

CHAPTER 16

EUGENE O'NEILL

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IT was one evening in the summer of 1916 in Provincetown, Massachusetts, when American theatre changed forever. That was when, according to Susan Glaspell, members of the Provincetown Players, after listening to a reading of a one-act play by an aspiring playwright named Eugene O'Neill, "knew what we were for" (Gelb and Gelb 2000, 558; Sheaffer 1968, 347). When the Players produced *Bound East for Cardiff* that summer, it marked the fortuitous convergence of the enterprising vision of a fledgling theatre company with the bold new voice of a determined young dramatist. The result was the emergence of the "native dramatic art" (Gelb and Gelb 2000, 498) that Glaspell and her visionary partner, George Cram Cook, were driven to produce. With them, Eugene O'Neill would define that dramatic art in its infancy, and then, independently of the Provincetown Players, he would go on to secure its place on the world stage.

O'Neill wrote more than fifty plays. They are populated with people from all walks of life, from seamen and farmers to businessmen and landowners, from derelicts and prostitutes to newspaper editors and professors. His characters face numerous challenges unique to their times, from the development of technology to the exploitations of capitalism and the ravages of war, as well as those common to all times, from marital strife and sibling rivalry to illness, death, and the need for dreams or illusions to endure life. Some characters experience the hopefulness of triumph and success, others the hopelessness of defeat and failure, and most experience both.

O'Neill once said, "Most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God" (O'Neill 1961, 115). These words may seem strange coming from a man who lost his faith at the age of fifteen, but they signify the scale of his reach as an artist. His own words notwithstanding, O'Neill's dramas are about human relationships; indeed, there are not many writers who have depicted the dynamics within families with the emotional punch and psychological insights of O'Neill. That said, however, his words do explain why at the heart of all of his drama is a human being (or several) standing alone, attempting to make sense of an inscrutable world and his or her place in it; these words explain why O'Neill defined the essence of human existence as "hopeless

hope." In play after play throughout his career, from the earliest naturalistic one-act plays through the more ambitiously complex theatrical experiments of his middle years and the powerfully nuanced dramas of his final creative period, it is this vision of the human condition, as it evolves dramaturgically, that secures O'Neill's stature as a major dramatic artist.

LIFE INTO ART

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born on October 16, 1888, in a hotel in Times Square in New York City. The son of the popular nineteenth-century actor James O'Neill, who earned fame and fortune touring the country in the role of Edmond Dantès in the melodramatic *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Eugene never knew the stability of a permanent childhood residence. The only home he knew as a boy was in New London, Connecticut, where the O'Neills spent their summers between theatrical seasons. That house in New London was to become the setting for *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the autobiographical masterpiece that O'Neill completed in 1941 but that was not published or produced until 1956, when it would earn him his fourth Pulitzer Prize, three years after his death in Boston.¹

There is arguably no other literary figure who used the circumstances of his life as the fabric of his art so deliberately as O'Neill. In his early and middle works, those life events and the people involved are hidden beneath a fictional veil of varying thickness, but in the final works of his creative life, the veil becomes quite thin, and ultimately transparent, revealing the actual ghosts of the playwright's life. As Stephen Black has demonstrated in his biography, *Eugene O'Neill: Beyond Mourning and Tragedy*, "O'Neill found a way to use the writing of plays as a form of self-psychoanalysis" (1999, xviii), culminating in the poignant autobiographical revelations of *Long Day's Journey into Night* and its quasi-sequel, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*.

Long Day's Journey into Night is set in the summer of 1912, a turning point in the life of the playwright. After attempting suicide in New York City earlier that year,² the twenty-four-year-old O'Neill returned to his family's summer home in New London where he was diagnosed with tuberculosis (known as consumption at the time) and then confined to a sanitarium, where he read voraciously and discovered his ambition to become "an artist or nothing" (Gelb and Gelb 2000, 433). In *Long Day's Journey*, the mature dramatist depicted the complex familial and psychological environment in which the patient had been immersed and from which his sanitarium stay was an escape (although he only hints at the circumstances surrounding the suicide attempt earlier that year). Toward the end of the play, in a lengthy monologue, Edmund reflects on his existence:

It was a great mistake, my being born a man. I would have been much more successful as a sea gull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death! (O'Neill 1988a, 812)

This sense of not belonging, of aloneness, haunted and defined the aging playwright until his dying day, just as it had haunted and defined the young Edmund Tyrone as he sits immobilized by the hopeless despair of his family at the end of *Long Day's Journey*, and as it haunted and defined the young Eugene O'Neill who had survived a suicide attempt, then tuberculosis, and then set out to become an "artist or nothing" by writing plays. Judging by *Long Day's Journey* alone, there would be little hope for the survival of this young man, let alone his triumph as a great artist. Although the man did physically escape that debilitating home environment, the playwright, in fact, remained psychically bound to it forever.

