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978-0-521-38264-9 - Eugene O'Neill: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Jackson R. Bryer and Robert M. Dowling

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EUGENE O'NEILL

This book brings together the largest selection of reviews ever published of Eugene O'Neill's plays, from his debut productions by the Provincetown Players and the Washington Square Players in 1916 and 1917, through his great Broadway successes of the 1920s and 1930s, his 1946 return to Broadway, and the remarkable premieres that followed his death in 1953. It includes reviews of his four Pulitzer Prize winners—*Beyond the Horizon*, “*Anna Christie*,” *Strange Interlude*, and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*—as well as *The Iceman Cometh*, *A Touch of the Poet*, *Hughie*, and *More Stately Mansions*. Taken as a whole, this collection expansively documents the contemporary reception of the only American playwright to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature and the dramatist responsible for making the American play a serious art form.

Jackson R. Bryer is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Maryland.

Robert M. Dowling is Professor of English at Central Connecticut State University.

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Series Editor's Preface

The American Critical Archives Series documents a part of a writer's career that is usually difficult to examine, that is, the immediate response to each work as it was made public on the part of reviewers in contemporary newspapers and journals. Although it would not be feasible to reprint every review, each volume in the series reprints a selection of reviews designed to provide the reader with a proportionate sense of the critical response, whether it was positive, negative, or mixed. Checklists of other known reviews are also included to complete the documentary record and allow access for those who wish to do further reading and research.

The editors of each volume have provided an introduction that surveys the career of the author in the context of the contemporary critical response. Ideally, the introduction will inform the reader in brief of what is to be learned by a reading of a full volume. The reader can go as deeply as necessary in terms of the kind of information desired—be it about a single work, a period in the author's life, or the author's entire career. The intent is to provide quick and easy access to the material for students, scholars, librarians, and general readers.

When completed, the American Critical Archives should constitute a comprehensive history of critical practice in America, and in some cases England, as the writers' careers were in progress. The volumes open a window on the patterns and forces that have shaped the history of American writing and the reputations of the writers. These are primary documents in the literary and cultural life of the nation.

M. THOMAS INGE

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Editorial Note

The generally maintained theory that play reviewers who have to rush their review into type immediately after the play is over haven't the necessary time in which to arrive at a sound estimate of the play is flimflam. The reviewer who can't make up his mind accurately as to a play's worth immediately after it's finished hasn't any mind to make up.

– George Jean Nathan, “Eugene O'Neill as a Character in Fiction” (1929)

Eugene O'Neill is the first playwright to be the subject of a volume in Cambridge University Press's American Critical Archives Series. This volume, as a result, is distinct from the others in the series. O'Neill had thirty-five plays open in New York during his lifetime; three others opened in other cities and never reached New York. Three of his full-length plays premiered after his death (more about these later). We found reviews of thirty-eight of these forty-one premiere productions. In the 1920s and early 1930s, when all but a very few of these openings occurred, there were a dozen or more daily New York newspapers, all of which had regular drama critics. And, of course, his plays were also reviewed by most of the major magazines of the time, such as *The Dial*, *The Smart Set*, *The American Mercury*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The New Yorker*—often by important critics such as George Jean Nathan, Robert Benchley, Alexander Woollcott, Joseph Wood Krutch, and Stark Young. Through a lengthy process of rigorous pruning, we selected an average of twenty to twenty-five reviews of O'Neill's plays that opened on Broadway, rather than at the Provincetown Playhouse or other off-Broadway theaters (for these, we have fewer reviews). Because we could include only a representative sample of the total, we added, at the end of the reprinted reviews for each play, a list of “Additional Reviews” we located but did not reprint.

O'Neill himself might have made the decision-making process as to which reviews to reprint easier for us, had we listened to him. By 1928, the year he won his third Pulitzer Prize (for *Strange Interlude*), he had divided theater critics into three distinct classes: “Play Reporters,” “Professional Funny Men,” and “the men with proper background or real knowledge of the theater of all time to entitle them to be critics”:

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The play reporters just happen to be people who have the job of reporting what happens during the evening, the story of the play and who played the parts. I have always found that these people reported the stories of my plays fairly accurately. The Professional Funny Men are beneath contempt. What they say is only of importance to their own strutting vanities. From the real critics I have always had the feeling that they saw what I was trying to do and whether they praised or blamed, they caught the point.¹

O'Neill's taxonomy provides an instructive editorial guideline—just stick to the third category, as O'Neill would probably have it, and stamp the dilettantes out of existence once and for all. But we chose instead to include all three classes, a choice we believe allows the reader the fullest access to the American theater world as it was over the first half of the twentieth century, not as O'Neill might have wished it to be.

We also chose to include reviews of O'Neill's four major posthumously produced plays: *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *A Touch of the Poet*, *Hughie*, and *More Stately Mansions*. These plays, especially the first—which earned him his fourth Pulitzer Prize—are among his greatest and, in many ways, represent the culmination of his career. With the exception of *More Stately Mansions*, they were all completed more than a decade before his death and withheld from production for various reasons—so they are different from, for example, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* or Ernest Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden*, works left incomplete at the author's death and posthumously published in somewhat questionable form. The responses to O'Neill's posthumously produced plays also provide fascinating comparisons to the responses to those produced in his lifetime.

