

The American Century Theater  
presents

Eugene O'Neill's  
**Beyond  
the  
Horizon**



**Audience Guide**  
Written and compiled by Jack Marshall



January 14–February 12, 2011  
Theatre Two, Gunston Arts Center



*Theater you can afford to see—  
plays you can't afford to miss!*

## About The American Century Theater

**The American Century Theater** was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, but overlooked American plays of the twentieth century . . . what Henry Luce called “the American Century.”

The company’s mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to surrender our moorings to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all Americans, of all ages, origins and points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These audience guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

*The American Century Theater is a 501(c)(3) professional nonprofit theater company dedicated to producing significant 20th Century American plays and musicals at risk of being forgotten.*

*The American Century Theater is supported in part by Arlington County through the Cultural Affairs Division of the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Resources and the Arlington Commission for the Arts.*

*This arts event is made possible in part by the Virginia Commission on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as by many generous donors.*



## Contents

The Playwright: Eugene O’Neill .....	1
About <i>Beyond the Horizon</i> .....	8
Wrestling with God: Old Testament Themes in <i>Beyond the Horizon</i> .....	17
“Save Eugene O’Neill!” .....	23

The 2010–2011 American Century Theater Season

back cover



## The Playwright: Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953)

—Edward L. Shaughnessy

From *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1999  
[REPRINTED from the June 2005 TACT Audience Guide for *The Emperor Jones*]

“One thing that explains more than anything about me is the fact that I’m Irish.” Thus did Eugene O’Neill acknowledge the high importance of his Celtic heritage. Another crucial given in his background was Catholicism. Even after a bitter and permanent break with the church, he would later concede, “Once a Catholic, always a Catholic.” It seems quite clear, then, that O’Neill’s ethnic and religious inheritance deeply affected his world view and his artistic vision.

Eugene’s father, James O’Neill (1846?–1920), who became an American matinee idol, had been driven with parents and siblings from his native Kilkenny in the midcentury famine exodus. He had suffered a deforming fear of poverty, very likely an effect of his childhood uprooting and penury. The shadow of that trauma would later darken the lives of his wife and sons. This history is relived in Eugene’s searing family tragedy, *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (1956).

O’Neill’s mother, Ella (Quinlan (1857–1922)), was born in New Haven to immigrants from Tipperary. She enjoyed a privileged convent education at St. Mary’s Academy in South Bend, Indiana. But, like James, she confronted a personal nemesis: Ella O’Neill fell victim to morphine addiction, the drug prescribed to relieve her pain after Eugene’s birth. That event took place in the Barrett House, a hotel at 43rd and Broadway, on October 16, 1888.

“I was nursed in the wings,” O’Neill said of the years when he accompanied his parents on tour. Among the most formative influences on the playwright-to-be was surely his father’s numbing enslavement (nearly 6,000 performances) to an immensely popular recycling of the Dumas novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a warhorse melodrama that earned James O’Neill a fortune. But the endless repetition of one role precluded his developing an undeniable acting talent. Eugene came to regard his father’s theater as false and shallow, but he also gained from his “house” privileges an astonishing knowledge of stagecraft and theater business.

As Ella had been, her sons were boarded at the best Catholic schools: James, Jr., (Jamie (1878–1923)), at Notre Dame prep, Georgetown, and Fordham;

Eugene at Mount St. Vincent in the Bronx and De La Salle Academy in Manhattan. Contented and obedient in their early years, each boy in his turn was devastated when he learned of his mother's drug addiction. To Eugene, ". . . it made everything in life seem rotten!" Thus, at fifteen, he lost all belief in a compassionate and personal God. Reluctantly, James entered the young apostate in Betts Academy in Connecticut, and later in Princeton. But if he had gotten his way, Eugene remained forever haunted by his Catholic sensibility. Again and again his plays offer variations on the themes of sin, guilt, and the search for redemption.

Goaded by Jamie, his "creator," Eugene had spun out of control even before leaving college. Near the end of his first year (1907), failing academically, O'Neill was dropped from the Princeton rolls. Yet, as he always had, he continued to read omnivorously: in addition to fiction and poetry, Emma Goldman's anarchist magazine, *Mother Earth*, Shaw's *Quintessence of Ibsenism*, and selected works of Nietzsche. In 1909 Eugene entered into an ill-advised marriage with Kathleen Jenkins of New York, who bore a son, Eugene, Jr. In 1911 Kathleen sued for divorce. O'Neill offered little protest, having made no effort to see the boy. He set out for Honduras on a gold-prospecting expedition but discovered there only malaria. Over the next two years he would sign on as ordinary seaman on several voyages: to British, African, and South American ports of call. These travels were interrupted by periods of panhandling and dereliction. Whatever good came from these rough adventures was more accidental than planned: an earned certificate as able seaman and, somewhat in the manner of Melville, an appreciation for the sea and ships that would provide material for his art.

By 1911 O'Neill was nearly exhausted by the psychological and physical damage he had inflicted upon himself. For a time he lived the meanest waterfront existence, staying in a flophouse-bar called "Jimmy-the-Priest's." Here he fell into an even more desperate state of personal degradation and once attempted suicide. He would recall this period in *Anna Christie* (1921) and *The Iceman Cometh* (1946). Somehow he managed a rally and moved into his family's New London headquarters in the summer of 1912. He began working as a reporter on the *New London Telegraph*. Still, the dissipation had taken a toll. Diagnosed in November to have a mild case of tuberculosis, Eugene entered the Gaylord Farm Sanatorium, where he remained for five months. This period of enforced withdrawal offered an opportunity for reflection and profitable reading. Earlier, knocking about with Jamie and others, O'Neill had taken advantage of his access to Broadway houses (via James's *carte blanche*). He had seen a great deal of the new drama: Ibsen (*Hedda Gabler*), Shaw (*Mrs. Warren's Profession*), but especially the works of Abbey Theatre playwrights: Synge, Yeats, and Lady Gregory. "It was in seeing

the Irish Players (on a first American tour in 1911–1912) that gave me a glimpse of my opportunity. I went to see everything they did . . . .” At Gaylord, O’Neill began to read these new playwrights in earnest.

### **Early Relationships, Personal and Professional**

The decade 1914–1924 reveals a period of astonishing self-reclamation in O’Neill’s life. These years mark his development from theater tyro to world dramatist. By 1922 he had already won Pulitzer Prizes for *Beyond the Horizon* (1920) and *Anna Christie*. His path of ascendancy was not without dips but it was generally steady. Indeed, James was so impressed by Eugene’s efforts that he financed the publication of his son’s first book, *Thirst and Other One Act Plays*, and paid his tuition as a special student at Harvard in George Pierce Baker’s advanced “English 47,” a workshop in playwriting.

