

Eugene O'Neill

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California



"I will always be a stranger who never feels at home . . . who must always be a little in love with death."

The Long Day's Journey of Eugene O'Neill

Until he came to Tao House in California, America's groundbreaking playwright had been a wanderer. Eugene O'Neill was born in New York City on October 16, 1888, the son of James O'Neill, an actor who, like other major stars of the time, spent his life on extended tours of the country. The young O'Neill was raised in hotel rooms and the wings of theatres. As he grew older, Eugene was sent to Catholic boarding schools and to Princeton University. His growing realization that his father's considerable talent had been cheapened by repeated performances of the melodrama *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and his shocked discovery that his mother was addicted to the morphine prescribed for her painful recovery from Eugene's birth, were realities too great for the young man to endure. He ran from them.

He ran far—to Honduras in 1909 on a gold-prospecting expedition, to South America in 1910, sailing on one of the declining number of commercial wind-powered ships, and to England in 1911 as a crewman on a passenger ship. He tried to escape by drinking and for a time lived in a flophouse on the Manhattan waterfront. Once he attempted suicide, and in 1912, when he was 24, he fell ill with tuberculosis. In the sanatorium, for the first time, he was forced to pause.

His illness was quickly arrested, but during his convalescence he began to write plays, testing himself in the theatrical world he had long watched from the wings. In the summer of 1916 at Provincetown, Mass., he fell in with a group of amateur actors who staged his short play about the sea, *Bound East for Cardiff*.

Above: O'Neill's parents Mary Ellen Quinlan O'Neill and James O'Neill. The family's torturous relationships were at the root of some of O'Neill's most important work.
LEFT TO RIGHT: EUGENE O'NEILL PAPERS, YALE COLLECTION OF AMERICAN LITERATURE, BEINECKE RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY; HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY

Below: The Wharf Theater in Provincetown, where *Bound East for Cardiff* was staged in 1916, the first production of an O'Neill play.

His playwriting ambitions were affirmed by its success. Critical and popular acclaim followed rapidly. In 1920 he received the first of his four Pulitzer Prizes for the tragedy *Beyond the Horizon*, a play that combined the real and the poetic in a way that Broadway playgoers had not seen. Two years later the tragicomic *Anna Christie* won his second Pulitzer Prize.

O'Neill rapidly became known as America's most exciting dramatist. Actors and scenic designers were taxed by the demands of his imagination, but he was no less demanding of himself. The scope of his plays is wide: Marco Polo's voyage to China (*Marco Millions*, 1928); a play of contemporary life using masks in the Greek manner (*The Great God Brown*, 1926); a nine-act drama in which the characters speak their thoughts aloud (*Strange Interlude*, 1928, for which he won his third Pulitzer Prize); and a gentle comedy about young love in early-1900s New England (*Ah, Wilderness!*, 1933). By the time he came to California in 1936, 35 of his plays had been produced. Counting those that remained incomplete or had been destroyed, he had written nearly 60 plays.

By 1936, with no clear idea of when or how it would be produced, O'Neill had begun work on a cycle of 11 plays about the history of an American family. Its theme was announced in its title, *A Tale of Possessors, Self-Dispossessed*. He often had to work on several plays simultaneously, and he craved isolation so his focus on the ambitious project could be undisturbed. In 1936 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. With the stipend, he and his wife Carlotta were able to build the house he came to call his "final home and harbor," Tao House.

"The sea has been good to Eugene O'Neill. It was there for his opening. There was a fog, just as the script demanded, fog bell in the harbor. The tide was in, and it washed under us and around, spraying through the holes in the floor, giving us the rhythm and flavor of the sea . . ."

—Susan Glaspell, of the Provincetown Players

Right: O'Neill, left, en route to Honduras in 1909 to prospect for gold.

