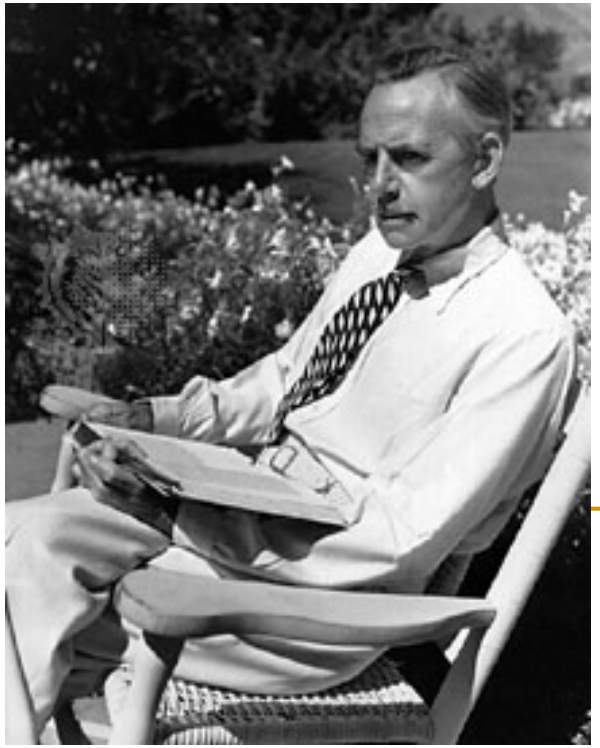

Eugene O'Neill,

born Oct. 16, 1888, New York, N.Y.
died Nov. 27, 1953, Boston, Mass.

Eugene O'Neill

- Foremost American dramatist and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936.
- His masterpiece, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (produced posthumously 1956), is at the apex of a long string of great plays, including *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), *Anna Christie* (1922), *Strange Interlude* (1928), *Ah! Wilderness* (1933), and *The Iceman Cometh* (1946).

Early life

- O'Neill was born into the theatre. His father, James O'Neill, was a successful touring actor in the last quarter of the 19th century whose most famous role was that of the Count of Monte Cristo in a stage adaptation of the Alexandre Dumas *père* novel.
- His mother, Ella, accompanied her husband back and forth across the country, settling down only briefly for the birth of her first son, James, Jr., and of Eugene.

Early Life

- Eugene, who was born in a hotel, spent his early childhood in hotel rooms, on trains, and backstage.
- Although he later deplored the nightmare insecurity of his early years and blamed his father for the difficult, rough-and-tumble life the family led—a life that resulted in his mother's drug addiction—Eugene had the theatre in his blood.
- He was also, as a child, steeped in the peasant Irish Catholicism of his father and the more genteel, mystical piety of his mother, two influences, often in dramatic conflict, which account for the high sense of drama and the struggle with God and religion that distinguish O'Neill's plays.

Early Life

- O'Neill was educated at boarding schools—Mt. St. Vincent in the Bronx and Betts Academy in Stamford, Conn.
- His summers were spent at the family's only permanent home, a modest house overlooking the Thames River in New London, Conn.
- He attended Princeton University for one year (1906–07), after which he left school to begin what he later regarded as his real education in “life experience.”

Early Life

- The next six years very nearly ended his life.
- He shipped to sea, lived a derelict's existence on the waterfronts of Buenos Aires, Liverpool, and New York City, submerged himself in alcohol, and attempted suicide.

Early Life

- Recovering briefly at the age of 24, he held a job for a few months as a reporter and contributor to the poetry column of the *New London Telegraph* but soon came down with tuberculosis.
- Confined to the Gaylord Farm Sanitarium in Wallingford, Conn., for six months (1912–13), he confronted himself soberly and nakedly for the first time and seized the chance for what he later called his “rebirth.”
- He began to write plays.

