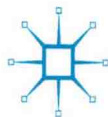


EUGENE O'NEILL'S ONE-ACT PLAYS

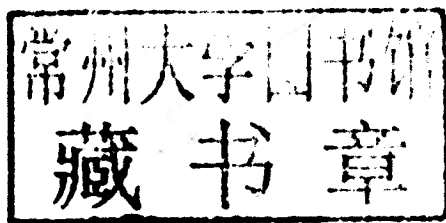
NEW CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Edited by
Michael Y. Bennett and
Benjamin D. Carson

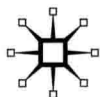


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EUGENE O'NEILL'S ONE-ACT PLAYS

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EUGENE O'NEILL'S ONE-ACT PLAYS

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To Ben's mentor, Frank R. Cunningham, and Michael's
mentor, Robert Combs, who showed us O'Neill's
"native eloquence" and taught us so much more

ESSAY ABSTRACTS

"The Playwright's Theatre: O'Neill's Use of the Provincetown Players as a One-Act Laboratory" by Jeff Kennedy

When the Provincetown Players formally organized in September of 1916, playwright Eugene O'Neill insisted on one thing: that they name the playhouse "The Playwright's Theatre." O'Neill set about writing plays that in performance would help answer questions he had as a playwright, something like a self-imposed curriculum to inform his work. He believed that this amateur company committed to experimenting, and toward the creation of an American identity in theatre, would allow him to test his ideas. Early on, O'Neill exited the daily workings of the Players to concentrate on his writing and maintained a relationship with the Players unlike anyone who called themselves a member of the company. This essay examines the experimentation in his one-act plays performed by the Provincetown Players and how his relationship with the group evolved in the process.

"Rethinking O'Neill's Beginnings: Slumming, Sociology, and Sensationalism in *The Web*" by J. Chris Westgate

Offering a rebuttal to the ahistoricism that governs so much of the criticism on Eugene O'Neill, this essay situates O'Neill's origins firmly in the Progressive Era. This essay demonstrates that *The Web*, O'Neill's first play, reflects a central concern of theater from this period: ethically conflicted depictions of New York lowlife. On the one hand, *The Web* attempts a sociological reading of the conditions of prostitutes, concentrating on how poverty becomes a "category of social being" that defines material circumstances and psychological well-being. On the other hand, *The Web*'s melodramatic design potentially turns Rose's plight into slumming, a popular pastime wherein the wealthy observed the underworld for excitement and titillation.

"Eugene O'Neill's *Abortion* and Standard Family Roles: The Economics of Terminating a Romance and a Pregnancy" by Lesley Broder

While Eugene O'Neill's *Abortion* may seem melodramatic in the twenty-first century, it would have been quite radical had it been performed when it was written in 1914. In the play, Nellie's status as a commodity to be traded and exchanged winds through the discussion between Jack and his father, John, about her abortion. The sanctity of their social position and Nellie's lower-class status preoccupy them. Despite the bold title, abortion is only referred to in hushed euphemisms and is cast as a shameful reality that cannot be addressed openly; instead, abortion runs through the play as representative of the larger issue of women's economic dependence on men.

"*The Movie Man*: The Failure of Aesthetics?" by Thierry Dubost

Like many early works, *The Movie Man* deserves some critical attention not because the passing of time has eventually turned an early dramatic attempt into a masterpiece, but because it exposes a series of threads that O'Neill later wove in different shapes, both thematically and aesthetically. This essay highlights some of the causes—past and present—that explain the lack of success of this clumsy dramatic attempt, contrasting some thematic or aesthetic aspects with O'Neill's future writing modes. Consequently, focusing on how the young playwright failed will help show why *The Movie Man* remains interesting for critics, as a crossroads of genres, a possible starting point to define a new aesthetic frame within which the playwright never included his future plays.

"'God Stiffen Us': Queering O'Neill's Sea Plays" by Phillip Barnhart

Though O'Neill's characters are often men gathered together in confined spaces, few scholars have undertaken a queer reading of his plays. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that since the eighteenth century the "path to male entitlement" requires intense male bonding that cannot readily be distinguished from "the most reprobate" bonding. She further suggests that the proximity of intense male friendship to homosexual desire or action fulminates in homosexual panic. This essay examines the homosocial bonds, the homoerotic undertones, the romantic friendships, and the implication of homosexual panic, and its resultant violence in O'Neill's sea plays.

