism of the primal urge in Picnic and the new "Priapism," so designated by Eric Bentley²⁵, tends to cloud the real tone of depression and futility. Again Harold Clurman found it another example of our modern negativistic dramatic approach.

The women are all frustrated by fearful, jerky men; the men are ignorant without objectives, ideals or direction--except for their spasmodic sexual impulses. There is no broad horizon for anyone, and a suppressed yammer of desire emanates from every stick and stone of this dry cosmos, in which the futile people burn to cinders.²⁶

Again, the hilarity of Bus Stop and tender compassion which augments its power as a play do not erase the philosophical despair illustrated in it. Through the ironic incantations of Professor Lyman we receive these ominous overtones.

Maybe we have lost the ability. Maybe Man has passed the stage in his evolution wherein love is possible. Maybe life will continue to become so terrifyingly complex that Man's anxiety about his mere survival will render him too miserly to give of himself any true relation.²⁷

John Gassner found it to be the major work of compassion in the season of 1955, but also pointed to the serious reflection of the major problem of our age. ". . . and along with other exhibitions of resigned or hopeful life, these tragi-comic fragments of experience

²⁵Bentley, The Dramatic Event, pp. 103-106.

²⁶Harold Clurman, "Theatre," New Republic, Vol. CLXXVI (March 7, 1953), p. 213.

²⁷Inge, Bus Stop, Act II.

express the condition humaine--the blundering search for self-realization and love in a frequently frustrating and nearly always bewildering world."²⁸ Inge himself leaves little doubt about this matter in the final lines of his comedy. Virgil, the loving sidekick of the primitive Bo, has decided to leave his young friend and like the Professor strike out for the unknown. As the play ends he is seeking a place to stay until the bus to Kansas City arrives. When he finds that there is no place, that the restaurant must close he accepts it with fatalistic calm.

GRACE: Then I'm sorry, Mister, but you're just left out in the cold.

VIRGIL: (To himself) Well . . . that's what

happens to some people.²⁹

in the dark at the top of the Stairs exhaustion, resignation,

despair to the extent of suicide, and unfulfilled want are well represented. The dark at the top of the stairs is the fearful unknown in each of our lives which, Inge tells us, can be overcome if we find somebody willing to climb with us. But as John Chapman points out, ". . . finding the right companion is a perilous task."³⁰ But for Morris, Lottie, Marie and Sonny no assurance is given that a right companion will be found.

²⁸John Gassner, "Broadway in Review," Educational Theatre Journal, Vol. VII (1955), p. 124.

²⁹Inge, Bus Stop, Act III.

³⁰John Chapman, New York Daily News, December 6, 1957.

Brustein described the play as being "conscientiously unheroic."
 ". . . this is life without heroism, wit, intelligence or even true energy, akin in its lack of hard virtues to life as visualized by the nihilists, Beckett, Ionesco."³¹ Brooks Atkinson recognized the greatness of the play but also found that the scenes "revealed the lonely agony of people who live together without really knowing one another, suffering in silence, communicating only when the situations are desperate."³² Richard Watts in his review found it to be a sensitive study of "lost and lonely people . . . tortured introverts."³³ But Patrick Dennis called it a "literate soap opera" designed to show the frustrating results of non-communication, fears and timidity.³⁴

In being consistent with the opening of this chapter Inge may be classified as a "cautious optimist." His plays end happily, he avoids the finality of death with one exception, and even in his obsession with the sex theme he tries to show it as a healthy forerunner to consummated love. But even though his plays end happily, they end with a note of doubt. It would be likely in sequels written to his works to find his characters immersed in the same bewilderment and despair that he casts for them in the early acts of each play. Further, his optimism reflects an almost existential

³¹ Brustein, "The Men-taming Women of William Inge," p. 57.

³² Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, December 6, 1957.

³³ Richard Watts, Jr., New York Post, December 6, 1957.

³⁴ Patrick Dennis, "A Literate Soap Opera," New Republic, Vol. CXXXVII (December 30, 1957), p. 21.

acknowledgment that life must be endured either without supreme guidance or rational justification.

Inge, unlike Miller, does not concern himself outside of the four walls of the mid-American home. He is not posing great problems of social significance and hence avoids committing himself to more universal conclusions. He is satisfied to assume that his audiences will find solace in subdued heroes returning to the sanctity and entrapment of the home. In this way he becomes one of Brustein's modern conformists to dramatic form and idea. "The typical play of the Fifties closes in, for it documents the hero's hang-dog return to the hearth."³⁵

Inge avoids the unashamed, philosophical despair of O'Neill and the wild depravity of an insensitive new age of Tennessee Williams. Nevertheless, Inge leaves us with a feeling of doubt about the future of his people and hence the future of mankind in general. In this sense he becomes a skillful writer of illusion and justifies Eric Bentley's claims. "Mr. Inge's plays still seem to me, not realized drama but a homeless man's fantasies of home, an alienated man's fantasies of the longing--hence the curiously morbid insistence upon healthy instinct."³⁶

³⁵Brustein, "Notes on a Suburban Theatre," p. 603.

³⁶Eric Bentley, "Theatre," New Republic, Vol. CXXXII (May 2, 1955), p. 22.

CHAPTER IX

THE USE OF THE THEME OF LIFE NEGATION BY OTHER AMERICAN WRITERS OF THE PERIOD

"In one way or another there are almost no important 'rising' playwrights on the continent or even the United States who have escaped the pessimistic scourge" ¹ This is the conclusion of Frederic Lumley in his examination of serious playwriting from Ibsen to the present day. The concern for despair has found roots in the playwriting of America's four major mid-century dramatists; it is the purpose of this chapter to show that the theme is in no way monopolized by them. Uncertainty, inquietude, extreme anxiety and philosophical negativism have become commonplace material for the plays produced in New York in every one of our theatre seasons since World War II. These plays, both successes and failures, have competed for New York audiences with the standard fare of bright comedies, psychological thrillers and musicals of magnificent craftsmanship. No attempt will be made in this chapter to determine the precise percentage of such work in American theatre, but a general quantitative assessment to support Lumley's claim has been made by many of our better known critics of the theatre and described in brief by the yearly editions of Best Plays edited in turn by Burns-Mantle, John Chapman and Lewis Koenenberger. In preparation for this study over 60 plays were

¹Lumley, op. cit., p. 136.

examined which were written by Americans and produced in New York between the years 1945 and 1958 and which dealt critically or passively with the theme of negation of life. There were others of brief appearances which were exiled to critical oblivion without publication that were also described by the critics as being plays of despair and pessimism. Add to this number the produced plays of foreign writers such as Osborne, Ionesco, Beckett and Rattigan and the total becomes significant.

In discussing the topic of negation Sam Selden writing in 1957 contended that much of the literature of our time has been afflicted by black thinking and purposeful negation. But he was quick to add that American theatre for the most part has supplied strong resistance to the theme, and for the most part plays of ultimate despair have been commercial failures as well as critical failures.² To illustrate this Selden chose as a selective list the 17 plays picked by the New York Drama Critics Circle as the best works for the period of 1935 to 1956. He concluded that of this group 14 had endings which were frankly forward in their outlook or which tended toward affirmation, and only 2 of the plays, A Streetcar Named Desire and The Shrike, could be described as, ". . . closing in a condition of lasting darkness."³

²Selden, op. cit., pp. 52-113.

³Ibid., p. 109.

Mr. Selden's observation must be respected in the light of two qualifying conditions: the one being that his judgment is based not on theme but on the way in which the play ends; the second condition concerns the 21 years that he selected for his examination. If the conditions were altered to the extent that the Pulitzer Prize and Critics' Circle Award lists were examined from 1945 to 1958, and if the theme of life negation as opposed to the thesis of life negation were the criteria for judgment, a different conclusion might be drawn.

In this period and with these award winning plays 17 different dramas appear (see Table 1). Thirteen of these prize plays deal with philosophical negation, despair, human degradation or anxiety. Of the remaining four (State of the Union, South Pacific, Dairy of Anne Frank, and Teahouse of the August Moon) only one can be described as escapist comedy--Teahouse. South Pacific, the only musical honored in this period, is both romantic and heroic but includes in its bright body a song refuting the allegation that the human race is falling on its face and one that charges that racial discrimination and hatred is an intentional and learned process of man. Many of the plays in this list include strongly heroic elements and affirmative conclusions such as State of the Union, Dairy of Anne Frank, J.B., Raisin in the Sun, and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Many concentrate squarely on the universal problem of the eternal human predicament. But man's struggle to find meaning to life, to arrest his descent into submissive defeat and loneliness, to overcome the internal and external forces that deprive him of happiness and purpose afford the primal

TABLE 1
 NEW YORK DRAMA CRITICS CIRCLE AWARDS AND
 PULITZER PRIZE WINNERS, 1945-1958

Year (Season)	Pulitzer Prize Winners	New York Drama Critics Circle Awards
1945-1946	<u>State of the Union</u>	(None)
1946-1947	(None)	<u>All My Sons</u>
1947-1948	<u>A Streetcar Named Desire</u>	Same
1948-1949	<u>Death of a Salesman</u>	Same
1949-1950	<u>South Pacific</u>	<u>The Member of the Wedding</u>
1950-1951	(None)	<u>Darkness at Noon</u>
1951-1952	<u>The Shrike</u>	<u>I Am A Camera</u>
1952-1953	<u>Picnic</u>	Same
1953-1954	<u>The Teahouse of the August Moon</u>	Same
1954-1955	<u>Cat on a Hot Tin Roof</u>	Same
1955-1956	<u>Diary of Anne Frank</u>	Same
1956-1957	<u>Long Day's Journey Into Night</u>	Same
1957-1958	<u>Look Homeward, Angel</u>	Same
1958-1959	<u>J.B.</u>	<u>Raisin in the Sun</u>

action of the majority of this list. This entire illustration might be countered with the contention that serious and corrective drama has always occupied a higher place in critical acclaim than comedy; Euripedes is more significant than Aristophenes. But the mark of negative concern in our contemporary theatre has been more than just incidental. Testimony for this statement has been included throughout the earlier chapters and will be added to here.