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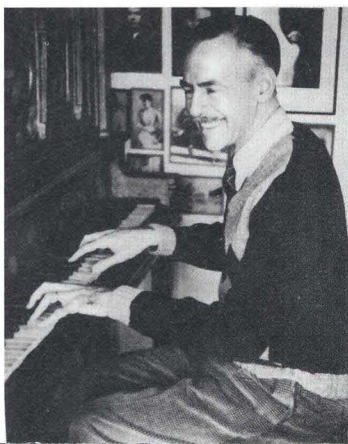
"I have never had a home, never had a chance to establish roots. I grew up in hotels. . . . It's strange, but the time I spent at sea on a sailing ship was the only time I ever felt I had roots in any place."

During the early years in California, he worked single-mindedly, at times almost desperately, on the historical cycle. But he was plagued with health problems, and the overwhelming task he had set himself was draining him of energy and spirit. After completing *A Touch of the Poet* he shelved the cycle (he burned two of the plays before leaving Tao House) and in rapid succession wrote the autobiographical plays that rank among the highest achievements of the English-speaking theatre: *The Iceman Cometh*, *Hughie*, *A Moon For The Misbegotten*, and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. For the last play, he received his fourth Pulitzer, awarded posthumously following the New York premier in 1956.

He never completed another play after 1943. A worsening tremor in his hands slowly robbed him of the ability to write, and he found himself blocked when he couldn't set pencil to paper. With the coming of the war, servants were unavailable, and neither of the O'Neills could drive. Suffering from a rare degenerative disease, O'Neill had to leave his sanctuary and once again move on. In a hotel room in Boston he destroyed the drafts and notes for his unfinished plays. Carlotta said it was like "tearing up children." Effectively silenced by illness, O'Neill died there in 1953.

Giving one of his rare smiles, O'Neill relaxes at his cherished "Rosie," an old player piano reputedly from a New Orleans bordello.

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O'Neill at Tao House

Of all the places Eugene O'Neill called home during his restless life, Tao House was the one that held him longest, the refuge where he wrote his last plays. In early 1937 he and Carlotta were living in a San Francisco hotel. "No roots. No home," Carlotta wrote as they searched for a place to live. Drawn to the privacy and climate of the San Ramon Valley, they purchased a 158-acre ranch near Danville and planned what O'Neill hoped would be his final home.

O'Neill's interest in Eastern thought and Carlotta's passion for Oriental art and decor inspired the name Tao House. Taoism is one of the great religious traditions of China. "Tao" (pronounced *dow*), generally translated as "The Way," is the term given to the primal reality that gives birth to the visible world. O'Neill was aware of Taoist concepts, some of which paralleled his own



Eugene and Carlotta O'Neill spent most evenings reading. The private couple led a quiet life in the cool, dark rooms of Tao House.

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dramatic ideas. The sea symbolized for him the "impelling, inscrutable forces behind life which it is my ambition to at least faintly shadow . . . in my plays."

While O'Neill wrote, Carlotta channeled her own creative energy into the house. Combining a Spanish colonial exterior of adobe-like blocks with an interior of deep blue ceilings and red doors, tiled or black-stained floors, and Chinese furniture, she called it her "pseudo-Chinese house." Because Carlotta's eyes were overly sensitive to light, most of the shades were kept drawn. The darkness and the ghostly images reflected by colored mirrors created a shadowy, enclosed atmosphere that unsettled some visitors.

Though the O'Neills rarely spent a night away from Tao House and Carlotta often kept people at arm's length, especially when the "Master," as she called him, was at work, the couple was far from reclusive. They were visited by relatives, friends, and O'Neill's old theatre colleagues. O'Neill enjoyed gardening and attending football games, where the intensely private man relished a rare anonymity in the crowd. His health permitting, though, he mostly immersed himself in his plays, working on several at a time.

Shut away by thick walls and three doors leading to his study, Carlotta ensuring that his isolation was undisturbed, his creative energy flowed unchecked for days, even weeks at a stretch. He rose early and usually worked uninterrupted from early morning to about 1 pm. After lunch he generally napped, swam in the pool, or walked with Carlotta, though sometimes he worked without break into the night. He also devoted time to his dog Blemie, something of a surrogate child for the couple. In the evenings they usually read or listened to their collection of jazz and blues records.

