

Classic Poetry Series

Eugene O'Neill
- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Eugene O'Neill(16 October 1888 – 27 November 1953)

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was an American playwright and Nobel laureate in Literature.

 Early Life

O'Neill was born in a Broadway hotel room in New York City on October 16, 1888. O'Neill's father, James O'Neill, was one of Nineteenth Century America's most popular actors. Due to his father's profession, O'Neill was sent to a Catholic boarding school where he found his only solace in books. O'Neill spent his summers in New London, Connecticut.

In 1906 he entered Princeton but was soon nts vary as to why he left. He may have been dropped for attending too few classes, been suspended for "conduct code violations", or "for breaking a window," or according to a more concrete but possibly apocryphal account, because he threw "a beer bottle into the window of Professor Woodrow Wilson," future president of the United States)

He spent several years at sea, during which he suffered from depression and alcoholism. O'Neill's parents and elder brother Jamie (who drank himself to death at the age of 45) died within three years of one another, not long after he had begun to make his mark in the theater. Despite his depression he had a deep love for the sea, and it became a prominent theme in many of his plays, several of which are set onboard ships like the ones that he worked on.

He married in 1909 but divorced within three years, however he did have a son during the time he was married. By 1912, O'Neill had held a multitude of odd jobs, including one as a gold prospector in Honduras. He had also become a regular at New York City's flophouses and dingy saloons. That same year he became ill with tuberculosis and was inspired to become a playwright while reading during his recovery.

Literary Career

During the 1910s O'Neill was a regular on the Greenwich Village literary scene, where he also befriended many radicals, most notably Communist Labor Party founder John Reed. O'Neill also had a brief romantic relationship with Reed's wife, writer Louise Bryant. O'Neill was portrayed by Jack Nicholson in the 1981

film *Reds* about the life of John Reed.

His involvement with the Provincetown Players began in mid-1916. O'Neill is said to have arrived for the summer in Provincetown with "a trunk full of plays." Susan Glaspell describes what was probably the first ever reading of *Bound East for Cardiff* which took place in the living room of Glaspell and her husband George Cram Cook's home on Commercial Street, adjacent to the wharf (pictured) that was used by the Players for their theater.

Glaspell writes in *The Road to the Temple*, "So Gene took *Bound East for Cardiff* out of his trunk, and Freddie Burt read it to us, Gene staying out in the dining-room while reading went on. He was not left alone in the dining-room when the reading had finished." The Provincetown Players performed many of O'Neill's early works in their theaters both in Provincetown and on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village. Some of these early plays began downtown and then moved to Broadway.

O'Neill's first published play, *Beyond the Horizon*, opened on Broadway in 1920 to great acclaim, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. His first major hit was *The Emperor Jones*, which ran on Broadway in 1920 and obliquely commented on the U.S. occupation of Haiti that was a topic of debate in that year's presidential election. His best-known plays include *Anna Christie* (Pulitzer Prize 1922), *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), *Strange Interlude* (Pulitzer Prize 1928), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), and his only well-known comedy, *Ah, Wilderness!*, a wistful re-imagining of his youth as he wished it had been. In 1936 he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. After a ten-year pause, O'Neill's now-renowned play *The Iceman Cometh* was produced in 1946. The following year's *A Moon for the Misbegotten* failed, and did not gain recognition as being among his best works until decades later.

He was also part of the modern movement to revive the classical heroic mask from ancient Greek theatre and Japanese Noh theatre in some of his plays, such as *The Great God Brown* and *Lazarus Laughed*.

O'Neill was very interested in the Faust theme, especially in the 1920s. His career as playwright consisted of three periods. During his realist period, the plays utilize his own experiences, especially those he had as a seaman. In the 1920s he decided to try his hand at expressionism in an effort to capture the forces behind human life on stage. These plays were influenced by ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Swedish playwright August Strindberg. During the final of his three periods O'Neill returned to realism. These works are considered to be his best. The plays in his final period once again draw

on his own experiences for their story lines and themes.

Family Life

O'Neill was married to Kathleen Jenkins from October 2, 1909 to 1912, during which time they had one son, Eugene O'Neill, Jr. (1910–1950). In 1917, O'Neill met Agnes Boulton, a successful writer of commercial fiction, and they married on April 12, 1918. The years of their marriage—during which the couple had two children, Shane and Oona—are described vividly in her 1958 memoir *Part of a Long Story*. They divorced in 1929, after O'Neill abandoned Boulton and the children for the actress Carlotta Monterey (born San Francisco, California, December 28, 1888; died Westwood, New Jersey, November 18, 1970). O'Neill and Carlotta married less than a month after he officially divorced his previous wife.