Walter Kerr in his book in which he attacks the quasi-Chekhovian writers of American drama blames the poor health of American theatre on the preponderance of plays which attempt to dramatize lives that are anti-dramatic in their stasis and frustration. Included in the list of plays that he discusses are not only the successes of Inge, Williams, and O'Neill, but also the unpleasant failures of writers like Elmer Rice, Robert Anderson, and Truman Capote. He further deplors the waste of writing talent that these negative plays represent.⁴

At the end of the 1957-1958 season--one of considerable merit--Brooks Atkinson concluded in his yearly summary that, "The traditional optimism of America is not much in evidence on the stage."⁵ The bitter and disconsolate tone of that year included such plays as Duerrenmatt's The Visit, Samuel Beckett's bleak and baleful End Game, Ulysses in Night Gown that effectively annihilated the dignity of man, Ionesco's short plays which reiterated his conviction that life

⁴Kerr, op. cit., pp. 101-104.

⁵Brooks Atkinson, "Downbeat Accent," New York Times, June 22, 1958, Section II, p. 1.

is absurd, and such other grim pictures as Blue Denim, The Rope Dancers, Look Homeward, Angel, and West Side Story. "On the whole this is a gloomy picture. Theatre goers looking for a good time have not had many places to go . . . the conclusion seems to be that theatre goers as a lot accept the lugubrious tone of the drama as a valid transcription of life."⁶ This last statement was based upon the opinion that, despite its negativism, the season was one of the best in years both artistically and financially, a direct refutation of Selden's claim quoted earlier.

Among others Henry Popkin, writing in 1953, pointed out that the tendency toward anti-real, anti-natural dream plays is a mark of the inability for disturbed and maladjusted man to accept maturity. This accounted, he believed, for the increasing numbers of plays depicting man as one who sought permanent escape in suicide or temporary escape in childhood, sex, wasteful romanticism, and alcohol. In most of such plays we are asked to admire the nostalgic, childish, incomplete hero in a way that will defy even a mildly traditional concept of heroism. Popkin cited such plays as Camino Real, Time of the Cuckoo, Deep Blue Sea, Picnic, Midsummer, Climate of Eden, The Grass Harp, and Grand Tour.⁷ Had he revised this article five years later he could have included innumerable other candidates such as Sweet Bird of Youth by Tennessee Williams, Handful of Fire by N. Richard Nash,

⁶Loc. cit.

⁷Henry Popkin, "Broadway Takes Refuge in Childhood," Commentary, Vol. XVI (September, 1953), pp. 241-246.

A Clearing in the Woods by Arthur Laurents, The Traveling Lady by Horton Foot, A Memory of Two Mondays by Arthur Miller, Bad Seed by Maxwell Anderson, Comes a Day by Steve Langdon, plus a large package of imports by our most successful English and continental writers.

Paul Tillich, the theologian, in denouncing the theatre of the United States for its images of meaninglessness and despair, contended that even comparatively positive solutions in those plays that could not be called negativistic were undermined by doubt and ambiguity. Tillich was astonished that large crowds attend these plays because of our traditional optimism and our courage to be a part of the democratic system, and in his astonishment assumed that New York theatre audiences represent only a small group of the American population.⁸

Charles Glicksberg in attempting to analyze the lethargic and defeated attitude of the modern hero found our playwrights unable to describe, let alone to advocate, affirmation.

The riddle of existence remains insoluble. Nevertheless, the dramatists, like the poets and novelists of our time, are unable to rest content with a tolerant skepticism. They must through their work, affirm the meaning--or lack of meaning--of life; their recurrent message, especially during the last two decades, has been one of fairly consistent negation.⁹

⁸Tillich, op. cit., p. 145.

⁹Glicksberg, "The Modern Playwright and the Absolute," p. 460.

Phillip Gelb seemed even more frantic in his conclusions.

"All that will be lost if the present trend of the theatre continues unabated and undisputed is life itself."¹⁰

Even Arthur Miller who professed no connection with negativism said, "So far, I will admit, the bulk of literature not only on the stage, but elsewhere, is an exposition of man's failure: his failure to assert his sense of civilized and moral life."¹¹

It is perhaps fitting to conclude such testimony with comment from those as equally affected as the writer and the critic, namely the theatre-goer himself.

It is with nostalgia that I recall my medical student days in the early 1930's when I could slip away from the burdens of scientific education to enrich my life and re-fuel my soul with an occasional Wednesday or Thursday matinee. These escapades if not always up to esthetic standards rarely turned out to be a bus man's holiday, as they often have been in the 1940's and 1950's. Much too often--particularly in the last ten years--I have found myself witnessing reconstructed scenes and scripts of my office and hospital work. Whether deftly or ineptly done the subject of the mentally ill seems to be the predominant preoccupation of the writer and the public. Nowadays I often leave the theatre unmoved and unrefreshed.¹²

The nature of the negativism found in the works of our contemporary playwrights differs little from that already discussed in detail in Schopenhauer's philosophy and in the works of our four major

¹⁰Phillip Gelb, "Strictly Controversial," The Tulane Drama Review, Vol. III (October, 1958), p. 60.

¹¹Miller, "Morality and Modern Drama," p. 191.

¹²Phillip Weissman, M.D., "Author or Analyst," New York Times, September 1, 1957, Section II, p. 1.

playwrights. The most significant characteristics, however, are found in the reporting of loneliness and human estrangement. Many of the plays examined reported this as the central complication around which the characters reached futilely toward each other in continual frustration. Frequently out of this theme grew the stronger despair and the climactic conclusion that life was not worth living. As with Inge this inability to communicate, this frustrated longing brought about either brutality or a total withdrawal under a cover of illusion.

The remarkable absence of the dynamic hero is also apparent in these works. Too frequently the man who is supposed to serve as the hero of the drama becomes entangled in psychological involvements, Freudian motivation or guilt debilitation. His failure, or more properly his inability to understand himself, lessens the possibility of affirmative action. It is here that his writer indicts him to a defeat prior to any climax brought about by a technical struggle. He becomes inferior to himself even before it is apparent to us that he is inferior. As Carlyle sadly observed, "Alas, the fearful Unbelief is unbelief in yourself."¹³

It will also be apparent in going over the serious drama of the period that the American playwright has refused to be concerned about national or international problems. It is appalling to realize that the American dramatist although willing to discuss the anxieties

¹³Carlyle, op. cit., p. 126.

of our age does little to delineate the major problems that bring about this anxiety. Whereas the drama of the Thirties was characterized by blatant propaganda, reactionary protest and melodramatic problem plays, the drama of the Fifties seems to bend over backwards in restraint. The question of the Communist-free world struggle, the question of our attempt to define a national purpose, or the question of the survival of the human race occupies only occasional interest in our theatre, and on those occasions for the most part the conclusions are both ambiguous and despairing.

Art for utilitarian purposes such as religious or political propaganda has often been questioned. One must agree with Atkinson when he says that, "Drama does not make life. Life makes drama. When the world is out of control, don't expect writers to make it happy or contented."¹⁴ At the same time it could be argued that the discontent of our lives is poorly represented by the people shown and the conclusions drawn in Picnic, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, or in The Iceman Cometh.

Lillian Hellman has been one of our most respected and most productive playwrights. Almost every comprehensive discussion of modern American theatre includes discussion of her plays and her influence on her contemporaries. Her work spans three decades. Her success in the American theatre cannot be denied. Because of her prominence and because of her ability to write plays of bitter and

¹⁴Atkinson, "Downbeat Accent," p. 1.

and explosive nature, two of her works written since World War II will be examined briefly.

In 1947 Miss Hellman returned to the theme of loveless and degraded family life with Another Part of the Forest. In more ways than one this play brought to mind an earlier work of hers, The Little Foxes. In both plays she reveals the nullity of life brought about by self-centeredness, greed, and brutality. Another Part of the Forest is set in a poverty stricken and defeated South of around 1880 and deals with a most unattractive and isolated family which had attained wealth, power, and comfort through the traitorous exploitation of the Civil War by the father. Against the background of luxury and even culture, Miss Hellman has placed not only a family isolated from a community, but a family whose individual members are isolated as well. The story itself is both simple and unexciting, but the interrelated conflicts within the family supply the dramatic power. A son seeks to free himself from the grip of his father and to gain control of the family fortune. The daughter seeks only the luxury that a doting father can supply her, and a marriage with a once aristocratic southern gentleman. Marcus Hubbard, the father, is a complex character of extreme greed and cruelty. His wife is isolated into the dim walls of her demented mind and the two sons are so shallow and unheroic that they more properly belong in the company of Harry Hope's saloon. Aside from the almost inhuman drive for material goods no human values exist at all. In her play she has assembled people so self-centered that although they cannot

belong to any society or to any one else they are unaware of their loneliness. It is needless to say that they are not bothered by what redemption could be gained from a guilt complex. It is significant that Miss Hellman attributes human sympathy and concern only to the demented one, and the rest exert themselves only in behalf of the worst elements of Nietzschean power. This is truly a drama of degeneration and brutality equal to its counter-society found in Tobacco Road.