In the summer of 1916, in Provincetown, Massachusetts, O’Neill met George Cram “Jig” Cook, specialist in Greek drama, and his playwright wife, Susan Glaspell. Their group included poets, political writers, and idealists of all varieties—in general a crowd sympathetic to the socialist philosophy espoused by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman: Max Eastman and Michael Gold, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Louise Bryant, Hutchins Hapgood and John Silas Reed, *et al.* Some of them had heard about and asked to read O’Neill’s plays. They read *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916): “Then we knew what we were for,” said Glaspell. With O’Neill, the Provincetown Players vowed to produce new American plays “of artistic, literary and dramatic—as opposed to—Broadway merit.”

By 1918 O’Neill had found his path. He met and married Agnes Boulton (1893–1968), a modestly talented fiction writer. Like O’Neill, she had been married and had one child. But, because each had personal ambitions to fulfill, their relations were never entirely compatible. Shane Rudraige was born in Provincetown in 1919. A daughter, Oona (later Mrs. Charles Chaplin), was born in Bermuda in 1925. Clearly, O’Neill had not severed his Irish roots.

The Provincetown Players established a regular-season playhouse on Macdougall Street in Greenwich Village. O’Neill, drawing further on his sailing experiences, included three other one-act pieces with *Cardiff* and named the quartet the *S. S. Glencairn* cycle. In November 1920, the Provincetown offered *The Emperor Jones*, a radically experimental play, starring the gifted black actor, Charles Gilpin, as Brutus Jones. So successful was the production that, on December 27, it was moved uptown and began a Broadway run of 204 consecutive performances.

But *The Emperor's* very success foredoomed the Provincetown's claim on O'Neill. Soon he developed close working relations with two other theater geniuses, critic-director Kenneth Macgowan and designer-producer Robert Edmond Jones (the "triumvirate"). These three organized the Experimental Theatre, Inc., official successor to the Provincetown. They produced an impressive list of O'Neill plays: *Welded*, an adaptation of *The Ancient Mariner*, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, and *Desire Under the Elms* (all in 1924); *The Fountain* (1925); and *The Great God Brown* (1926). A little later O'Neill sought the services of the Theatre Guild (a spinoff of the Washington Square Players), with its greater financial resources and professionalism. The Guild staged *Marco Millions* and *Strange Interlude* (in 1928), *Dynamo* (1929), and, with Robert Jones, *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933), *Days Without End* (1934), *The Iceman Cometh*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1947).

### **Bold Experiments, Dark Themes, and a Failed Search for God**

In 1926, still married to Agnes, O'Neill met the actress-beauty, Carlotta Monterey (1888–1970), and pursued an affair with her. After their marriage in July, 1929, Carlotta devoted her life to O'Neill, a devotion so fierce that she often alienated his friends and children. Guarding his seclusion (1938–1943), Carlotta acted as gatekeeper of Tao House, their retreat near Danville, California. Here O'Neill wrote his final and greatest plays, including *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Although their relations were often stormy, Eugene and Carlotta remained married. They are buried side by side in Forest Hills, Boston.

Theater historians credit O'Neill with single-handedly bringing a serious American drama into being and with setting new directions in world drama. He is regarded as a bold experimenter, especially in the 1920s, as a playwright who sought to revive the grand tragedy and as an artist who wrestled with the question of meaning in modern life. For, out of his own experience and as a disciple of Nietzsche, O'Neill concluded that God was dead.

Between 1920 and 1929, some eighteen original O'Neill plays were mounted in the New York art theaters and on Broadway, an output that virtually guaranteed a certain number of failures. He combined the techniques of expressionism with the themes of naturalism. The arrogant "emperor" Jones rules his West Indies "subjects" until they rebel. As he runs for his life through the moonlit forest, all outer signs of his power shredding with his uniform, the action is intensified by a frantically accelerating beat of tom-toms. In his last moments, Jones is found a quivering mass, victim of his own fears. *Jones* is both allegory and psychological realism.

Another triumph of expressionism is *The Hairy Ape* (1922). A modern Neanderthal, Yank Smith, delights in his brute strength, confident that his power “makes de woild move.” By accident he discovers that capital, not brute force, controls society; he is merely a replaceable part in the mechanistic order of things. The play examines modern man’s dawning recognition that, having lost his harmony with Nature, he has lost his place in the natural order.

*Desire Under the Elms*, as Joseph Wood Krutch observed, treated “the eternal tragedy of man and his passions.” In this, and its theme about the wages of sin, the play is typically O’Neill. Men and women covet what others have: land, gold, sexual partners. To get them, they commit vile and violent acts: theft, adultery, infanticide. American in setting, *Desire Under the Elms* was called a return to high tragedy—Greek in theme, Shakespearean in vision.

Perhaps O’Neill’s boldest experiment was to “reinvent” the mask of classical Greek drama. *The Great God Brown*, brilliant but confusing, finally baffles the audience: the actors’ repeated masking and unmasking only defeats the viewer’s attempts to follow the play’s logic. Still, he had bravely accepted the challenge to dramatize Jung’s archetypes, the *persona* and *anima*. O’Neill was searching for “god substitutes” which science, he said, had failed to provide. And the idea of God-equivalents was what he hoped to advance in *Lazarus Laughed* (1927), *Strange Interlude*, and *Dynamo*. *Lazarus*, virtually unproduceable with its 420 roles, espouses Nietzsche’s doctrine of Eternal Recurrence. The hero transcends his fear of death when he comprehends his participation in the cycle of Nature. *Strange Interlude*, a Broadway smash (426 performances) and a bestseller, was a nine-act marathon. In it O’Neill reclaimed the use of asides, a device that permitted characters to speak their inner thoughts as their opposites “freeze,” unaware. *Dynamo*, with Lee Simonson’s futuristic set and special effects, offered the idea of electricity as a force to be worshipped.

O’Neill produced only three new plays in the 1930s, two that have become classics, the other a bitter failure. *Mourning Becomes Electra* retells the House of Atreus myth, here set in New England but with a Civil War background. In this trilogy, the author outdid his *Interlude* demands in a bold presentation of thirteen acts. The evening began at 5:30, was interrupted for dinner, and finished near midnight.

Unlike all of O’Neill’s other plays, *Ah, Wilderness!* is all-American in its small town, home-and-hearth charm and its Fourth of July setting and remains a summer stock favorite. It is a picture of the youth and family life the author might have preferred. Richard Miller, a generous but hotheaded adolescent, represents young O’Neill. In the play’s 1933 Broadway premiere (285 performances), the father was played by perennial song-and-dance man,

George M. Cohan, whose own father, with James O'Neill, had helped to found the Catholic Actors' Guild. The following year (1934), O'Neill seemed to signal a wish to reclaim his lost faith. In *Days Without End*, two actors play antithetical extremes within a single character (John Loving), one part cynical and sneering, the other searching for his childhood beliefs. The unregenerate self wears a mask and can be heard by the hero (and the audience) but not by the other characters. The play failed, as did O'Neill's search for faith.

