

Topic Page: [O'Neill, Eugene \(1888 - 1953\)](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/o_neill_eugene_1888_1953)

Summary Article: **O'Neill, Eugene (Gladstone)**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

1888–1953, American dramatist, b. New York City. He is widely acknowledged as America's greatest playwright.

Early Life

O'Neill's father was James O'Neill, a popular actor noted for his portrayal of the Count of Monte Cristo. Young O'Neill, his mother, and his older brother lived an unsettled life traveling with James on tour. The tortured relationships in his family haunted O'Neill all his life and are reflected in many of his plays. From boarding school he entered Princeton in 1906 but remained there only a year. During the next few years he traveled widely and held a variety of jobs, acquiring experience that familiarized him with the life of sailors, stevedores, and the outcasts who populate many of his plays.

O'Neill was stricken with tuberculosis in 1912 and spent six months in a sanatorium, where he decided to become a playwright. In the next two years he wrote 13 plays. He studied with George Pierce Baker at Harvard (1914–15) and in the summer of the following year began his association with the Provincetown Players, a theatrical group that produced many of his one-act plays.

Plays

O'Neill's first full-length play to be produced was *Beyond the Horizon* (1920; Pulitzer Prize), a grim domestic drama set in New England. After several "ambitious" failures, O'Neill's first great play, *Desire under the Elms* (1924), was produced; set in 19th-century New England, it dramatizes the impassioned battle for dominance between a hard, puritanical father and his sensitive son. O'Neill's next important work, *The Great God Brown* (1926), is a complicated, symbolic play about a modern man's futile struggle to identify himself with nature. *Strange Interlude* (1928; Pulitzer Prize), a nine-act drama, is a Freudian character study of an emotionally sterile woman, whose frequent asides give expression to her deeper thoughts and feelings. His other plays of the period include *Marco Millions* (1928), *Lazarus Laughed* (1928), and *Dynamo* (1929).

In 1931 O'Neill's great trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* was produced. Set in post–Civil War New England, it is a retelling of the ancient Greek myth surrounding the murder of Agamemnon. After *Days Without End* (1934), no new O'Neill play was performed until *The Iceman Cometh* (1946). Considered by many critics his greatest work, it looks at a group of drunken outcasts who are stripped of their illusions by a misguided, guilt-ridden savior. In 1936 O'Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1947), about the frustrated love between an alcoholic and a farm woman, was not well received, but a revival of the play in 1973 was successful.

Later Life and Plays

Near the end of his life O'Neill renounced his daughter Oona when, at 18, she married the actor Charlie Chaplin, a man her father's age; O'Neill himself contracted a crippling disease that made him unable to write. At his death O'Neill left several important plays in manuscript, including the autobiographical masterpiece, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (produced 1956; Pulitzer Prize), and two parts of an unfinished cycle of plays using American history as a background—*A Touch of the Poet* (first U.S. production, 1958) and *More Stately Mansions* (first U.S. production, 1967).

Bibliography

See biographies by L. Sheaffer (2 vol., 1968-73), A. and B. Gelb (2 vol., 1962, rev. ed. 1974; 2000; and 2016), and N. Berlin (1988); studies by O. Cargill et al. (1961), T. Bogard (1972), and J. Chothia (1982).

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