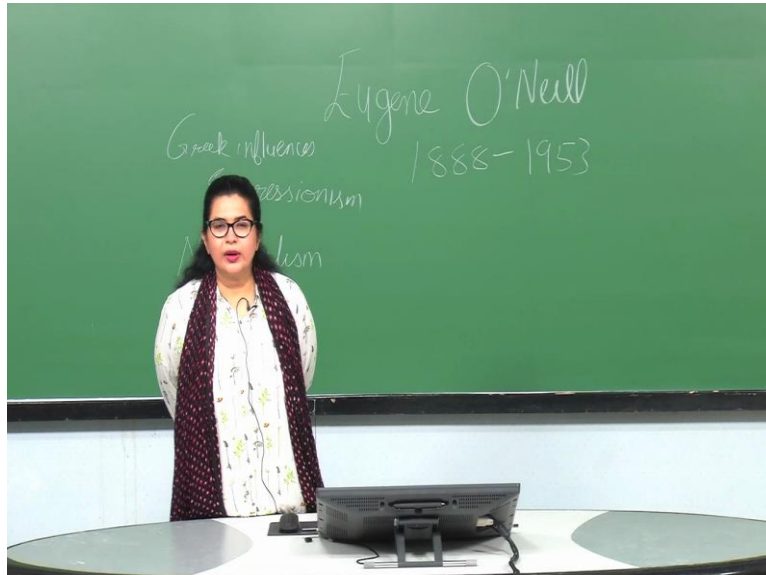


American Literature & Culture
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Eugene O'Neill An Introduction (Lecture 32)

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Welcome friends to this session on Eugene O'Neill, one of the greatest American playwrights of all time. Eugene O'Neill who lived between 1888 and 1953, he established America's plays in the realm of literary drama by introducing dramatic realism and psychological focus to theater. So today we are going to analyze or rather look at some of his major works, his early life of course and the kinds of influences he had on his dramaturgy and his contribution towards American drama, especially in the twentieth century. Now we are going to soon do his *Desire under the Elms*.

So I thought it appropriate to have a brief introduction to O'Neill's plays. Remember he was the first American playwright to regard the stage as a literary medium and the only American playwright ever, and this is important, to receive the Nobel Prize for literature, so the only American playwright ever. Not the only American writer, you know that even Hemingway won the Nobel for literature but we are talking about Nobel for the dramatist, who won the Nobel for literature.

Hemingway was born in 1888 in New York City and you will find the influence of the New York dialects, the New York way of life in his plays. he was interestingly born in a Broadway

hotel room and he died there as well. It is very ironic. His father James O'Neill Senior was a successful Shakespearean actor who left literary theater for a more profitable lead role in the adaptation of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He was known for doing *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He did the performance so many times. So if you read *Long Day's Journey into Night* you will understand, its, the play is regarded as one of the greatest plays ever written in America and it's heavily autobiographical in its tone. O'Neill's mother Ellen; she accompanied her husband all across the country. Unfortunately she got addicted to morphine which began at Eugene's birth and this was to impact his art in the later period. The influences he had, you know he, they travelled a lot, at the same time it was a rather troubled family background, rather dysfunctional family and all these had a profound influence on the way he, on his plays.

Now he spent much of his early childhood touring with theatrical companies, with his mother and older brother, Jamie. The only stable residence they had was the house in New London in Connecticut where they stayed in summers. He spent his early years in hotel rooms, on trains and backstage of the theater companies., about his education, he spent 6 years in a Catholic Boarding School and 3 years in the Betts Academy at Stamford, Connecticut. After attending a series of Catholic and non-sectarian boarding schools he attended the Princeton University in 1906 and he made little effort to study the required curriculum though he was widely read, he completely got absorbed in the works of Nietzsche and Strindberg and also Jack Lynn and all these writers, they had very profound influence on his writing.

However he was suspended at the end of his freshman year and decided not to go back to the University. He also decided to begin what he later regarded as his real education quote unquote, that his life experience. So thereafter he took up many small jobs. He became the secretary of a small jewelry house in New York but very soon he left it and he then joined a gold prospecting expedition in his Spanish Honduras. But after having contracted malarial fever, he returned to the US. Before leaving for this expedition, he secretly married his girlfriend Kathleen Jenkins without the consent and knowledge of his family.

In 1909, O'Neill set out as a sea officer as part of a shipping expedition and between voyages, he lived an existence bordering on poverty., he traveled widely from Buenos Aires to Liverpool and to New York City and these experiences offered good inspiration for the sea

plays he wrote later. 1912, he suffered a divorce. So that was a tough year for him. It was not a very productive year in his life, there was a failed attempt at journalism and also a diagnosis of tuberculosis and he spent lot of time in salons drinking profusely and all this, you know, it was like one of those bleak periods in his life. In 1914, he attended a workshop at Harvard where he studied literature and the use of dialect in Irish plays along with writing scenarios. He joined the Provincetown Theater Company which was formed by a group of likeminded artists to feature their own plays and it was at this time that his *Bound East for Cardiff* was accepted and it was a success. The play was light on plot but progressive in dialogs as he introduced the use of dialects into American drama.