In 1929, O'Neill and Monterey moved to the Loire Valley in central France, where they lived in the Château du Plessis in Saint-Antoine-du-Rocher, Indre-et-Loire. During the early 1930s they returned to the United States and lived in Sea Island, Georgia, at a house called Casa Genotta. He moved to Danville, California in 1937 and lived there until 1944. His house there, Tao House, is today the Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site.

In their first years together, Monterey organized O'Neill's life, enabling him to devote himself to writing. She later became addicted to potassium bromide, and the marriage deteriorated, resulting in a number of separations. Although they separated several times, they never divorced.

In 1943, O'Neill disowned his daughter Oona for marrying the English actor, director and producer Charlie Chaplin when she was 18 and Chaplin was 54. He never saw Oona again.

He also had distant relationships with his sons, Eugene, Jr., a Yale classicist who suffered from alcoholism and committed suicide in 1950 at the age of 40, and Shane O'Neill, a heroin addict who also committed suicide.

Illness and Death

After suffering from multiple health problems (including depression and alcoholism) over many years, O'Neill ultimately faced a severe Parkinsons-like tremor in his hands which made it impossible for him to write during the last 10 years of his life; he had tried using dictation but found himself unable to compose in that way. While at Tao House, O'Neill had intended to write a cycle of

11 plays chronicling an American family since the 1800s. Only two of these, *A Touch of the Poet* and *More Stately Mansions* were ever completed. As his health worsened, O'Neill lost inspiration for the project and wrote three largely autobiographical plays, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. He managed to complete *Moon for the Misbegotten* in 1943, just before leaving Tao House and losing his ability to write. Drafts of many other uncompleted plays were destroyed by Carlotta at Eugene's request.

O'Neill died in Room 401 of the Sheraton Hotel on Bay State Road in Boston, on November 27, 1953, at the age of 65. As he was dying, he, in a barely audible whisper, spoke his last words: "I knew it. I knew it. Born in a hotel room, and God damn it, died in a hotel room." (The building later became the Shelton Hall dormitory at Boston University. There is an urban legend perpetuated by students that O'Neill's spirit haunts the room and dormitory.) A revised analysis of his autopsy report shows that, contrary to the previous diagnosis, he did not have Parkinson's disease, but a late-onset cerebellar cortical atrophy.

Dr. Harry Kozol, the lead prosecuting expert of the Patty Hearst trial, treated O'Neill during these last years of ailment. He also was present for the death and announced the fact to the public.

He is interred in the Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood.

In 1956 Carlotta arranged for his autobiographical masterpiece *Long Day's Journey Into Night* to be published, although his written instructions had stipulated that it not be made public until 25 years after his death. It was produced on stage to tremendous critical acclaim and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1957. This last play is widely considered to be his finest. Other posthumously-published works include *A Touch of the Poet* (1958) and *More Stately Mansions* (1967).

The United States Postal Service honored O'Neill with a Prominent Americans series (1965–1978) \$1 postage stamp

Museums and Collections

O'Neill's home in New London, *Monte Cristo Cottage*, was made a National Historic Landmark in 1971. His home in Danville, California, near San Francisco, was preserved as the Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site in 1976.

Connecticut College maintains the Louis Sheaffer Collection, consisting of

material collected by the O'Neill biographer. The principal collection of O'Neill papers is at Yale University. The Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut fosters the development of new plays under his name.

A Regular Sort Of A Guy

He fights where the fighting is thickest
And keeps his high honor clean;
From finish to start, he is sturdy of heart,
Shunning the petty and mean;
With his friends in their travail and sorrow,
He is ever there to stand by,
And hark to their plea, for they all know that he
Is a regular sort of a guy.

He cheers up the sinner repentant
And sets him again on his feet;
He is there with a slap, and a pat on the back,
For the lowliest bum on the street;
He smiles when the going is hardest,
With a spirit no money can buy;
And take it from me, we all love him 'cause he
Is a regular sort of a guy.

I don't care for the praise of the nations,
Or a niche in the great hall of fame,
Or that posterity should remember me
When my dust and the dust are the same;
But my soul will be glad if my friends say
As they turn from my bier with a sigh
"Though he left no great name, yet he played out the game
Like a regular sort of a guy."

Eugene O'Neill

Even As A Child

Even as a child
my face was "gloomy." I found
few reasons to smile, none to laugh:
father gutting his great gifts
for the cheers of clowns.
For us. For money. My mother
dazed by drugs. My brother
charming, selfless. But also
smirking, corrupt. All lying,
and loving each other. Comedy?
From the fool's angle, the coward's angle. Laughter
means turning your back on suffering.
And on the hard truth that tragedy
writes the last act—always. I loved
the sea because it said that.
With infinite dignity and calm
and terrible firmness.