Further, we took several steps in our effort to streamline the book. We made substantial deletions of plot summaries within reviews and other extraneous material (though we did include plot summaries when they contained critical commentary within them). We did not include reviews of several other New York premieres of O'Neill plays that occurred after his death, nor did we include pre-New York openings of O'Neill's plays, such as *The Straw* in New London, Connecticut, in 1921; *Welded* in Baltimore in 1924; *Ab, Wilderness!* in Pittsburgh in 1933; *Days Without End* in Boston in 1933; *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in Stockholm in 1956; *A Touch of the Poet* in Stockholm in 1957; and *More Stately Mansions* in Los Angeles in 1967. We did, however, include reviews for the three O'Neill plays that opened outside New York and never were produced in New York during his lifetime—*Chris Christophersen* (Philadelphia), *Lazarus Laughed* (Pasadena, California), and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (Columbus and Cleveland, Ohio; Detroit; and St. Louis).

¹ Qtd in L. Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 144.

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In all but a very few instances, we included only one review per publication of each production; as a result of this decision, we relegated to our listing of “Additional Reviews” often very substantial “follow-up” reviews by important New York critics such as Brooks Atkinson, Alexander Woollcott, and Walter Kerr. Although O’Neill was friends with quite a few critics who regularly reviewed his plays—Atkinson, Nathan, Kenneth Macgowan, Stark Young, and Barrett H. Clark, among others—in those days that friendship did not disqualify those critics from reviewing his plays, and so does not disqualify them from being included in the present volume. On occasion, reviewers’ friendships with the playwright provided fascinating “inside” information; as examples, we draw the reader’s attention to Macgowan’s review of *Welded* in *Vogue* and Nathan’s review of *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* in the *New York Journal-American*.

For reasons of space and lofty permissions costs, we did not include second reviews by the same person in the same publication. (Exceptions to this include *The Emperor Jones*, *Diff’rent*, *The Hairy Ape*, and a few others in which uptown productions included new actors, scenes, and set designs.) This was perhaps the most difficult editorial decision we were forced to make, because second reviews were generally more thoughtful and comprehensive than the first reviews, which were often written the night of a performance when the bleary-eyed critic was racing toward a deadline. (Leonard Hall of the *New York Evening Telegram* lamented, after five hours of *Strange Interlude*, that trying to review O’Neill’s nine-act saga “on journalistic roller skates is like trying to engrave the Old Testament story of the flood on the head of a thumbtack.”) At the same time, first-night reviews often provided a more raw, more honest impression of the evening (see the epigraph). We did, however, include second reviews by different critics in the same publication and second reviews by the same critic in a different publication. O’Neill’s plays sold extremely well in printed form and were often reviewed as books, but we did not include these reviews for reasons of space and continuity.

Newspaper reviews of premieres frequently appeared in late-night editions, which today are sometimes not available in library collections. Consequently, we occasionally reprinted the reviews as they appeared in the next day’s edition, given that they were the only copies we could locate. More often than not, such reviews were headed “reprinted from yesterday’s late edition”—but we did not include that notation. We included subtitles to generic column titles, such as “The Theatre” or “The Stage,” when they were available and added substance to the content of the review, but not when they were excessively long. We did not regularize play titles; in most newspaper reviews, they appeared in quotation marks, whereas in magazines they usually were italicized.

For the most part, we reproduced the texts of reviews with no editorial corrections. In a few instances, we silently corrected obvious typos and in an equally few instances supplied, in brackets, a missing word when to do

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so helped a sentence make sense. When a word in a review could not be deciphered, we inserted “illegible” in brackets; in instances where we could speculate on a difficult-to-read word, we inserted a bracketed question mark after the word. We silently omitted all paragraph breaks in reviews, and we indicated misspellings and other errors in the reviews and their titles by [*sic*]. However, British spellings and variant or archaic spellings are not indicated by [*sic*].

The cast lists of each play on the title pages are based on the names of characters, actors, and actresses as they were listed in playbills on opening nights and in opening night reviews. In compiling these, we consulted Edna Kenton’s history of the Provincetown Players, Margaret Randal’s *The Eugene O’Neill Companion*, Travis Bogard’s “Notes” section in his edition of the Library of America’s *Complete Plays* of O’Neill, among other sources. In a few cases, we note cast changes that occurred midway through a production, such as the replacement of Mary Blair with Carlotta Monterey when *The Hairy Ape* went from the Playwrights’ Theatre to the Plymouth Theatre on Broadway; a few less significant changes we do not mention in the lists are made clear in the reviews themselves. Title pages only mention the transfer of a production when we have included reviews of that transfer. Thus, we note the transfer of *The Hairy Ape* to Broadway because we have reviews of that transfer, but because we could not find any reviews covering the transfer of *Lazarus Laughed* from Pasadena to Hollywood, that transfer is not listed on the title page. (We have listed two distinct cast lists for *The Rope*, since the cast was changed in its entirety in the transfer from the Provincetown Players to the Washington Square Players, and we have reviews for both.) It is important to note that some character names were changed in published versions: for instance, when *In the Zone* was published in book form (the script used for revivals), the character Olsen’s name was changed to Swanson and Yank’s to Jack.

Four-dot ellipses inside brackets indicate that text, usually a plot summary, has been removed. We also inserted ellipses when the title of an item and the page numbers of the full item encompassed more than the section reviewing O’Neill. In such instances, we most often listed the title of the piece but only the page numbers on which O’Neill was reviewed. As an example, George Jean Nathan’s *American Mercury* review of *Strange Interlude* (April 1928) appeared in his monthly column, “The Theatre.” The full column ran on pages 500–505, but O’Neill’s play was only reviewed on pages 500–502—so we listed the review under “The Theatre” but cited the page numbers as 500–502. We included bracketed ellipses at the end of the O’Neill section to indicate that other, non-O’Neill, material appeared following the O’Neill review. For such reviews in which non-O’Neill material appeared before the O’Neill review, we inserted bracketed ellipses at the beginning of the reprinted review. The only exception to this rule—and it occurred infrequently—was when the review had sections with individual titles, and in those cases we used that section title in

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our title. For example, if a column was called “Drama” and had a section titled “Strange Interlude,” we used the heading “Drama: Strange Interlude” and listed it as appearing on “pp. 500–502”; in such cases, ellipses were not used.