While he was at Tao House, O'Neill refused requests to produce the plays he wrote there. He wanted to complete five of the cycle plays first, and he did not want the others staged until the war was over. During his years there he turned his back on the "show shop," his jaundiced term for the theatre world, giving himself to "soul-grinding" work on the cycle and transforming his past into the autobiographical plays that made him America's most important playwright.

More Information

Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site

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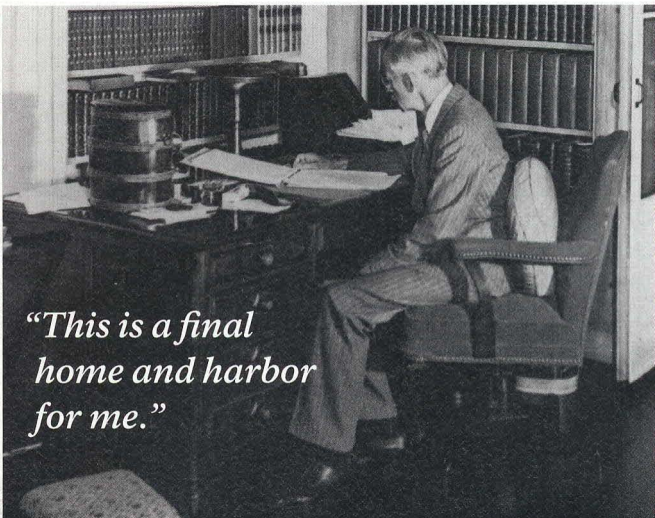
www.nps.gov/euon

Visits to the site are by reservation only.

For Your Safety: Be alert for uneven walking surfaces and stairs on the tour route.

Accessibility: Visitors with special accessibility needs should phone the site in advance.

Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. Visit www.nps.gov to learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities.



*"This is a final
home and harbor
for me."*

Eugene O'Neill: American Drama Transformed

In 1930, Sinclair Lewis defined Eugene O'Neill's place in American culture: "[O'Neill] has done nothing much in the American drama save to transform it utterly in ten or twelve years from a false world of neat and competent trickery to a world of splendor, fear and greatness . . . [he has] seen life as something not to be neatly arranged in a study, but as terrifying, magnificent and often quite horrible, a thing akin to a tornado, an earthquake or a devastating fire." Growing up literally backstage in the theatre of his father, O'Neill knew intimately the kind of drama he did not want to write. He was repelled by the hackneyed and melodramatic plots, broad gestures, and overwrought oratory of the American theatre and responded instinctively to the realism and experimental techniques of the European dramatists Shaw, Ibsen, and especially Strindberg.

O'Neill believed that the theatre should be taken as serious art rather than pleasant diversion. He wanted to pull in his audiences, make demands of them, commit them to the experience. He freely used experimental techniques to do so, but always in the service of a fundamental realism. From the start O'Neill was interested in the inner drama of his characters more than their physical or social world, and he evoked psychological states through powerful metaphorical settings. His innovations and revivals of ancient techniques were legion: masks and other expressionist devices, great length, the casting of black actors, taboo subject matter, extended asides with the action frozen, and serious dramatic treatment of the poor and powerless.

O'Neill's experiments, his unblinking look at raw, sometimes ugly truths were theatrical blows in a broader cultural revolution. He worked during a time of radical change and cross-fertilization in the arts, sciences, and social thought. Modernists like Brecht and Artaud in the theatre; Joyce, Woolf, and Eliot in fiction and poetry; Stravinsky and Schoenberg in music; and Picasso and Kandinsky in painting were breaking with old assumptions and conventions. O'Neill was in the thick of this movement to, in Ezra Pound's words, "Make it new."