"IRONIC FATE" IN THE EARLY ONE-ACTS

O'Neill's earliest plays were one-acts, and many of these plays addressed controversial topics not common to American drama at the time—including marital stress, infidelity, abortion, prostitution, poverty, and suicide—in a naturalistic style not common on the American stage. Of the twenty-five or so plays he had written by 1920, many bore the marks of a neophyte, some showed signs of genius, and virtually all reflected the vision of that young man who would later sit in the living room of the Tyrones' summer house and bemoan his bad fate to have been born into the human species. The first in a long line of introspective characters was the one who lay prostrate on the wharf at Provincetown in the summer of 1916, Yank in *Bound East for Cardiff* (completed in 1914):

This sailor life ain't much to cry about leavin'—just one ship after another, hard work, small pay, and bum grub; and when we git into port, just a drunk endin' up in a fight, and all your money gone, and then ship away again. Never meetin' no nice people; never gittin' outa sailor town, hardly, in any port; travellin' all over the world and never seein' none of it; without no one to care whether you're alive or dead. [*With a bitter smile.*] There ain't much in all that that'd make yuh sorry to lose it, Drisc. (O'Neill 1988a, 195)

O'Neill's early one-act plays are populated by numerous characters like Yank, men (mostly) who are unsettled and alone, if not physically, then psychically, in the face of an uncertain, and often cruel, world, what O'Neill called "ironic fate":

By "ironic fate," O'Neill meant that the lives of the characters are controlled, in despite of their wills, by a power of destiny that is inexorable, malevolent insofar as it can be said to have purpose, but in essence meaningless. (Bogard 1988, 17)

In *The Long Voyage Home* (1917), for example, Olson is left alone at a dingy bar and speaks of his strong desire to go home—"No more sea, no more bum grub, no more storms—yust nice work" (O'Neill 1988a, 517)—and his accompanying resolution to remain sober; yet, in the end, a prostitute tricks him into drinking a glass of spiked

ginger beer that knocks him out, enabling her and her pimp to steal all his money, and he ends up on board the "worst ship dat sail to sea," likely to "never see port once again" (521–22). In *The Rope* (1918), a prodigal son returns to claim his inheritance from his miserly father, and as the adults greedily plot against each other to gain the money, the granddaughter—a child—inadvertently finds the gold coins and tosses them uncaringly off a cliff and into the sea, leaving the men foiled in their greed by capricious fate. In play after play, an ironic ending suggests the existence of a powerful and inscrutable external force that thwarts all human efforts to find contentment and peace. Although some of the simplistic situations and predictable plot developments in these early plays can be traced to the melodramatic theatre of James O'Neill, even in these early plays, the characters struggle with their destiny in a way that suggests something much more deep and complex than melodrama. As Jeffrey Richards has stated, "O'Neill saw that drama must . . . boil life down to its essential agonies, then have his characters make of them the best that they can. In that sense, the author was working more in the tradition of the writers of Job than of *Monte Cristo*" (2001, xv).

According to Travis Bogard, it is *The Moon of the Caribbees* (1917) that truly distinguishes O'Neill's earliest work and evokes the great promise of his future achievements. While in many of the early plays, truthful character development sometimes overshadows contrived plot developments, these plays were still largely dependent on narrative, and as Bogard argues, "the significant failure of his earliest works had been failures of narrative" (1988, 86). *The Moon of the Caribbees* is a radical departure. It has no plot, but depends, instead, on mood, as it depicts a day in the life of the characters aboard ship: "The totality of the drama lies in the mood" (85). Bogard calls the play a "nearly flawless dramatic poem" (85); the men simply try to overcome with drunken revelry the melancholy solitude of life aboard ship, and in this, according to Bogard, the play captures "the fullest sense of life that O'Neill had put on his stage" (86). The dramatist later called it his "first real break with theatrical traditions. Once I had taken this initial step, other plays followed logically" (86). He was referring, of course, to the longer and more experimental plays that he wrote next, starting with *Beyond the Horizon* (1918), *The Emperor Jones* (1920), *Anna Christie* (1920), and *The Hairy Ape* (1921), the most critically acclaimed and commercially successful of this period, which would establish his reputation and come to define American drama in the 1920s and beyond.

BOLD DRAMATURGICAL EXPERIMENTS: MASKING AND UNMASKING

Beyond the Horizon is the story of two brothers, one suited to a life on the farm and the other to a life at sea, who switch roles for the love of a woman, which leads to disappointment and despair for all concerned. The story is more intricate, and the characters more complex, than those of the earlier one-act plays, but at the heart of this full-length drama

is still the human being at the mercy of fate. O'Neill's first full-length play to be produced and his Broadway debut, *Horizon* won him his first of four Pulitzer Prizes, but, as Louis Sheaffer points out, the true significance of the play lies in its unflinching realism:

[O'Neill] had already signaled his intent in his one-act plays. In *Beyond the Horizon*, he committed the deed: he introduced the American theater to life, the sad realities of everyday life, and began changing that theater into one more genuine, more vital, more sensitive to the human condition. (1968, 418)

Arthur and Barbara Gelb identify another aspect of *Horizon* that is so crucial to understanding O'Neill's impact on American drama: "Like his work to come, it was boldly self-revelatory—a long-acknowledged tradition of the great novelist but rarely if ever displayed by an American dramatist" (2000, 638).