Entry into theatre

O'Neill's first efforts were awkward melodramas, but they were about people and subjects—prostitutes, derelicts, lonely sailors, God's injustice to man—that had, up to that time, been in the province of serious novels and were not considered fit subjects for presentation on the American stage.

Entry into theatre

- A theatre critic persuaded his father to send him to Harvard to study with George Pierce Baker in his famous playwriting course.
- Although what O'Neill produced during that year (1914–15) owed little to Baker's academic instruction, the chance to work steadily at writing set him firmly on his chosen path.

- O'Neill's first appearance as a playwright came in the summer of 1916, in the quiet fishing village of Provincetown, Mass., where a group of young writers and painters had launched an experimental theatre.
- In their tiny, ramshackle playhouse on a wharf, they produced his one-act sea play *Bound East for Cardiff.* The talent inherent in the play was immediately evident to the group, which that fall formed the Playwrights' Theater in Greenwich Village.

- Their first bill, on Nov. 3, 1916, included *Bound East for Cardiff*—O'Neill's New York debut. Although he was only one of several writers whose plays were produced by the Playwrights' Theater, his contribution within the next few years made the group's reputation.
- Between 1916 and 1920, the group produced all of O'Neill's one-act sea plays, along with a number of his lesser efforts.
- By the time his first full-length play, *Beyond the Horizon,* was produced on Broadway, Feb. 2, 1920, at the Morosco Theater, the young playwright already had a small reputation.

- *Beyond the Horizon* impressed the critics with its tragic realism, won for O'Neill the first of four Pulitzer prizes in drama—others were for *Anna Christie, Strange Interlude,* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*—and brought him to the attention of a wider theatre public.
- For the next 20 years his reputation grew steadily, both in the United States and abroad; after Shakespeare and Shaw, O'Neill became the most widely translated and produced dramatist.

Period of the major works

- O'Neill's capacity for and commitment to work were staggering. Between 1920 and 1943 he completed 20 long plays—several of them double and triple length—and a number of shorter ones.
- He wrote and rewrote many of his manuscripts half a dozen times before he was satisfied, and he filled shelves of notebooks with research notes, outlines, play ideas, and other memoranda.

Period of the major works

- His most-distinguished short plays include the four early sea plays, *Bound East for Cardiff, In the Zone, The Long Voyage Home,* and *The Moon of the Caribbees,* which were written between 1913 and 1917 and produced in 1924 under the overall title *S.S. Glencairn; The Emperor Jones* (about the disintegration of a Pullman porter turned tropical-island dictator); and *The Hairy Ape* (about the disintegration of a displaced steamship coal stoker).

- O'Neill's plays were written from an intensely personal point of view, deriving directly from the scarring effects of his family's tragic relationships—his mother and father, who loved and tormented each other; his older brother, who loved and corrupted him and died of alcoholism in middle age; and O'Neill himself, caught and torn between love for and rage at all three.

- Among his most-celebrated long plays is *Anna Christie,* perhaps the classic American example of the ancient “harlot with a heart of gold” theme; it became an instant popular success.
- O'Neill's serious, almost solemn treatment of the struggle of a poor Swedish-American girl to live down her early, enforced life of prostitution and to find happiness with a likable but unimaginative young sailor is his least-complicated tragedy.
- He himself disliked it from the moment he finished it, for, in his words, it had been “too easy.”

- The first full-length play in which O'Neill successfully evoked the starkness and inevitability of Greek tragedy that he felt in his own life was *Desire Under the Elms.*
- Drawing on Greek themes of incest, infanticide, and fateful retribution, he framed his story in the context of his own family's conflicts.
- This story of a lustful father, a weak son, and an adulterous wife who murders her infant son was told with a fine disregard for the conventions of the contemporary Broadway theatre.
- Because of the sparseness of its style, its avoidance of melodrama, and its total honesty of emotion, the play was acclaimed immediately as a powerful tragedy and has continued to rank among the great American plays of the 20th century.