Above all, O'Neill aspired to the tragic. He was challenged by Greek and Elizabethan tragedy and by what

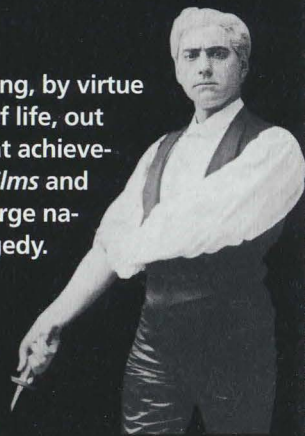
he termed the "first theater that sprang, by virtue of man's imaginative interpretation of life, out of his worship of Dionysius." His great achievement, in plays like *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, was to forge native materials into true American tragedy.

For all O'Neill's disdain for his father's theatre, the "tricks" he had absorbed in his youth continued to emerge in his mastery of staging and his adaptability to the practical demands of the theatre. Even some of what he considered the less desirable characteristics of the old school colored his work. In critic Heywood Broun's words: "In many external things, O'Neill is a pioneer. . . . But he is still the true son of the man who played *The Count of Monte Cristo* more than a thousand times. . . . Heredity has left in O'Neill the actor's greediness for every last potential twist and turn in any given situation." O'Neill himself said of the leading role in *A Touch of the Poet*: "What that one needs is an actor like Maurice Barrymore or James O'Neill, my old man. One of those big-chested, chiseled-mug, romantic old boys . . ."

The Emperor Jones 1920

"A persistent drumbeat punctuates *The Emperor Jones*, beginning slowly, quickening as scene follows scene, culminating in a headlong prestissimo. . . . You have a feeling of tense expectation . . . you are exasperated and yearn only for relief from the persistent agonizing sound. It is a nightmare."

—London critic, 1924



Charles Gilpin (above, at right) was the first black actor given a serious lead role in a mainstream American play.
MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK



O'Neill's father James O'Neill in his most famous role, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, in 1900. After seeing O'Neill's first play, he said, "Yes, yes, I think the boy has something in him."

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"Anna Christie" 1920

"I wanted to have the audience leave with a deep feeling of life flowing on, of the past which is never the past—but always the birth of the future. . . . It would have been so obvious and easy to have made my last act a tragic one. . . . It would not have been true. They would act in just the silly, immature compromising way that I have made them act . . . a bit tragically humorous in their vacillating weakness."

—O'Neill's response to critics

The Hairy Ape 1921

Hell in de stokehole? Sure! It takes a man to work in hell. . . . Steel, dat stands for de whole ting! And I'm steel, steel, steel!

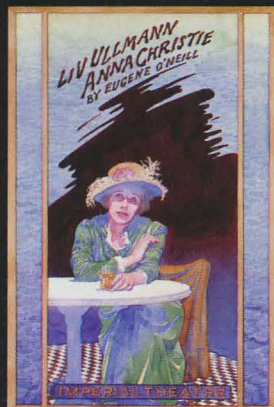
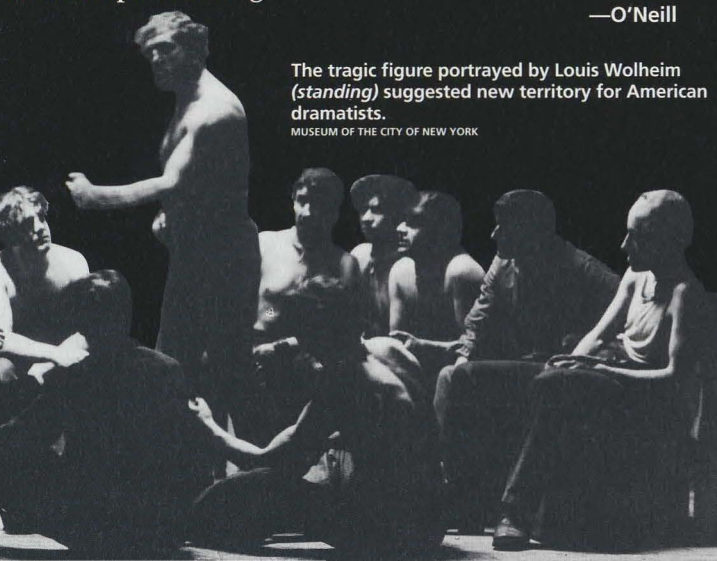
—Yank, from the play

"The subject here is the same ancient one that always was and always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt to belong."

