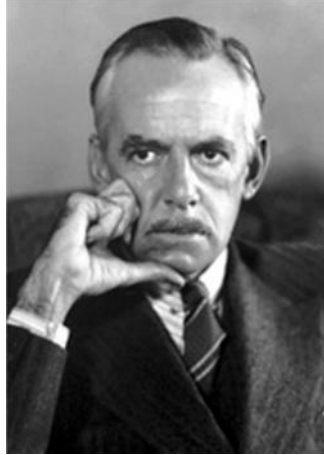


Nobel Prize in Literature 1936



Eugene Gladstone O'Neill

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1936 was awarded to Eugene O'Neill "*for the power, honesty and deep-felt emotions of his dramatic works, which embody an original concept of tragedy*".

This has been attributed to the bitter experiences of his youth, more especially to what he underwent as a sailor. The legendary nimbus that gathers around celebrities in his case took the form of heroic events created out of his background. With his contempt for publicity, O'Neill straightway put a stop to all such attempts; there was no glamour to be derived from his drab hardships and toils. We may indeed conclude that the stern experiences were not uncongenial to his spirit, tending as they did to afford release of certain chaotic forces within him.

His pessimism was presumably on the one hand an innate trait of his being, on the other an offshoot of the literary current of the age, though possibly it is rather to be interpreted as the reaction of a profound personality to the American optimism of old tradition. Whatever the source of his pessimism may have been, however, the line of his development was marked out, and O'Neill became by degrees the uniquely and fiercely

tragic dramatist that the world has come to know. The conception of life that he presents is not a product of elaborate thinking, but it has the genuine stamp of something lived through. It is based upon an exceedingly intense, one might say, heart-rent, realization of the austerity of life, side by side with a kind of rapture at the beauty of human destinies shaped in the struggle against odds.

A primitive sense of tragedy, as we see, lacking moral backing and achieving no inner victory - merely the bricks and mortar for the temple of tragedy in the grand and ancient style. By his very primitiveness, however, this modern tragedian has reached the well-spring of this form of creative art, a naive and simple belief in fate. At certain stages it has contributed a stream of pulsating life-blood to his work.

That was, however, at a later period. In his earliest dramas O'Neill was a strict and somewhat arid realist; those works we may here pass by. Of more moment were a series of one-act plays, based upon material assembled during his years at sea. They brought to the theatre something novel, and hence he attracted attention.

Those plays were not, however, dramatically notable; properly speaking, merely short stories couched in dialogue-form; true works of art, however, of their type, and heart-stirring in their simple, rugged delineation. In one of them, *The Moon of the Caribbees* (1918), he attains poetic heights, partly by the tenderness in depicting the indigence of a sailor's life with its naive illusions of joy, and partly by the artistic background of the play: dirge-like Negro songs coming from a white coral shore beneath metallicly glittering palms and the great moon of the Caribbean Sea. Altogether it is a mystical weave of melancholy, primitive savagery, yearning, lunar effulgence, and oppressive desolateness.

The drama *Anna Christie* (1921) achieves its most striking effect through the description of sailors' life ashore in and about waterfront saloons. The first act is O'Neill's masterpiece in the domain of strict realism, each character being depicted with supreme sureness and mastery. The content is the raising of a fallen Swedish girl to respectable human status by the strong and wholesome influences of the sea; for once pessimism is left out of the picture, the play having what is termed a happy ending.

With his drama *The Hairy Ape* (1922), also concerned with sailors' lives, O'Neill launches into that expressionism which sets its stamp upon his «ideadramas». The aim of expressionism in literature and the plastic arts is difficult to determine; nor need we discuss it, since for practical purposes a brief description suffices. It endeavours to produce its effects by a sort of mathematical method; it may be said to extract the square root of the complex phenomena of reality, and build with those abstractions a new world on an enormously magnified scale. The procedure is an irksome one and can hardly be said to achieve mathematical exactitude; for a long time, however, it met with great success throughout the world.

The Hairy Ape seeks to present on a monumental scale the rebellious slave of steam power, intoxicated with his force and with superman ideas. Outwardly he is a relapse to primitive man, and he presents himself as a kind of beast, suffering from yearning for genius. The play depicts his tragical discomfiture and ruin on being brought up against cruel society.

Subsequently O'Neill devoted himself for a number of years to a boldly expressionistic treatment of ideas and social questions. The resulting plays have little connection with real life; the poet and dreamer isolates himself, becoming absorbed in feverishly pursued speculation and phantasy.