The majority of the reviews we located in preparing this volume—well over a thousand—were obtained on site at the Library of Congress, Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (where the bulk of O’Neill’s papers reside), Connecticut College’s Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives (home of O’Neill biographer Louis Sheaffer’s papers), and the New York Public Library. Jordan Y. Miller’s seminal 1973 bibliography *Eugene O’Neill and the American Critic* was an important source for reviews and missing information—dates, page numbers, authors’ names, and the like—as were online newspaper archives such as *Chronicling America* and *Google News Archive*, as well as less well-known sites such as *Old Fulton New York Postcards* (digitized newspapers from New York State). One discovery was the extent to which an O’Neill premiere was reviewed in newspapers around the country, not just in the city in which the play premiered. Although such newspapers often reprinted a review from a local (most often New York) critic, they not infrequently sent their own theater critics to report on the event. Critics were sent to New York from such relatively distant locales as St. Louis, Los Angeles, St. Paul, Omaha, and Chicago, as well as from more nearby cities, such as Boston, Pittsburgh, Washington, and Raleigh, North Carolina. Clearly, an O’Neill premiere was considered national news, and newspaper editors wanted it covered by their own people. We therefore found reviews from local newspapers in numerous libraries across the United States.

J. R. B.
Kensington, Maryland
R. M. D.
New London, Connecticut

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available critical time and resources for this project's completion with course releases and grants, and the CCSU branch of the AAUP for providing him with assistance in paying permissions costs.

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Introduction

Mr. O'Neill is a voice, not an echo.

– Lawrence Reamer, *The Sun and New York Herald*, February 8, 1920

Whether he writes a good or a bad play, Eugene O'Neill never sinks into pleasant mediocrity.

– Maida Castellun, *New York Call*, March 8, 1928

In view of his acknowledged mastery of the theatre it is astonishing that his career can be so uneven.

– Brooks Atkinson, *New York Times*, January 9, 1934

Eugene O'Neill: The Contemporary Reviews covers a period of more than a half-century in American theater history—from 1916, when young “Gene” O'Neill first emerged as a playwright, to 1967, when his last mature play premiered posthumously in New York City. With this volume, we thus attempted to capture, for scholars and students alike, the trajectory of O'Neill's literary maturation over the full length of his career. More specifically, this collection demonstrates the intense scrutiny he drew from theater critics: “Our deepest interest in these plays,” wrote an early reviewer, “is aroused not so much by their theatrical vigor as by the opportunity they afford of watching a dramatist at work—a man in the process of growth and development.”¹ During this “process,” O'Neill won four Pulitzer Prizes, one posthumously for his autobiographical masterpiece *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, as well as the Nobel Prize in Literature—the only American playwright to date accorded that honor.

O'Neill once remarked that theater critics alternately labeled him “‘a sordid realist’ one day, a ‘grim pessimistic Naturalist’ the next, a ‘lying Moral Romanticist’ the next, etc.” None of these literary markers have ever adequately described his unique style. “I’ve tried to make myself a melting pot for all these methods,” he responded, “seeing some virtues for my ends in each of them, and, thereby, if there is enough real fire in me, boil down to my

¹ R. A. Parker, “An American Dramatist Developing,” *The Independent and The Weekly Review*, December 3, 1921, 236, rptd. in J. Y. Miller (ed.), *Playwright's Progress: O'Neill and the Critics* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1965), 28–29.

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own technique.”² O’Neill’s replies to his reviewers varied, often determined by his assessment of their intellectual acumen and personal integrity. To give an extreme example, he dismissed the prominent New York critic Heywood Brown (a frequent reviewer well represented in this volume who considered O’Neill overrated) as “a proper yellow son of a bitch. . . . a faker and liar, envious, etc.”³ Most theater professionals—playwrights, actors, directors, set designers, and the like—traditionally ignore reviews, especially while their plays are in production. But O’Neill apparently read his with a close vigilance bordering on the pathological, and he hired clipping agencies to collect reviews not readily available and then pasted them into enormous scrapbooks (housed at Yale University’s Beinecke Library).

Richard Watts Jr. of the *New York Herald Tribune* reported a fact about O’Neill and his critical reception that he learned during what he described as a “casual conversation” with the playwright in 1928 after the premiere of his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Strange Interlude*: “Among the notable things about Eugene O’Neill is the fact that he is one playwright who does not pretend that he never sees the notices of his plays. He reads them and is interested in them and, heaven knows, he has his likes and dislikes among the local critics. It is only fair to everybody to add that these judgments of his are not necessarily based on the degree of enthusiasm expressed for his works, even though he would object to being used as a sort of injured Belgium in a war between rival viewers.”⁴

World War I serves as a fitting metaphor for the rousing conflict of words fought in the press over the span of this collection. Theater critics ran afoul of one another over O’Neill’s plays—as Germany had with the Western allies over Belgium—more so than with the works of any other playwright in American history. Alliances and counter-alliances redrew the map of Europe just as O’Neill’s plays redefined American theater. “I’m getting awfully callous to the braying, for and against,” O’Neill wrote to George Jean Nathan, the renowned “father of American drama criticism” and his close friend. “When they knock me, what the devil!, they’re really boosting me with their wholesale condemnations, for the reaction against such nonsense will come soon enough. These tea-pot turmoils at least keep me shaken up and convinced I’m on my way to something.”⁵ The appearance of *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* in 1956 might

² Quoted in E. Törnqvist, *A Drama of Souls: Studies in O’Neill’s Super-Naturalistic Technique* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 28.