Anna Christie followed in the realistic tradition, boldly placing a prostitute at the center of a drama that takes place mostly aboard a barge and pits three sympathetically flawed human beings against that whimsical force of fate, here referred to as "dat ole davil, sea." Although in the end, she appears to accept the traditionally gendered role of the loyal wife who waits patiently and compliantly on land while her seafaring husband wanders the globe, Anna Christie is a strong, independent woman who rails against the men who claim to own her and try to control her destiny. A superficially happy ending led some critics to deride O'Neill for "selling out," to which O'Neill replied:

The happy ending is merely the comma at the end of a gaudy introductory clause, with the body of the sentence still unwritten. (In fact, I once thought of calling the play *Comma*)... My ending seems to have a false definiteness about it that is misleading—a happy-ever-after which I did not intend.... A kiss in the last act, a word about marriage, and the audience grows blind and deaf to what follows. (Sheaffer 1973, 67–68)

The implication of the ending apparently intended by O'Neill is that the characters are doomed to a life of disappointment in spite of their efforts to defy fate and find happiness together, but the final moments of the play provide enough hope for an audience to believe the contrary. Although, because of this misunderstanding, O'Neill considered the play a failure, it nevertheless was commercially successful and earned him his second Pulitzer Prize.

O'Neill continued to present controversial subject matter in both *The Emperor Jones* (race and racism) and *The Hairy Ape* (class and capitalism), and in these two plays, the dramatist experimented more radically with form, using the devices of Expressionism that had already become quite common in European drama to plumb beneath the surface of the human condition more revealingly than realism could do. At the core of each play, again, stands a man trying desperately to make sense of, and find comfort in, his existence. Both plays are episodic, visually and aurally evocative journeys into the psyches and souls of their central characters, Jones and Yank, respectively, and through

them, into the psyche and soul of the United States of America. Both characters are on a quest to find meaning, to find self-identity, and like Edmund, to belong; both find redemption, but, like Yank in "Bound East," only in death. At the very end of *The Hairy Ape*, after Yank is killed by the embrace of a gorilla, the stage directions state, "And, perhaps, the Hairy Ape at last belongs" (O'Neill 1988a, 163).

During the 1920s, O'Neill's exploration of challenging, sometimes controversial, topics using nonrealistic, experimental theatrical forms intensified. *Welded* (1923) was an intense and honest drama about torturous marital relations, and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1923) brought miscegenation to the stage, including the sight of a white woman kissing a black man's hand, which led to threats of censorship (Sheaffer 1973, 134–40). In *Desire under the Elms* (1924), O'Neill drew on Greek tragedy (i.e., *Hippolytus*, *Oedipus*, *Medea*) as the foundation for a more contemporary story of lust and greed in America, with the quasi-incestuous coupling of a young man and his stepmother at the center of the plot also bringing controversy in the press and threats of censorship. While all three of these plays are largely naturalistic, *Desire*, in particular, indicates the expanding reach of the dramatist, both in terms of form and content. In addition to its aspirations to frame a tragic vision for America founded on classic Greek tragedy, the play introduced the use of a single set with removable walls to allow the depiction of multiple simultaneous scenes. As Normand Berlin has observed, "This method of staging remains realistic, but it allows for remarkable fluidity of presentation, and it produces some highly effective scenes by means of juxtaposition" (1982, 81).

Even bolder experiments with form were still to come, as the dramatist attempted to represent his grand notions of "an Imaginative Theater" (Sheaffer 1973, 202), tied to Nietzschean philosophical ideas, and to dig more deeply into the human psyche. Those that depend on "poetic and lofty subject matter" (201) and physical pageantry at the expense of the inner lives of characters—such as *The Fountain* (1922), *Marco Millions* (1925), *Lazarus Laughed* (1927), and *Dynamo* (1929)—were failures, although often quite interesting. Others that use theatricality to reveal the "drama of souls" (Berlin 1982, 97)—such as *The Great God Brown* (1925), *Strange Interlude* (1927), and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931)—were more successful. Each of these plays was intellectually ambitious and stretched the limitations of the theatre, in some cases, beyond the practical. *Lazarus Laughed*, with its cast of hundreds, complicated use of masks, and other logistical challenges, is widely considered to be impossible to produce as O'Neill envisioned it (Bogard 1988, 279–90), and there have been very few attempts to stage it.