### **Lonely Journey to Olympus**

Although he was named the 1936 Nobel laureate in literature, O'Neill's reputation was, ironically, in decline. Between 1934 and 1946, he would have no Broadway premieres. Yet the period 1935–1943 may have been his most fruitful. For five years, he was occupied with plans for a massive family saga that would cover 150 years. Called *A Tale of Possessors, Self-dispossessed*, it would trace the corruption of the American soul by greed. But ill health and a sense that he had lost focus caused O'Neill to shelve the project in late 1939. Of eleven projected plays, only two manuscripts have survived: *A Touch of the Poet* and *More Stately Mansions*. The late Travis Bogard, eminent O'Neillian, observed, "(The *Tale*) was a work of astonishing scope and scale. . . . Nothing in the drama, except Shakespeare's two cycles on British history, could have been set beside it."

At Tao House, forgotten but left in welcome seclusion, O'Neill mined the tragedy of his own past and found universal themes in his personal experiences. Now, with a full understanding of the sorrows of his parents and brother, he came to fathom the fate of everyman: to be caught in the nets of time. In these straits he located his family, his colleagues and friends, himself. Two, perhaps three, of his final works, have entered the world's canon of great drama. *Long Day's Journey Into Night* gives us four characters (the O'Neills, here named Tyrone) who torture each other in a kind of internecine warfare. In this towering tragedy, we can see the dilemma of the human family: One is denied love and therefore withholds love. In this profitless enterprise, one is always self-defeated.

"*The Iceman* is a denial of any other experience of faith in my plays." The pessimism of the play is terrible, for it confirms that God is dead. Comfort is found only in the self-deception that one's life has a purpose. In Harry Hope's Raines–Law flophouse, the "hell hole" where O'Neill himself attempted suicide, one survived only by regarding the life of his fellows as hallowed. O'Neill had never regained faith, but he found at Hope's, not the debris of the cosmos, but the "best friends I ever had." The Irish-Catholic O'Neill had not lost his identity; he saw life as a vale of tears. The dynamics of these last plays is the confessional. In *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, Jim Tyrone (Jamie)

confesses his heartless binge in response to the death of his mother. In *Hughie*, a second-rate Broadway sport, in a momentary casting aside of pathetic bravado, accepts his need for human connection.

O'Neill's final decade was his own hell. He had long suffered a degenerative palsy (akin to Parkinson's) that increasingly robbed him of his capacity to write. Losing that, he had lost his *raison d'être*. Her role as protector of the artist's privacy thus cancelled, Carlotta had now become supernumerary. In these grey years, they often fell to quarreling, but she remained with him until his death (in another hotel room). The 1946 production of *The Iceman Cometh*, ballyhooed for the playwright's return to Broadway, received only a mediocre reception. The next year, *A Moon for the Misbegotten* stumbled in its Columbus tryout and closed in St. Louis.

An O'Neill revival began in 1956 and has hardly abated. That year *Long Day's Journey* was given its world premiere by the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. *A Touch of the Poet* (1957) and *More Stately Mansions* (1962) also premiered there. O'Neill's reception in Sweden had been a genuine phenomenon since the 1923 Scandinavian premiere of *Anna Christie*. In May 1956, a revival of *The Iceman Cometh* (565 performances at Circle in the Square Theatre, directed by José Quintero and starring Jason Robards, Jr.) received rave reviews. In November, *Long Day's Journey* was given its American debut at the Helen Hayes Theatre (390 performances).

O'Neill stands as a giant in the modern theater, even if he has seldom won unqualified support from the critics. To the literati, his faults have been grievous: grandiloquence (dialogue), forced seriousness of situation (bathos), and adventures in philosophy (issues beyond his depth). O'Neill himself had wished for the grace of language: he recognized that he seldom attained literary heights. Yet he has drawn the approval of audiences worldwide throughout the century. Actors vie for parts in O'Neill and credit him with an uncanny sense of theatricality and a genius of character motivation. All have praised his uncompromising integrity in the face of demands to cut his plays to win easy popularity. No other playwright has documented as profoundly as O'Neill did the arch theme of modern drama: the individual's anguish as he clings desperately to old answers in the face of a ubiquitous challenge to faith.

Asked in 1946 if he had returned to the faith of his boyhood, O'Neill replied, "Unfortunately, no." He had spoken with finality and honesty. Yet a kind of religious sensibility had apparently remained a part of his nature. Something serious in the theater was reborn with Eugene O'Neill, who saw the playhouse as modern man's last temple.

## About *Beyond the Horizon*

Excerpts from *Contours in Time*, by Travis Bogard  
New York: Oxford University Press, 1972  
Revised edition, 1988

. . . The important production was that of *Beyond the Horizon*. When it at last was staged, the fallow period came to an abrupt end, and O'Neill emerged as a full-fledged member of his profession. The Pulitzer Prize which it garnered the following year made his standing official . . . O'Neill had sent the script to Williams in April, 1918. It had languished in the producer's office until Richard Bennett discovered it and cajoled Williams into the trial production. Bennett's contribution to the play's success was, by his own estimate, extensive . . . in its time, it was a signal, the first view of the serious American drama, and the history of its reception is important.

In general, the journalistic criticism was acutely responsive to the play's statement and sharply critical of its structure. O'Neill's play is the story of two brothers, Robert, a dreamer and poet who longs to go to sea and seek the promise that lies beyond the horizon, and Andrew, a more practical man, whose desire extends no farther than the family farm which he tends expertly. A love affair between Robert and Ruth, a girl both brothers love, drives Andrew to sea and keeps Robert on the farm. The play depicts the gradual decline of the marriage and concludes with Robert's death. One reviewer saw the play only as a depiction of "the misery which follows the union of a man and woman who are incompatible," but for the most part, the reviewers rightly understood the search of the dreamer, Robert Mayo, as the quest of a man for his proper element. Alexander Woollcott, in the *New York Times*, wrote that Robert is "chained to a task for which he is not fitted, withheld from a task for which he was born. . . . At the end he crawls out of the farmhouse to die in the open road, his last glance straining at the horizon beyond which he has never ventured, his last words pronouncing a message of warning from one who had not lived in harmony with what he was."

From Woollcott's analysis, it is clear that O'Neill's first major statement of his earliest tragic theme, one which he had evolved through the writing of the *Glencairn* plays, was understood without ambiguity.

Successful in understanding Robert Mayo, the reviewers were less able to comprehend Ruth and Andrew. Ruth was seen merely as a drag on Robert's aspiration, a creature of instinct, who turned into a whining slut. Andrew, although he was understood as a complement to Robert, was not viewed as a

dispossessed man, who, like Robert, is forced to seek salvation far from his native element . . . .

Satisfied with the play's central character, its theme, its realism and its dialogue, the reviewers to a man found fault with the play's structure . . . . objecting to the exposition as clumsy, and in particular faulting what they called a "chronic looseness of construction," especially as it was evidenced in the division of each act into two scenes, one in the farmhouse, the other on an open road.

The poor production perhaps occasioned their censure. In its original staging, the play ran close to four hours, much of which was spent in interminable waiting while the scenes were being shifted. Especially in Act III, the change of scene was thought to dissipate the emotional force of Robert's death. Woolcott, who objected to the scenery as being painted "in the curiously inappropriate style of a German postcard," took the play severely to task on this score, and other reviewers were no less outspoken.