“‘The Curtain is Lowered’: Self-Revelation and the Problem of Form in *Exorcism*” by Kurt Eisen

With the recent discovery of *Exorcism*, O'Neill's 1920 autobiographical one-act play thought to be lost, scholars can explore not only what it reveals about the playwright's state of mind when he attempted suicide in 1912—the episode from life on which the play is based—but more important, what it reveals about his development as an artist when he wrote, staged, and immediately suppressed the play by gathering all known copies and destroying them. The newly discovered text shows O'Neill on the verge of his mature experimentation with the full-length form but also offers glimpses of the major autobiographical plays of his final period, revealing why the one-act form of *Exorcism* was inadequate to his aims.

“‘Ain't Nothin' Dere but de Trees!': Ghosts and the Forest in *The Emperor Jones*” by Paul D. Streufert

Though many critics of Eugene O'Neill's 1920 play *The Emperor Jones* approach the play in terms of race or psychology, this essay examines how O'Neill uses fear and terror in the play, focusing on its ghost characters and the medium of the forest, that supernatural place that links Brutus Jones's external and interior realities. O'Neill's use of ghosts and the haunted forest reveals both his debt to the European theatrical tradition of ghost plays as well as the religious rhetoric and literary tradition of the Puritans, such as Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative. Reading the ghosts in *The Emperor Jones* suggests a new way to read the literal and symbolic ghosts in the playwright's later works.

“Neither Fallen Angel nor Risen Ape: Desentimentalizing Robert Smith” by Thomas F. Connolly

The Hairy Ape is not primarily social commentary; Yank is not merely an exploited worker. Conventional analysis insists that even as the play's staging is somewhat expressionistic, its philosophy is deterministic: Yank stands for all humanity. Even if he does not understand the universe, or his part in it, Yank wants to dominate his surroundings. Therefore it is interesting that Mildred is able to shatter Yank's confidence effortlessly. Thus broken, he becomes genuinely alien. O'Neill uses the theatrical convention of the ape-man, but rejects sentimentality and overcomes melodrama (and Darwin or Freud). The play is an inverse *Pygmalion*: Mildred is Pygmalion, and Yank is Galatea. The play's subtitle lacks attention; thus the finale ought not be taken as pathetic, but as the inevitable conclusion to the life of someone who has displaced himself.

"Waiting for O'Neill: The Makings of an Existentialist" by Steven F. Bloom

This essay considers how elements similar to those of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* characterize some of the early one-act sea plays of Eugene O'Neill, including *Bound East for Cardiff*, *Ile*, and *A Long Voyage Home*, which were written over forty years before Martin Esslin included *Godot* among the plays he labeled "the Theatre of the Absurd." The characters in the sea plays repetitively pass the time with others waiting for something to happen, with the inevitability of death hovering over them. Although the ironic endings of O'Neill's early plays ultimately distinguish them from the so-called absurdist dramas, these one-act plays can be seen as early precursors of existential drama and demonstrate that the young O'Neill had the makings of an existentialist.

"Epistemological Crises in O'Neill's SS *Glencairn* Plays" by Michael Y. Bennett

This essay argues that O'Neill's SS *Glencairn* plays display a generic tension between realism and naturalism. The sailors—neither good nor bad—act as solitary and free individuals, and yet O'Neill seems to also suggest that they are bound by the harsh realities of the world. Through this tension between naturalism and realism in these sea plays, O'Neill anticipates Bertolt Brecht's notion of the alienation effect. This alienation effect is achieved by subtly forcing the audience to oscillate between accepting the worldviews of naturalism and realism, thereby destroying the stability of either worldview.