The Great God Brown and *Strange Interlude* were both efforts by O'Neill to bring the dualities of the human personality to the stage by using theatrical devices in more contemporary, realistic settings (Bogard 1988, 268). One of O'Neill's favorite devices was the mask, derived from Greek drama, but reconceived for a modern audience in psychological terms: "One's outer life passes in a solitude haunted by the masks of others; one's inner life passes in a solitude hounded by the masks of oneself" (O'Neill 1988b, 407). In *The Great God Brown*, the dramatist used masks to depict this duality in a much more

practical way than he had in *Lazarus Laughed*, but the use of this device can still seem heavy-handed and distancing:

We see the mask, but it covers no recognizable face, it responds to no beating heart. The mask points to the "vision" of a serious, sincere dramatist who seems more interested in his thesis, in his ideas on Life and God, than in the characters who present the ideas. (Berlin 1982, 88)

In *Strange Interlude*, O'Neill used spoken asides, which, although certainly artificial and overdone (to the extent that they became grist for the Marx Brothers' parodic mill in *Animal Crackers*), prove less distancing than the literal masks of *Brown*. Considered the theatrical equivalent of Joyce's stream-of-consciousness (97), the asides were decidedly "modern"; along with the length of the play (more than five hours with a dinner break), which gained a fashionable mystique, and the frank subject matter, the device contributed to the popular appeal of the production:

To a public relatively untutored in such matters, *Strange Interlude* unquestionably appeared as a revelation—a kind of primer of new thought, couched in language and action that opened new vistas in their understanding of human drives. (Bogard 1988, 297)

Strange Interlude was the most commercially successful of O'Neill's plays during his lifetime (Sheaffer 1973, 288–89), and it earned him his third Pulitzer Prize.

The last important work of this "experimental" period is *Mourning Becomes Electra*, in which O'Neill shuns the more contrived of his experimental techniques and builds on those that were more satisfying. Even more intentionally and transparently than *Desire under the Elms*, *Electra* adapts Greek tragedy (i.e., the *Oresteia*) to a mid-nineteenth-century American milieu (the return of a Civil War officer), using the Greek model to capture the human predicament of balancing free will against an overwhelming sense of fate and predestination, driven in modern terms by Freudian insights into the unconscious. Like *Strange Interlude*, the complete *Electra* trilogy challenges the audience's endurance, again running over five hours and including a dinner break. *Electra* uses masks, but in a metaphorical way, as the characters are described with "mask-like" faces, and the family resemblance among characters is likened to wearing masks. In Act 3 of "The Hunted," Orin is haunted by the resemblance among the men he has killed in the war: "Their faces keep coming back to me in dreams—and they change to Father's face—or to mine—" (O'Neill 1988a, 977), suggesting, of course, the universal human qualities that lie beneath the masks all people wear. *Mourning Becomes Electra* has the ambitious reach of O'Neill's middle plays, but it is more grounded in psychological truths than the less successful of those plays, and it is more compelling than the best of them because it is less noticeably encumbered by theatrical artifice: "O'Neill tells a big story about big passions, and he tells it with such truth that we get behind life and feel the real reality" (Berlin 1982, 117). *Mourning*

Becomes Electra marks the beginning of the playwright's inward retreat and his return to realism. As Berlin points out, "After the indulgences and excesses of the late twenties, O'Neill began the thirties with a realistic play that solidified his reputation as the American dramatist, and probably pushed him a giant step forward to the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936" (117–18).

There was one more accomplishment that preceded the Nobel Prize, one that provided another push toward the intensely personal realistic plays that would mark the pinnacle of his achievement: the reputedly somber, ponderous O'Neill wrote his only comedy, called *Ah, Wilderness!* (1932), which depicts the family and childhood the playwright claimed he wished he had had (Sheaffer 1973, 404), and it reflects nostalgia for a more innocent time in the United States. Set on July 4th in 1906, it is a coming-of-age story about Richard Miller, an idealized version of the young playwright himself, who quotes romantic literature considered risqué at the time, rebels against his parents and their values, has his first encounter with a prostitute and with alcoholic intoxication, and emerges a sober and stable young man on the verge of successful adulthood. There is a secondary storyline about an alcoholic uncle and his failed relationship with a spinster aunt, but the sad hopelessness of life that this plot and these characters represent is glossed over in the upbeat, comic spirit of the play. John Gassner said of *Ah, Wilderness!* that it is "one of the most attractive of American domestic comedies, nothing less and nothing more" (1965, 34–35). This time, O'Neill uncharacteristically emphasized the "hope" in "hopeless hope."

O'Neill received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936, the first, and still the only, American dramatist to be so honored. Had his career ended in 1937, his legacy would have been that his bold experimentation and adaptation of the innovative techniques of modern European dramatists to American themes and characters transformed drama in the United States and gave it a place on the world stage. Those great dramas that in their own right rose to the level of the works of those European dramatists like Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, and Chekhov were yet to come. The masterpieces that O'Neill wrote in the late 1930s and early 1940s would confirm the promise that the Nobel committee perhaps had seen in the influential and important works that they acknowledged with their award.

