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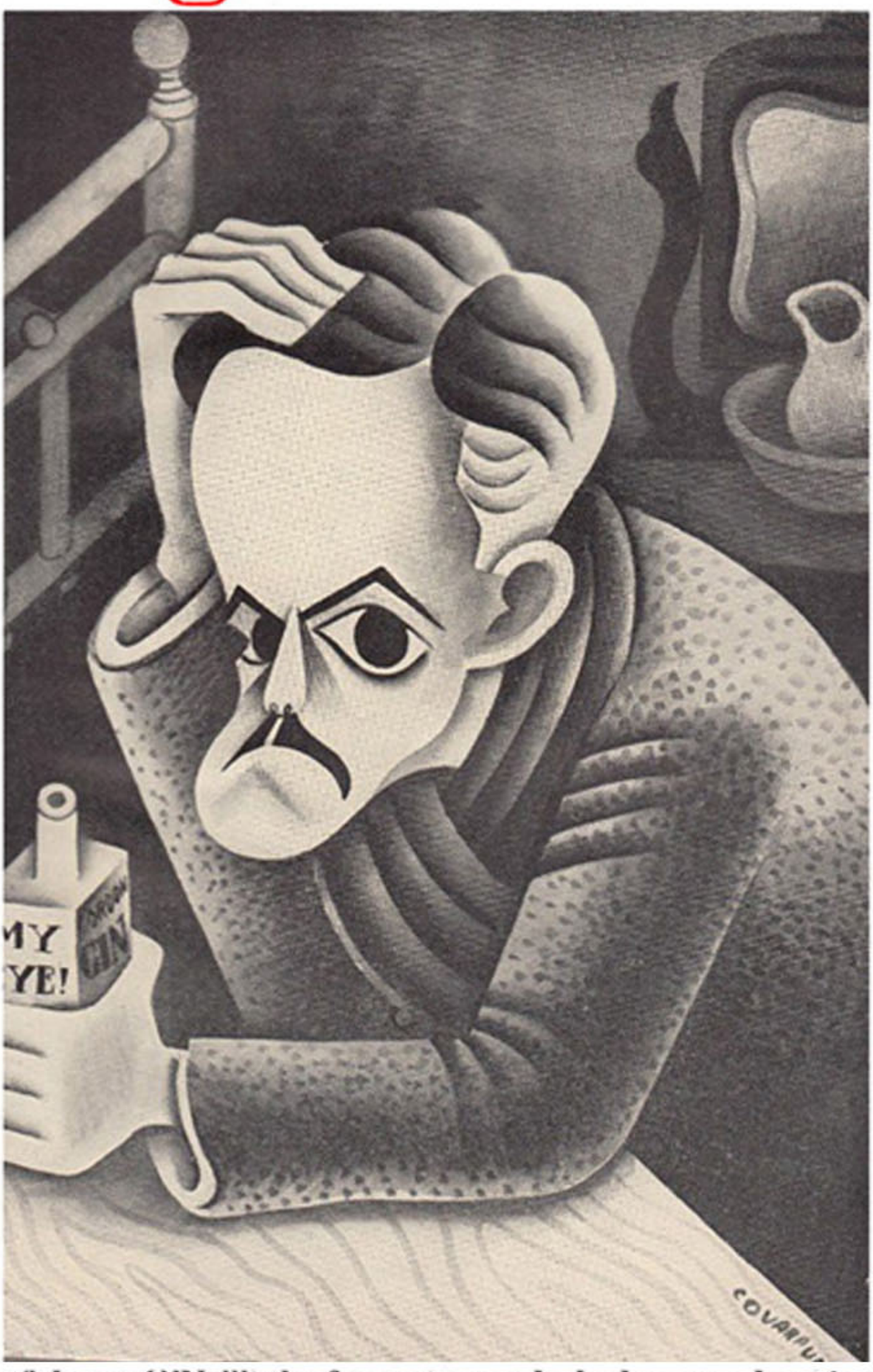
The Extraordinary Story Of Eugene O'Neill



As the son of James O'Neill, the famous actor, he had every educational advantage; yet, at twenty, he shipped as a common sailor and spent several years at sea, or hanging around the waterfront dives at various ports—He is thirty-four now and for the past three years his plays have been the great sensation of each theatrical season

THREE years ago, Eugene O'Neill was practically unknown, except to a small group of people in New York. A few of his one-act plays had been produced by the Provincetown Players in a makeshift theatre down in the Greenwich Village part of the city; but to up-town Broadway, and to the great world outside, he was not even a name. Yet to-day he is the most talked-of playwright in America.

It is less than three years since "Beyond the Horizon"—which was the first of O'Neill's long plays to get a production—made the general public realize that here was a man who not only had something interesting to say but could say it in a new way. All New York began to talk about Eugene O'Neill.

Then, two years ago, the Provincetown Players put on "The Emperor Jones" in their little theatre made out of an old stable. It crowded the wooden benches; turned people away; was taken to an up-town theatre and became the sensation of the dramatic season. It was on tour last year and will be taken to London.

O'Neil

Twice O'Neill had scored and he had done it with plays which the average theatrical manager would have sworn the public would not accept.

