

## Biography of Eugene O'Neill

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Trevor M. Wise

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born on October 16, 1888, at the Barrett Hotel in New York City, New York, son of James O'Neill, a well-known matinee idol, and Mary Ellen (Ella) Quinlan. Much of O'Neill's youth was spent in the wings of the theater as he toured the country with his parents and older brother Jamie, watching his father perform his most famous role—the Count of Monte Cristo.

When not touring the country with his family, O'Neill attended Catholic boarding school at St. Aloysius Academy at Mount Saint Vincent in the Bronx borough of New York. He then spent four years at Betts Academy, a non-sectarian prep school in Stamford, Connecticut. O'Neill spent the summers with his family at the Monte Cristo Cottage in New London, Connecticut, the only permanent home O'Neill knew as a child. In 1903, at the age of fifteen, O'Neill became aware of his mother's morphine addiction and was introduced to alcohol by his brother Jamie, setting him on a path of heavy drinking and alcohol abuse. In the fall of 1906, O'Neill enrolled in Princeton University, only to be expelled in the following spring for his poor academic performance.

In October 1909, O'Neill secretly married Kathleen Jenkins, his first of three wives. Shortly after the wedding, O'Neill set sail for Honduras to prospect for gold, but found none. While abroad, O'Neill lived the life of a waterfront derelict, working odd jobs and drinking heavily, until he contracted malaria and was forced to return to the United States. Upon his return, O'Neill avoided his responsibilities of being a good husband to Kathleen and father to his first son, Eugene O'Neill Jr., born in 1910. In the spring of 1912, O'Neill attempted suicide at Jimmy the Priest's, a saloon in New York where he was living, before returning to New London in the summer to work at the *New London Telegraph* newspaper. The paper was not able to pay for another reporter, so O'Neill's father, being good friends with the owner, paid

his son's salary. It was also during this summer that O'Neill's divorce from Kathleen Jenkins became official.

In the winter of 1912, O'Neill was admitted to the Gaylord Farm Sanatorium for the treatment of tuberculosis. O'Neill stayed at Gaylord for six months, during which time he voraciously read the works of August Strindberg and Friedrich Nietzsche, among others, and decided in earnest to become a playwright.

Having no formal post-secondary education other than his few months at Princeton, O'Neill enrolled in a dramatic technique course taught by Professor George Pierce Baker at Harvard University in the fall of 1914; O'Neill never completed the course, dropping out after only one year due to financial constraints. Also in 1914, O'Neill's first volume of plays, *Thirst and Other One Act Plays*—which included *Thirst*, *The Web*, *Warnings*, *Fog*, and *Recklessness*—was published, funded by his father James.

In 1916, O'Neill was introduced to the Provincetown Players by his anarchist friend and fellow bohemian Terry Carlin. In July of that year, O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916) was first produced by the Provincetown Players at the Wharf Theater in Provincetown, Massachusetts, followed by *Thirst* that September. The Players put on nearly every one of O'Neill's early short plays.

In November 1916, *Bound East for Cardiff* was produced by the Provincetown Players at the Playwrights' Theater in New York City, marking O'Neill's professional New York debut. During this time, O'Neill was living in Greenwich Village, making friends with local intellectuals and writers such as John Reed, Louise Bryant, and Mary Heaton Vorse. O'Neill fell in love with Louise Bryant, but their romance was short-lived. O'Neill then met Agnes Boulton, a writer of short novels and stories that appeared in pulp magazines. The two were married in 1918, within six months of meeting each other for the first time. The couple moved to Peaked Hill Bar, an old abandoned Coast Guard Station on Cape Cod, which was purchased for them by O'Neill's father. In the fall of 1919, O'Neill's second son and first child with Agnes,

Shane O'Neill, was born. It was also in 1919 that *The Dreamy Kid* (1919) was first produced. This represented the first American play by a white production company with an entirely black cast.

In 1920, O'Neill's first successful full-length play, *Beyond the Horizon* (written in 1918), was produced on Broadway and garnered O'Neill the first of four Pulitzer Prizes he would receive for his work. O'Neill's father James passed away from intestinal cancer in August 1920, but was able to see his son awarded his first Pulitzer Prize and take pride in his genius and achievement. O'Neill was awarded his second and third Pulitzer Prizes for "*Anna Christie*" in 1922 and *Strange Interlude* in 1928. His fourth Pulitzer Prize was awarded posthumously for *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) in 1957.

In February 1922, O'Neill's mother died of a brain tumor, causing O'Neill's older brother, Jamie, to return to his heavy drinking. Jamie succumbed to acute alcoholism and passed away in 1923 in a New Jersey sanatorium. At around this time O'Neill met Eugene O'Neill Jr. for the first time and took a serious interest in his son's upbringing and education. In 1925, O'Neill's only daughter, Oona, was born. At the age of eighteen, Oona married actor Charlie Chaplin, who was fifty-four at the time, and O'Neill severed all communications between himself and Oona, as he did not think his daughter should be marrying someone so close to his own age. O'Neill's alcoholism worsened over the course of 1925, but after many setbacks, O'Neill successfully stopped drinking in 1926. In the same year, O'Neill was awarded an honorary doctorate from Yale University.

While summering at Belgrade Lakes in Maine in 1926, O'Neill became reacquainted with the actress Carlotta Monterey; they had first met several years before, when Carlotta was performing as Mildred Douglas in *The Hairy Ape* (1922). In 1928, O'Neill asked his wife Agnes for a divorce, and she refused; O'Neill left Agnes and fled with Carlotta to France. While abroad, O'Neill contracted the flu and briefly relapsed into drinking. The divorce between Agnes and O'Neill was made final in 1929, and Carlotta and O'Neill were married the

same year. O'Neill and Carlotta moved to the Chateau Le Plessis, near Tours, France, where O'Neill hoped to live in isolation to concentrate on his work.