Knowing too well
the struggle and sorrow of life I tried hard
to believe, to help. In plays I wanted
to bring our past alive—the brave dreams.
But probing deep I saw cruelty, decay.
In my last year I could only rage
that our country too had cast away
the best chance ever—like my father!
For greed, blind greed, we grew deaf
to the one question that matters, "What
does it profit a man if he gain the whole world but..."
Damn! Damn our dumb callousness.

Eugene O'Neill

Free

Weary am I of the tumult, sick of the staring crowd,
Pining for wild sea places where the soul may think aloud.
Fled is the glamour of cities, dead as the ghost of a dream,
While I pine anew for the tint of blue on the breast of the old Gulf Stream.

I have had my dance with Folly, nor do I shirk the blame ;
I have sipped the so-called Wine of Life and paid the price of shame;
But I know that I shall find surcease, the rest my spirit craves,
Where the rainbows play in the flying spray,
'Mid the keen salt kiss of the waves.

Then it's ho! for the plunging deck of a bark, the hoarse song of the crew,
With never a thought of those we left or what we are going to do;
Nor heed the old ship's burning, but break the shackles of care
And at last be free, on the open sea, with the trade wind in our hair.

Eugene O'Neill

It's Great When You Get In

They told me the water was lovely,
That I ought to go for a swim,
The air was maybe a trifle cool,
"You won't mind it when you get in"
So I journeyed cheerfully beach-ward,
And nobody put me wise,
But everyone boosted my courage
With an earful of jovial lies.

The Sound looked cold and clammy,
The water seemed chilly and gray,
But I hastened into my bathing suit
And floundered into the spray.
Believe me, the moment I touched it
I realized then and there,
That the fretful sea was not meant for me
But fixed for a polar bear.

I didn't swim for distance
I didn't do the crawl,
(They asked why I failed to reach the raft,
And I told them to hire a hall.)
But I girded my icy garments
Round my quaking limbs so blue,
And I beat it back to the bath house
To warm up for an age or two.

I felt like a frozen mummy
In an icy winding sheet.
It took me over an hour
To calm my chattering teeth.
And I sympathized with Peary,
I wept for Amundsen's woes,
As I tried to awaken some life in
My still unconscious toes.

So be warned by my example
And shun the flowing sea,
When the chill winds of September

Blow sad and drearily.
Heed not the tempters' chatter
Pass them the skeptics' grin
For the greatest bull that a boob can pull
Is "It's great when you get in."

Eugene O'Neill

Nocturne

The sunset gun booms out in hollow roar
Night breathes upon the waters of the bay
The river lies, a symphony in grey,
Melting in shadow on the further shore.

A sullen coal barge tugs its anchor chain
A shadow sinister, with one faint light
Flickering wanly in the dim twilight,
It lies upon the harbor like a stain.

Silence. Then through the stillness rings
The fretful echo of a seagull's scream,
As if one cried who sees within a dream
Deep rooted sorrow in the heart of things.

The cry that Sorrow knows and would complain
And impotently struggle to express -
Some secret shame, some hidden bitterness -
Yet evermore must sing the same refrain.

Silence once more. The air seems in a swoon
Beneath the heavens' thousand opening eyes
While from the far horizon's edge arise
The first faint silvery tresses of the moon.

Eugene O'Neill

To Winter

"Blow, blow, thou winter wind."
Away from here,
And I shall greet thy passing breath
Without a tear.

I do not love thy snow and sleet
Or icy flows;
When I must jump or stamp to warm
My freezing toes.

For why should I be happy or
E'en be merry,
In weather only fitted for
Cook or Peary.

My eyes are red, my lips are blue
My ears frost bitt'n;
Thy numbing kiss doth e'en extend
Thro' my mitten.

I am cold, no matter how I warm
Or clothe me;
O Winter, greater bards have sung
I loathe thee!

Eugene O'Neill

Villanelle Of Ye Young Poet's First Villanelle To His Ladye And Ye Difficulties Thereof

To sing the charms of Rosabelle,
To pour my soul out at her feet,
I try to write this villanelle.

Now I am caught within her spell,
It seems to me most wondrous sweet
To sing the charms of Rosabelle.

I seek in vain for words to tell
My love -- Alas, my muse is weak!
I try to write this villanelle.

Would I had power to compel
The English language incomplete
To sing the charms of Rosabelle.

The ardent thoughts that in me dwell
On paper I would fair repeat
I try to write this villanelle.

My effort fruitless is. O H--I!
I'll tell her all when next we meet.
To sing the charms of Rosabelle,
I tried to write this villanelle.

Eugene O'Neill