We have to remember that he was not overtly political writer. You are not going to find traces of politics in his work. At the same time, some of his close friends were communists. For example the founder of the US Communist Party, John Reed was one of those people, and O'Neill was closely associated with John Reed and his wife. In 1918, he married his second, that was his second marriage, and the lady was called Agnes Boulton who was a writer of short stories, novels and in 1919 they had a son Shane. In 1922, it was like Eugene's brother, we have already talked about him, Jamie, he plunged into a life of alcoholism and died in a sanatorium. So that was another setback for him.

He was quite close to his brother and it was during this time that his mother also died. Now he wanted to escape from all these. So Eugene and his family moved to Bermuda where his daughter Oona was born. Oona later became an actress but O'Neill disowned her for marrying and, this is interesting, Oona married Charlie Chaplin, the great actor, the comic actor Charlie Chaplin from Hollywood and Eugene O'Neill disowned her because she was only 18 and Chaplin was much older and they never reconciled. In 1929 O'Neill got married to Carlotta Monterey. His literary productivity continued in the years that followed.

In 1934, he wrote *Days Without End*, the last of his plays to be produced on Broadway. He suffered a nervous breakdown and degenerative disease similar to Parkinson's which made his hands shake. Thus writing became very difficult and he couldn't write plays for the next 12 years. In 1937, O'Neill moved to California and in this period he finally came to terms with the painful aspects of his life and he wrote his most autobiographical plays such as *Long*

Day's Journey into Night and A Moon for the Misbegotten. And that was the end of his literary career. He died in 1953.

As most of you must be aware of, O'Neill is widely awarded playwright. In 1920, he received his first Pulitzer Prize for *Beyond the Horizon*. In 1922, he won his second Pulitzer for *Anna Christie*. At the same time, in the same year he also received the American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal and he held the membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the Irish Academy of Letters. In 1928 and 57 he won his third and fourth Pulitzer for *Strange Interlude* and *Long Days Journey in Night* respectively. In 1936 as already mentioned he became the only American Playwright ever to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

Now coming to his uniqueness, and his writing style, in the earlier period he focused on Realism and we have been talking about realism and the beginning of American Theater and drama. We know American playwrights were heavily influenced by realism. At the same time there was some influence of Europe as well. So he was a realist with touches of naturalism. He presented the characters and events as realistically as possible including the colorful ways in which his characters spoke. He was the first to introduce the use of dialect in American plays. When we do *Desire under the Elms* you will understand what I mean by his peculiar dialects, the peculiar dialects used in the play.

His plays often employed radical devices and themes which made them epitomes of modernism. You have to remember, he is a modernist. He is writing during the period which is considered the peak of Modernism. And of course, he was influenced by the Greeks like most people who were writing during that period, Strindberg, Freud of course and Nietzsche. His plays, at least most the plays and most of the time, they follow the unities of time, place and action though there may be some exceptions. O'Neill often applied his painful life experiences to playwrighting and transformed his experiences inside and outside the theater into characters of shattering psychological depth and realism.

He was also one of the pioneers of expressionism on American stage. In *Emperor Jones*, 1920 play and one of his most famous plays, it was, he employed expressionistic devices the production of this play was notable for having an African American lead. Now the actor

Charles Sydney Kilpin was an Afro-American and this was quite new in American theater. This was done at O'Neill's insistence and opened the way for African, American actors in theater and musicals. The play draws on events of Haitian History and portrayed the destructive effects of industrialism on humanity.

The story is focused on an African American Porter who has who travels to the Caribbean Island and persuades the inhabitants to crown him the Emperor. It was originally titled *The Silver Bullet*. The play was highly successful and was produced in major world capitals including London and Paris. The play brought forth negative effects of Racism in US and other countries. So, sort of you know, put the spot line on the destructive effect of racism in various countries especially in America.

Now we have referred expressionism here and there in our course and we know that the movement is started in Germany. It was a modernist movement which began in painting and poetry and precursors include people like Strindberg and Edward Munch whose *Scream* is you know an iconic painting and also several other playwrights who were writing at this point of time. So it is considered with inner realities than outer realities, the movement and in Expressionist Theater, actions and dialog portray the way one or more characters perceive it, which may be radically different from the way life really is. It developed as a reaction to rapid industrialization and materialism. The exponents of expressionism in American theater include Elmer Rice who famously wrote *The Adding Machine*. Tennessee William in *A Street car named Desire* and of course a O'Neill.