- In *The Great God Brown,* O'Neill dealt with a major theme that he expressed more effectively in later plays—the conflict between idealism and materialism.
- Although the play was too metaphysically intricate to be staged successfully in 1926, it was significant for its symbolic use of masks and for the experimentation with expressionistic dialogue and action—devices that since have become commonly accepted both on the stage and in motion pictures.
- In spite of its confusing structure, the play is rich in symbolism and poetry, as well as in daring technique, and it became a forerunner of avant-garde movements in American theatre.

- One of O'Neill's enduring masterpieces, *Mourning Becomes Electra,* represents the playwright's most complete use of Greek forms, themes, and characters. Based on the *Oresteia* trilogy by Aeschylus, it was itself three plays in one.
- To give the story contemporary credibility, O'Neill set the play in the New England of the Civil War period, yet he retained the forms and the conflicts of the Greek characters: the heroic leader returning from war; his adulterous wife, who murders him; his jealous, repressed daughter, who avenges him through the murder of her mother; and his weak, incestuous son, who is goaded by his sister first to matricide and then to suicide.

- Following a long succession of tragic visions, O'Neill's only comedy, *Ah, Wilderness!,* appeared on Broadway in 1933.
- Written in a lighthearted, nostalgic mood, the work was inspired in part by the playwright's mischievous desire to demonstrate that he could portray the comic as well as the tragic side of life.

- Significantly, the play is set in the same place and period, a small New England town in the early 1900s, as his later tragic masterpiece, *Long Day's Journey into Night.*
- Dealing with the growing pains of a sensitive, adolescent boy, *Ah, Wilderness!* was characterized by O'Neill as “the other side of the coin,” meaning that it represented his fantasy of what his own youth might have been, rather than what he believed it to have been (as dramatized later in *Long Day's Journey into Night*).

- *The Iceman Cometh,* the most complex and perhaps the finest of the O'Neill tragedies, followed in 1939, although it did not appear on Broadway until 1946.
- Laced with subtle religious symbolism, the play is a study of man's need to cling to his hope for a better life, even if he must delude himself to do so.

Long Day’s Journey into Night

- Even in his last writings, O'Neill's youth continued to absorb his attention.
- The posthumous production of *Long Day's Journey into Night* brought to light an agonizingly autobiographical play, one of O'Neill's greatest.

Long Day's Journey into Night

- It is straightforward in style but shattering in its depiction of the agonized relations between father, mother, and two sons.
- Spanning one day in the life of a family, the play strips away layer after layer from each of the four central figures, revealing the mother as a defeated drug addict, the father as a man frustrated in his career and failed as a husband and father, the older son as a bitter alcoholic, and the younger son as a tubercular, disillusioned youth with only the slenderest chance for physical and spiritual survival.

- O'Neill's tragic view of life was perpetuated in his relationships with the three women he married—two of whom he divorced—and with his three children. His elder son, Eugene O'Neill, Jr. (by his first wife, Kathleen Jenkins), committed suicide at 40, while his younger son, Shane (by his second wife, Agnes Boulton), drifted into a life of emotional instability.
- His daughter, Oona (also by Agnes Boulton), was cut out of his life when, at 18, she infuriated him by marrying Charlie Chaplin, who was O'Neill's age.

- Until some years after his death in 1953, O'Neill, although respected in the United States, was more highly regarded abroad.
- Sweden, in particular, always held him in high esteem, partly because of his publicly acknowledged debt to the influence of the Swedish playwright August Strindberg, whose tragic themes often echo in O'Neill's plays.
- In 1936 the Swedish Academy gave O'Neill the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first time the award had been conferred on an American playwright.

- O'Neill's most ambitious project for the theatre was one that he never completed. In the late 1930s he conceived of a cycle of 11 plays, to be performed on 11 consecutive nights, tracing the lives of an American family from the early 1800s to modern times.
- He wrote scenarios and outlines for several of the plays and drafts of others but completed only one in the cycle—*A Touch of the Poet*—before a crippling illness ended his ability to hold a pencil.
- An unfinished rough draft of another of the cycle plays, *More Stately Mansions,* was published in 1964 and produced three years later on Broadway, in spite of written instructions left by O'Neill that the incomplete manuscript be destroyed after his death.