"O'Neill's *Hughie*: The Sea Plays Revisited" by Robert Combs

O'Neill is famous for his expansive dramatic techniques, but a contrary impulse—that of the one-act play and its cousin the short story—is also essential to his success as a dramatist. In *Hughie*, a one-act play that belongs in the company of *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, O'Neill revisits his early sea plays where he first explored the individual's inevitable confrontation with self, other, and nothingness. The one-act play, like the short story, focuses on a single dramatic moment that illuminates a lifetime of struggle for individuals living in a world that makes loneliness a form of ironically heroic endurance. Typically, an O'Neill play focuses on some necessary illusion that renders life bearable and makes human contact for his characters possible; O'Neill's dramatic crises render that illusion transparent and thus expose his characters to the destruction of the very ground of their being. In his sea plays, the sailors face themselves,

their pasts, and each other against the background of the sea. In *Hughie*, two men in a run-down hotel lobby in midtown Manhattan in 1928 endure the dark night of their souls by means of their contrary impulses to communicate and to lose themselves in private fantasies and fears. This essay uses two other works—Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* and the short story it may have inspired, James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"—to reflect upon O'Neill's ironic presentation of his characters' struggles to survive as their life-sustaining illusions are destroyed.

"Condensed Comedy: The Neo-Futurists perform O'Neill's Stage Directions" by Zander Brietzke

The New York Neo-Futurists produced an original work, *The Complete and Condensed Stage Directions of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. 1, Early Plays/Lost Plays*, at the tiny Kraine Theater in Greenwich Village in the fall of 2011. In keeping with the company's nonrepresentational aesthetic, the troupe of six actors deleted the dialogue in several of the famous playwright's early one-acts and two of his first full-length plays and performed only the stage directions as read verbatim by a stage manager. The overall effect was, first of all, hilarious, parodying the playwright's zeal for packing novelistic details into a dramatic medium. More important, the production demonstrated the need and challenge to interpret imaginatively and creatively O'Neill's texts and dismissed the notion entirely that his work could be taken seriously by simply doing what the playwright said in his lengthy stage directions.

CONTENTS

Essay Abstracts	ix
Introduction	1
1 The Playwright's Theatre: O'Neill's Use of the Provincetown Players as a One-Act Laboratory <i>Jeff Kennedy</i>	17
2 Rethinking O'Neill's Beginnings: Slumming, Sociology, and Sensationalism in <i>The Web</i> <i>J. Chris Westgate</i>	35
3 Eugene O'Neill's <i>Abortion</i> and Standard Family Roles: The Economics of Terminating a Romance and a Pregnancy <i>Lesley Broder</i>	51
4 <i>The Movie Man</i> : The Failure of Aesthetics? <i>Thierry Dubost</i>	67
5 "God Stiffen Us": Queering O'Neill's Sea Plays <i>Phillip Barnhart</i>	81
6 Epistemological Crises in O'Neill's SS <i>Glencairn</i> Plays <i>Michael Y. Bennett</i>	97
7 "The Curtain Is Lowered": Self-Revelation and the Problem of Form in <i>Exorcism</i> <i>Kurt Eisen</i>	113
8 "Ain't Nothin' Dere but de Trees!": Ghosts and the Forest in <i>The Emperor Jones</i> <i>Paul D. Streufert</i>	129

9	Neither Fallen Angel nor Risen Ape: Desentimentalizing Robert Smith <i>Thomas F. Connolly</i>	145
10	Waiting for O'Neill: The Makings of an Existentialist <i>Steven F. Bloom</i>	163
11	O'Neill's <i>Hughie</i> : The Sea Plays Revisited <i>Robert Combs</i>	175
12	Condensed Comedy: The Neo-Futurists Perform O'Neill's Stage Directions <i>Zander Brietzke</i>	193
	Notes on the Authors	203
	Index	207

INTRODUCTION

Benjamin D. Carson

Eugene O'Neill's plays were forged in the crucible of suffering—an admixture of abandonment, spiritual loss, homelessness, and guilt—and the sense that life is deeply tragic. O'Neill had, in Edward Shaughnessy's words, "a tragedian's mind-set"¹ rooted in a Catholic sensibility and fostered by knowledge of the classical (Greek) tradition.² While O'Neill lacked faith, his work "expresses in symbols" his "search for a faith" that forever eluded him.³ But the gap between what is longed for and what can be had is the very stuff of tragedy and is at the heart of O'Neill's greatest works. "Man's modern tragedy," Shaughnessy writes, "is to seek a higher life but to know that it cannot be attained,"⁴ and for O'Neill, "the one eternal tragedy of Man . . . is the only subject worth writing about."⁵