The Emperor Jones (1920), as an artistic creation, stands rather by itself; through it the playwright first secured any considerable celebrity. The theme embraces the mental breakdown of a Negro despot who rules over a Negro-populated island in the West Indies. The despot perishes on the flight from his glory, hunted in the dead of night by the troll-drums of his pursuers and by recollections of the past shaping themselves as paralyzing visions. These memories stretch back beyond his own life to the dark continent of Africa. Here lies concealed the theory of the individual's unconscious inner life being the carrier of the successive stages in the evolution of the race. As to the rightness of the theory we need form no opinion; the play takes so strong a hold upon our nerves and senses that our attention is entirely absorbed.

The «dramas of ideas» proper are too numerous and too diversified to be included in a brief survey. Their themes derive from contemporary life or from sagas and legends; all are metamorphosed by the author's fancy. They play on emotional chords all tightly strung, give amazing decorative effects, and manifest a never-failing dramatic energy. Practically speaking, everything in human life in the nature of struggle or combat has here been used as a subject for creative treatment, solutions being sought for and tried out of the spiritual or mental riddles presented. One favourite theme is the cleavage of personality that arises when an individual's true character is driven in upon itself by pressure from the world without, having to yield place to a make-believe character, its own live traits being hidden behind a mask. The dramatist's musings are apt to delve so deep that what he evolves has an urge, like deep-sea fauna, to burst asunder on being brought into the light of day. The results he achieves, however, are never without poetry; there is an abundant flow of passionate, pregnant words. The action, too, yields evidence in every case of the never-slumbering energy that is one of O'Neill's greatest gifts.

Underneath O'Neill's fantastic love of experimenting, however, is a hint of a yearning to attain the monumental simplicity characteristic of ancient drama. In his *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) he made an attempt in that irection, drawing his motif from the New England farming community, hardened in te progress of generations into a type of Puritanism that had gradually come to forfeit its idealistic inspiration. The course embarked upon was to be followed with more success in the «Electra» trilogy.

In between appeared *A Play; Strange Interlude* (1928), which won high praise and became renowned. It is rightly termed «A Play», for with its broad and loose-knit method of presentation it cannot be regarded as a tragedy; it would rather seem most aptly defined as a psychological novel in scenes. To its subtitle, «Strange Interlude», a direct clue is given in the course of the play: «Life, the present, is the strange interlude between the past and what is to come.» The author tries to make his idea clear, as far as possible, by resorting to a peculiar device: on the one hand, the characters speak and reply as the action of the play demands; on the other, they reveal their real natures and their recollections in the form of

monologues, inaudible to the other characters upon the stage. Once again, the element of masking!

Regarded as a psychological novel, up to the point at which it becomes too improbable for any psychology, the work is very notable for its wealth of analytical and above all intuitive acumen, and for the profound insight it displays into the inner workings of the human spirit. The training bore fruit in the real tragedy that followed, the author's grandest work: *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). Both in the story it unfolds and in the destiny-charged atmosphere enshrouding it, this play keeps close to the tradition of the ancient drama, though in both respects it is adjusted to modern life and to modern lines of thought. The scene of this tragedy of the modern-time house of Atreus is laid in the period of the great Civil War, America's *Iliad*. That choice lends the drama the clear perspective of the past and yet provides it with a background of intellectual life and thought sufficiently close to the present day. The most remarkable feature in the drama is the way in which the element of fate has been further developed. It is based upon up-to-date hypotheses, primarily upon the natural-scientific determinism of the doctrine of heredity, and also upon the Freudian omniscience concerning the unconscious, the nightmare dream of perverse family emotions.

These hypotheses are not, as we know, established beyond dispute, but the all-important point regarding this drama is that its author has embraced and applied them with unflinching consistency, constructing upon their foundation a chain of events as inescapable as if they had been proclaimed by the Sphinx of Thebes herself; Thereby he has achieved a masterly example of constructive ability and elaborate motivation of plot, and one that is surely without a counterpart in the whole range of latter-day drama. This applies especially to the first two parts of the trilogy.

Two dramas, wholly different and of a new type for O'Neill, followed. They constitute a characteristic illustration of the way he has of never resting content with a result achieved, no matter what success it may have met with. They also gave evidence of his courage, for in them he launched a challenge to a considerable section of those whose

favourable opinions he had won, and even to the dictators of those opinions. Though it may not at the present time be dangerous to defy natural human feelings and conceptions, it is not by any means free from risk to prick the sensitive conscience of critics. In *Ah, Wilderness* (1933) the esteemed writer of tragedies astonished his admirers by presenting them with an idyllic middle-class comedy and carried his audiences with him. In its depiction of the spiritual life of young people the play contains a good deal of poetry, while its gayer scenes display unaffected humour and comedy; it is, moreover, throughout simple and human in its appeal.

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