³ E. O’Neill, letter to R. Sisk, March 11, 1929, Louis Schaeffer-Eugene O’Neill Collection, Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London.

⁴ R. Watts Jr., “Realism Doomed, O’Neill Believes,” *New York Herald Tribune*, February 5, 1928, sec. 7, p. 2.

⁵ G. J. Nathan, “Eugene O’Neill,” in M. W. Estrin (ed.), *Conversations with Eugene O’Neill* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 132.

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be regarded as the Treaty of Versailles, simultaneously ending and renewing the age-old battles over the legacy of O'Neill's dramatic vision.

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born on October 16, 1888, in a hotel room at the Barrett House in New York City, on the corner of Broadway and 43rd Street—a location that would soon become the theatrical center of the world. In important ways, American theater when O'Neill was a child reflected the growing industrial order in the United States. By standardizing plays based solely on their profit potential and relying on matinee idols such as O'Neill's celebrated father James O'Neill, producers guaranteed a large audience. Melodramatic spectacles pitted good against evil, the good always winning out, and an unabashed condition for booking was a happy ending. The realist movement in the United States was making significant changes in literature, photography, painting, and many other arenas.⁶ But most American plays written between the Civil War and World War I were still produced with money-making stars in mind, and playwrights were considered hired guns rather than artists in the way screenwriters were soon to be regarded in Hollywood's studio system. Star power and profit margins trumped self-expression and innovation.

Theater producers in the United States were slow to accept serious American plays well into the twentieth century. The long-standing perception of theater was that it was strictly a profit-making venture—reflecting a narrow-mindedness toward the genre that, to some extent, continues to this day. The most powerful commercial force preventing American drama from reaching its full potential was the contract and booking duopoly made up of the Theatrical Syndicate and the Shubert Brothers (now known as the Shubert Organization), which, according to one observer of the time, “aimed at and almost succeeded in controlling the American theatre by coercion, bribing critics, boycotting newspapers, blackballing actors, and hogtying managers and owners of theatres.” Finding themselves “debarred” time after time from venues throughout the country, unconventional theater professionals “finally succumbed one by one[;] the playwrights listened to their commercial dictators, [and] managers of minor theatres became their henchmen.”⁷ Over several decades, such activities effectively suppressed the efforts of playwrights to produce an authentically American dramatic voice.

At the same time, self-styled “modern” American audiences in the first two decades of the twentieth century were discovering the works of foreign playwrights and performers who had been redefining drama during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century—Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, August Strindberg, Anton Chekhov, and the famed Abbey Players of Dublin—several of whose productions enjoyed

⁶ See B. Murphy, *American Realism and American Drama, 1880–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁷ Quoted in C. Barrington, *American Chaucers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 47.

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highly publicized, though often controversial, presentations throughout the United States. In the spring of 1907, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* opened in New York, and O'Neill attended this celebrated production no less than ten times. (He commuted from Princeton University, where he was then a freshman and from which he would be expelled the following spring for low academic achievement and bad behavior.) He also attended performances by the Abbey Players during the company's six-week engagement in New York in 1911; their repertoire included plays by John Millington Synge, William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, and T. C. Murray. O'Neill expressed nothing but disdain for the popular theater of his father, and he later remarked that "as a boy I saw so much of the old, ranting, artificial, romantic stage stuff that I always had a sort of contempt for the theatre. It was seeing the Irish players for the first time that gave me a glimpse of my opportunity."⁸

What became known as the Little Theatre Movement boldly answered the early-twentieth-century call for a distinctly American drama that would confront the cultural and political debates of smaller communities and the nation at large. Manhattan's Neighborhood Playhouse and Comedy Theatre, the Chicago Little Theatre, and the Boston Toy Theatre soon spawned similar ventures throughout the United States in truly off-off-off Broadway locales such as Ohio, Indiana, and South Dakota. In the fall of 1916, after two successful summer seasons in Provincetown, Massachusetts, one of these theater groups, the Provincetown Players, introduced New York City—and soon the world—to its greatest talent, Eugene O'Neill. The original Provincetown Players included the anarchist journalist Hutchins Hapgood, author Neith Boyce (Hapgood's wife), labor journalist Mary Heaton Vorse, playwright Susan Glaspell (O'Neill's only rival as a dramatic talent in the group), the director George "Jig" Cook (Glaspell's husband and the undisputed leader of the Players), the painters William and Marguerite Zorach, Provincetown's "poet of the dunes" Harry Kemp and his wife, the actress Mary Pyne, and the set designer Robert Edmond Jones.

O'Neill's world premiere as a playwright arrived with his one-act sea play *Bound East for Cardiff* on July 28, 1916, at the Wharf Theatre—a crude performance space in a fish house at the end of a dilapidated wharf in Provincetown—and the Players produced his next one-act play *Thirst* that August. The Wharf Theatre has long since been washed out to sea, but its legacy as the birthplace of American drama lives on. That August, in an article titled "Many Literary Lights Among the Provincetown Players," the *Boston Sunday Globe* reported that "it begins to look as if the American drama may be richer for the fun and the work of the Provincetown Players this summer. They have put on two plays by Eugene O'Neil [*sic*], a young dramatist whose work was heretofore

⁸ Quoted in L. Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Playwright* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), 205.