—O'Neill

The tragic figure portrayed by Louis Wolheim (standing) suggested new territory for American dramatists.

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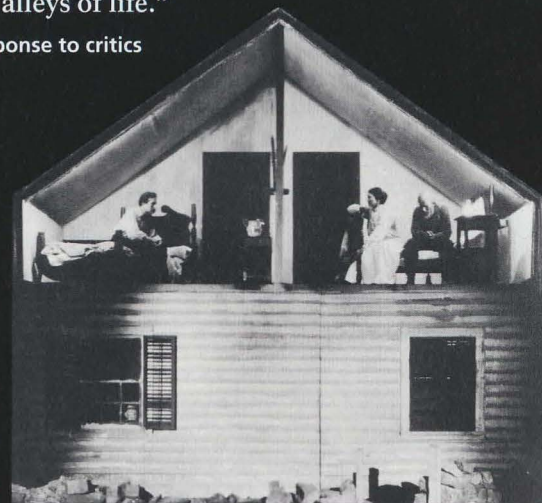
Playbill for 1977 production of "Anna Christie," with Liv Ullmann in the leading role.

POSTER BY JAMES MCMULLAN

Desire Under the Elms 1924

"What I think everyone missed in *Desire* is the quality in it I set most store by—the attempt to give an epic tinge to New England's inhibited life—but, to make its inexpressiveness practically expressive, to release it. It's just that—the poetical vision illuminating even the most sordid and mean blind alleys of life."

—O'Neill's response to critics



O'Neill's set for the first production of *Desire Under the Elms*.
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Mourning Becomes Electra 1930

Drawing of scene from 1947 film of *Mourning Becomes Electra*

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"Is it possible to get a modern psychological approximation of the Greek sense of fate . . . which an intelligent audience of today, possessed of no belief in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by?"

—O'Neill

The Tao House Plays

At Tao House, Eugene O'Neill finally wrote the plays that had been germinating for years, tapping painful memories and working them into compelling theatre. It meant reopening old wounds. Carlotta O'Neill remembered her husband emerging from his study red-eyed and gaunt after working on *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. His remark that "There are moments [in *The Iceman Cometh*] . . . that suddenly strip the secret soul of a man stark naked . . ." reflected his own need to forgive and ask forgiveness. The five plays that O'Neill wrote at Tao House include the life studies generally regarded as his finest achievement, works of profound compassion, elegies of pity and absolution.



THE ESTATE OF ERWIN BLUMENFELD

The Iceman Cometh 1940

It's the No Chance Saloon . . . Bedrock Bar, the End of the Line Cafe. . . . Don't you notice the beautiful calm in the atmosphere? That's because it's the last harbor. No one here has to worry about where they're going next, because there is no farther they can go.

—Larry Slade, from the play

"Lord knows the characters talk too much. . . . But it is good talk—racy, angry, comic drumbeats on the lid of doom."

—Critic Brooks Atkinson, 1946

Jason Robards (right) and Farrell Pelly in *The Iceman Cometh*, 1956.

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Long Day's Journey Into Night 1941

"This play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood."

—From the dedication to Carlotta O'Neill

"At the final curtain, there they still are, trapped within each other by the past, each guilty and at the same time innocent, scorning, loving, pitying each other, understanding and yet not understanding at all, forgiving but still doomed never to be able to forget."

—O'Neill on the characters, who were based on his family

(From top, clockwise) Fredric March, Jason Robards, and Bradford Dillman in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, 1956.

HAMPDEN-BOOTH THEATRE LIBRARY, NEW YORK

