

Biographical Information of Eugene O'Neill

Eugene O'Neill was born in 1888. He died in 1953. Within the chronological framework of O'Neill's life, American drama was transformed from display and entertainment into a vehicle confronting the emotional and psychological traumas of human problems and deeply felt human concerns. Such a transformation of American drama was shaped largely by Eugene O'Neill.

O'Neill's father was a successful actor, flamboyant off stage and on, famous for his title role in a stage version of Alexandra Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a play he toured in for many years. O'Neill's early experience with theatre and acting was that of watching his father perform in this spectacle of melodrama, a prevailing form on the American stage during the last half of the 19th century. O'Neill, born in a hotel when his parents were "on the road", grew up in the nomadic world of footlights. Until he entered boarding school, his only permanent home was the few months a year spent in the family's summer place in New London, Connecticut.

After attending Catholic boarding school in the Bronx and Betts Academy in Connecticut, O'Neill enrolled in Princeton University for one year, leaving for good after being suspended. For the next several years he roamed, picking up odd jobs, going to sea on a cattle boat headed for South America, prospecting for gold in the Honduras, living in waterfront dives, drinking heavily, and mixing with the bohemian crowd that was beginning to gather in lower Manhattan's Greenwich Village. In this "roaming", he stored an aggregate of "real-life" experiences from which he would later draw in building his plays, particularly his early one-act plays about the sea. Greenwich Village friends he encountered in this period of his life would play a vital role in helping him achieve success in his efforts to become a playwright.

In 1912, O'Neill contracted tuberculosis. Ironically, the tuberculosis that almost destroyed him physically, putting him in a sanitarium in the winter and spring of 1912-13, provided the time and environment in which he would put alcohol aside, grow intellectually, and begin to find direction for his creativity. His accounts of the exhilaration he felt as he buried himself in Greek tragedy and Shakespeare, discovered European playwrights such as Chekhov, Ibsen, Kaiser, Wedekind, and Strindberg, probed psychological theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, and philosophical arguments of Nietzsche give witness to the deep impact those months had in forging the artist he would later become.

In 1914, O'Neill enrolled at Harvard, in George Pierce Baker's famous playwriting class, English 47. For financial reasons, he did not return the following year. In 1916, he became associated with the Greenwich Village Provincetown Players, a group dedicated to mounting experimental work in American drama, operating in the summer on a fisherman's wharf in Provincetown, Massachusetts and in the winter in the Village. In 1917, the Provincetown Players produced O'Neill's *Thirst* and *Bound East for Cardiff*, the first of many of his one-acts they would produce, to be followed later by production of his longer plays. Thus began an association which would eventually put O'Neill's dramas on Broadway, bringing financial success and world-wide acclaim as America's first and, still in the eyes of many, greatest dramatist.

Perhaps as an unconscious, as well as conscious, response to the overly sentimental spectacles O'Neill had witnessed as a child, as an extension of the hardships he had endured in his "vagabond" years, and reflecting the influence of the early work of Continental dramatists he had read when he was ill, O'Neill's first one-acts were realistic, "naturalistic," mainly a recreation of "life as it is actually is." But even in this early "realism," in which he portrayed the crudeness and starkness of life at sea, there was a hint of hyperbole that suggested he felt the need to push beyond a "slice of life" mode.

As O'Neill began to build longer dramas, increasingly cognizant of the limitations of external action as "realism," he reached for structural patterns and special devices that would project the complex emotional and psychological contexts of an individual's inner self. In experimenting with ways to articulate this inner

“realism”, O’Neill would return to the “voices” he had immersed self in when ill. He would again find inspiration for themes and structural innovations in the work of European dramatists, particularly Strindberg, who also were experimenting with patterns of a “new” realism. He would revisit the theories of Freud, Carl Jung, and Nietzsche, and the content and structures of Greek and Shakespearean drama. Eventually, the most compelling inspiration for the themes and forms of his drama would be family.