RETURN TO NATURALISM: THE LIE OF THE PIPE DREAM

The money that came with the Nobel Prize paid to build the house in which O'Neill lived in Danville, California, called Tao House, where he was to complete his life's work; this meant turning decidedly inward, a turn that had begun, to some extent, with *Mourning Becomes Electra* and, to a larger extent, with *Ah, Wilderness!* When he first came to Tao House in 1938, however, he was working on what, at the time, seemed to be the

pinnacle of his creative work, the ambitious cycle of plays he called "A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed." At its most grand, the scheme was for eleven plays, tracing the history of an Irish family in America from the time of the Revolution until the Depression. That family's history would demonstrate the personal, spiritual price of American materialism, a theme O'Neill had addressed previously in such plays as *Desire under the Elms* and *Marco Millions*. O'Neill found the theme for his cycle suggestively articulated in the Bible: "For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" (Sheaffer 1973, 442).

Although he never completed the cycle, and in fact destroyed virtually all the notes and manuscripts for it before he died, he did manage to complete one of the intended cycle plays while living at Tao House, and that was *A Touch of the Poet* (1942).³ Although, like *Desire under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, it takes place in the nineteenth century, and is not at all autobiographical on its surface, it shares in its style, characterizations, and thematic implications much more with the autobiographical plays of O'Neill's final years. *Poet* is essentially naturalistic and has a lightness to it that is uncharacteristic of the middle plays; Stephen Black goes so far as to call it a comedy (1999, 462). Like those middle plays, any autobiographical references are found beneath the surface. The grandiose *Con Melody*, for instance, has much in common with the actor James Tyrone of *Long Day's Journey* and, by extension, with the playwright's father, James O'Neill. Its setting in a run-down bar has much more in common with the setting of *The Iceman Cometh* than either of the other nineteenth-century settings. In fact, thematically, with its focus on the life lie, *A Touch of the Poet* seems very much like a companion piece to *The Iceman Cometh* and *Hughie*. In these late plays, O'Neill's characters still struggle with the dualities of personality that he previously dramatized with masks and asides, but in his return to naturalism, he discovered more realistic ways to stage the dualities, especially through the use of intoxication and alcoholism (Bloom 1984, 22–27).

Con Melody, having lost through a scandal the status and respectability he had gained in Ireland, has attempted to start his life anew in Massachusetts, where he has been tricked into purchasing a tavern that is no longer well situated for success. While his wife and daughter struggle to make ends meet, Melody presumes to play the role of a gentleman and pretentiously condescends to his local Irish patrons. As O'Neill indicates in the stage directions, "He overdoes it and one soon feels that he is overplaying a role which has become more real than his real self to him" (O'Neill 1988a, 197–98). As he preens in front of a mirror, dressed in the "style worn by English aristocracy in Peninsula War days," quoting from Lord Byron, he strikes a foolish figure, but as O'Neill also indicates in the stage directions, "there is something formidable and impressive about him" (198). He is a strong, charismatic character, more dynamic and compelling than anyone else in the play, except perhaps his daughter, Sara. When, toward the end, he returns from defeat at the hands of the servants of the Harford family, he surrenders to reality, killing his mare and, with her, killing the illusion that has sustained him. At the end, he joins the locals in the bar, and Sara, sorrowfully asks, "But why should I cry, Mother? Why do I mourn for him?" (281). Sara recognizes the significance of the life lie, the need human beings have to create and maintain some kind of sustaining illusion that allows them to overcome

the unpleasant challenges of the reality of their lives and of human life. It is this philosophical question, embodied onstage by identifiably realistic characters with whom a modern audience can relate, that becomes one of the central questions at the heart of O'Neill's other late plays, and that is, in fact, one of the central questions of modernist thinking in the twentieth century. It is certainly at the heart of the first of the three highly personal dramas to which O'Neill had turned most of his attention while living at Tao House, *The Iceman Cometh* (1939).

In her critique of *The Iceman Cometh*, Mary McCarthy complained that one "cannot write a Platonic dialogue in the style of 'Casey at the Bat'" (Sheaffer 1973, 586), but, in fact, O'Neill could, and did, do just that. *The Iceman Cometh* is long and repetitive, but it depicts a couple of days in the lives of a group of alcoholics, whose days are long and whose lives are repetitive. The playwright himself explained: "If there are repetitions . . . they'll have to remain in, because I feel they are absolutely necessary to what I am trying to get over" (Gelb and Gelb 1973, 870). For José Quintero, who directed the successful 1956 Circle-in-the-Square production that revived O'Neill's reputation, *Iceman* "resembles a complex musical form, with themes repeating themselves with slight variations, as melodies do in a symphony" (1957, 28). In *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill returns to the milieu of many of his earliest plays. Like those plays, *Iceman* is set in a seamy bar populated by unschooled and inarticulate characters of varied ethnicities on the lowest rungs of society's ladder, but O'Neill dispenses with simplistic plot contrivances and instead creates a rich and complex character-based drama that is, McCarthy's comment notwithstanding, deeply philosophical.