O'Neill's another major play is *The Hairy Ape*. It is again an expressionistic play written in 1922. It is about Yank, the lead character is called Yank, whose job is talking, cold furnaces on a steamer that reduces human to the level of animals. However he finds their insult of upper class woman Mildred more painful than work, than his laborious work. His search for revenge forms the rest of the story.

The play highlights, again the dehumanizing effects of modern society in which physical characteristics as well as internal trades demonstrate the effect of industrialism on human beings. O'Neill experimented with language and included a dialect, so this is something that you should, make note of, the use of dialect reflecting the exact way the characters talk even

though certain words were too crude for the theater. Expressionist techniques such as exaggeration of certain features, scenery, events or even music is used to present the internal reality, the mindscape of the characters., the Greek influence is perceptible. In *Mourning becomes Electra*, the 1931 play, one of his most complex and ambitious works. It's a trilogy of 3 plays, *The Homecoming*, *The Hunted* and *The Haunted*.

O'Neill drew inspiration from the ancient Greek tragedy format and also contemporary Freudian psychology in American history. He intended to create a modern psychological drama using a plot from Greek tragedy for which he chose the Myth of Aritisia. The play includes the dark theme of, kind of love that daughters feel for their fathers and subsequent hatred they feel for their mothers. Then came the *Iceman Cometh* in 1939.

The title is taken from the joke, the major character Hicky likes to tell about his wife that she cheats on him with the iceman and symbolically it means much more. The play begins with extensive stage directions including very precise physical description for each character. The play had several reputations like the recurring excuses, poor choices and dreams that made up the character's lives which emphasize the pattern that the characters are unable to escape. In *The Moon for the Miss Begotten*, again he drew on his life experiences this is one of his more autobiographical plays and his expression of his love for his older brother, Jamie.

It is a 1943 play and it's about a farmer and his daughter who are masters at comic deception, whether they are deceiving their landlord or wealthy neighbor or each other, it forms and that forms the crux of the plot. The play is notable for its balance of comedic and tragic elements and it is set in the period after *A Long day's Journey into Night*. It almost like picks up where the earlier play left off.

So again the play takes place within a 24 hour period from noon until the dawn of the next day, the following day, so again observe the unity of time at least. It is set in an impoverished New England farmhouse, the interactions between characters are comic in the first act but increasingly become tragic. One problem for the theatrical producers was the character of Josie. It was difficult to cast the character in the 1940s when young actresses were expected to reflect conventional notions of female attractiveness.

But this play requires an exceptionally large woman so that was a problem. We have to understand that. Casting may become a huge problem when dramatists or playwrights use a certain kinds of characters. Now coming to his *Long Day's Journey in to Night*, this is his most autobiographical play. There are 4 members of an Irish American family and they blame the fate as well as each other for what went wrong in their lives. Yet they love each other even as they exchange hurtful words. The tyrant that is what they are called; face similar challenges that the O'Neills' had faced.

O'Neill never wanted the play to be published or produced until 25 years after his death though his wife chose to release it just 3 years later. The entire play takes place in a summer house like the one where O'Neills spend their summer. The time span of the play was 24 hours and the setting is a single place so again observance in unity and the title suggests, the play involves the movement from light into darkness, -both figuratively and literally. It begins in the morning and ends at night. The characters frequently retreat into denial; continually referring to dark memories that affect their present and casts clouds on the future, and as already discussed, this play won him the fourth Pulitzer Prize.

So now what could be his legacy of such a wide ranging and a playwright who had such a long span of successful career? So you have to know that he had, he has had a far-reaching influence on American dramaturgy. For a long time, everyone emerged out of the shadows of O'Neill. He was the member of the American Theater Hall of Fame and interestingly Jack Nicholson portrayed O'Neill in the 1981 film called *Reds* which is the movie about the life of John Reed, the founder of Communist Party in America. Eugene O'Neill Award is Sweden's finest dramatic award for their stage actors and O'Neill's legacy lives on especially in the way he won his use of expressionism on American stage and also the way he portrayed family relationships which was such an important, which remains so important in most American drama till date.

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Reference

- Evans, Robert C, Grantt, Patricia. *Students Encyclopedia Of Great American Writers, Vol 3_1910 to 1945*. Facts On File. New York:2010. print
- H Oakes, Elizabeth. *American Writers(American Biographies)*. Facts On File. New York:2004. print.

So here are the references. Please look at the references here and

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Thank you very much. In our next class we will start with *Desire under the Elms*. So please ensure that you have your text. Because we are going to do a textual reading like we do for all our plays, so we will be doing discussion as well as textual reading of the play as well. So kindly be ready with your text of *Desire under The Elms*.