In her next play, The Autumn Garden, which appeared four years later, Lillian Hellman continued the theme of wasted lives and human estrangement, but revealed this actuality to the characters themselves as well as to us, the readers. Once again the South served as the setting, but the time moved to the present day. It is a play about trapped, despairing and immature people, again mostly wealthy, who are perennial inhabitants of a summer boarding house near New Orleans. The Autumn Garden lacks the brutality and the crudity of the former play, but surpasses it in exploring the theme of negated life and will-less people. Miss Hellman is also more cognizant of the various kinds of illusion and despair and adroitly draws each participant to a realization of the nothingness of his own life. There is a faint similarity between the sophisticated household and the drunken inhabitants of The Iceman Cometh. In The Autumn Garden the role of Hickey is played by the cunning and shallow Nick Demery who manages to break apart the illusion that has sustained each of the undeserving lives about him. General Griggs realizes that his lot

is to be stuck with a stupid and unfaithful wife. Edward Crossman is made to confess that his respectability is but a sham and that his purposeless existence can only be endured under a state of alcoholism. Even Constance Tuckerman, the owner of the boarding house, finds her romantic memory of Nick is nothing but a shattered dream and that her life in the future will find no fulfillment. In the end all of the characters are made to realize that they have been trying to cover wasted lives, but even more sadly, must admit that they are unable to take any steps in the direction of change. There is no redeeming character except for one innocent child, no glimmer of hope, and the theme that modern man attempts to justify a meaningless existence by lying to himself is a strong indictment against our society. This is truly a drama of the non-heroic.

John Van Druten, another of America's noted playwrights, affords some competition with Tennessee Williams for the creation of jaded women. It would be totally unfair to assume that this is the chief accomplishment of Van Druten for he has produced several interesting and well-received dramas in the American theatre. Voice of the Turtle enjoyed both Broadway success and subsequently little theatre approval, and the play which will be discussed here, I Am A Camera, received considerable critical acclaim when it played in New York in 1952. Perhaps the chief objection to the jaded women of John Van Druten is not so much their inability to find responsible placed in society, but rather, that they are non-conformists in relation to standard

sexual morality. The author himself defended his recurrent use of such women by saying,

Why should a girl feel dirty just because she has fallen what she thinks is in love twice and each time given herself to the man she was in love with . . . I think in many cases it would be awful for a girl to marry the first man she had an affair with.¹⁵

If this does not totally dismiss the morality question it at least gives indication that like Williams he is aware of the restlessness of women. This not only suffices as explanation for the heroines of I've Got Sixpence and Voice of the Turtle, but serves as the proper introduction to Sally Bowles, one of the most astonishing and restless women in American drama. I Am A Camera refers to the photographic impression made in the mind of a young and aspiring writer, whose experiences in pre-war Berlin included the companionship of Sally Bowles. Like much of Van Druten's work, the story occupies a minor position in the play. He seems much more concerned about the development of characters and the portrayal of intricate and often pathetic relationships between them. Sally Bowles is a product of normal, unspectacular English country life who turns to a Bohemian existence in Berlin as her answer for trying to find a meaning to her existence. She represents the non-productive, the shallow, the escapist members of a beleaguered generation caught in world poverty and trapped between two wars. As Sally moves from place to place and man to man she pretends she is seeking the excitement of

¹⁵John Van Druten, cited by Henry Hewes, "John Van Druten's Wholesome Sinner," Theatre Arts, January, 1953, p. 32.

life and that she will eventually settle into something useful and productive. In her kindness, in her vivacity, and her wit she manages to find the companionship that she so desperately needs but companionship is only a portion of the fulfillment, the balance seems far out of her reach.

Under the guise of generosity and freedom Van Druten almost excuses her immorality and asks us to do the same. But deeper analysis will show that she contributes nothing, rationalizes her way out of a stricken conscience and actually pretends only to a vitality, a sincerity and charm. It is the portrait of a personality that can stand no measurement below the surface. She is unable to move away from her own sensual centered life. As the story concludes she amiably parts from her latest companion and assures both him and herself that she will some day find life's meaning and settle into a useful existence. But beneath this assurance both she and the reader are well aware that she is nothing more than a pitiful drifter, unable and unwilling to change, who will spend her life seeking company and seeking approval. Van Druten has skillfully drawn a young woman of considerable interest, but comes dangerously close to asking our approval of her surface qualities.

One of the most agonizing plays of the period is N. Richard Nash's See the Jaguar. The form of this study in brutality is reminiscent of the earth-rooted folk plays of the Twenties and Thirties and affords a strange mixture of barbaric abnormality and overly tender sentimentality. To show that degradation and nihilism are not reserved

for urban centers or their sophisticated inhabitants Nash sets this play in an isolated mountain locale of Colorado. It is the story of the forces of evil versus the forces of good as represented on the one hand by Dave Riggs an idealistic young school teacher, and the powerful and somewhat sadistic Brad who is sheriff, owner and master controller of the mountain community. ~~When~~ a young and wild mountain boy is released from his lifetime prison by his mother who kept him there because she wished to protect him from the evil of the world, he is tracked down and captured by Brad and his hunting cronies. Dave befriends the boy and then later betrays him in order to gain the favor of Brad who is the father of the girl he wishes to marry. In the end Dave realizes the compromise he has made with his own moral code and attempts to release the boy from a cage into which he has been placed for purposes of tourist attraction. In so doing he is killed and the primitive justice is assumed to continue.

The play is written in a surrealist style with poetic overtones and its melodramatic conflicts and its ludicrous images tend to cloud the major conflict. Rather clearly drawn, however, is the major problem of our time, ". . . the conflict of those who have no power except their humanity with those who have every power except humanity."¹⁶ In this regard Nash is in no way a negativist. His hero--the one with humanity--opposes inhumanity with all of his limited power and since he represents the weaker of the two forces

¹⁶"How Palpable is a Hit?" Theatre Arts, Vol. XXXVII (August, 1953), p. 33.

goes to a hero's death. But negation does appear firmly on the side of the inhuman camp and symbolically we are to interpret that this is the way of the world. In trying to explain what the world is like to the frightened Wally, Dave paints a picture of pessimistic color.

No--wait! (gently) Sit down, boy, sit down. And listen close. Your mother wrote a letter. She said I was to explain things to you. Where to start? You asked me why we're running. Well, out here in the world we do a lot of running, everywhere at once. Where to? From what? . . . You're running from this hill. Up here--it's strange--men harm one another. Don't ask me why. For food or fear--some even say for love--it's crazy--men harm one another.¹⁷

One of the most common topics in drama since World War II is to be found in plays dealing with disillusioned youth. Because of the national concern for the increased occurrences of juvenile delinquency and because of the perplexities of an unsettled and hostile world that faces the new generation, it is not surprising that the American playwright should find material in the misery of the young. I Am A Camera concerns young disillusionment in a previous period but its parallel to the common youthful dilemma of today can be seen readily. See the Jaguar and its frightened and bewildered young recluse can well symbolize the predicament of all youth facing a hostile and frantic world.

One of the more recent and successful young writers in the American theatre, Robert Anderson, has dealt with the theme of the

¹⁷N. Richard Nash, See the Jaguar, reprint in Theatre Arts, Vol. XXXVII (August, 1953), Act II, Sc 1.

loneliness and despair of youth in two successful plays. Tea and Sympathy is a touching story of a boy facing the charges of homosexuality and the insecurity of being abandoned in an adult world. The second play, All Summer Long, lacks the melodrama and the sensationalism of Tea and Sympathy but it possesses an even more universal and more touching exposure of a lonely young boy in a loveless and dreary middle class American family. Anderson's play is an adaptation of a novel entitled A Wreath and a Curse by Donald Wetzel. Again, like many of the plays dealing with this theme the story is simple. The study of the lives within it is complex. The play concerns a common mid-western family living in an old house on the edge of a river. As the river relentlessly erodes the earth to the very foundation of the house the youngest child, Willy, who is a quiet and intelligent boy of eleven, worries about the future of the home and more about the lack of concern and action on the part of his father. Willy is both misunderstood and unable to understand and as he fails to communicate with his self-centered father he approaches despair. The tragedy of this disintegrating family comes in the realization that actually no evil exists, only an attitude of loneliness and misunderstanding. Although Willy has been given the heroic role, the author is careful to delineate the unhappiness and failing of every member of the family. The mother worries about failure and about the future of her children, but because she is unable to articulate her love and incapable of affording either consolation or advice she is unable to reach them. The married daughter

Ruth has no other thought nor concern than for her own beauty, and when she finds that she is pregnant withdraws even further into her isolation. The father is in an almost perpetual anger and impatience with his boys, partially because of their refusal to approach the ideal he has set for them, and partly because of his own inability to reach them on any level. Don the older son is unable to walk because of an automobile accident. Although he is able to serve as both an older brother and a father to the sensitive young Willy, he has not been able to adjust to his own inactivity and interrupted plans for education. When Willy can find no help from his father nor from anyone in attempting to stem the destructive power of the river he solicits the help of Don and spends his summer building a wall of heavy stones. Rather than receiving encouragement or help in this endeavor, he is ridiculed for wasting a summer. When the wall collapses in a heavy rain in the Fall and the house begins to crumble, he faces a defeat that must surely leave an indelible mark upon him. But Don, in comforting Willy and assuring him that it is the effort of battle that counts despite the eventual defeat, manages to restore a normal affirmation in the boy and at the same time revitalize his own thinking. Anderson has succeeded in writing a meaningful play about a universal condition. He is showing that when love cannot be articulated it dies. Just as the family feels the ground tremble beneath them with the force of the rising river, so does it feel the trembling of old foundations of their relationships as the members drift further apart.