Aside from the only two incidental characters, the police officers who arrive at the very end, there are seventeen characters in the play, and many of them are onstage for much of the playing time. Each has his or her own story of disappointment or failure, and each has his or her own pipe dream that keeps hope alive. All of them drink heavily, seeking solace in their pipe dreams and escape from reality through intoxication. The dramatic conflict arrives in the person of Hickey, the salesman who arrives twice a year to buy them drinks and make them happy. On this visit, though, he is selling a new bill of goods; this time, he is selling the truth, as he forces all of the inhabitants of Harry Hope's Saloon to face the truth about themselves. Thus, the drama compellingly poses the question to the audience: Is it better to live life with illusions, or to face the truth? The antithesis to Hickey's philosophical thesis is articulated by the self-proclaimed "Foolosopher," Larry Slade: "The lie of a pipe dream is what gives life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us, drunk or sober" (O'Neill 1988a, 569–70). The discourse is enacted by the full ensemble, symbolized most poignantly by Harry Hope's attempt to take his promised walk around the precinct, only to return to the saloon, frightened and desperate: "But bejees, something ran over me! Must have been myself, I guess" (676–77). So, to Hickey's apparent surprise, these confrontations lead to universal gloom. Hickey himself has irretrievably destroyed his own illusion by killing his wife, Evelyn, saying, "Well, you know what you can do with your pipe dream now, you damned bitch!" (700). For Hickey, there is no turning back, and at the end, he is taken offstage by the police, to his execution, he hopes. Of the other two characters who face the truth, Parritt kills

himself, and Larry, the “only real convert to death Hickey made here” (710), sits alone at the end without hope or purpose, while all the others return to their drunken carousing and revelry, safe, under the illusion of Hickey’s insanity, in the comfort of their restored pipe dreams. The philosophical discourse of the drama is made visual in this closing tableau of the play, in which O’Neill depicts the paradox of human existence that he had long defined as “hopeless hope”: “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! . . . Only through the unattainable does man achieve a hope worth living and dying for—and so attain himself” (Gelb and Gelb 2000, 422–23).

O’Neill recognized the magnitude of his accomplishment in *Iceman* in a correspondence with Lawrence Langner, quoted by the Gelbs:

I have a confident hunch that this play, as drama, is one of the best things I’ve ever done. In some ways, perhaps *the* best. What I mean is, there are moments in it that suddenly strip the secret soul of man stark naked, not in cruelty or moral superiority, but with an understanding compassion which sees him as a victim of the ironies of life and of himself. Those moments are for me the depth of tragedy, with nothing more that can possibly be said. (Gelb and Gelb 1973, 837)

The grounds for these claims are equally, perhaps even more, compelling in *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1941).

The naked souls in *The Iceman Cometh* are based on many of the people O’Neill knew in his early days at sea and in barrooms and flophouses, but those in *Long Day’s Journey into Night* are based on the members of his own family of origin, as the dramatist revealed so transparently, and so poignantly, in the dedication inscribed to his wife, Carlotta, in the published version of the play:

I mean it as a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me the faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play—write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for *all* the four haunted Tyrones. (O’Neill 1988a, 714)

The repetitive cycle of guilt and blame in the play powerfully suggests that all four Tyrones are responsible for the family’s apparently hopeless situation (represented by Mary’s morphine addiction, the men’s alcoholism, and Edmund’s consumption) and, at the same time, that none of them is responsible for it, that they are all just victims, as we all are, of a mysterious and incomprehensible fate that has hovered ironically over O’Neill’s characters since his earliest one-act plays. As Mary says to Edmund in Act 2, scene 1: “It’s wrong to blame your brother. He can’t help being what the past has made him. Any more than your father can. Or you. Or I” (751). Consistent with the contradictory nature of so much of her behavior in the play, having said that, Mary, however, continues to blame her husband and sons for much of what disappoints and torments her in life.

To some, O’Neill never quite provides the same forgiving justifications for Mary’s behavior as he does for the other three characters, especially for the father in his revelatory monologue in Act 4, perhaps stemming from a refusal to forgive his own mother.

Throughout the play, Mary is distant and aloof, and aided by the morphine, she retreats further into her past, erecting an impenetrable wall between herself and her family that is especially painful for Edmund, who yearns for maternal comfort in the face of his gloomy diagnosis. After a series of attempts to make that connection with his mother, Edmund finally lashes out at her in frustration and anger: “It’s pretty hard to take at times, having a dope fiend for a mother!” (788), and the sound of the foghorn at that moment reinforces the danger of that penetrating reality. Deeply wounded, Mary retreats upstairs—“I must go upstairs. I haven’t taken enough” (789). O’Neill never allows the damaged mother to return. The next time she appears, in Act 4, she enters as the young girl she once was, her face “a marble mask of girlish innocence” (823).

