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O'Neill, Eugene [Gladstone]

(1888–1953),

born in New York City, as a child accompanied his father, James O'Neill (1847–1920), a popular romantic actor, on theatrical tours, and later attended a Catholic boarding school and a Connecticut preparatory school. He entered Princeton (1906), but remained there only a year. After secretarial work in New York, he went on a gold prospecting trip to Honduras (1909), but contracted malaria, and returned to the U.S. to be assistant manager of his father's company. Soon tiring of their mediocre vehicle, he shipped as a seaman for Buenos Aires. Employed for a time in Argentina, he then worked his way to South Africa and back on a cattle steamer, and after a period of beachcombing in Buenos Aires returned to New York. His last experience at sea followed, when he worked on ships between New York and Southampton. Next he tried acting during one of his father's tours, and reporting for a Connecticut newspaper, but suffered a physical breakdown and was sent to a sanatorium for six months. He had already written verses, and during this period of enforced rest and reflection turned to the drama as a medium for expressing the view of life he began to develop, based on his life at sea and among outcast and oppressed people in many places.

During the following winter (1913–14), he wrote his first play, *The Web*, seven other one-act plays, and two long plays. He gained further experience as a student in G.P. Baker's 47 Workshop (1914–15), and spent a winter in Greenwich Village. In 1916 he became associated with the Provincetown Players, who during the next three years produced many of his one-act plays, including *BOUND EAST FOR CARDIFF* (1916) and *THE MOON OF THE CARIBBEES* (1918). This period of practical experiment brought to a climax his years of apprentice work, and he began to win general recognition when three of his plays were printed in *The Smart Set*. With the New York production of *BEYOND THE HORIZON* (1920, Pulitzer Prize), O'Neill was acknowledged as the foremost creative American playwright.

Although he was associated with Robert Edmond Jones in managing the Greenwich Village Theatre (1923–27) and was a director of the Provincetown Players and a founder of the Theatre Guild, which produced his later plays, he became increasingly absorbed in writing, to the exclusion of other interests. He followed *Beyond the Horizon* with further naturalistic studies of tragic frustration set in modern American backgrounds: *Chris Christopherson* (1920).

rewritten as *ANNA CHRISTIE* (1921, Pulitzer Prize); *Diff'rent* (1920); *Gold* (1921); *The Straw* (1921); and *The First Man* (1922). From the same period came his achievements in symbolic expressionism, *THE EMPEROR JONES* (1920) and *THE HAIRY APE* (1922); but he continued the naturalistic approach in *ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT WINGS* (1924), and *DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS* (1924). In the same year he turned to the use of symbolic masks in a Provincetown production of Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner*, which he adapted and directed.

The romantic and poetic elements of his nature, which had hitherto appeared in details of his plays, dominated *THE FOUNTAIN* (1925), an affirmation of life and spirit, and "the Eternal Becoming which is Beauty." His next play, *THE GREAT GOD BROWN* (1926), fused symbolism, poetry, and the affirmation of a pagan idealism, in an ironic tragedy of modern materialism; and *LAZARUS LAUGHED* (1927) and *MARCO MILLIONS* (1928) similarly attack the contemporary emphasis on acquisition and material standards, in terms of poetic emotion, exotic color, and satirical irony. Always an experimenter in forms, O'Neill attempted in *STRANGE INTERLUDE* (1928, Pulitzer Prize) to create a dramatic technique using the stream-of-consciousness method, in a nine-act tragedy of frustrated desires. This psychological analysis of motives was followed by a trilogy, *MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA* (1931), adapting the Greek theme and preserving the dominant emotions of fear, horror, and a brooding sense of a malignant fate. O'Neill's deep interest in problems of religion in the modern world appears in two plays of this later period: *Dynamo* (1929), in which an electrical dynamo becomes a divine symbol, replacing the old God but destroying its worshippers; and *Days Without End* (1934), in which the hero is irresistibly attracted to Catholicism.

Ah, Wilderness! (1933) is a pleasant New England folk comedy, very different from O'Neill's usual concerns. *THE ICEMAN COMETH* (1946) is a tragedy, realistically set in a Bowery bar, symbolically portraying the loss of illusion and the coming of Death. *LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT* (1956, Pulitzer Prize), an autobiographical tragedy written in 1940, and depicting a day in 1912 in the unhappy life of the Tyrone family, was the first of his posthumously produced and published plays. In 1958 came *Hughie*, a one-act character study. Of his projected eleven-play cycle, *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*, about the effect possessions had on an American family from the colonial era to the present day, two have been acted and issued: *A Touch of the Poet* (published 1957, produced 1958) and its immediate sequel, *More Stately Mansions* (1964).

O'Neill's works are deeply affected by his wide reading, especially in Greek tragedies, Ibsen, and Strindberg, but it is his own stage experience and his own insight into character that made them so distinguished and earned him a Nobel Prize (1936). His *Poems*, minor works, were collected in 1980, and "As Ever, Gene" (1980) assembled 130 letters to George Jean Nathan.

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