There is a striking similarity between All Summer Long and Death of a Salesman. Again, the theme of negation through misplaced values and human estrangement is apparent. Although morally and mentally more stable than Willy, Mr. Mumson is equally disheartened in his relationship with his sons. When he finds his own inadequacies pressing in upon him he strikes out at his boys or withdraws into his own self-centeredness. At times the wistful and pitiful quality of the speeches recalls Miller's merciless revelation of his despairing salesman. In the height of the conflict, Mr. Mumson decides to paint the doomed house, an act reminiscent of Willy Loman's planting of a barren garden. The resultant speech by his son, Don, points the similarity: "Maybe he had trouble sleeping last night and then he decided he'd paint the house. Maybe he had a dream that if he'd only paint the house everything would be okay about the river and the world."¹⁸

Although the play ends with hope of affirmation by both boys there is no assurance that the family as it moves away from its broken home will find anything besides ennui and misunderstanding in its new location.

Jane Bowles' play In the Summer House produced in 1953, is a more bitter and melodramatic picturization of human estrangement and disillusionment of youth. Just as certain similarities exist between the father-son relationship of All Summer Long and Death of a

¹⁸Robert Anderson, All Summer Long (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1958), Act II, Sc. iv.

Salesman so does this play draw striking similarity to Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie. Both plays deal with a domineering mother who fights not only her own lost memories and way of life but is also faced with the approaching spinsterhood of a neurotic daughter. In choosing this story Miss Bowles, like Williams, deals with the depression of human estrangement and the eternal searching for escape by maladjusted and lonely people. The daughter, Molly, in In the Summer House is similar to Laura in many ways. Her retreat from reality is into a vine covered summer house situated on the edge of the California coast. Where Laura has her records and her glass menagerie, Molly has this retreat and her almost endless collection of comic books. Her attempts to cling to her mother are certainly more than healthy, and when she is faced with an approaching marriage she is as insecure and miserable as the pathetic Laura. Miss Bowles further imitates the Williams' technique by requiring a background of strange and ethereal music. Unfortunately In the Summer House does not capture the same simplicity as The Glass Menagerie but draws into the picture strange sexual overtones of forced suicide, a bizarre and unsuccessful second marriage by the mother, and an additional complex life found in another widow, Mrs. Constable, who is reported as a genial derelict addicted to alcohol. In this respect the theme of defeatism through human estrangement is enlarged to include immorality, physical and mental degeneration, and innumerable other aspects of life negation.

The problem of maladjusted and disillusioned youth on the brink of despair can be found also in Moss Hart's strange psychological study of a jungle retreat and a lonely clinging of disturbed young people. Like others, The Climate of Eden affirms life in the end but its theme deals with negativism. Also included in this category are Blue Denim by James Herliky and William Noble, the musical West Side Story by Arthur Laurents and Leonard Bernstein, and Ketti Fring's stage adaptation of Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel.

If our playwrights have found dramatic materials in despairing youth in an unsettled world, they have found equal opportunity in depicting the loneliness and despair of the aged. This theme moves all the way from the frustrated conditions of middle aged women who cannot bear the loneliness of declining years to the equally depressing problem of old people unable to face either boredom or death.

Exemplifying the former is Arthur Laurents' The Time of the Cuckoo brilliantly played by Shirley Booth in the 1952-1953 season. Although this is intended to be a comedy about a personable middle-aged secretary who tries to battle her loneliness and unromantic life in a final moment of love, its humor is dimmed considerably by the human problem that underlies it. Leona Samish seeks this last chance romance in the hospitality of a Venetian vacation. But because she is bound to well-ingrained moral standards, her efforts to find love are thwarted and she faces the return to a life of increasing loneliness. Although Laurents tampers with morality in his other characters, he permits Leona the retention of her dignity. Sadness and loneliness,

however, is the price she must pay for her decision. Elmer Rice's play of lesser success, The Grand Tour had earlier dealt with the same idea; a spinster on a European holiday has a chance for illicit romance but is hopelessly bound by the conditions of her upbringing and returns home both victor and victim.

More meaningful in the age-problem category are the plays dealing with the despair of the very old. Robert McEnroe in his The Silver Whistle chose to approach the problem in a highly romantic, comic form, but the moment of brightness that he brought to an old people's home by an enterprising and jovial scoundrel introduced affirmation and relieved their perpetual boredom at the expense of the dignity of age. Because of this the lasting consequence of his solution not only could be doubted but also condemned.

Truman Capote touched the same problem of loneliness and human estrangement among the aged in his story of Dolly and Verena Talbo who attempt an escape to childhood in a tree. Although a fantasy of considerable charm, The Grass Harp afforded little more consolation than The Silver Whistle.

Perhaps a more meaningful study of despairing age attempting to recapture the affirmation of the past was made by Horton Foote in his simple and tender play, The Trip to Bountiful. Again, some of the influence of Tennessee Williams and his concern for the unfeeling of the modern age toward the bypassed eras of the South is apparent. But unlike Williams' plays the traditional element is not characterized by an aristocratic and a decadent South. In The Trip to Bountiful,

Mrs. Watts, a fast aging woman in her sixties, finds herself trapped in the tight rooms and the crowded streets of the big city of Houston. Her life is made more miserable by a crude and unsympathetic daughter-in-law who will not tolerate her attempts to escape to the past nor her simple comfort in singing old hymns. Like many older people whose lives are no longer useful nor pleasant Mrs. Watts wants to escape, to go back, to find the lost freedom and happiness at her old farm house in the small town of Bountiful. She effects this escape but when she reaches the home of her youth finds that all of her friends are gone and her house in a state of final deterioration. Although this visit has brought some strength to endure the future, it is certain that her return to the tight and airless apartment in Houston will bring an early and lonely death. This play, with its sensitive depiction of lonely, wasted, and inexpressive lives, is in the best Chekhovian tradition.

Perhaps the two finest plays in our period that deal with the theme of the negativism of the age are Phillip Barry's Second Threshold and Dorothy Parker and Arnaud d'Usseau's play entitled The Ladies of the Corridor. In both plays the problems discovered and approached in the growing field of geriatrics are met head on.

In Barry's play which was completed for him by his friend Robert Sherwood after Barry's death is an open discussion by intelligent people of the thesis that life is not worth living. Unlike other despair literature, there is no evidence of accompanying morbidity, moral degeneration or the whine of loneliness. Josiah

Bolton has been a brilliant and successful barrister, cultured, dignified and endowed with impeccable strength of character. Josiah in his retirement concludes that life without further production is life that is ended. He sees in himself a figure of worthlessness unsustained by blind religious faith or close human connection. For him, death has come in the afternoon and as a rational and intelligent adult he plans the termination of the physical life as well. There are no deep philosophical trappings in this calm and controlled despair, but the horror of its conclusion is no less real for us, since Josiah Bolton is a man of heroic stature and worth. Barry's admirable restraint and good taste in dramatizing this death in life is evidenced by the delicate approach to the suicide plan. A previous accident has alerted Josiah's daughter and a young doctor friend, called Toby, to the predicament and intention of the distinguished Bolton. He assures his daughter that his high spirits and his anti-morbidity will prevail as long as he lives, but her approaching marriage to a much older man in England has severed his last motivation for continuance. He plans a hunting trip as soon as she leaves for England and both his daughter and Toby realize that the high powered rifle which he keeps on the rack will be the instrument of his death. A clue to his despair and a foreshadowing of the fatal event is subtly announced by Josiah himself.

. . . what I look for is the hidden motive, the hidden motive in you, and you, and in me--and in life and death. Sometimes I find it. Sometimes

the motive thinks it's hidden when it isn't.
 Then I can stalk it--silently, stealthfully--
 till I'm within easy range--and then--bang.¹⁹

The Barry-Sherwood conclusion is two-fold. First, we are made to realize that despite human strength and accomplishment the possibility of self-inflicted death in the ennui of old age is a horrible and universal one. Second, the clarification of human relationships and the resuscitation of love are the only solutions to a growing dilemma. In his play, Barry solves the dilemma for us by forcing on Josiah the realization that he is both loved and wanted.