Although her face is described as masklike, she, in fact, appears now as one of those naked souls to whom O’Neill referred in *Iceman*, one seen with compassion “as a victim of the ironies of life and of [her]self” (Gelb and Gelb 1973, 837). She is introduced derisively by Jamie: “The Mad Scene. Enter Ophelia!” (O’Neill 1988a, 824), and although Edmund defensively strikes Jamie, the blow does not narrow the gulf between Mary and the three men. No longer blaming any of them, no longer even acknowledging their presence, she relives the winter of her senior year of high school, when the Holy Mother advised her to test her claimed desire to be a nun by “living as other girls lived” to see if she was really called to life as a nun. As Mary recalls, though, “something happened to me,” suggesting no personal responsibility and no blame, only fate: “I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time” (827–28). In her final retreat from the family, Mary does not earn forgiveness, but in this last line, O’Neill implicitly grants her at least pity and understanding. Mary, in her current state, seems unaware of what happens to her “after a time,” but the audience knows full well, seeing before them onstage that her marriage to James Tyrone has led to a life of disappointment, pain, and sadness. Like *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day’s Journey* concludes with an evocative tableau. Although all four Tyrones are together in their home, isolated by a wall of fog, each is very much alone, sadly isolated from each other, emphasizing the irony of Mary’s final words.

In *The Iceman Cometh* and *A Touch of the Poet*, many of the characters find solace in the sustaining camaraderie of others; in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, that spirit of camaraderie does not exist overtly onstage at the very end, but there is some hope implicit in the strong family bonds that tie the Tyrones together, paradoxically the very same bonds that cause them to attack each other so relentlessly; these bonds are secured between Edmund and his father and Edmund and his brother in the final act and lie beneath the surface of the final tableau. In the last two plays that O’Neill completed, *Hughie* (1942) and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1943), the main characters struggle with the same human condition of aloneness and with similar ties that bind and can help sustain them.

Hughie is the only surviving complete work from another cycle of plays that O’Neill ambitiously conceived of in his final years, this one to be a series of one-acts about the deceased, called “By Way of Obit.” In *Hughie*, O’Neill returns to the one-act format that he had used to hone his dramaturgical skills as a novice playwright some twenty-five years previously. Although the dominant style of the play is naturalistic, akin in its run-down hotel lobby setting and in its characterizations to *The Iceman Cometh*, it is

apparent that the mature dramatist was still driven to experiment with nonrealistic techniques to bring out the inner thoughts of his characters. The play is essentially a monologue, spoken by Erie, a small-time gambler who lives at the hotel and passes his time in the lobby regaling the Night Clerk with tales of his exploits with women and dice in the big city. Most of the Night Clerk's reactions, however, are unspoken, detailed in the stage directions, and reportedly imagined by O'Neill to be depicted, along with the activities on the street outside, through the use of a soundtrack and projected images on a screen (Sheaffer 1973, 523). Even without these devices, though, the play compellingly depicts the loneliness of the individual in the modern urban landscape, and, like *Iceman*, it suggests that the companionship of another human being can help sustain the illusions that lend meaning to life in the face of a painful and empty reality. Remarkable for its brevity and its use of both external and internal monologues, *Hughie* is thematically consistent with the other late plays, similarly combining humor and pathos to depict O'Neill's vision of the human condition.

A Moon for the Misbegotten, the last play that O'Neill would complete in his lifetime, is, in fact, a kind of obituary for the playwright's brother, Jamie O'Neill, conceived in the same spirit of "By Way of Obbit" but in a full-length mode. Jim Tyrone is not dead yet, but there are many references to his deathlike condition. Jim Tyrone is a broken man. His joking good humor hides a tortured soul. In a long monologue in Act 3, Tyrone confesses to Josie not only that he has not mourned his mother's death adequately, but also that he has desecrated her memory by getting drunk and having sex with a prostitute every night on the train ride back east while his mother's body lay in the baggage car. Seeking and finding forgiveness in Josie's arms, Tyrone is released from the suffering of his life to find comfort in death. In the final words of the play, Josie grants Tyrone his last rites: "May you have your wish and die in your sleep soon, Jim, darling. May you rest forever in forgiveness and peace" (O'Neill 1988a, 946).