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unproduced and who, they are confident, is going to be heard from in places less remote than Provincetown.”⁹ Jig Cook told Chicago journalist Edna Kenton on her arrival on Cape Cod that summer, “You don’t know Gene yet. . . . You don’t know his plays. But you will. All the world will know Gene’s plays some day. . . . Gene’s plays aren’t of Broadway; he’s got to have the sort of stage we’re going to found in New York.”¹⁰

On November 3, 1916, in New York’s Greenwich Village—the hub of avant-garde life in the city and the ideal location for a theatrical revolution—the Players made their debut at their self-constructed Playwrights’ Theatre at 139 Macdougall Street, just south of Washington Square. Their first bill included *Bound East for Cardiff*, and they also produced O’Neill’s one-act play *Before Breakfast* on December 1. During that 1916–1917 season, O’Neill, along with Susan Glaspell, Theodore Dreiser, Djuna Barnes, Mike Gold, and other writers working with the Players, overtly rebelled against the systematic commercialization of Broadway, issuing a manifesto announcing their intent “to establish a stage where playwrights of sincere, poetic, literary and dramatic purpose could see their plays in action and superintend their production without submitting to the commercial manager’s interpretation of public taste.”¹¹ During 1917 alone, the Players premiered O’Neill’s one-acts *Fog* on January 5, *The Sniper* on February 16, *The Long Voyage Home* on November 2, and *Ile* on November 30; and the Washington Square Players produced his one-act *In the Zone* on October 31. Each play, wrote Clayton Hamilton in *Vogue*, was “distinguished, one and all, not only by dramatic power but also by indisputable verity.”¹²

Continuing to promote the remarkably prolific O’Neill, the Players, who had relocated to 133 Macdougall, premiered his one-acts *The Rope* on April 26, 1918; *Where the Cross Is Made* on November 22, 1918; and *The Moon of the Caribbees* less than a month later, on December 20. *The Rope* is relatively unknown today, but at the time *Theatre Magazine* praised it as “vigorous and virile, at times truly brutal, it is instinct with a fine observation of life and character while the language rings finely true.”¹³ When O’Neill’s one-act *The Dreamy Kid*, the first American play by a white production company to have a cast made up exclusively of African Americans, opened on October 31, 1919, Kenneth Macgowan described it in the *New York Globe and Commercial Advertiser* as a literary achievement: “It is marked by the familiar virtues of

⁹ Quoted in A. Gelb and B. Gelb, *O’Neill: Life with Monte Cristo* (New York: Applause, 2000), 573.

¹⁰ Quoted in E. Kenton, *The Provincetown Players and the Playwrights’ Theatre, 1915–1922*, T. Bogard and J. R. Bryer (eds.) (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹² C. Hamilton, “Seen on the Stage: The Washington Square Players,” *Vogue* 50.5 (December 15, 1917), 94. Clayton Hamilton was a close friend of James O’Neill’s and encouraged Eugene O’Neill before any of his plays had been produced.

¹³ A. Hornblow. “Mr. Hornblow Goes to the Play,” *Theatre Magazine* 27.108 (June 1918), 358.

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this skilled writer. It is short, sharp, and incisive. Its people live. Its story moves. It is full of ‘punch.’”¹⁴ (Because the Provincetown Players actively discouraged critics from attending performances, there are very few reviews of the earliest O’Neill one-acts produced in 1916–1917; the one exception is *In the Zone*, which, because it was produced by the Washington Square Players, was reviewed more widely.)

“Who Is Eugene O’Neill?” read a *New York Times* headline in 1917 after *In the Zone* appeared, other than a playwright “whose name has been more or less on the tongue of the theatrically interested populace”? O’Neill’s emphatic answer came with two full-length plays, *Beyond the Horizon* (1920) and “*Anna Christie*” (1921), each of which won the Pulitzer Prize. (O’Neill had never heard of the newly endowed award, but he was delighted with the \$1,000 that came with it.¹⁵)

Broadway producer John D. Williams optioned *Beyond the Horizon* in 1918, with encouragement from George Jean Nathan, though many frustrating months elapsed before the play was finally produced in early 1920. After its premiere on February 3, 1920, at the Morosco Theatre—O’Neill’s first appearance on Broadway—*New York Times* critic Alexander Woollcott christened it “an absorbing, significant, and memorable tragedy, so full of meat that it makes most of the remaining fare seem like the merest meringue.”¹⁶ O’Neill’s first mature full-length effort, the play instantaneously placed him above the old guard of American dramatists such as David Belasco and Clyde Fitch—household names at the time but men whose memories have since been overwhelmed by O’Neill and his legacy.

Chris Christophersen opened in Atlantic City under the title *Chris* on March 8, 1920, but received disappointing reviews and never reached New York. (In a revised version, called “*Anna Christie*,” it opened the following year to near universal critical acclaim and, as mentioned earlier, won O’Neill a second Pulitzer Prize.) The Players produced O’Neill’s one-act *Exorcism* later that month, and their production of it earned them another glowing review from Woollcott. It was to be the last new one-act O’Neill play produced in his lifetime. The run lasted two weeks, after which O’Neill collected all the copies of the script and reputedly destroyed them. *Exorcism* was O’Neill’s most autobiographical play up to that point and the most revealing about the torments of his early life that would inform his later work. For more than ninety years scholars speculated that this lost work contained unknown truths about O’Neill’s experience in the winter of 1911–1912, when he attempted suicide

¹⁴ K. Macgowan, “The New Plays: The Provincetown Players, Reopening, Present One Real Oddity in Their New Bill,” *New York Globe and Commercial Advertiser*, November 3, 1919, 12.