Despite the critical carping at technical problems, *Beyond the Horizon* made O'Neill an important American dramatist . . . . The production, in short, was accompanied by a renewed sense of energy manifested not only in the number of plays O'Neill had in hand but also in an important development of his themes and techniques. The play seemed a work of a new and vital imagination, and its success was unquestionably valid. Certainly the play is the first major work of the O'Neill canon. It is fully characteristic. It is also a clearly "American" play, and thus an important "original." Yet, as with many of the one-act plays that had preceded it, O'Neill relied heavily on the work of others for important seminal inspiration and general direction. *Beyond the Horizon*, like *Bound East for Cardiff*, is at once original and deeply derivative.

In 1926 in a letter to Edward Sheldon, O'Neill acknowledged two important influences on his work:

*Dear Edward Sheldon:*

*I was immensely grateful for your wire about (The Great God) Brown. Your continuous generous appreciation of my work during the past years has meant a great lot to me, has been one of the very few things that have gratified me and satisfied me deep down inside. I say this—and I want you to know I say it!—with the deepest sincerity. Your Salvation Nell, along with the work of the Irish Players on their first trip over here, was what first opened my eyes to the existence of a real theatre as opposed to the unreal—and to me then, hateful—theatre of my father, in*

*whose atmosphere I had been brought up. So, you see, I owed you this additional debt of long standing.*

The debt to both Sheldon and the Irish Players is evident in *Beyond the Horizon*.

After a stormy run in Boston, where Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* generated its customary riots, the players from the Abbey Theatre had come to New York in November, 1911, under the management of George Tyler. Riots were expected when the Synge work opened, and wisely the directors determined to hold back its production until audiences had had a taste of the Players' quality. They opened, therefore, with a bill of short plays, including *The Rising of the Moon* and *Spreading the News* by Lady Gregory and a two-act tragedy by T. C. Murray called *Birthright*. O'Neill saw all the Players' New York performances, and his general indebtedness to their quasi-poetic, yet realistic, style is important, if obvious. More particular is his debt to Murray's play. His borrowing from it was extensive and continuous throughout his life.

*Birthright* is a Cain and Abel story set on a small Irish farm owned by Bat Morrissey and his wife, Maura. Hugh, the elder of their sons, is to inherit the farm, while the younger, Shane, leaves to make a new life for himself in America. Hugh, in his father's opinion, is less able to run the farm than Shane for he has other interests than farming. He is a poet, something of a dreamer, but also he is interested in sports and has become the village hero because of his skill at hurling. In sharp contrast to Shane, whose whole life is centered on the farm, Hugh likes dances and other forms of amusement. In Shane, Bat recognizes one of his own kind, but Hugh is alien to him. He feels that no one to whom the farm is not an entire way of life should inherit it . . . .

Evidently, *Birthright* is a play that stirred O'Neill's imagination deeply, and some aspects of his creative processes can be judged from the use he made of the play. He saw the play in 1911, and it provided him with the germinal plot idea for *Beyond the Horizon*, seven years later. O'Neill's story of two brothers, one a poet, the other a true farmer, with the former due to possess the land while the latter must go to sea, is too close to the structure of relationships in *Birthright* to be put down as mere coincidence. *Beyond the Horizon* is a re-imagining of the elements of Murray's play which by 1918 might well have been only a general recollection of a good plot idea.

The process, however, did not stop there. His imagination continued to feed on Murray's characters. Some residue of its initial impact remained in 1924, when he wrote *Desire Under the Elms*, retelling again the story of the struggle of a farmer's sons for the land. The long dialogue between Bat and Maura, in which Bat attributes his "hardness" to the qualities of the land, is seminal to Ephraim

Cabot's great monologue on the same theme in the second act of *Desire Under the Elms*, and Ephraim, like Bat, feels that his wives were unfit to bear him the right kind of sons.

Years later, in 1935, it appears that when he was writing *A Touch of the Poet*, although by then he may have remembered nothing of Murray's play, he found welling into his mind an image of an Irish peasant woman, waiting while her husband's mare was being shot. In creating the character of Nora Melody, he may also have recalled how Maura waited for one of her family to return by keeping busy about the house during a long vigil in the night.

The evidence suggests that O'Neill had been so deeply moved by his first sight of the Irish Players in Murray's work that the play embedded itself in his subconscious mind. A residuum of that emotion remained with him, letting half-forgotten images come to the surface whenever the connotative conditions were right and especially whenever he wrote of the land. Such a process may be no more than one of the usual processes of creativity, and, at its best, with O'Neill as with other writers and their "sources," the germinal elements take radically different form and meaning when they are fully developed. Occasionally, O'Neill was trapped in slavish imitation, as when in *Before Breakfast* he imitated Strindberg and was caught less by a genuine commitment than by an intriguing concept, manner or style. More often, the process permitted O'Neill to respond emotionally and completely, and to re-see his source material in his own terms, as he did in his use of Conrad in *Bound East for Cardiff* and of Murray's play in three of his major works.

*I think the real life experience from which the idea of Beyond the Horizon sprang was this: On the British tramp steamer on which I made a voyage as an ordinary seaman . . . there was a Norwegian A.B. and we became quite good friends. The great sorrow and mistake of his life, he used to grumble, was that as a boy he had left the small paternal farm to run away to sea. He had been at sea twenty years and had never gone home once in that time. I don't imagine he had written home or received a letter from there in years.*

*He was a bred-in-the-bone child of the sea if there ever was one. With his feet on the plunging deck, he was planted like a natural growth in what was "good clean earth" to him. If ever man was in perfect harmony with his environment, a real part of it, this Norwegian was.*

*Yet he cursed the sea and the life it had led him—affectionately. He loved to hold forth on what a fool he had been to leave the farm. There was the life for you, he used to tell the grumblers in the fo'c'stle. A man on his own farm was his own boss. He didn't have to eat rotten grub,*

*and battle bedbugs, and risk his life in storms on a rotten old  
“Limejuice” tramp. He didn’t have to wait for the end of a long voyage  
for a pay day and a good drunk.*

*No, sir. A man on his own farm could get drunk every Saturday night  
and stay drunk all day Sunday if he wanted to! (At this point the fo’c’stle  
to a man became converted to agriculture.) Then too, a man on a farm  
could get married and have kids . . . .*

The sailor O’Neill describes is doubtless the same man who inspired the figure of Olson in *The Long Voyage Home*, where O’Neill first began to articulate the sense of a man’s relationship with elemental forces. The thematic concept provides the strongest link to Robert Mayo, whose connection with the Norwegian sailor is somewhat tenuous.

As O’Neill explained it:

*I thought what if he had stayed on the farm with his instincts? What  
would have happened? But I realized at once he never would have  
stayed. . . . I started to think of a more intellectual, civilized type—a  
weaker type . . . a man who would have my Norwegian’s inborn cravings  
for the sea’s unrest, only in him it would be conscious, too conscious,  
intellectually diluted into a vague intangible romantic wanderlust. His  
powers of resistance, both moral and physical, would also probably be  
correspondingly watered. He would throw away his instinctive dream  
and accept the thraildom of the farm for—why, for almost any nice little  
poetical craving—the romance of sex, say.*

*And so Robert Mayo was born. . . .*

The account of the genesis of the character is evidently aimed at public consumption. It shows O’Neill emerging as a public figure and capitalizing to an extent on his rough-and-tumble past. His ironic treatment of Robert Mayo as the victim of a “nice little poetic craving” is far from the way he is presented in the play. The uncharacteristic sophistication of the statement may well reflect the easy cynicism of such associates as George Jean Nathan with whom he had been corresponding.