It is impossible to put one “label” on Eugene O’Neill’s style of dramatization. At different times, and sometimes within the same framework, he is a naturalist, a romanticist, an impressionist, a symbolist, an expressionist, often bordering on the surreal. He is an empiricist, a psychoanalyst, and a mystagogue. Above all, he is an innovator, crafting provocative scripts and challenging methods of staging, integrating settings, lighting, and props in compelling ways, pushing the boundaries of theatrical conventions beyond where they had never been before.

O’Neill’s personal theories of psychoanalysis deviated in certain ways from those of Freud, but his dramas reflect Freudian influence, shaped with such themes as the power of the subconscious, oedipal relationships, the impact of sex drives, repression and sublimation. Some of his most innovative plays build off of such Jungian theories as the divided self and racial memory. He borrows the trilogy concept of violation and divine retribution, the use of masks, the structural discipline of the Unities from classical Greek tragedy, and the idea of soliloquy and asides from Shakespeare to build his psychological themes. His work is permeated with Nietzsche’s outlook on tragedy, the Dionysian- Apollonian struggle of the individual. Although he “borrows,” each of his works is uniquely his own.

Eugene O’Neill’s themes, like those of many of his contemporaries, were shocking to audiences of his time. He lashed out against what he perceived as the stifling conventions of puritan attitudes about sex still embedded in American culture, against prejudiced judgment of individuals for being who they are, the destructiveness of materialism, the lost identity of the individual in a modern technological age, and the raw ambition for money and power as the American Dream. He argued, in especially forceful ways in *The Hairy Ape* and *The Iceman Cometh*, that man must have a “pipe dream” (reflecting the influence of Nietzsche) to survive psychically and emotionally and that forces of modern life destroy such dreams.

Eugene O’Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936. But during the 30’s, facing new health problems and suffering setbacks from the productions of his plays, he retreated from the world of the stage. After a long hiatus he resumed writing, but now in a more direct style, free of the elaborate devices he had used in some of his earlier scripts. The themes of this new cycle of creativity would build mainly off his personal and family struggles. In 1941, he wrote what many consider the pinnacle of O’Neill’s achievement in drama, the intensely autobiographical *A Long Day’s Journey into Night*, which exposes the failures, frustrations, bitterness, and thwarted love within O’Neill’s immediate family. O’Neill commented, “It is a quiet play ... a play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood.”

A Long Day’s Journey into Night was produced in 1956, released posthumously by O’Neill’s widow, against his wishes that it not be released for twenty-five years from when he signed it over to a publisher in 1945 and that it never be produced. It would win him, posthumously, a fourth Pulitzer Prize. *The Iceman Cometh* was written in 1939 but was not successfully put on Broadway until 1946. His last work, an unfinished trilogy that includes *A Touch of the Poet* and *More Stately Mansions* and based on the tribulations of O’Neill and his Irish-American family, was also released and produced after his death, against his wishes that the manuscripts be destroyed.

Eugene O’Neill’s plays are steeped in tragedy and disillusionment. With few exceptions they project life as a series of tragic disappointments, lost dreams, spiritual disconnection. And yet, out of the intense portrayal of maladjusted lives, deep frustrations, thwarted desires, and despair emerge a haunting beauty, a mystical eloquence, a hidden affirmation that the strife and heartache of it all is worth the “journey.”

In Eugene O'Neill's words: "I see life as a gorgeously-ironical, beautifully-indifferent, splendidly-suffering bit of chaos, the tragedy of which gives man a tremendous significance ... what I'm after is to get an audience to leave the theatre with an exultant feeling from seeing somebody on stage facing life, fighting against the eternal odds, not conquering but perhaps inevitably being conquered. The individual life is made significant just by the struggle."

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Selected Plays of Eugene O'Neill

Web:

An Electronic Eugene O'Neill Archive
<http://www.eoneill.com/essays/index.htm>