The Ladies of the Corridor appeared three years later on the New York stage and found some audience success despite its embarrassingly revealing theme. Unlike Second Threshold problems of old age are not placed in the background of a wealthy and comfortable home, but in the cold and disheartening isolation of a resident hotel catering mostly to upper-middle class American widows. But like Second Threshold the surface, for the most part, is both restrained and jovial, while underneath the tragic battle is waged by lonely women who are leading pointless and trivial lives. The authors of this play chose to use several lives for illustration rather than centralizing discussion on one person. Because of this the material lacks both the unity and the thoroughness of Barry's work, but it makes up for it in showing the diversification of a tragic theme.

¹⁹Phillip Barry, Second Threshold, with revisions by Robert Sherwood (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1951), Act II, Sc. i.

Among the several women who endure their aching loneliness is one who is determined to find and secure a new life. She is an attractive and cultured widow who shuns the escapist activities of the endlessly busy occupants around her, but when an opportunity presents itself in the form of a young lover she finds that she is unable to alter her life to new friends, new surroundings and new amenities, and in a fit of unrationalized jealousy she drives him away. Like the others, she capitulates in her battle to recapture her youth and her meaningful existence and seeks escape in the quiet pastime of needle point.

Among the others, only one manages to find creative activity, and this salvation comes to her because of her financial poverty. One finds no illusive comfort in gossip, needle point, stamp collecting or little dogs, but turns instead to liquor and to the visitation of transient men. This headlong plunge into despair is shown as no solution and her eventual fate lies in suicide.

Although The Ladies of the Corridor possesses little of the heroic overtones of Second Threshold, it is equally intense in its depiction of lonely and directionless women who clutch at whatever cheerfulness they can afford each other in their eager waiting for bits of gossip or a letter inviting them to a son's distant home for Thanksgiving. They illustrate well Schopenhauer's description of time as a force of evil.

Two excellent plays concerned with human guilt and anxiety appeared in the last years of this selected period. The first of

these was noted more for its experimentation in form than it was for its exploration of negative philosophy and yet it so clearly states the contemporary theme that it cannot be omitted from discussion. This is Arthur Laurents' play, A Clearing in the Woods, produced in 1957.

It is the story of an overwrought woman who lives her past through the troubled memories of herself, her father, and the other men in her life. In this process she returns to an unidentified clearing in the woods, a symbolic place for the clearing of the mind, in an attempt to find the meaning of her own existence and a motivation for her continued life. We learn early that her despair at the time of this visit is so deep that she is on the very brink of suicide. When she moves into the clearing she meets three young girls of varying ages and in her discourse with them we learn that she is reliving herself in three other periods of her early life. Each of the young girls cries for acceptance by the woman in the "now" but because she cannot accept and because her "now" falls short of their expectations her despair becomes more intense. Fortunately, the turn of events and the argument afforded by other visitors to the clearing makes her realize her own limitations and encourages her to accept herself for the imperfect human being that she is.

But in this dream-like exposition we catch the strident tones of familiar negativistic philosophy. Again at the heart of the problem lies human estrangement, not the least of which is the woman's hatred of herself. One of her past lovers, a man named

George, gives a key to one side of her psyche, when he encourages her to believe in Nothing and never be disillusioned or disappointed. Her own response is, "I can die of nothingness."²⁰ She refuses to accept this cloak of convenient illusion.

The woman has found estrangement a condition of her life with several men, her father included, and she seeks in one the amalgam of all. In this respect she can be called a post-war Nina Leeds and amazingly enough her confessions are almost identical with O'Neill's famed character. She worships success, not only in herself, but in one that she must love. She is angry at the world, at others, and at herself, and her real despair comes when she realizes that her other values prevent her from acquiring the one qualification for hope and contentment--she cannot love.

Once again the author permits conciliation and adjustment, but only after a most interesting representation of the subject theme. Laurents' play is obviously existential in its philosophy and it is fair to say that Laurents himself holds with existential beliefs. In the preface to his drama he states, ". . . theatricality is largely supplied by extravagant violence or sensational subject matter; and truth is usually limited to the theme of eternal loneliness; man is lonely at birth, at death, even in love."²¹

In the following season a new playwright submitted his work

²⁰Arthur Laurents, A Clearing In the Woods (New York: Random House, Inc., 1957), Act I.

²¹Ibid., p. vii.

to the New York test, and did so with one of the most moving and pathetic dramas of the decade. Morton Wishengrad centered his negative theme in The Rope Dancers, in one of the period's most touching guilt complexes. It is a pathetic story of a girl named Lizzie who was born with six fingers and because of the shame exhibited by her mother develops a chronic fear of her deformity. She is permitted only limited company, does not attend the public schools and keeps her hand in a white glove at all times. Her mother interprets this deformity as a symbol of the sin of her own lust and her husband's infidelity. "The finger of God's wrath" she call it,²² and this most cruel accusation turns the little girl into a convulsive and pitiful prisoner of her own guilt. The father who is weak in his responsibility to his family, loves his daughter with the same intensity as the mother, but his attitude toward her and her deformity is totally different. Unfortunately, his kindness and sensitivity are wasted since his weakness prevents little more than a token battle against the mother. In the climax of the play, a doctor is summoned to treat the young girl and in the questioning that follows Lizzie pours out the torment of her life.

LIZZIE: Pa, make him understand that my name is Elizabeth Pamela Ursula Hyland, and I have six fingers.

DR. JACOBSON: My name is Isaac Jacobson. I am a Jew.²³

²²Morton Wishengrad, The Rope Dancers (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1958), Act I, Sc ii.

²³Ibid., Act II, Sc. iii.

Jacobson's simple reply is to indicate that we must all bear some "deformity" in our lives and in the eyes of others, and in so doing symbolizes the handicaps and the burdens of mankind. It is this individual cross that sets man apart.

The intensity of the guilt that the mother feels precedes the unexplained death of Lizzie after her finger has been amputated. Margaret has always felt that the conception of the child was an act of sin on both her part and that of her husband. Since the finger is the equation of sin to Margaret she interprets the Scripture literally and hence believes that she has willed her own daughter's death by the amputation. "When lust hath conceived it bringeth forth sin, and sin when it is finished bringeth forth death."²⁴ Again the qualities of life negation are seen in the basic assumption that life is evil, that pain exceeds pleasure, and accompanying such conclusions come the suffocation of guilt and the wild striking of brutality.

A similar discussion of inherited evil was dramatized by Maxwell Anderson in his psychological melodrama, The Bad Seed. But in this play Anderson has emphasized the ludicrous and diabolical character of a most complex little girl to an extent that she becomes far more dramatic and important to us than any implied philosophy or attitude toward life. Evil in one so young and apparently innocent can in no way be enlarged to construe the evil of the world in general, and thus the play becomes a more significant

²⁴Ibid., Act III.

study of an isolated character and an excellent conveyance for suspense and melodrama.

Foremost among the plays depicting the depressing fall of man were four which dealt with the degenerate society of modern theatre artists in general and more particularly the shallow and wasted inhabitants of the colony called Hollywood. Two of these plays were written by one of the most provocative and vital dramatists of the pre-war period, Clifford Odets. The other two were written in more recent years by lesser known writers, James Lee--Career, and Budd Schulberg in collaboration with Harvey Breit--The Disenchanted. Although all four of the plays deal with distorted values, moral degeneration and the prostituted art of the theatrical world, two of them, Country Girl and Career, are twisted into therapeutic conclusions of reasonably believable happiness.

When Odets presented The Big Knife, the fourth of this group, to Broadway in 1949, he had already served his term of lucrative conformity in the demoted position of a Hollywood writer. It is, therefore, rational to assume that the bitterness and denunciation presented in this play evolves from his own authoritative experience and possibly from his own developed attitude. To represent the dollar idolatry of the film capital he chose Charlie Castle, a Hollywood star, as the tragic victim. Charlie had been an actor of great creative promise. Through hard labor, study, and intelligence he had developed his art to a high level, but because of the

attractiveness of the money afforded and the challenge of cinematic art he forsook the legitimate theatre and turned to the motion picture industry. This investment fulfilled the promise of a quick return in money and fame, but in keeping with the familiar pattern it also destroyed the foundation of his art, as well as the foundation of his spiritual and moral character.

At the beginning of the play we are shown this man entrapped in his meaningless, luxurious surroundings fighting half-heartedly to overcome his enslavement. We are led to believe that Charlie Castle is a man of worth, a man of good intention, but we are also aware that he is a man too broken in spirit to effectively combat the forces that oppose him. Indicative of his weakness are his sexual promiscuity, alcoholic binges and morbid frustration. Because his once high values haunt him at every turn, Charles becomes a real and pitiful figure of tragic despair as he approaches the final event of his life. Although it is a story centered on a minor and isolated portion of our society, it, nevertheless, is a picture of a man trapped into degeneration and nullity. Despite his moral surrender he retains his love for his wife and makes one final effort to free himself from the complication that surrounds him. When this fails he sinks to the ultimate of despair and commits suicide.

In conjunction with this story of fallen man, Odets has created a force of evil so unattractive and sadistic that he seems more animal than human. This is Marcus Hoff, the producer, the overseer, the baron slave owner of the movie industry. His demonic

exertions against his victims make him more of a chariacture than a character but he is believable enough to make the horror of Charlie's life seem real and predictable. Because he is unhampered by any ethical requirements and because he is unflinchingly strong he survives and is victorious while the guilt ridden artist sinks into oblivion.

