

EUGENE O'NEILL

# Eugene O'Neill's Importance for American Theatre

During the first half of the twentieth century, Eugene O'Neill was America's greatest living playwright. Many drama critics today would say that O'Neill remains one of the best playwrights ever. O'Neill is usually known for his later works, arguably his best and most autobiographical plays: *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. Yet, the body of work that would win O'Neill the Nobel Prize for Literature came from his early to mid-career plays – those he wrote before his later pieces that seemed torn from his flesh. O'Neill remains the only American playwright to have won that coveted award.



By the time O'Neill had received the Nobel Prize in 1936, his health was in decline, in part from overworking himself. Soon his popularity in the American theatre would decline as well, for after decades of unparalleled experimentation, O'Neill increasingly turned to realism, in a style that was seen by some critics as old-fashioned. Unfortunately, O'Neill's earlier innovations were largely overlooked.

Writing against the theatre of his father – a famous actor who became associated with the lead role in *The Count of Monte Cristo* – the young O'Neill eschewed prevailing melodramatic formulae and stock characters. Experimenting with masks and other expressionistic devices, ethnic and immigrant dialects, interracial casting, and interior monologues, O'Neill crafted a new drama for the American stage.

O'Neill worked at a time when the United States struggled with an inferiority complex about its drama. No American Shakespeare, Ibsen, or Chekov had yet emerged. Even worse, the U.S. was swimming in popular entertainments such as mediocre melodramas, raunchy vaudeville acts, and racist minstrel shows. Whilst it is not quite accurate to say there were no great playwrights before O'Neill (Clyde Fitch, Susan Glaspell, and Rachel Crothers all stand out as noteworthy), none possessed O'Neill's unique devotion to American character. Moreover, O'Neill had the vision to create a distinctly modern form of writing that grew increasingly brilliant. O'Neill had epic ambitions, rewriting classical Greek tragedies like the *Oresteia* in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, incorporating Freudian and Jungian theory in *Desire Under the Elms* and *Strange Interlude*, and in writing an unfinished eleven-play cycle that nearly destroyed him.

O'Neill's arrival on the American theatre scene is often falsely mythologized as a divine birth. But O'Neill worked hard for many years, even before he joined the Provincetown Players in the summer of 1916. The Players, who devoted themselves to developing strictly American plays for American audiences, embraced experimentation. Founders Susan Glaspell and George Cram "Jig" Cook – along with Louise Bryant, Jack Reed, William and Marguerite Zorach and Robert Edmond Jones, among others – all tried their hand at writing, designing for, and acting in new plays. But soon O'Neill broke away from the pack (just after breaking their budget with the costly production of *The Emperor Jones* in 1920).

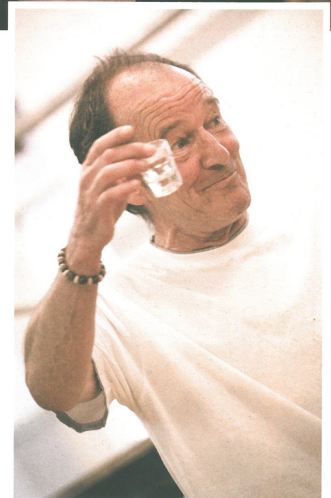


By the time he wrote *Anna Christie*, O'Neill already had a Pulitzer Prize and two Broadway successes under his belt. *Anna Christie* would garner O'Neill his second Pulitzer, establishing him as America's pre-eminent playwright. In *Anna Christie*, the young O'Neill explored new ways of representing immigrant voices. O'Neill had been experimenting with dialect ever since his early plays, mostly African American (*The Dreamy Kid*, *The Emperor Jones*) or Irish (*Bound East For Cardiff* and *Moon of the Caribbees*). In *Anna Christie*, he revived Irish brogue and fleshed out a Swedish dialect. He also featured the drunken jabber of denizens in a portside dive – a kind of dry-run for *Iceman* – in an effort to portray the gritty reality of "the lower depths," just as Gorky had done for Russian drama.

In addition to capturing authentic American voices, *Anna Christie* also offered a new take on the prostitute drama, a subgenre of plays that were hugely popular in the American theatre. Whilst O'Neill had already delved into prostitution in *The Web* (1913), in *Anna Christie* he portrayed prostitution with more sympathy and complexity than other playwrights.

O'Neill's contributions are enduring. *Anna Christie* was twice made into a film (most famously with Greta Garbo in 1930) and was adapted into a Bob Fosse musical extravaganza called *New Girl in Town* in 1957.

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Photos by Marc Brenner: Far left, Ruth Wilson; Top, Jude Law and Ruth Wilson; Above, David Hayman