Josie arrives at this moment of absolution at great cost to herself. Long in love with Jim Tyrone, she invests great hope in their moonlit rendezvous, only to find that he is too wracked by guilt about his mother to love another woman and that the love he seeks is the forgiving maternal love that he has never experienced from his own mother. So he pleads for her forgiveness through Josie, who obliges, and as Tyrone falls asleep on her breast, comforted by her love and forgiveness, Josie recognizes the painful irony of her situation, in terms that recall the sense of "ironic fate" with which O'Neill's characters have contended from the beginning (Bogard 1988, 17):

God forgive me, it's a fine end to all my scheming, to sit here with the dead hugged to my breast, and the silly mug of the moon grinning down, enjoying the joke! (O'Neill 1988a, 934)

So while Tyrone is made whole again in preparation for his death, Josie has lost her hope for wholeness in a romantic relationship with Tyrone. In Act 4, Josie settles for wholeness with her father.

The relationship between Josie and Phil Hogan is perhaps the crowning achievement of *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. Having its roots in the relationship between Anna and Chris in *Anna Christie*, and drawing from the same well of domestic humor as he had been tapping since *Ah, Wilderness!*, O'Neill created a father-daughter relationship that is enduring and sustaining. Their bond is founded on mutual understanding and respect, and they truly enjoy each other's company. The joking banter between them gives them pleasure and helps to pass the time in an otherwise harsh and humorless environment. The loss of Tyrone's love, then, is somewhat less traumatic for her because she has her father. Just as O'Neill was able to imagine a family so unlike his own in *Ah, Wilderness!*, in *Moon*, he is able to imagine solace within a family unlike his own. As Josie bids farewell to the dead Jim Tyrone, she returns to the comfort of the "fun and excitement" with her father. It was approximately twelve years later when Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* would introduce the world to Vladimir and Estragon, two hopeless human beings who endure the challenges of a seemingly pointless existence by waiting it out together, engaging in endless, mutually entertaining banter. Like Vladimir and Estragon, Josie and Hogan appear to have little reason to go on, yet they do; much the same can be said for Erie and the Night Clerk in *Hughie* and the carousing denizens of Harry Hope's at the end of *The Iceman Cometh*.

O'NEILL'S GENIUS

O'Neill began his career as a dramatist emulating the great modern European playwrights in style and approach; in his final plays, he makes his claim to take a place beside them as his drama gains the heft of content and vision. The accomplishment of these plays, according to Berlin, "allows the name O'Neill to be mentioned along with Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw, and perhaps one or two others, as the giants of modern drama" (Berlin 1982, 130). Linda Ben-Zvi draws a line of connection, and even influence, between O'Neill and the Theatre of the Absurd: "His plays have within them the awareness of modern futility and the need to find dramatic articulation of this nullity. . . . They are also important as historical foreshadowings of the theater that was to follow, the theater of Beckett, of Pinter, and later of Shepard and Mamet, a theater that O'Neill may in part be responsible for foretelling, even for influencing" (1990, 54).

While working through the psychological and emotional traumas of his own life through his writing for the stage, Eugene O'Neill transformed American drama and brought it into the modern era. According to the Gelbs, "No one expressed [O'Neill's] creative struggle as tellingly as the equally haunted Tennessee Williams: 'O'Neill gave birth to the American theater and died for it'" (2000, 640). In 2004, the playwright Tony Kushner wrote of "the genius of O'Neill":

In a play called *Fog*, O'Neill wrote a stage direction which could be used now to describe Eugene O'Neill's centrality in American drama, his inescapable presence

in our national theatrical imagination, earned by virtue of his identification of our "native eloquence": "... the genius of the fog ... broods over everything" (2004, 256).

The genius of Eugene O'Neill has made all the difference to American drama as it has evolved from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.

NOTES

1. O'Neill had decreed that *Long Day's Journey into Night* was never to be produced and was to be published only twenty-five years after his death. As the sole executor of his estate, including all of his written and published works, his widow, Carlotta Monterey, allowed it to be published and produced in 1956. To this day, there is still disagreement and uncertainty about whether or not Carlotta was justified in overturning the stated wishes of her husband. Most scholars agree that the course of American drama would likely have been very different if *Long Day's Journey* had not been published until 1978, as the playwright originally had stipulated. With the publication and production of this monumental drama, O'Neill's stature in the American theatre was revived and his legacy ensured. For more details, see Gelb and Gelb (2000, 14–22).
2. O'Neill depicted this episode in the one-act play called "Exorcism," which was written in 1919, produced in 1920, but then destroyed by O'Neill and believed to be lost until a copy was discovered and published more than ninety years later in 2011 in *The New Yorker* and then in book form in 2012 by Yale University Press.
3. A draft of one other play from the cycle survived. Entitled *More Stately Mansions*, it was meant to follow *A Touch of the Poet* in the cycle, with the struggle between the spiritual and the materialistic in American culture played out within the conflictual relationships in the Harford family (Deborah, Simon, and Sara). An abridged version was published in 1964 and produced on Broadway in 1967, but O'Neill himself considered *Mansions* to be an "Unfinished Work" (Sheaffer 1973, 480).

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