In fact, Robert Mayo is one of the many early self-portraits, and in describing him, O’Neill first uses the phrase that will become a significant key to the description of his tragic hero:

*He is a tall, slender young man of twenty-three. There is a touch of the poet about him expressed in his high forehead and wide dark eyes. His features are delicate and refined, leaning to weakness in the mouth and chin.*

In his lineaments, the faces of John Brown, the Poet in *Fog*, and something perhaps of Smitty, are to be seen clearly. Later heroes, all “touched” with poetry, will be cast in the same mold and will be similar in appearance. If O’Neill’s account is in any degree true, to turn his staunch sailor friend inside out meant that what he found as an opposite was himself. The publicity is little more than a mask, for in Robert Mayo, O’Neill explored his own truth.

In the play, O’Neill plunges Robert into a Strindbergian matrimonial drama, much as he had done earlier with John Brown and Alfred Rowland, and as he later was to do with other self-portraits, Dion Anthony, Curtis Jayson in *The First Man*, and Michael Cape in *Welded*. Ruth and Robert Mayo are shackled to one another in soul-destroying bondage of the sort that O’Neill had discovered in *The Father* and *The Dance of Death*. The primary effects are the same in *Beyond the Horizon* as they are in Strindberg. After the death of spirit, the man plunges toward physical death and the woman moves toward infidelity. That the tone of the play is not especially like Strindberg’s is partly the result of its merger with the Irish folk drama that supplied the basic narrative situation, and partly also because a third “source” somewhat diminished the Strindbergian overtones.

Legend has it that the title for the play came from a conversation O’Neill held with a small boy on the Provincetown shoreline. The boy wondered what lay “beyond the horizon,” and the phrase provided O’Neill with his title.

Whether the anecdote is true or not, any reader of the literature of the United States in the first quarter of the twentieth century will recognize in the title’s imagery what might be called the “Horizon Syndrome,” an affliction that manifested itself in countless inspirational poems, stories and short plays in precisely the way O’Neill used it—to suggest boundless aspiration for a somewhat vaguely defined freedom of spirit. To cite a single, potentially influential example: in November, 1912, Edward Sheldon’s play, *The High Road*, was produced in New York. It is the story of a farm girl who is seduced by a traveling artist and leaves home. In the course of her life she becomes a woman of some political prominence. Early in the play, Sheldon gives full development to the horizon imagery. The high road leads through apple country, “winding like a ribbon, until it is lost in the far distance of the violet hills.” The first act love scene between Mary Page and the artist, Alan Wilson, provides an example of the inspirational motif:

*MARY (pointing)—Do you see where the moonlight hits the rocks on the top of that hill? It makes it look like a house all built o' gold. . . .*

*ALAN I've climbed those hills . . . . It's hard work, but I didn't care. I just pushed along and thought of the welcome waiting for me at the top.*

*MARY An' what was it like when ye got there?*

*ALAN There was nothing but the plain, bare rocks.*

*MARY Wasn't ye awful disappointed?*

*ALAN Perhaps—just at first—but then right off I saw the golden house again. . . . Across the valley—on the hills beyond! . . .*

*MARY An' when ye'd climbed up the next hill, it was just the same? . . . An' no one's ever walked into the house an' sat close by a winder an' looked out over the world?*

*ALAN Not one. Only each time that you climb a hill it seems a little bigger and a little brighter . . . .*

Although O'Neill was clearly writing in a recognizable vein, *Beyond the Horizon* was rightfully received as a compelling original. As his first major play, it properly builds on all his most significant earlier work. His sense of a special relationship between man and his environment had emerged at the outset of his career in his perceptions about the sun and the fog and especially about the power the sea has over men's lives. To this he added the relatively recent idea, derived in part from Conrad, of the power of hope to sustain men. Then, in depicting the details of Robert's marriage, he drew upon his understanding of husbands and wives derived from Strindberg. Finally, in Robert and Andrew, he sketched the poetical self-portrait and its materialistic counterpart with which he had been occupied since *Fog*. What emerged finally was the memorable figure of a man "touched" with poetry, O'Neill's true tragic protagonist. Robert was a man who was out of harmony with his environment, who could not "belong" and who therefore was condemned to live between hope's eternal optimism and the inevitability of despair. *Beyond the Horizon* is thus a summing-up of O'Neill's early years as a playwright; at the same time, the merging of his major thematic preoccupations produced a new structure which would serve as a base for further development. It is also true, as is often the case with the emergence of an important playwright, that the tragedy defined for its audiences certain formulations which they chose to accept as beliefs of their society.

In retrospect, the causes of the success of *Beyond the Horizon* are complex. To be sure, the play was a naturalistic tragedy in the modern mode by a young American playwright whose career had excited interest. Its production was a labor of love by important actors who had idealistically rejected wearisome commercial success as a testament of their faith in it. It appeared in a context of growing enthusiasm for the new theatre as an art form, and it was sufficiently well written to merit serious discussion. Yet, there have been equal successes under similar conditions . . . . Yet these plays are forgotten and *Beyond the Horizon* survives. It does so because, with great clarity and with the simplicity of a fable, its theme established a major tragic motif of American drama.

Man's relationship with nature has, of course, been a constant theme in literature under a wide variety of formulations and interpretations. The concept of natural man as being an exemplar of the good, or of reversion to nature as indicating the brute in man, of man's soul as being in or out of tune with nature, or of man turning endlessly in space as the victim of uncomprehending forces of his environment—none of these has novelty. Yet O'Neill's use of man's desire to belong to nature as the source of a tragic action was an important new variant on an old theme...As developed by O'Neill tragic disharmony with nature is depicted most often in terms of private, personal loss in such figures as the Hairy Ape, Eben Cabot or Dion Anthony. Many of those who came after him broadened the scope beyond a purely personal focus to include social disorders and to picture man as a victim of suffocating societal pressures. Even here, however, from American authors, the explanation of the malady of both the individual and his society is the fundamental dislocation between man and nature.

For example . . . . Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* finds everyman's problem to be caused by his divorce from the land. Willy remembers the grassy plains of the west, the music of the flute, the shadowy patterns of leaves, and his last action is the frantic, symbolic gesture of planting seeds in the sterile earth.

In the light of later developments, *Beyond the Horizon* proved a seminal play, establishing a theatrical pattern which endured for at least two decades. Inexpert as it was in many of its elements, in the whole it showed O'Neill to be a dramatist who could speak significantly to his audiences, by presenting them with a meaning which was accepted as an important truth, and in effect an aspect of national belief: that man will only be complete when he lives in a right relationship with the earth.