O'Neill and Carlotta returned to the United States in 1931, eventually residing at Casa Genotta in Sea Island, Georgia. That year, *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) was produced on Broadway to critical acclaim. In 1933, O'Neill's only comedy, *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933), was produced and saw enormous success. It is in *Ah, Wilderness!* that O'Neill depicted the idealized life he always wished he had had in his youth.

During his years at Casa Genotta, O'Neill began work on his eleven-play cycle "A Tale of Possessors, Self-Dispossessed," which was to follow the story of the Harford family from 1754 to 1932, showing the effects of corrupting power and material things. Only one of the cycle plays was ever completed—*A Touch of the Poet*, which was not produced until 1958. *More Stately Mansions* was also a part of the cycle, though it was unfinished at the time of O'Neill's death and was completed posthumously by scholars in 1964.

In 1934, *Days without End* was produced and suffered disastrous reviews. Unfortunately, this caused O'Neill much strife, and he would not see production of his work for the next twelve years. *The Iceman Cometh* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, written in 1939 and 1943, were the last two plays of O'Neill's produced in his lifetime in 1946 and 1947, respectively.

In 1936, O'Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, though due to failing health, he was unable to attend the Nobel ceremony. As of 2012, O'Neill is the only American dramatist to have received this honor. Following his Nobel, O'Neill moved with Carlotta to Danville, California, where they built Tao House.

At Tao house, O'Neill began work on his most autobiographical piece, *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Writing *Long Day's Journey into Night* proved to be a long and arduous process for O'Neill, as he increasingly suffered from the worsening tremors that plagued him

throughout most of his life. O'Neill completed *Long Day's Journey into Night* in 1941 and presented the original script to Carlotta as a twelfth wedding anniversary gift. He also sent a copy to his publisher at Random House and to the O'Neill collection at Yale University. Since Carlotta was the guardian of his creative life, O'Neill informed her of two stipulations for the script: that it was not to be published until twenty-five years after his death, and that it was never to be produced. O'Neill was to complete only three more plays in his lifetime: *A Touch of the Poet*, *Hughie* (1964), and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. The O'Neills sold Tao house in 1944, and by 1945, they were living in New York City.

*The Iceman Cometh* was produced in New York City in 1946 and, as he had with other productions of his plays, O'Neill attended rehearsals; when his health deteriorated rapidly, however, he was unable to continue to attend. *The Iceman Cometh* opened to lackluster reviews in 1947. *A Moon for the Misbegotten* opened and closed in Columbus, Ohio, never making it to New York City; it was the last of O'Neill's plays to be produced during his lifetime. Due to these failures, Carlotta refused to allow anyone to stage a production of any of O'Neill's work written after 1934. It was not until 1956 that Carlotta allowed a new director, José Quintero, to take the helm of *The Iceman Cometh* at the Circle in the Square theater; the revival was met with rave reviews.

Carlotta and O'Neill separated for a brief time in 1948, before moving to Marblehead, Massachusetts. On September 25, 1950, Eugene O'Neill Jr. committed suicide and O'Neill did not attend his son's funeral. Again in February 1951, after a heated quarrel, O'Neill and Carlotta separated, but got back together in May. By that time O'Neill's tremor had become so bad that he had to stop writing. In 1952, while in residence at the Shelton Hotel in Boston, O'Neill asked Carlotta to help him burn his unfinished manuscripts and drafts, as he did not believe that they were ready to be seen. This material included virtually all that existed of the eleven-play cycle that O'Neill had been working on before he wrote *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

O'Neill passed away from pneumonia in his room at the Shelton Hotel on November 27, 1953. Following his death, an autopsy revealed that O'Neill had suffered from a rare neurological disorder superficially resembling Parkinson's disease. Many years later, in April 2000, an extensive study confirmed that he had suffered from late-onset cerebellar cortical atrophy. The report suggested that this condition was unlikely to have been caused by alcoholism, since O'Neill had, in fact, been sober, with only a few lapses, for the last twenty-five years of his life, but rather was more likely to have been passed down through his family.

In 1956, Carlotta circumvented O'Neill's wish that *Long Day's Journey into Night* not be published until twenty-five years after his death by taking the script to a publisher other than Random House, which remained committed to honoring O'Neill's wishes. The play, which O'Neill regarded as his finest work, was first published by Yale University Press. *Long Day's Journey into Night* was then produced for the first time by the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, Sweden. Carlotta claimed that O'Neill gave his blessing for this theater to be the first to produce the script. In 1956, *Long Day's Journey into Night* was produced on Broadway by José Quintero. This production—along with *The Iceman Cometh* at Circle in the Square that same year, also directed by Quintero—began an O'Neill renaissance that cemented O'Neill's reputation as the greatest American dramatist.

Following the Broadway production of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *A Touch of the Poet* was produced in October 1958, followed by *Hughie* in December 1964, and *More Stately Mansions* in October 1967. *More Stately Mansions* was believed to have been destroyed with O'Neill's other unfinished manuscripts, yet Carlotta possessed the sole remaining copy, first published in 1964. The script was finished by others but presented as written by O'Neill in a production in 1967.

Eugene O'Neill was the first American realist playwright, following the model set before him by Russian playwright Anton Chekov, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, and Swedish playwright August

Strindberg. Despite the tragic life O'Neill led, he had a unique ability to illuminate the present as he dwelled on the past, showing that everyday life contained all the elements of compelling drama. O'Neill will always be remembered for giving birth to the American tragedy.

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