O'Neill was born in a hotel in New York City on October 16, 1888, but he was reborn a playwright at the Gaylord Farm Sanatorium, in Wallingford, CT, in late 1912 and early 1913. His "second birth," he wrote to Gaylord's Dr. Lyman, "was the only one which had [his] full approval."⁶ At Gaylord, O'Neill, like his double, Stephen Murray in *The Straw*, had nothing but time; time to think about his future and reflect on his past. It was at Gaylord that his "mind got the chance to establish itself,"⁷ and before long he determined to become "an artist or nothing."⁸ O'Neill, always a voracious reader, began to study seriously the works of Synge, Yeats, Lady Gregory, Brieux, Hauptmann, Ibsen, and Strindberg,⁹ and soon after leaving Gaylord, his tuberculosis having been arrested, he started to write.

While, incredibly, O'Neill would win his first Pulitzer Prize (for *Beyond the Horizon*) seven years after he began writing, the prize was certainly hard won. His early efforts were "inexpertly"¹⁰ composed and melodramatic; many are unstageworthy and remain unproduced. But with time and an effort that bordered on obsession, amid the din of Greenwich Village and later the semisolitude of Provincetown, O'Neill found his voice. The early plays, for all of their inadequacies,

not only “set forth the initial terms of the playwright’s artistry and thought,” but they are the first utterances of a true American theater.¹¹ If, as Edmund claims, in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, “stammering is the native eloquence of us fog people,” then O’Neill’s one-acts are his first stammerings, his first attempt as an artist to cut through the fog, to give form to a vision that cried out for expression but, in its opacity, its intangibility, was so difficult to articulate. O’Neill would eventually give shape to his vision, but as even he acknowledged, the “germ of the spirit, life-attitude, etc.,” of all his greatest artistic achievements, was cultivated “practically within my first half-year as a playwright.”¹²

Arthur and Barbara Gelb have written that, “looking back, it seems to us that from the very beginning O’Neill was writing drafts for the final masterworks that have stamped him as America’s foremost dramatist,”¹³ so it is surprising that O’Neill’s one-acts have received so little attention from scholars. This is undoubtedly because, as Travis Bogard argues, with the exception of *Bound East for Cardiff*, “no one of his plays of the period [1913–14] is worth consideration in its own right.”¹⁴ What Russell Carl Brignano says of Richard Wright’s uneven body of work could just as easily apply to O’Neill’s: “His successes are colossal, his failures dreadful.”¹⁵ Even though O’Neill subscribed to the “Arts of [sic] Art’s sake credo,”¹⁶ his earliest plays are best read in light of his political commitments, the sociopolitical, cultural, and historical milieu in which they were written, the history of dramaturgy, and recent critical theories.

It is fair to say that O’Neill’s early plays are portraits of an artist as a young man, but they are portraits deeply rooted in time. O’Neill’s nascent artistic sensibility began to bloom at a world-historical moment, a period of intense transformation that would redraw the political, economic, and cultural landscape of the Western world. The completion of *The Movie Man*, in the summer of 1914, for example, marks “the final effort of O’Neill’s first year as [a] fledgling dramatist.”¹⁷ Coincidentally, O’Neill completed the play just weeks before the assassination, on June 28, 1914, of Archduke Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, in Sarajevo, which sparked World War I. When the Treaty of Versailles was signed five years to the day later, on June 28, 1919, a new Europe had emerged from the ashes of the old. On the economic front, 1913 sees the implementation by Henry Ford of assembly line production in Dearborn, Michigan; though for David Harvey, “the symbolic initiation date of Fordism must, surely, be 1914, when Henry Ford introduced his five-dollar, eight-hour day as recompense for workers manning the automated car-assembly line

he had established the year before at Dearborn, Michigan.”¹⁸ The effects of Fordism, however, go far beyond economics. For Antonio Gramsci, the “American phenomenon” of Fordism represented “the biggest collective effort to date to create, with unprecedented speed, and with a consciousness of purpose unmatched in history, a new type of worker and of man.”¹⁹ The “new methods of work,” which here are synonymous with new methods of capitalist accumulation, are, Gramsci argues, “inseparable from a specific mode of living and of thinking and feeling life.”²⁰ This new mode of production, then, had its correlate in the cultural sphere, a new “structure of feeling,” what we might call the cultural logic of modernism.