The cosmos of the play is equally divided between land and sea. If Andrew had stayed on the farm, if Robert had gone to sea, each would have held true to his essential nature and been able to live in harmony with the elements around him.

The implication, therefore, is that Robert belongs to the sea and Andrew to the land. It is not enough to say that Robert's longing for the sea is "too conscious, intellectually diluted into a vague, romantic wanderlust." ...Robert, in the cup of the hills, cut off from the horizon, is imprisoned, forcibly held back from joining the element to which he rightly belongs. His weakness and his romanticism are irrelevant; until he can unite himself with the sea, he can be no stronger. On land, the unyielding furrows are sterile, and, by the same token, Andrew finds no nurture at sea but travels unmoved to romantic shores, seeing only abused land. Andrew's corruption is epitomized by his perverting the farmer's instinct and gambling in wheat. Robert makes the point specifically: "You used to be a creator when you loved the farm. You and life were in harmonious partnership. And now—."

Andrew and Robert stand sharply opposed, the poet and the . . . . O'Neill sees them—perhaps because he sensed in his relationship with his own brother a similar radical opposition—positive and negative images of what he called "longing and loss." Despite the gulf between them they are chained together, and, later, in more complex plays he will repeat the same strange fraternal conflict . . . .

In the action of *Beyond the Horizon*, there is no solace. Like the sailors of the *Glencairn*, Andrew's wants are easily satisfied, but the source of his discontent remains unlocated. Robert, however, is different, for he is touched with a poet's power of vision and is able to bring unspoken needs to a level of consciousness. He is able to articulate hope, to sense what lies beyond the farthest range of vision.

To be sure, in the play he does not frame matters in such terms. Admitting he is a failure, he says that he can justly lay some of the blame for his stumbling "on God." Yet it is hard to understand how God is to be blamed for Robert's ruin. "God" in such a scheme can mean little more than such a hostile, "ironic life force" . . . . O'Neill, emerging as a poet, is no longer concerned with what is totally negative, as such derivative deterministic conceptions essentially were. To him, now, the real forces in the play are the powers in the sea and the land that, while they reject alien children, hold out promise of peace and harmony to those who truly belong. The promise is important. Robert claims it at the end of the play, mistakenly asserting that he has won it through "sacrifice":

*And this time I'm going! It isn't the end. It's a free beginning—the start of my voyage! I've won to my trip—the right of release—beyond the horizon! . . . Ruth has suffered—remember, Andy—only through sacrifice—the secret beyond there— . . . the sun! . . . Remember!*

With these words he dies, leaving Andrew and Ruth spiritually exhausted, “in that spent calm beyond the further troubling of any hope.”

What Robert means by “sacrifice” is not clear. So that he can marry Ruth he drives Andrew from the farm, denies the power of the sea and proceeds then in a stumbling and incompetent course in a service, the land’s, for which he is not fitted. Ruth turns against him, their child dies and the farm fails. But Robert, who has made no choice beyond the initial determination, has not sacrificed, nor is there any indication that his death is a sacrificial atonement for his initial error. On the contrary, although his original action has caused suffering, his death is close to a blessing, both a release from pain and a reunification with the element that is rightfully his . . . . Now, it is clear, Robert’s death ends what Georges Bataille would call the “discontinuity” of his being. Discarding through death his individuating consciousness, ridding himself of the poet’s awareness of the need for belonging, he moves through death into the mainstream of continuous life energy . . . . he has “dissolved” into the secret . . .

Having been born, he is doomed to “discontinuity,” and, except in such transitory moments as Edmund Tyrone describes, when “the veil is drawn back,” he must live without belonging. Seeking to belong, however, suffering the lack of harmony, he will come to know, if not to achieve, his God, his home, his proper good.



## **Wrestling with God: Old Testament Themes in O’Neill’s *Beyond the Horizon***

—*Shelly Regenbaum*

Copyright eOneill.com 2007

Excerpts

The search for God is undoubtedly one of O’Neill’s major preoccupations in many of his plays. In a letter to George Jean Nathan on the subject of *Lazarus Laughed*, O’Neill explained his feelings on religion. After the death of the old God, O’Neill wrote, science and materialism failed to give “any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a

meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with . . . . It seems to me,” he wrote, “that anyone trying to do big work nowadays must have this big subject behind all the little subjects of his plays or novels, or he is simply scribbling around the surface of things and has no more real status than a parlor entertainer.” O’Neill borrowed his “big subjects” from a variety of sources, predominantly Greek legends and Christian theology and ritual.

The interest of this essay, however, lies in those “big subjects” which seem to be indebted to, and inspired by, the Old Testament. The story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac is strongly suggested in the plays which dramatize the lives of the 19th-century New England Puritans—namely, *Where the Cross Is Made*, *The Rope*, and *Desire Under the Elms*. In *Beyond the Horizon* (1918), O’Neill’s first full-length play, which depicts sibling rivalry between Robert and Andrew Mayo, we sense the compelling presence of the story of Jacob and Esau.

At first glance, it may be difficult to recognize the influence of the biblical story. Indeed, *Beyond the Horizon* contains no references, or direct allusions, to the Old Testament in general or to the Jacob and Esau narrative in particular. Furthermore, the plot of the play, particularly in its resolution, differs from the biblical narrative. Yet the influence of the Old Testament can be found in striking thematic correspondences. The story of Jacob and Esau is deeply embedded in the thematic texture of the play and becomes a metaphor, a paradigm for the strife of the Mayo brothers, and perhaps all of O’Neill’s brothers. There are also other prominent biblical themes in the play—in fact, seven in all. In addition to the two brothers, there are the relationship between the brothers and their parents; the reversal of roles; the bowl of lentils; the exile; the wrestling with God; and the reconciliation.

### **The Two Brothers**

Jacob and Esau are sharply contrasted in character and aspirations. Jacob, the younger brother, is delicate and spiritual, “a plain man, dwelling in tents”. Midrashic literature views him as a reader and a student. Esau, by contrast, is strong and physical, “a cunning hunter, a man of the field” (Gen., 25, 27). He is a man of action and appetites. When he comes hungry from the field one day, he sells his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentils. In Hebrew, Jacob’s name has two meanings, to follow and to deceive. Prior to his wrestling with God on the Yabbok River, Jacob is indeed a follower . . . . As a young man, Jacob is passive and timid. He obeys his mother when she orders him to steal from Isaac the blessing reserved for Esau. He listens to her when she advises him to escape his brother’s wrath and flee to Haran. In

Haran, he allows his uncle, Laban, to take advantage of him. We do not have much information on Esau, but, from the little we know, we can infer that, unlike his brother, he is independent and rebellious. When he marries a Canaanite woman, he openly defies his father (Gen., 26, 34–5).

