



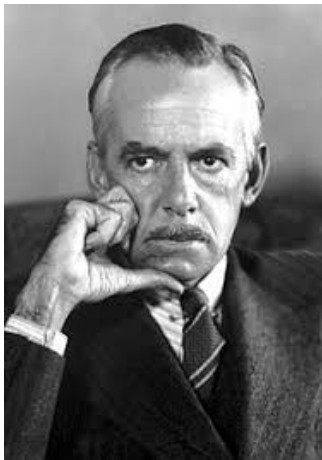
The Long Voyage Home
The Lifelong Quest of Eugene O'Neill
by Jerry James

“Born in a hotel room—and goddammit—died in a hotel room!”

—O'Neill's Purported Last Words



James O'Neill



Eugene O'Neill



Ella O'Neill

The personal life of Eugene O'Neill, like that of many men of genius, was a mess. He drank far too much, far too often, for far too long. His altercations with his three wives sometimes became physical—on both sides. (One left him lying in the snow with a broken leg.) His two sons committed suicide, while his daughter (at 18) married Charlie Chaplin, who was exactly six months her father's junior. When he died at 65, he looked much, much older. As Tennessee Williams said, “Eugene O'Neill gave birth to the American theatre and died for it.”

Exposition

Eugene O'Neill was born on October 16, 1888, in temporary quarters—the Barrett House Hotel on Times Square. He would spend the rest of his life searching for home.



*Eugene, James Jr. and James O'Neill, 1900
On the porch of Monte Cristo Cottage*

Because his father was an actor, on the road eight months a year, young Gene spent his first seven years on trains, in hotels and backstage. He was then sent to boarding school. In 1906, he went to Princeton, where

he flunked out. Stephen A. Black succinctly sums up the next six years. “He shipped to sea, lived a derelict’s existence on the waterfronts of Buenos Aires, Liverpool and New York City, submerged himself in alcohol, and attempted suicide.” He also impregnated a girl, whom he would marry and divorce. All this on a dollar-a-day allowance from his father.

By 1912, when he showed up at the O’Neill’s Monte Cristo Cottage in New London, CT—the only real home he had ever known and that only for the summers—he was, quite frankly, a bum. A bum with tuberculosis.

O’Neill entered the state TB sanatorium in December 1912. Two days later, he walked out, then somehow convinced his father to pay for a more expensive private cure. (James wanted to spend as little as possible; to him, TB was a death sentence.) During treatment, O’Neill, who had dabbled in newspaper work, resolved to become a playwright, to take what was useful from his father’s theatre and burn the rest. “I want to be an artist or nothing,” he wrote to Harvard Professor George Pierce Baker, with whom he would study playwriting in the first such course in America.

Conflict

It took four more years of writing and struggle for O’Neill to find a like-minded group, the Provincetown Players. In the summer of 1916, while engaged in the affair with Louise Bryant that would later be re-enacted by Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton in the movie, *Reds*, he read the group a play based on his experiences at sea.

The Provincetown Players’ leaders, George Cram “Jig” Cook and Susan Glaspell, are forgotten today, but they were the first to recognize O’Neill’s genius. They were stunned to encounter a writer with, as Harold Bloom wrote, “no American precursors.” Out of nowhere had appeared a

playwright by Strindberg and Ibsen out of Nietzsche and Freud, an Irish-American Catholic angry with God. Glaspell wrote, “Then we knew what we were for.”



Carlotta Monterey O’Neill (1888-1970)
“This was Gene’s favorite picture of me.”

That fall, the Provincetown Players produced O’Neill in New York for the first time, in Greenwich Village. By 1920, he was on Broadway, the winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Drama.

Fast-forward to 1934. After uncountable bottles of whiskey, twenty Broadway plays, three Pulitzer Prizes, two more marriages, two more children and the fresh failure of his latest work, O’Neill and his third wife, the thrice-divorced Carlotta Monterey resolved to leave what he called the “Broadway Show Shop.”

O’Neill had written those twenty plays while living in what would invariably prove to be temporary quarters: Manhattan, New Jersey, Provincetown, Connecticut, Bermuda, France, Long Island, Georgia. Carlotta—mother, mistress, secretary, wife, muse and ministering angel—now headed them to California. Along the way, O’Neill would receive the 1936 Nobel Prize in Literature, the only one ever awarded to an American dramatist.

East of San Francisco, Carlotta built what was to have been their final home, Tao House, so named as to seek the right way of

life. For O'Neill, it was as right as anything in his life had ever been. Here, he wrote *The Iceman Cometh*, *A Moon For the Misbegotten* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

It is interesting that of all the plays for which Eugene O'Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize, perhaps only three still hold the stage. His reputation now rests on the plays he wrote at Tao House, the place he called home.