- O'Neill's final years were spent in grim frustration.
- Unable to work, he longed for his death and sat waiting for it in a Boston hotel, seeing no one except his doctor, a nurse, and his third wife, Carlotta Monterey.
- O'Neill died as broken and tragic a figure as any he had created for the stage.

Assessment

- O'Neill was the first American dramatist to regard the stage as a literary medium and the only American playwright ever to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature.
- Through his efforts, the American theatre grew up during the 1920s, developing into a cultural medium that could take its place with the best in American fiction, painting, and music.

Assessment

- O'Neill saw the theatre as a valid forum for the presentation of serious ideas. Imbued with the tragic sense of life, he aimed for a contemporary drama that had its roots in the most powerful of ancient Greek tragedies—a drama that could rise to the emotional heights of Shakespeare.
- For more than 20 years, both with such masterpieces as *Desire Under the Elms, Mourning Becomes Electra,* and *The Iceman Cometh* and by his inspiration to other serious dramatists, O'Neill set the pace for the blossoming of the Broadway theatre.

Major Works:
One-act plays of the sea

- *Bound East for Cardiff* (performed 1916); *The Long Voyage Home* (performed 1917), later used as the title of a film version of O'Neill's plays of the sea; *Ile* (performed 1917); *In the Zone* (performed 1917); *The Moon of the Caribbees* (performed 1918), published in a collection, *The Moon of the Caribbees, and Six Other Plays of the Sea* (1919), which included the first book publication of the above plays plus *The Rope* (performed 1918), and *Where the Cross Is Made* (performed 1918).
- This same collection was published in 1940 as *The Long Voyage Home: Seven Plays of the Sea.*

Longer plays

Beyond the Horizon (performed and published 1920); *The Emperor Jones* (performed 1920, published 1921); *Anna Christie* (performed 1921, published 1922); *The Hairy Ape* (1922); *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924); *Desire Under the Elms* (performed 1924, published 1925); *The Great God Brown* (1926); *Marco Millions* (performed 1928, published 1927); *Strange Interlude* (1928), a two-part play in nine acts; *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), a trilogy comprising *Homecoming, The Hunted,* and *The Haunted; Ah, Wilderness!* (1933), O'Neill's only comedy; *The Iceman Cometh* (written 1939, performed and published 1946); *A Touch of the Poet* (written 1935–42; performed and published posthumously, 1957), third of a projected cycle

Longer plays

of 11 plays to be collectively entitled *A Tale of the Possessors, Self-Dispossessed; Long Day's Journey into Night* (written 1939–41; performed and published posthumously, 1956); *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (written 1943; performed 1957, published 1952); *Hughie* (written 1941; performed 1964, published 1959, one of a projected cycle of one-act plays, to have been collectively entitled *By Way of Orbit*); *More Stately Mansions* (unfinished, written 1935–41; performed 1962, published 1964).The handiest source for all the plays is “The Library of America” *Complete Plays,* 3 vol. (1988). Some of the other plays have been published as separate volumes.

Additional reading

Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill,* enlarged ed. (1973, reissued 1987); Doris Alexander, *The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill* (1962); and Louis Shaeffer, *O'Neill, Son and Playwright* (1968, reprinted 1989), and *O'Neill, Son and Artist* (1973, reprinted 1990), are biographies. Critical studies of his works include Virginia Floyd (ed.), *Eugene O'Neill: A World View* (1980), and *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill: A New Assessment* (1985); Frederic I. Carpenter, *Eugene O'Neill,* rev. ed. (1979); Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill,* rev. ed. (1988); and Richard F. Moorton, Jr. (ed.), *Eugene O'Neill's Century: Centennial Views on America's Foremost Tragic Dramatist* (1991).