The two brothers in *Beyond the Horizon* bear a striking resemblance to the biblical brothers. Their contrasting personalities are also suggestive of O'Neill and his brother Jamie, and of other brothers in O'Neill's plays, particularly Jamie and Edmund Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Robert Mayo, the younger brother, has a delicate constitution and refined features. He is a sensitive thinker and an avid reader, with "a touch of the poet about him". Like Jacob, Robert is a dreamer. He lives intensely in his visions of "the far off and unknown," and pursues "the secret which is hidden just over there beyond the horizon". Like Jacob, who dreams of angels ascending and descending a ladder "set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven" (Gen., 28, 12), Robert is in quest of revelation. His older brother, Andrew Mayo, is "husky [and] sun-bronzed", "a son of the soil". Like Esau he is "a man of the field", and like Esau, who is described as "cunning", Andrew is "intelligent in a shrewd way". Like his biblical prototype, he is rather contemptuous of the world of the imagination and of the spirit. The sea, which attracts Robert (as it did O'Neill), holds no fascination for Andrew: "You can have all the sea you want by walking a mile down to the beach," he says to Robert. He derives more satisfaction from the earth than ever from "any book." Like his father, Andrew is wedded to the soil and is thus naturally destined to inherit the farm. Robert's essence lies in wandering and in the pursuit of beauty and mystery.

### **Sons and Parents**

In the play, as in the biblical story, the mother dotes on the younger son, while the father loves the elder and chooses him as his heir. Isaac loves Esau because "he did eat of his venison". James Mayo favors Andrew because, like him, he is a true farmer. Like Esau, Andrew is the bread winner and brings home food from the field. The biblical mother, Rebekah, loves and protects her younger son, Jacob. Kate Mayo, who had once been a school teacher and still "retains a certain refinement of movement and expression foreign to the Mayo part of the family", loves Robert. She constantly worries about his health and is deeply upset by his plans to leave home. Later she protects him from Mrs. Atkins' blatant and malicious accusations. Both Jacob and Robert are mother's sons. Both, indeed, are strongly influenced by women later in their lives. Jacob obeys his wives, Rachel and Leah. Robert

sometimes gives in to Ruth's wishes too easily, particularly at the beginning of their relationship.

### **Reversal of Roles**

When Rebekah conceives, God says to her: "Two nations are in thy womb and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels: and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger" (Gen., 25, 23). The prophecy comes to pass. Jacob buys Esau's birthright with a bowl of lentils and secures the covenantal blessing from his father, Isaac: "Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee: be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee: cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee" (Gen., 27, 29). Not only is the elder destined to serve the younger, but Jacob is assigned a role which is most alien to his nature. He is timid and submissive, a dreamer. In the blessing he is called upon to be a leader, a man of action and authority. He habitually withdraws from action, but in the future he will have to command and rule. Esau, the proud and independent brother, will bow down to Jacob.

In the play, a similar reversal of roles and fates occurs, although the theme of usurpation is absent. Robert gives up his sea voyage for the love of Ruth: "Our love is sweeter than any distant dream," he tells her. "It is the meaning of all life, the whole world. The kingdom of heaven is within—us!" He decides to become a farmer and show his father "that I'm as good a Mayo as you are—or Andy, when I want to be." Andrew, who is also in love with Ruth, decides to join his uncle on the ship. Both brothers thus choose a vocation which runs against their natures. Robert inherits the farm while Andrew, the son of the soil, takes off to the sea. The farmer becomes a sailor; the sailor is turned farmer. Like the biblical brothers, Robert and Andrew find themselves in roles which contradict and thwart their identities  
.....

### **The Reconciliation**

In the Bible and in the play, there is a moving reconciliation between the brothers. The expression of love is free and warm. In the Bible, the brothers' past bitterness seems to have vanished. Jacob has overcome his fear of Esau, and Esau has forgotten his anger: "And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept." (Gen., 33, 4) Andrew comes home to his brother to support him in his sickness: ". . . I love Rob better'n anybody in the world and always did. There isn't a thing

on God's green earth I wouldn't have done to keep trouble away from him." And yet, in both stories the reconciliation, although moving, appears tentative and incomplete.

The meeting between the biblical brothers is brief. Esau is remarkably generous, but Jacob is wary of him. He does not quite trust his brother; he is restrained and uncertain. He promises Esau to visit him in Seir, but he never does. The brothers remain distant, different, separate.

In the play, Andrew's love for Robert is put to a severe test. Will Andrew obey Robert and marry Ruth? He dislikes her intensely. He talks to her with impatience and aversion as if he were ashamed of ever having loved her. If he marries her, he will have to wrestle with the same unbearable burden of hate that Robert had had to struggle with. Is he capable of doing it? Andrew's final words to Ruth give no answer to these questions: "I—you—we've both made such a mess of things! We must try to help each other—and—in time—we'll come to know what's right to do—(*Desperately.*) And perhaps we—". The reconciliation is marked by rapid, painful discoveries. In the few hours he spends with Robert, Andrew learns more about himself than he had done in his entire lifetime. He does face the truth: "we've made such a mess of things". But will he become a Robert, or will he dwindle into a Jamie who admits his weaknesses but helplessly gives in to them? Could Esau wrestle with God?

The strange biblical prophecy, "The elder shall serve the younger", shapes the lives of Jacob and Esau and casts its long shadow on their relationship. Andy, like Esau but in a more desperate way, becomes his brother's server. He is doomed by his love for his brother and by the irreversible twists of fate. If he obeys Robert, he will be trapped by the farm and the woman. If he does not obey him, he will be tormented by his moral debt to his dead brother. Like Esau, who is told by his father that "by thy sword shalt thou live, and shalt serve thy brother . . ." (Gen., 27, 40), Andrew is condemned to a life of bondage and waste. Esau, however, creates a new life for himself in the land of Seir and is furthermore comforted by Isaac's distant promise of freedom from the rule of Jacob: ". . . and it shall come to pass when thou shalt have the dominion, that thou shalt break his yoke from off thy neck" (Gen., 27, 40). Andrew cannot have his own independent future, because Robert's will deprives him of choices, even the choice of his own mode of expiation, and forces him to stay on the farm.

The biblical story sheds light on the quality of love and distance, affinity and contrast between the brothers. It links their struggle to the archetypal rivalry

and the archetypal search for identity. It adds richness and depth to the lives of the New England farmers, and it becomes a vehicle for the expression of the search for God. Yet it is in the outcome of this quest that the parallel ultimately splits apart, showing the fundamental difference between the biblical promise of life and continuity and the tragic vision of O'Neill.

In the biblical story the presence of God is never doubted. The covenantal promise, which God had given Abraham, preserves the lives of the patriarchs and ensures the continuity of the family and the community. It transcends the twists and turns of events and overrides the threatening conflicts between father and son, brother and brother. Isaac survives Abraham's sacrificial sword; Jacob escapes the wrath of Esau; and Esau ultimately frees himself from his brother's yoke. The covenantal vision, transmitted from father to son and shared by the community, is reassuring and inspiring.

O'Neill's vision, by contrast, is grim and ambivalent. Throughout the play he seeks God, but he constantly doubts Him and questions His presence. The quest, which strengthens Jacob, exhausts Robert and finally kills him. He dies with a comforting vision and seems to have found God. But he cannot pass on to his brother his mysterious and perhaps redeeming legacy. Neither Ruth, who is beyond the "troubling of any hope", nor Andrew can touch his secret which thus becomes a burden and a curse. Robert's God, like Ephraim Cabot's, is hard and lonesome.