Dramatis Personae



*Monte Cristo Cottage, New London, CT
"Long Day's Journey" takes place entirely
in the small annex at left*

Long Day's Journey is about the O'Neill family, their fictional last name derived from their ancestors' rule over County Tyrone in Ireland. Their first names are real, with one exception. And most of the incidents in the play actually happened, although some are severely tweaked. They just didn't all happen on one day in August 1912.

James O'Neill (1846-1920) emigrated from Ireland at age eight. Two years later, his father deserted the family. At 22, after a childhood of bitter poverty, James wandered onto the stage. There, he became a young actor to watch, the seeming heir to Edwin Booth, with whom he alternated in the roles of Othello and Iago. But in 1883, he

appeared in a stage adaptation of Alexandre Dumas' novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He then bought the script outright for \$2,000.

Over the next thirty years of touring, James played Edmund Dantes perhaps six thousand times, including a 1913 silent film version. At the peak of *Monte Cristo's* appeal, he netted \$40,000 every season, well over a million in 2019 dollars. It ruined him as a serious actor. No one wanted to see James O'Neill in another role anymore than they wanted to see Joseph Jefferson as anything other than Rip Van Winkle.

In his private life, James' early poverty made him alternately so expansive he stood drinks for the house and so miserly he threw nickels around as if they were manhole covers. He was a sucker for bad investments, although he did put a little money into the newfangled zipper. Late in life, James could still down a bottle of whiskey a day and appear sober. He lived to see O'Neill's early successes, although he did ask, "My son, why don't you write more pleasant plays?"

Mary Ellen "Ella" Quinlan O'Neill (1857-1922), convent-educated and middle-class, met James at fifteen and married him at twenty. Their second son, Edmund, died of measles at eighteen months. Eugene, conceived as a replacement, weighed eleven pounds at birth. The doctor prescribed morphine for Ella's postpartum pain. Soon, she was hooked. Ella blamed her addiction on Eugene and told him she wished he'd never been born. After many cycles of rehabbing and relapsing, Ella finally kicked the habit for good in 1914 at the Sisters of Charity convent in Brooklyn.

James "Jamie" O'Neill Jr. (1878-1923), smart and charming, should have been a lawyer. But his mother blamed him for infecting his brother with those fatal measles. At fourteen, he caught her shooting up. Jamie began to drink, quickly spiraling

out of school and into acting. Eventually, his alcoholism led to his being banned by every manager in the profession. Jamie died at 45, crushed by the bizarre misadventures with his mother's casket that O'Neill would later chronicle in *A Moon For the Misbegotten*.

In *Long Day's Journey*, Eugene named his own character Edmund, for the dead brother he had replaced. His father and brother told him about his mother's addiction when he was fifteen. This was his play about ironically coming home.

"A deeply tragic play, but without any violent dramatic action," O'Neill wrote. "At the final curtain, there they still are, trapped within each other by the past, each guilty and at the same time innocent, scorning, loving, pitying each other, understanding and yet not understanding at all, forgiving but still doomed never to be able to forget."

Denouement



Tao House, Danville, CA

Life at Tao House didn't last. In 1944, the O'Neills left their "final home" for that most bourgeois of reasons, the inability to get servants during the war. *The Iceman Cometh* had a modest Broadway run. *Moon*

for the Misbotten died on the road. O'Neill and Carlotta wound up playing out a Strindbergian endgame in Boston, where he died on November 27, 1953, in the Shelton Hotel—temporary quarters.

O'Neill had forbidden publication of *Long Day's Journey* for 25 years. Also, it was *never* to be performed. But within seven months of his death, Carlotta disobeyed both orders, for reasons that remain unclear. For this we must thank her, as we thank Max Brod for doing likewise and not burning the works of his friend Franz Kafka.

In 1955, Carlotta had the play published. Then she arranged for the world premiere in Sweden in February 1956, followed nine months later by the Broadway production that won for O'Neill his fourth, posthumous, Pulitzer Prize. Who knows what would have happened had this been delayed until 1978?

O'Neill had inscribed the play's manuscript to Carlotta, saying, in part, "I mean it as a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me the faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play—write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for *all* the four haunted Tyrones... You know my gratitude. And my love!"

And in Carlotta's actions after his death, O'Neill knew her love. At his death, he was in danger of slipping into the past, alongside once-successful playwrights like Maxwell Anderson. Instead, she elevated him to the playwrights' pantheon.

Carlotta Monterey, who had once left Eugene O'Neill lying in the snow with a broken leg, had now brought him home.

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.