In two short speeches near the climax of the struggle, Charlie clarifies the picture of modern despair in a materialistic world.

. . . the lonely junked people of our world--
millions of them--wasted by the dreams of life
they were promised and the swill they received. . .
I think lots of us are in for a big shot of
Vitamin D: defeat, decay, depression, despair.²⁵

A few moments later Charlie narrows the cause of this negation as he addresses his friend Hank, a writer.

And do you say in your book it isn't even easy
to go to hell today? That there's nothing left
to sin against? Correction! There's health left
to sin against! Health--the last nervous con-
viction of the time! We're sick at heart but
will increase the life span! What for? Nobody
knows! . . . And we plunged ourselves, all of
us, into the noble work of making the buck re-
produce itself! Oh, those luscious salmon eggs
of life!²⁶

The Big Knife is at times overly dramatic, but it reproduces with detail evils of success worship and misplaced values. It draws out the shell of life into which modern despair can easily pour.

²⁵Clifford Odets, The Big Knife (New York: Random House, Inc., 1949), Act III.

²⁶Loc. cit.

The Disenchanted is equally clear in its depiction of lost art, degeneration and depravity. Again, a character of worth is chosen as the victim, but this time the creative writer instead of the creative actor serves as the negative hero. Both the story and the character are highly reminiscent of the rise and fall of the renowned F. Scott Fitzgerald, although the author has maintained that Manly Halliday is more an amalgam of an age of fallen writers than a biographical representation of any one man.

The story lines as well as the dramatic lines of The Disenchanted parallel those of Odet's play. Halliday has found that success and money have served to tranquilize his creative spirit. He is haunted by the memories of his vigorous past and of his artistic companion and wife Gere Halliday, whose love is necessary for his existence but whose influence tends to drag him further into stagnation and ennui. He accepts a lucrative assignment to work with a junior writer in producing a script for a typically worthless movie. In doing this he hopes that it is his last subversion of his art and that through the money gained from this short assignment he will return to another of his great novels. But the task, the returning wife, and alcohol are too much for Manly Halliday and he expires after one long orgy with his life still unfulfilled. His last piece of writing consists of a short death note pencilled to his young colleague which states: "A second chance--that was our delusion. A first chance--that's all we have. Remember that, laddie."²⁷

²⁷Budd Schulberg and Harvey Breit, The Disenchanted (New York: Random House, Inc., 1959), Act III.

Although the play lacks the dramatic energy of The Big Knife its theme and its direction are the same. Both Manly Halliday and Charlie Castle revive the Faustian legend by selling their souls to a Mephistophilian element of their society.

Both Career and Country Girl are explorations of the same theme but in these plays the frequently stated evils that surround the performing arts are insufficient to bring about the destruction of the artists. Despite their affirmative conclusions, however, both plays paint clearly the price that must be paid for fame and the wasted life demanded of those not strong enough to remain erect.

All of these plays discussed point readily to the anxiety of our age, the unfulfilled want of restless people, the depressing isolation of lives that cannot blend with other lives or with society-- in short, they delineate well the problems and the tragedy of life negation. For the most part their authors have adhered to the form of realism with occasional usage of bold symbolism and mild fantasy. In some cases they have retained the natural form but allowed themselves the expression of poetry and scenic fantasy. Only two of the plays deviate greatly from the conventional form: the musical West Side Story and the highly experimental A Clearing in the Woods. In this respect the authors of the negativistic plays seem more concerned with the factor of idea within the conventional representative theatre of the day than they are with the exploration of new and experimental form. One other element binds these plays together, and that is the presence of psychological significance. In many cases

they seem to be clinical studies of disturbed and maladjusted people which may account for the frequent insignificance of plot. In one such example, heretofore unmentioned, the clinic serves as a portion of the setting for negation. This is the case in The Shrike written by Joseph Kramm and produced in 1952. In this drama the hero's mental illness is manufactured by a scheming wife who breaks his will by threatening to keep him incarcerated in a mental hospital unless he returns to her, submissive and obedient. Here, again, the modern hero is totally outmatched by the modern antagonist. It is she who represents the diabolic negation of life, the horror and greed of the human race and it is he who represents ineffectual heroism. His protest and his sacrifice are far reduced from Strindberg's hero in The Father.

In the same period, 1945 to 1958, Broadway received many works of life theme and character from the dramatists of other lands. Many of their contributions have been among our most critically successful plays. Names such as Sartre, Ionesco, Beckett, Giradeaux, Betti, Rattigan, Duerrematt, Lawler, and Osborne have become synonymous with plays of power and generally of negation.

Add to this the indirect influence that has risen from the "beat generation" in this country and the "angry young men" of England and the morbid climate of American theatre finds explanation. In the case of the British movement for the revolutionary young, some concrete and vigorous protest devoid of strong political influence can be seen, especially in the plays of John Osborne. But so far

the "beat generation," a coinage by Jack Kerouac, has failed to produce significant dramatic representation of their beliefs or disbeliefs. Part of this may be due to their inherent indifference and nondisciplined activity, or it may simply mean that the young now being schooled in spiritual and value negation have yet to grow into influence. If, however, the beat generation is as foundationless as we are lead to believe it is unlikely that its contributions to the American theatre will be significant. The following description of "beat" man sustains this argument.

He (the beat) senses that time is shrinking into itself, the past losing its relevance and the future receding further and further from his control . . . he glimpses the portense of chaos everywhere and correspondingly grows aware of his own nakedness and impotence--his nothingness.²⁸

Such minds so saturated with negation must bow to some regimentation and authority before they can dramatize negation significantly. To this date they have shown little potential in being able to augment the efforts made from O'Neill to Morton Wishengrad in dramatizing effectively the negative theme.

²⁸Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg, editors, The Beat Generation and Angry Young Men (New York: The Citadel Press, 1958), p. 9.

CHAPTER I

CONCLUSIONS

In the periods following World War II, concluded for this study in the year 1958, considerable evidence exists to support the proposition that American dramatists had made full and varied use of the theme of life negation. Although depressing subject matter has been used in American drama since it came of age with Eugene O'Neill the predominance of this material in the plays of both major and secondary writers during the last dozen years makes sordidity, pessimism, and despair a characteristic of our contemporary theatre. Hamlet's indecision and sorrow weighed upon him to the extent that his sanity and ultimately his revenge were imperiled.

How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! ah fie! (Act I, Sc. ii)

Yet despite his precarious resignation Hamlet gathered his heroic resolve to effect the last fatal act in avenging his father's murder. In the dramatic representation of our own age the struggles and torments of our heroes bring on equal lamentations. But too frequently their internal strength is insufficient to permit them to rise to even fatal purpose and they sink into the oblivion of their own conclusions. Hamlet's mournful words have been re-echoed by Willy Loman, by the lost women of Williams, the entire O'Neill family, and even the likeable and common mid-westerners of William Inge.

These four leaders in American drama along with the majority of their colleagues have managed to produce an innumerable list of commendable plays since World War II. This is to say that the American theatre, whatever its state, has been enriched by depressing themes just as it has by other subject material. Using the criterion of the two major prizes awarded annually, the foremost plays during this period have been those that touched or admitted to negation. Clurman's defense of the attitude expressed in these dramas refutes the claim of those who would lay the illness of our theatre to the illness of the minds of those who write the plays for it. "It does not matter in art whether or not one is a pessimist or an optimist. To say that life is lovely is no more correct, convincing, moving, or significant than to say it is horrid."¹ It is evident that these playwrights have found life to be unpleasant in the bulk of their writing but in fair judgment it must be conceded that their findings have been frequently well expressed. If the parallel is not overdrawn it can be pointed out that the ancient Greeks were neither cheerful nor optimistic people. Nietzsche reminded us that they were aware of life's stings and misfortunes as well as its tragic brevity, and were not reluctant to have the pain of their realization translated for them in dramatic language and vision.² When Midas asked Silemus what fate is best for a man, Silemus answered, "Pitiful race

¹Harold Clurman, "Theatre," Nation, Vol. CLXXVI (April 4, 1953), p. 294.

²Durant, "The Story of Philosophy," p. 442.

of a day, children of accident and sorrow, why do you force me to say what were better left unheard? The best of all is unobtainable-- not to be born, to be nothing. The second best is to die early."³ But out of such suffering the Greeks created modern drama and abetted the gloom of their disillusionment with the power of their art.

In this conclusion the comparison may be questioned, for the extent of both our solace and our artistic accomplishment through contemporary American drama is difficult to assess. Brooks Atkinson in 1957 wrote,

The tragic idea is not popular in this country. We do not constitute a good seed bed for tragic writing, for we are an optimistic nation and have never ceased believing that the big problems can be solved and the conditions of man improved. . . .⁴

One year later this same critic in his review of the 1957-1958 season altered his belief to the extent that the disconsolate drama appearing on Broadway had been successful both artistically and financially. "The conclusion seems to be that theatre-goers as a lot accept the lugubrious tone of the drama as a valid transcription of life."⁵

Little argument will be offered against the contention that in the other mediums of drama--television, the cinema and radio the natures of the plays have been predominantly bright, adventurous, comic, and heroic. Since these forms are consumed in far greater

³Loc. cit.