In both the Bible and the play, the struggles of the spirit are monumental and mysterious. In the Bible they renew the bonds between man and man, man and God. In the play they raise profoundly disturbing questions. Is Robert's endeavor rewarded? His moral victory is a poignant achievement. But can it ennoble or inspire others? Is Robert's victory a Pyrrhic victory? Is it too costly to pursue or imitate? Yet in spite of the harrowing and threatening nature of these questions, O'Neill continued to wrestle with them throughout his career, and this is the measure of his courage and achievement.



## “Save Eugene O’Neill!”

—*Jack Marshall*

A few years ago, *The Washington Post* reported that the Fairfax County library system was dumping thousands of volumes that had not been checked out in the last 24 months. Among the classics tossed to make room for more novels by John Grisham and Tom Clancy and the fulminations of Bill O’Reilly and Ann Coulter: Gibbon’s *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*; Voltaire’s *Candide*, Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* got the heave-ho, too. Holding on by a thread only because one librarian professed a bias as a former English major: *Nine Plays* by Eugene O’Neill.

The book was compiled by O’Neill himself, during a creative lull after his 1936 Nobel Prize for Literature. He was in ill health, battling alcoholism and depression (as usual), and it was widely assumed, perhaps even by the playwright himself, that his career was over. The nine plays were thus O’Neill’s summing up of his artistic legacy before the burst of genius in the 1940s that produced a second act to his career that was even more impressive than the first. The nine plays include *Beyond the Horizon*.

And when libraries begin throwing out Eugene O’Neill, it will be a cultural turning point, just as the banishing of Hemingway and Voltaire are turning points. When public libraries base their collections on public tastes rather than literary worth, it guarantees widespread loss—loss of memory, loss of perspective, loss of ideas, loss of inspiration, loss of critical standards, loss of cultural depth and diversity. But what is the alternative? One can hardly argue that a book that never makes it to the checkout desk is contributing anything to the community. Books, like plays, don’t communicate all by themselves. Somebody has to want to read them and watch them.

One could be more sympathetic with the decision of the Fairfax libraries if its policy were uniformly applied with a consistent philosophy. The librarian who was interviewed for the *Post* story said that the plays of William Shakespeare would “always” be available, as well as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Well . . . *why*? Why is Britain’s greatest playwright guaranteed enshrinement in our culture, while Tennessee Williams loses his place on the shelves to reader apathy, and Eugene O’Neill barely makes the cut? For that matter, why should one librarian’s biases give O’Neill a pass? And who decided that Fitzgerald’s masterpiece gets the equivalent of academic tenure, while, for example, *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* flunks out? If pure popularity is

the measuring stick, than let's apply it to all. On the other hand, if the library is going to assume the responsibility of cultural guardian, its choices should be based on better criteria, not biases, conventional wisdom, and individual favorites.

Libraries, art museums, orchestras, and theater companies are either the guardians of cultural riches, or there are no guardians. Art forms that cannot escape commercial forces are doomed to slough off supposed classics like dead skin. Commercial radio is gradually eliminating not only classical music and jazz from the airwaves but also the popular music of the '40s, '50s, and '60s, and with it Bob Dylan, Bing Crosby, Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Irving Berlin, and Richard Rodgers. With hundreds of cable TV channels now available, only one consistently shows great black-and-white classic films, which are gradually fading from public awareness along with their inimitable stars: James Cagney, Clark Gable, Errol Flynn, Fred Astaire, Gary Cooper, Bette Davis, Ginger Rogers, Spencer Tracy, and dozens more . . . even Shirley Temple!

What will save Eugene O'Neill? Commercial necessities long ago invaded the theater: grants are all that keep most companies, even prominent ones, out of bankruptcy, and grants are linked to audience. "I think the days of libraries saying, 'We must have that, because it's good for people,' are beyond us," said Leslie Burger, president of the American Library Association and director of Princeton Public Library. "There is a sense in many public libraries that popular materials are what most of our communities desire. Everybody's got a favorite book they're trying to promote."

This is an odd attitude in a society that delivers messages and promotes policies to discourage smoking, trans fats, fast driving, excessive drinking, gambling, and junk food. "Most of our communities" enjoy those things, too. What's the difference between promoting good health and good art? It couldn't be that the dollars for unhealthy food, drink, and drugs flow to corporations, while corporations, foundations, and governments will *pay* for increased public consumption of rap music, Steve Martin plays, Ann Rice novels, Tom Cruise movies, and Broadway jukebox musicals.

Could it?

So the hurdles to keeping the plays of Eugene O'Neill in our cultural memory become more and higher. Each generation of teachers reflects its own cultural experience: today *The Color Purple*, the poems of Maya Angelou, and *The Heidi Chronicles* are more likely to be assigned in high school than *Moby-Dick*, the poems of Robert Frost, and *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Libraries, it seems, will be no help. "A book is not forever," said Sam Clay, director of the

21-branch Fairfax system, in the *Post* story. He is proving it by dumping the writings of Plato and Aristotle, the thoughts that launched the Renaissance and formed the foundation of Western philosophy and science. At least they stayed with us for 3,000 years; the libraries are ready to jettison O'Neill in less than a century.

If O'Neill is to survive, as well as Miller, Williams, Albee, Hellman, and all of the other great American playwrights of the past, it must be the theater that saves him. Even as other cultural institutions abandon their obligation to fight for the best of our art and literature, the theater tries to adapt its own versions of the model set by art museums, blending old and new, using current fads and momentary hits to attract new attention to proven works of quality and lasting value. And it must find ways to present O'Neill's plays in new and innovative ways, without distorting or destroying what makes them great. Most of all, the theater must do O'Neill well, a difficult challenge, because his are uniquely difficult plays. Nothing will kill a classic like a string of shoddy productions.

Even all of this will not be enough if audiences take no responsibility for preserving their own cultural heritage. Encouraging the public to see plays that are more than time-killing eye candy or strings of formula one-line jokes is often derided as an "eat your spinach" tactic that is bound to fail, but while spinach may not appeal, most adults know that they won't thrive on a diet of Oreos and Big Macs, either. The argument for Eugene O'Neill's plays is more persuasive than the case for spinach: it's not just that they are good for us, but also that they are *good*.

O'Neill ought to be saved, not for him (for he is well past caring), but for us and those who come after us. Can he be saved in an era where art that doesn't pay the bills is regarded as a burden, not a treasure?

We shall see.



**You can still get a “short subscription” to  
our exciting 2010–2011 season!**

**Two great plays you won’t want to miss—**

***Stage Door*** by Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufman  
*April 8–May 7, 2011*

Gore Vidal’s ***Visit to a Small Planet***  
*July 8–August 6, 2011*

To subscribe, visit [www.AmericanCentury.org](http://www.AmericanCentury.org),  
call 703-998-4555, or  
talk to an American Century Theater staff member.