There is little question that the second decade of the twentieth century saw a revolutionary transformation in representational modes in art, music, and literature. If 1914 marked the symbolic initiation date of Fordism (and thus a new mode of production), it could be argued that the 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art (featuring the work of Matisse, Picasso, Duchamp, Klee, Kandinsky, etc.) at the Regiment Armory in New York marks the symbolic initiation of modernism—a date that falls squarely between Virginia Woolf’s preferred date for this initiation (1910) and D. H. Lawrence’s preference (1915). This is not to suggest, however, that experimentation in art and literature was not going on before 1913. Quite the contrary, in the late nineteenth century Baudelaire, Flaubert, Wilde, Yeats, Ibsen, and Strindberg, in literature, and Manet, Renoir, and Cezanne, in art, were already breaking away from the Victorian aesthetic sensibility and setting the stage for what was to come. But in terms of instantiating new modes of seeing, of representing the rapidity and unpredictability of modern life, 1913 is pivotal. The year O’Neill would first try his hand at drama, 1913, the literary world saw the publication of Marcel Proust’s *Swann’s Way* and D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*. By the end of 1914, the year O’Neill declared (to George Pierce Baker) his intention to be “an artist or nothing,” James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, and Ezra Pound’s Vorticist manifesto had been published.²¹

O’Neill’s transformation from a down-and-out sailor and would-be suicide to an artist was contemporaneous, then, with the “qualitative transformation in what modernism was about,” which “most commentators agree” took place “somewhere between 1910 and 1915.”²² While O’Neill was new to his craft, and though it would take some time for O’Neill to find his footing, his instinct for experimentation (evident as early as *Bound East for Cardiff* [1914]) certainly mirrored that of his modernist contemporaries. Not all of his early

plays, however, were experimental. His earliest efforts contained the hallmarks of the kind of melodrama characteristic of mainstream American theater at the turn of the century. They also reflect O'Neill's sociological awareness, at least in part a consequence of his association with penniless sailors, bar flies, and characters the likes of Hippolyte Havel, Terry Carlin, Dorothy Day, and John Reed. O'Neill, sociologically speaking, had his finger on the pulse of the moment, but more important, his work does more than just record "the body politic" of his time.²³ In a comparative reading of certain of O'Neill's and Reed's works, John S. Bak argues, "Although just as effective in capturing the social concerns of the times—including the workers' struggle, women's work opportunities and suffrage, and the atrocities of the First World War—O'Neill never seemed as devoted to changing them as Reed was. Instead, O'Neill was content simply to record what he saw happening around him, exploring instead the effects these social ramifications had on the struggles that confronted the individual daily. In short, Reed's works never transcended their social message as O'Neill's did, and that is why he is remembered more as an historian than, like O'Neill, as a literary artist."²⁴

This focus on the individual, rather than the broader "social concerns of the times," is evident in all of O'Neill's plays, even those that most overtly address social themes. While certainly a play about the injustices endured by Africans and African Americans throughout history, *The Emperor Jones* (1920), for example, as an expressionist drama, emphasizes the plight of one Brutus Jones. Expressionism was "at its height between 1910 and 1925,"²⁵ and thus coincided with the first third of O'Neill's career (1913–20). And as an artistic form, expressionism was a good fit for O'Neill, who from the beginning sought objective correlatives to inner emotions. As M. H. Abrams notes, "The expressionist artist or writer, undertakes to express a personal vision—usually a troubled or tensely emotional vision—of human life and human society. This is done by exaggerating and distorting what, according to the norms of artistic realism, are objective features of the world, and by embodying violent extremes of mood and feeling. Often the work implies that what is depicted or described represents the experience of an individual standing alone and afraid in an industrial, technological, and urban society which is disintegrating into chaos."²⁶ *The Hairy Ape* (1921), which, according to Travis Bogard, "lies at a half-way point [between realism and the new expressionism] in O'Neill's career," is about "man's attempt to come into harmony with his world, to find to whom, to what he can belong."²⁷ In this sense, then, O'Neill's concerns in *The Emperor Jones* and