⁴Brooks Atkinson, "Tragedy to Scale," New York Times, September 1, 1957, Sect. 2, p. 1.

⁵Atkinson, "Downbeat Accent," p. 1.

quantities than the somewhat limited legitimate theatre it would be reasonable to claim that the American appetite has really altered but little and that ". . . human custom demands that public art calling for mass responses shall be positive rather than negative."⁶ Like the other mediums play going may be a social activity, but it affords more opportunity for private taste.

In examining the presence of a negation of life theme in contemporary American drama it was necessary to clarify the meaning of this theme and to describe its characteristics. The definition used for this study grew out of the systematized philosophy of despair as created and exemplified principally by Schopenhauer with additional references to the doctrines of Nietzsche and Sartre. In addition, help was sought by consulting critical commentary on despair philosophy as found in the writings of dramatists in other ages. Following this step, the characteristics were identified by common terminology to be applied in analysis of selected writers and their dramas in the period following World War II.

As was anticipated the investigation revealed many inconsistencies in the thematic emphasis found in contemporary American theatre. No concerted or identifiable movement for any cause, pessimistic or otherwise, could be deduced from the inspection of our serious plays or our recognized playwrights. However, the subject theme did emerge to an extent that its presence can be evaluated as

⁶Selden, op. cit., p. 113.

a significant element in our theatre character. To summarize briefly, the evidence revealed in this study gave foundation to the following conclusions:

1. Our four major playwrights of the post-war period, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and William Inge, were concerned with the characteristics and consequences of life negation.

2. Their contemporaries dealt with the same themes in increasing frequency from the late Forties through the Fifties.

3. The period of negation in drama following World War II resembled only slightly the serious drama of protest and revolt that dominated the period that preceded it in the Thirties.

4. The playwright of the period 1945 - 1958 has found ample material in negation, but this does not imply that he has approved the condition or decreed it as a permanent problem of modern man; frequently he has been satisfied to report it without further comment; his use of the negative theme has not required his adherence to a negative thesis.

5. Life negation has been articulated and described in its various forms of depravity, unrighteousness and despair, but less detail or clarification has been devoted to the causes of the major problems underlying the predicament of mankind.

In relation to the first conclusion, the major portion of this investigation centered on the works of four writers whose leadership in contemporary and current American theatre has been generally

recognized by our critics. In all four cases the presence of the subject theme predominated in their plays.

The first and most prolific of the quartette was Eugene O'Neill whose primal position in modern American theatre and whose influence on subsequent American dramatists have not been denied by even those who find his works lacking in certain merits. Not only has the prolific talent of O'Neill afforded a score of plays containing negation and despair, but his well-documented life has disclosed his own doubts concerning the worth of life and the meaning of existence. His biographers, both recent and late, recognize his tragic leanings as emanating from a personal philosophy both sorrowful and nihilistic. His admitted fluctuation between the solace of his Catholic faith and the depression of a meaningless world left many of his plays inconclusive, but indecision is not apparent in the dramatized story of his own family and his own life. Long Day's Journey Into Night is accumulative testimony to O'Neill's capitulation to the forces of darkness.

Another of his late plays, a masterful portrait of degenerate and wasted lives, augmented the theme with a study of the illusions of the human race. The multitude of characters who make the tragic drama for The Iceman Cometh exemplify in detail every trait of human despair.

Significantly, both plays reveal the early experiences of its author--experiences which were subjected to the influence of people from every walk of life and whose degeneration was shared by O'Neill

himself. O'Neill was a great by-product of the age of realism and the age of disillusionment. His admiration went readily toward psychological and sociological problem writers who preceded him on the Continent. His own reading outside the field of drama included the teaching of both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and their influence can be identified in many of his works, including the last of his plays. Although O'Neill admitted to the seeking of an American tragedy befitting that of the Greeks, his final efforts were more emphatic in their intense study of pessimism than they were in heroic action. The fierce contention that exists between the champions and the attackers of O'Neill does not extend to the proposition that his influence has dominated the American playwrights almost from the beginning of his works.

Some of O'Neill's defenders, even those commenting upon his dramas appearing after World War II, have defended O'Neill's morbidity on the basis of his tragic search. One such defender employed strange reasoning when he submitted that:

. . . O'Neill offers a remedy for that anxiety [meaninglessness]. His plays declare that the meaning of life is its inevitable progression toward death. This is not, of course, an assertion which gives meaning to any of the particularities of life, in fact it drains them of meaning. But it is a way of redeeming existence from meaningless anarchy by showing that its pattern is basically simple and imperturbably. The bleakest philosophy is preferable to chaos.⁷

⁷Tom F. Driver, "Of the Late Plays of Eugene O'Neill," Tulane Drama Review, Vol. III (December, 1958), p. 158.

If O'Neill found little cause for affirmation he at least afforded opportunity for correction through negative example. It is unfortunate, however, that his dedication to creating an American drama failed to extend to the consideration of our national problems in the hectic years of the Thirties and the war-ridden years of the early Forties. Where his contemporaries had fallen short of O'Neill in the previous period, they forged ahead by their participation in the radical surge toward social and political drama. Through this period O'Neill faded behind the radical thrusts of Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, and the editors of the "Living Newspaper." Even the critical years of world conflict found him unwilling to pass judgment on the larger issues facing his fellow countrymen. This may be accounted for in part by his search for the universal. In his failure to find it in social legislation, revolt, and war, he continued to seek the elements of the past. When his last works appeared after World War II they turned not only to long forgotten decades but to the restatement and amplification of the old despair. If O'Neill's influence on our theatre is a conceded fact, the negativism that he wrote about in these final plays served as effective patterns for those who followed.

The bulk of Tennessee Williams' contributions have appeared since 1945. Unlike O'Neill, he has confined himself for the most part to a regional drama and in it has found material for his depiction of life unpleasant and degraded. The philosophical context of his work is not as clear-cut as O'Neill's late plays. In close

examination his contentions seem to be based on what he considers the prime struggle of his region. He shows, first, in its state of increasing decay, a way of life which was based on traditional moral and cultural patterns, but a way of life which has grown poor, unattractive, archaic, and useless. Against this southern traditionalism he matches the undeniable rise of the new, vibrant and somewhat barbaric newcomer. In the one-sided struggles that follow, the representatives of the old and traditional succumb to their own weaknesses and are made to lay bare their own deterioration and instability. Most frequently this instability is reflected in sexual dissipation and abnormality and in alcoholic retreat. The resulting depression is not so much Williams' advocacy as it is the fate of the victims and the results of our own observations. The best illustration of this idea comes in his highly dramatic A Streetcar Named Desire, but elements of it can also be found in The Glass Menagerie, Summer and Smoke, Camino Real, and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

Analysis also reveals that Williams' focus is upon the heroine rather than the hero, and it is his heroines who are reduced to these debilitating examples. As John Osborne puts it, "Williams' women . . . all cry out for defilement, and most of them get it America is as sexually obsessed as a medieval monastery. That is what these plays are about--sex--sex and failure."⁸ In a larger sense they are illustrative of Schopenhauer's contention that man is a plaything of

⁸John Osborne, "Sex and Failure," an essay in The Beat Generation and Angry Young Men, p. 318.

the world of will. In modern alteration this can be construed as the depression of Freudian determinism coupled with the insensitivity of a modern world. Man's bewilderment, retreat and loneliness lead to his nothingness. His estrangement from the world is seen as a psychological outgrowth of a cultural estrangement. Williams may deny that he is a negativist yet those who are his principal creations are defeated at the start and descend to utter despair and hopelessness.

Arthur Miller, on the other hand, sees the estrangement of man as a phenomenon of socioeconomic consequences and misplaced values. From this point of view Miller appears as a stronger correctionist and moralist than does Tennessee Williams. From his vantage point he comments less upon the evil of man within him than he does about the social sin of man against man. In Death of a Salesman Willy is less a victim of himself than he is of the society that produced his false values and his pitiful ineffectiveness. Miller is willing to accept the modern world for what it is, but sits in a position of what Harold Clurman calls, "humanistic jurisprudence"⁹ as he judges those before him. Unlike the ill-used heroines of Williams, Miller endows his people, ineffective as they may be, both with a determination to struggle and with an illusion that victory is possible. As testimony to their struggle he concludes their lives with suicide, unjust condemnation to death, or murder. This does not mean that he is a negativist, but it does mean that his characters, though

⁹Harold Clurman, "Theatre Attention," New Republic, Vol. CXX (February 28, 1949), p. 27

sometimes valiant and always passionate, are inundated with frustration and eventual despair.

Whatever Miller's personal philosophy--and this is in doubt--he makes great use of negativism for the subject of his works. Through his people we find that he subscribes little to human goodness, intelligence, or charm; they are inevitably defeated by social vice; truth makes unbearable the reality around them. These people display their final negativism when they find that "dying is the loudest proof of having lived."¹⁰

The plays of William Inge, the fourth playwright analyzed in detail, strike a different cord than that sounded by his three contemporaries of note. He is a writer of successful comedies dealing with the little people of middle-class America and he manages to combine a sincere regard for human compassion with a copious supply of sentiment. Even the conclusions he draws in his plays are decidedly optimistic and encouraging. If we are afflicted with some doubt for the cause of such optimism--as for example in Come Back, Little Sheba--we are willing to admit that the playwright has made every effort to guide his little people along ascending paths rather than descending ones. The careful consideration will reveal that Inge, no less than any of the other three, writes about the anxieties, the frustrations and depressions of little people ensnared in the uncertainty of our age.