¹⁵ L. Sheaffer, *O’Neill: Son and Artist* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 17.

¹⁶ A. Woollcott, “The Play: Eugene O’Neill’s Tragedy,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1920, 12.

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at Jimmy the Priest's waterfront flophouse in Lower Manhattan, and that it might also deepen our understanding of much of his later work, especially *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. This speculation turned out to be true when, on October 17, 2011, *The New Yorker* surprised the literary world by publishing for the first time the full script of *Exorcism*. It had been discovered in the summer of 2011 in the papers of the Academy-Award-winning Hollywood screenwriter Philip Yordan. (His widow Faith Yordan found it while emptying an old file cabinet; O'Neill's second wife Agnes Boulton had given it to Yordan as a Christmas present.) The play, though not one of his finest, offers important biographical material, notably about his suicide attempt and his marriage to Kathleen Jenkins, whom he married in 1909 after she became pregnant with his first child, Eugene O'Neill Jr., and then divorced in the summer of 1912—a month before the action of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* takes place.

O'Neill's next play, *The Emperor Jones*, stands as the first major American expressionist drama. Expressionism, a German-born theater movement of the 1910s and 1920s, is distinctive in its rendering of characters' (and their authors') inner psyches projected onto the stage with distorted set designs, grotesque exaggerations, and contrasts depicting the outer world with which they struggle. The November 1, 1920, premiere at the Provincetown Playhouse was a landmark success for African Americans as well. *The Emperor Jones* was the first play to cast a black actor, Charles S. Gilpin, in the leading role in an otherwise white cast of a white theater company's production. O'Neill, who did not get along with Gilpin personally, admitted much later that “[a]s I look back now on all my work . . . I can honestly say there was only one actor who carried out every notion of a character I had in mind. That actor was Charles Gilpin as the Pullman porter in *The Emperor Jones*.”¹⁷ Although steeped in controversy to this day—should a white writer use a minstrel-like Negro dialect to explore the collective unconscious of African Americans?²—*The Emperor Jones* was a critical success, and on December 27 it moved uptown to the Selwyn Theatre.

After a two-month run following its premiere in the theater on Macdougall Street on December 27, 1920, O'Neill's off-beat two-act play *Diff'rent* moved uptown, first to the Selwyn Theatre, where it was billed as a “daring study of a sex-starved woman,”¹⁸ and then to the Times Square Theatre. It has never been considered one of O'Neill's best. “Even with the help of the censor who tried to stop it,” O'Neill's earliest biographer Barrett H. Clark wrote, the play was “never a great success in the theater.”¹⁹ O'Neill's *Gold* premiered on

¹⁷ Quoted in A. Gelb and B. Gelb, *O'Neill*, 236.

¹⁸ Quoted in R. H. Wainscott, *Staging O'Neill: The Experimental Years, 1920–1934* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 59.

¹⁹ B. H. Clark, *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays* (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1926), 79.

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Broadway the following June. A sprawling expansion of *Where the Cross Is Made, Gold* closed after only thirteen poorly reviewed performances. O'Neill responded with confidence, writing Nathan, "Well, this is rather reassuring. I had begun to think I was too popular to be honest."²⁰

"*Anna Christie*," for which he won his second Pulitzer Prize, opened on November 2, 1921, at the Vanderbilt Theatre. It charts the life of a young prostitute who reunites with her father, a barge captain, and falls in love with an Irish sailor. In the final scene the two are to be married, and audiences applauded the presumed happy ending, while many reviewers criticized it. But O'Neill claimed that both missed the point, insisting that the ending represents the sea's pitiless grip on its victims. Few critics remarked on the sense of tragic fate that O'Neill intended, with the exception of Alexander Woollcott, who observed: "O'Neill seems to be suggesting to the departing playgoers that they can regard this as a happy ending if they are short-sighted enough to believe it and weak-minded enough to crave it."²¹ That audiences in 1921 applauded a decent future for a "girl gone bad" as a happy ending was nevertheless a striking development in American theater. Previous plays about prostitutes, most prominently George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1905), had been shut down on obscenity charges, and "*Anna Christie*" marked a clear turning point for the kind of subject matter American audiences were willing to accept.

O'Neill's *The Straw* opened on November 3, 1921, in New London, Connecticut, the town where O'Neill had grown up; it then moved to the Greenwich Village Theatre on November 10. A fictional account of O'Neill's experience at the Gaylord Farm Sanatorium in Wallingford, Connecticut, from Christmas Eve, 1912, to June 3, 1913, after he had been diagnosed with tuberculosis, *The Straw* remained one of the playwright's favorites throughout his career. *The First Man* opened on March 4, 1922. No play in O'Neill's canon, except for his early full-length play *Servitude* (1914; unproduced in his lifetime), testifies so blatantly to the dramatist's jaundiced view of life with the opposite sex. The critics, even heretofore friendly ones, deplored it. O'Neill regularly showed his plays in manuscript form to a select few friends, and one of this number, Nathan, occasionally rendered his opinion of them before they were produced or published. (We did not include such "reviews" in this book.) In one such instance, Nathan even admitted "confidentially—and rudely"—in his review of *The First Man* that, after reading the script, he had tried to convince O'Neill not to produce the play six or seven months before it opened; he then went on to describe it as "a tour de force in all of the O'Neill defects."²²

²⁰ Quoted in B. H. Clark, *Eugene O'Neill*, 79.