Perhaps it is all the more startling that this material finds

¹⁰William Wiegand, "Arthur Miller and the Man Who Knows," The Western Review, Vol. XXI (Winter, 1957), p. 102.

expression in what are otherwise bright American folk comedies, but Inge does not forsake the sordid scene for human warmth and comedy. Like Tennessee Williams he borrows without hesitation from Eugene O'Neill the tough talking, crude-mannered, well-torsoed young man. He is also willing to show sex and alcohol as symptoms of insecurity. He is willing to reveal at every turn those who are defeated from the start, with no hope for recovery or rejuvenation. Lola in Come Back, Little Sheba, the Professor in Bus Stop, the old maids and widows in Picnic and the empty Morris and his wife in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs--are all victims of a larger force that has driven them to shallowness and boredom. In simple numbers he takes second place neither to Williams nor to Miller in characterizing empty lives. Only O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh produces a greater accumulation of such evidence. But Inge, dealing as he does with negativism, manages to infuse an impression of the goodness of mankind sufficiently to preserve the comic spirit of his plays. His individual contribution to negativism that makes him distinctive from his three contemporaries is his theme of man entrapped in sexual pursuit, man subdued by woman, man reduced in fire by the domestic process. It is probably that his well-written and entertaining plays will be remembered as optimistic comedies but he will also be revered by some for having ". . . restored to mid-westerners their privilege to be as traumatized by life as any other Americans represented on Broadway."¹¹

¹¹Brustein, "The Men-taming Women of William Inge," p. 52.

Augmenting the negative emphasis of these four major playwrights are the bleak philosophies and morbid images found abundantly in the plays of other contemporary American dramatists. With few exceptions the playwrights of America who have been recognized to the extent of New York production have been concerned in one way or another with the sordidity, discouragement, and hopelessness of life.

The significance of the morbid theme in drama in the period following World War II can be determined in part by the number of plays of this type which have received Critics' Circle and Pulitzer Prize Awards. Although serious drama has generally been recognized in the history of these awards, the negativism and non-heroic character appearing after World War II is easily distinguished from the character of the drama that preceded it.

Significance can also be attached to the abundance as well as the quality of the work of this period. Even with the increasing economic problems and the resultant caution in production investment the plays depicting the frustration of empty lives have continued to appear with the usual run of musicals, comedies, and melodramatic thrillers. That our dramatists have found inspiration in the uncertainty and discouragement of our age is hardly exaggeration. A review of the thirteen years covered in this examination will reveal the thoroughness with which they have explored the variations of the theme. The most well traveled avenues of depression have been the disillusionment of youth, the unfulfillment of the aged, and the depravity of man faced with guilt and anxiety. A great number of

these writers are more than willing to discuss the psychological manifestations. In some cases, notably The Autumn Garden, See the Jaguar, The Big Knife, Blue Denim, Tea and Sympathy, Second Threshold, The Rope Dancers, A Clearing in the Woods, The Shrike, Bad Seed, and In the Summer House, the results become almost clinical in discussion and action.

Since The Glass Menagerie and The Iceman Cometh there have been few additions to the characteristics of the theme or the kind of tragic victims used for illustrations. O'Neill, Williams, Miller and Inge have covered the theme sufficiently well to include almost every area and type of our American citizenry. For the most part, however, they have dealt with middle class and in some cases lower class society, but their colleagues have augmented this to show that the spiritual, moral and philosophical depression extends to the wealthy, the sophisticated, and the intelligent. Both Lillian Hellman and Phillip Barry write intelligently about the upper classes while John Van Druten, Arthur Laurents, and Robert Anderson show their concern for disillusioned people of culture and intelligence.

The period also contained four plays dealing directly with bitter depression and wasted lives among those in the performing arts. It will be interesting to see whether the playwrights of the immediate future continue to find negativistic material in their own small society of writers, producers, and actors.

Although there have been some variation in character, plot, and dramatic form, the characteristics of life negation have remained

consistent. Exhausted, lonely, unheroic, and despairing humanity have been paraded before us in an almost unending stream. In almost all of the dramas mentioned in this dissertation the basis for action has been predicated upon a desire of unhappy people to find communication with fellow man or to find relief in escape to another world. Their inability to do either has effected a type of drama reminiscent of the stasis portrayed in Chekhov's plays. In only a few instances does this escape wish extend to ancient threnodism. Suicide is approached or actually committed in sixteen of the plays chosen for study, but the primary emphasis on the death wish can be found in only one play--Second Threshold.

One of the noted weaknesses in the plays of this type since World War II has been the failure of the playwright to examine the causes of negation with the same thoroughness used in examining the nature of negation. It must be admitted at the outset that our playwrights have been no more inept or non-definitive than have been our leaders in other areas of our national life. Part of the problem has been characterized by bewilderment which will imply a certain amount of ambiguity and indecision in both the cause and solution.

Equally undetermined is an explanation of the cause for the preponderance of such drama itself. In this respect it is difficult to distinguish between supposition and logical reason, but certain conclusions can be drawn from the evidence already discussed in the body of this dissertation. Any list of influences must be headed by Eugene O'Neill himself. The mere weight of his work and his repu-

tation as our recognized representative in world theatre are bound to be influential on those who follow him. Even among those who do not admire O'Neill the influence must remain significant. Since most of the critics of American drama use him as a basis of judgment and comparison, it is also probable that the same forerunners of O'Neill's writings are inherited in this dual process by those who followed him. This includes in the long span of his productive life the restatement of Chekhov, Ibsen, and Strindberg, the search for compromise in the forms of realism, and the experimentation with other modes of theatrical form and dramatic language. Based on the evidence supplied in this analysis one might suppose that there is a greater abundance of Chekhovian drama in the last years of O'Neill and following O'Neill than there was during the period of the Twenties and the Thirties.

The negative tradition may also find cause in the failure of moralism and traditionalism. In this regard our writers are finding it more and more difficult to rely upon the firm foundation of Americanism and all that that word implies in social progress, human dignity, and historical clarity. Increasingly we are finding that "the world is too much with us," borrowing Wordsworth's phrase, a condition that tends to disrupt a complacent comfort founded on concrete values, and with clarity gone we are unable to progress through correction and protest. We cannot overcome the fact that:

. . . the solid middle class virtues on which so many of us depended so that we could meaningfully oppose them are no longer believed in seriously enough for opposition to mean anything . . . people

lack the sense of tradition with which to assimilate the endless shocks and changes of the twentieth century.¹²

To this conclusion Brooks Atkinson adds,

In this rancorous, poisoned period of history, writers are like everyone else: they lack confidence in the security and the wisdom of the contemporary world, like everyone else they need two directions in which they can go; outward or inward. This is, accordingly, an introspective era in which writers search their own beliefs. What they see does not cheer them.¹³

This absence of orientation is the basic key to the difference between the bitter and discouraging drama of the Twenties and the negativism inherent in the plays following World War II. Although technically it may have fallen short of the craftsmanship exhibited today, the theatre of the Thirties ". . . attempted to make the stage an instrument of public enlightenment through a passionate involvement with the national scene."¹⁴ Because of this, even the radical plays observed a form of order and discipline of purpose. Major issues of domestic and international concern were not avoided but were discussed with fervency and courage.

In our current theatre we have inherited anger, resentment, and even revulsion, but our apostles for the most part do little to change existing beliefs or offer little in the way of alternatives.

¹²Kagin, op. cit., p. 52.

¹³Atkinson, "Downbeat Accent," p. 1.

¹⁴Harold Clurman, "The Theatre of the Thirties," The Tulane Drama Review, Vol. IV (December, 1959), p. 11.

American dramatists have shunned the creation of plays concerned with the common destiny of the world. The major problems of human survival, power conflicts, and the freedom and dignity of man have not succeeded in the arena of the theatre. Such exceptions as The Crucible, J.E., Darkness at Noon and Inherit the Wind appear too infrequently to alter this undesirable direction. Even our own national concerns--the social, economic, and moral matters of this age--have yet to find real expression from our playwrights. Individual man continues to receive sincere attention but too frequently the individual selected for dramatization is a fear-ridden, ineffective deviate.

In this respect the avoidance of the major issues of the age and the major struggle for man to find his place in the scheme of things constitutes the most realistic charge that the American drama is negative.

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I, Winford Bailey Logan, was born in Akron, Ohio, September 28, 1919. I received my secondary school education in the public schools of Akron, and my undergraduate training at Hiram College which granted me the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1941. From the University of North Carolina, I received my Master of Arts degree in 1948. After some graduate course work at Western Reserve University, I enrolled in The Ohio State University in the summer of 1954. In the year 1956, I received a leave of absence from The College of Wooster, where I have taught since 1948, and completed my course and residency requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Speech. During this time I was recipient of a Danforth Teacher's Study Grant. The completion of the requirements for my degree has been accomplished during subsequent summer periods.