²¹ A. Woollcott, "The Play: The New O'Neill Play," *New York Times*, November 3, 1921, 22.

²² G. J. Nathan, "Eugene O'Neill Is at Worst in His New Play, 'First Man,'" *Spokane [WA] Spokesman-Review*, March 26, 1922, sec. 5, p. 2.

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In December 1921, O'Neill completed *The Hairy Ape*, another masterpiece of American expressionism that builds on the structural technique of *The Emperor Jones*; in the course of its eight brief scenes, the protagonist is stripped of his delusional sense of self-worth. *The Hairy Ape* powerfully voices O'Neill's views on the historical moment—class relations, materialism, alienation, dehumanization, and the disillusionment that resulted from modern industrialization and consumer culture. Along with *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape* signals O'Neill's transformation from a rebellious naturalistic writer to an accomplished avant-garde modernist of the 1920s. Woolcott described the audience at Macdougall Street as “packed to the doors with astonishment . . . as scene after scene unfolded.” The script itself was “uneven,” he said, but he also reflected that “it seems rather absurd to fret overmuch about the undisciplined imagination of a young playwright towering so conspicuously above the milling mumbling crowd of playwrights who have no imagination at all.”²³

After a bitter falling out with his former director and spiritual tutor Jig Cook, along with other Players who believed their great hope had become too commercialized, O'Neill severed his ties with the Provincetown group and formed The Experimental Theatre, Inc., which took over the Provincetown Playhouse and produced three new O'Neill plays in the spring of 1924: *Welded* on March 17, a thinly veiled dramatization of his flagging marriage to his second wife, the fiction writer Agnes Boulton, which lasted a meager twenty-four performances (during one performance Doris Keane, who starred in the play, overheard an audience member grumble, “if that fellow says [I love you] again, I'll throw a chair at him”²⁴); *The Ancient Mariner*, a dramatization of Samuel Coleridge's poem, on April 6; and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* on May 15.

The months leading up to the premiere of *All God's Chillun*, an expressionistic play about the destructive psychological torments of a mixed-race marriage in New York, were filled with great anxiety. The Provincetown Playhouse received poison-pen letters, bomb threats, and warnings of race riots. “If you open this play,” the Long Island Ku Klux Klan warned, “the theater will be bombed, and you will be responsible for all the people killed.” These threats were in reaction to a report in the *New York Herald* that, in O'Neill's new play, the white actress Mary Blair was to kiss the hand of her black male co-star Paul Robeson.²⁵

One smart tactical move on the Players' part was to revive *The Emperor Jones* ten days before *All God's Chillun* opened, with Paul Robeson as Jones rather than Gilpin, whose performance was by then legendary among audiences

²³ A. Woolcott, “The Play: Eugene O'Neill at Full Tilt,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1922, 18.

²⁴ Quoted in L. Sheaffer. *O'Neill: Son and Artist.*, 132.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

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and critics. Their decision had the favorable effect of taking the spotlight off the script of *All God's Chillun*, which had been published in the *American Mercury* magazine that February, and placing it on the talents of the Provincetown Players' newest African-American star.²⁶ O'Neill later joked that theater critics in attendance at the opening of *All God's Chillun* felt "cheated that there hadn't been at least one murder that first night."²⁷ Most of the major reviewers—including Heywood Brown, Percy Hammond, and Alexander Woollcott—were also disappointed in the play itself, arguing that O'Neill had overreached and failed to achieve whatever it was he had set out to do.

The Experimental Theatre, Inc., produced the four one-act plays in O'Neill's *S. S. Glencairn* series as one bill that opened under the title *S. S. Glencairn* at the Provincetown Playhouse on November 3, 1924. The order in which the plays were produced, thereafter often a point of confusion for O'Neill scholars, is clear from the reviews: *The Moon of the Caribbees*, *The Long Voyage Home*, *In the Zone*, and *Bound East for Cardiff*. O'Neill was now a literary celebrity, an anomaly at that point in American theater history, and his experimental style had developed dramatically since the 1916 premiere of *Bound East for Cardiff*. Although numerous critics had attended the *S. S. Glencairn* one-acts when they had been done as individual productions, few had reviewed them, except for *In the Zone*; but now, because of O'Neill's considerably increased stature, reviews appeared in all the major publications. For the most part, they applauded the return of these early sea plays, which were now being presented together for the first time. Their reviews reflect a feeling of respite and wistful nostalgia after the clamor caused over the past four years by *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Emperor Jones*, "Anna Christie," and *The Hairy Ape*. On December 16, 1924, the production moved uptown to the Punch and Judy Theatre and then, on January 12, 1925, to the Princess Theatre. In 1940, John Ford directed a film of the Glencairn cycle, titled *The Long Voyage Home*, with the screenplay by O'Neill's friend Dudley Nichols (John Wayne played the Swedish sailor Olson). It was O'Neill's favorite of the many film versions of his plays.

On November 11, 1924, *Desire Under the Elms*—another brilliant hybrid of naturalism and expressionism like *The Hairy Ape*, but this time about New England Yankee culture—opened to strong reviews at the Greenwich Village Theatre. Nathan made an analogy in his review of *Desire Under the Elms* that might be applied to any O'Neill play reviewed in this collection; indeed, we consider it a sort of thesis statement: "I don't wish to pretend . . . that 'Desire Under the Elms' is a good play simply because O'Neill happens to be the author of it. . . . But it is far and away so much better than most of the plays being

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁷ The Publicity Committee, "The Fifteen-Year Record of the Class of 1910 of Princeton University" (typescript), Louis Schaeffer-Eugene O'Neill Collection, Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London.

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written by anyone else who hangs around here that one gratefully passes over even its obvious deficiencies. It doesn't matter much if a beautiful and amiable and engaging woman tucks in her napkin at her chin or not."²⁸

Next came *The Fountain*, his first major historical drama, which premiered on December 10, 1925, at the Greenwich Village Theatre with an abysmal run that lasted just more than two weeks. *The Fountain* charts the voyage of the Spanish colonial explorer Juan Ponce de León (1460–1521) when he signed on to Christopher Columbus's second voyage to the New World and became obsessed with finding the legendary Fountain of Youth in Florida. O'Neill's experimental mask play *The Great God Brown* opened on January 23, 1926. During rehearsals, O'Neill talked of the new play as "worth a dozen *Fountains*."²⁹ One of O'Neill's most philosophically difficult plays, *The Great God Brown* treats Nietzsche's perceived, and regrettable, triumph-in-tragedy of Apollonian practicality over Dionysian ecstasy. The play received often bewildered but generally positive reviews, and it stunned the cynics with its popular success, especially after it moved uptown to the Garrick Theatre in March and then to the Klaw Theatre in May. Legend has it that two working-class shop clerks were overheard discussing the play after the third act. The first remarked, "Gee, it's awful artistic, ain't it?" To which the other replied, "Yes, but it's good all the same."³⁰

The Theatre Guild, formerly the Washington Square Players but now Broadway's most prestigious company for showcasing serious American and European dramatists, accepted O'Neill's next play, *Marco Millions*, in order to acquire the option on the superior *Strange Interlude*. *Marco Millions*, another historical drama like *The Fountain* but this time concerning the travels of the famed thirteenth-century Italian merchant adventurer, opened on January 9, 1928, and *Strange Interlude* three weeks later, on January 30. *Lazarus Laughed*, another epic, this one depicting the biblical Lazarus as a figure of Roman worship after Jesus Christ raises him from the dead, premiered on April 9, 1928, at the way-off-Broadway Pasadena Community Playhouse in California. (Finding reviews of *Lazarus Laughed* was a major challenge for this project.) The Pasadena Playhouse enlisted a cast of 159 amateur actors, many of whom doubled and tripled to play approximately 420 roles, and designed 400 costumes; 300 masks of all sizes, shapes, and styles; and hundreds of wigs—hence the financial impossibility of a subsequent New York production. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that on opening night the theater was full to capacity. It was a major success that placed the Pasadena Playhouse,

²⁸ G. J. Nathan, "The Kahn-Game," *Judge* 87.2249 (December 6, 1924), 17.

²⁹ Quoted in T. Bogard, *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, rev. edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 238.

³⁰ Quoted in B. H. Clark, *Eugene O'Neill*, 163.

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according to George C. Warren writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “in the front rank of the free theater of America.”³¹

In 1928, O'Neill was awarded his third Pulitzer Prize for *Strange Interlude*, a lengthy psychological drama that stunned audiences with its “thought asides,” an innovative technique in which actors on the stage froze while one voiced his or her thoughts. O'Neill applied this technique to avoid the pitfall of the soliloquy, which by that time was considered a throwback to romance and melodrama, when characters often seemed more like romantic symbols than actual people. But many critics still railed against the lack of poetry to be found in the asides, in contrast to the poetry to be found in, for instance, a Shakespearean soliloquy. Nathan rebutted these complaints, arguing that no genre is inherently superior to the other; in fact he dismissed the importance of so-called poetry in drama altogether:

What is argued against O'Neill's asides and soliloquies may just as logically be argued against Shakespeare's. If O'Neill's might be cut out as largely superfluous and interruptive of his play's action, so might Shakespeare's. Most of the soliloquies written by the latter were simply put into his plays to please actors and the plays would move more dramatically without them. If you doubt it, read almost any one of them, even “Hamlet,” with the soliloquies and asides deleted. To contend that Shakespeare's soliloquies constitute great poetry and that O'Neill's do not is to sidestep the direct issue. That issue is simply whether O'Neill's soliloquies and asides are dramatically valid. Poetry or lack of poetry has nothing to do with the case.³²

O'Neill's next play *Dynamo*, the first of a planned trilogy of plays called *God Is Dead! Long Live—What?*, turned out to be a dramatically invalid rumination on the lack of a God-figure. In *Dynamo*, which also includes thought asides, a New England preacher's son substitutes Science for his father's Judeo-Christian God. It was produced by the Theatre Guild on February 11, 1929, and was panned by the majority of the critics. Even Nathan disliked the play, but he scoffed at the ad hominem attacks from critics over O'Neill's undeniable failure: “It probably all goes back to the characteristic delight of Americans in pulling their heroes off their pedestals. If there is one thing an American likes to do better than putting a man on a pedestal it is booting him off it. . . . O'Neill is the current goat. He will now have to write at least three plays worthy of Shakespeare at his best to get half-way up the old pedestal again.”³³ However well intentioned such defenses of his plays might

³¹ G. C. Warren, “Play at Pasadena Received with Rousing Acclaim,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 15, 1928, sec. D, p.1.

³² G. J. Nathan, “The Theatre,” *American Mercury* 13.52 (April 1928), 501–502.

³³ G. J. Nathan, “Judging the Shows,” *Judge* 96.2471 (March 9, 1929), 18.