Then came last season, with another brace of O'Neill plays: "Anna Christie" and "The Hairy Ape." Grim pictures of grim life, a rough slap in the face to people accustomed to the conventions of society and the traditions of the theatre. Yet crowds of these people went to see both plays—and applauded enthusiastically when their faces were metaphorically slapped.

It wasn't the slap itself that got this reaction. It was the thing, the force itself, the meaning behind the blow. As O'Neill said to me:

"The audiences sat there and listened to ideas absolutely opposed to their ordinary habits of thought—and applauded these ideas."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because they had been appealed to through their emotions," he said, "and our emotions are a better guide than our thoughts. Our emotions are instinctive. They are the result not only of our individual experiences but of the experiences of the whole human race, back through all the ages. They are the deep undercurrent, whereas our thoughts are often only the small individual surface reactions. Truth usually goes deep. So it reaches you through your emotions."

The inference is that O'Neill thinks he gives us the truth in his plays. Certainly he tries to give us the truth as he sees it. He has courage and sincerity. But he does not use it to preach a hidebound creed. He does not tell us flatly what we "ought" to do. He shows us human beings, living in an environment that is absolutely strange to the average person: a negro, crazed by superstitious terror; a girl, drinking in a waterfront dive; a stoker, shoveling coal in the furnace-room of an ocean steamer—"queer" people with whom we might think we could have nothing in common.

O'Neill puts these "queer" people before us, and shows them groping their way through the very same spiritual problems we know to be our own. He wants to accomplish two things: He wants to give us a better understanding of ourselves and a better understanding of one another.

He gained his own understanding of human beings through his extraordinary experiences as a young man. He is only thirty-four years old now. But the experiences I refer to began when he was nineteen and continued through the next five or six years.

His father was James O'Neill, famous as an actor a generation ago, especially in the rôle of "Monte Cristo." The boy traveled around with his father and mother until he was seven years old. Then he was put into a convent school. Later he went to preparatory school and, at eighteen, entered Princeton.

In all those years, he had almost no home life at all. The nearest approach to it was when, occasionally in the summer, the O'Neill family stayed at New London, Connecticut, where they had a house. But nine

tenths of the boy's time was spent in hotels and schools. Perhaps this helps to account for the things he did later.

As I said before, he entered Princeton at eighteen. He lasted there just one year. Some of his escapades were more than the college authorities could stand and he was suspended for a year. He might come back then, if he would promise to be good and to attend to his studies.

But nineteen-year-old Eugene O'Neill did not *want* to be "good." As for studies, the only one that interested him was the one known as "the proper study of mankind;" which, of course, is man himself. He had no ambitions, not even any dreams, for his future. All he cared about was to live! And his idea of living was to have a wild time.

His father owned an interest in a small mail-order business; and this fact was what got the young man his first job. He was made secretary of the company. His chief duty was to handle the correspondence; but the stenographer knew more about it than he did, so she did most of the work.

After a year of this sort of thing, the business was more than willing to let him go—and for once

he was more than willing to agree with his employers! A friend of his was going down to Honduras to prospect for gold; an enterprise which appealed to O'Neill's craving for adventure. So he went along.

Six months he stayed down there; six months of heat and tropic storms, of natives that wouldn't work and of insects that worked unceasingly. Then he got the fever and was sent home. He had found neither gold nor glamour. At that time, James O'Neill was playing with Viola Allen in "The White Sister." He made his son assistant manager; and for six months Eugene traveled with the company. But he hated that sort of life far more than he had hated Honduras.

In spite of his lack of interest in his studies at college, he was even then a voracious reader; especially of books on philosophy and sociology. He used to haunt the bookshop of the anarchist Tucker. He read Nietzsche and Karl Marx, and Kropotkin—books which encouraged his own instinctive rebellion against conventional people and conventional ideas.

Also, he read books about the sea, especially Conrad's wonderful stories. They stirred his imagination as nothing else had. They promised real adventure, escape from people who seemed to him mere shadows cast by the rigid customs and ideas of society. That was what he wanted: to live his own life among men who were brutally themselves. So when his father's season closed, at Boston, Eugene O'Neill shipped aboard a Norwegian bark, and went to sea.

LET me describe the man as he is to-day. It will help you to appreciate the strangeness of the life he led during his early twenties. He is tall and dark and thin. Everything about him (except his hair and eyes!) seems to be long and thin. I

believe his hands, for instance, are the longest and the most slender I ever have seen. They are the type of hands that go with the dreamer temperament.

His eyes are very dark, very intense. His hair is dark; but, young as he is, it is already showing a little gray at the temples. He is quiet and slow of speech with strangers. When it comes to ordinary "small talk" he is a good imitation of a sphinx. Even when he is interested, there are long pauses, when, unless you know his ways, you think he isn't going to say anything more. Then, unexpectedly, he begins again; and he is likely to say something so interesting that you soon learn not to break in on these pauses.

I went to see him recently at his summer home, though he sometimes stays there as late as November. The house, until a few years ago, was the Peakèd Hill Bars Coast Guard station, on the dunes a few miles from Provincetown, Massachusetts. From it, not another house is to be seen. The only human habitations are the new station, a quarter of a mile away, and a small shack. But these are hidden by the hills of sand.

It is a desolation of sand and sea; but very beautiful—also very remote! Few persons could plow through the soft sand to reach it, fewer still *would* do so. An automobile would be "mired" in sand within a few feet. Only a horse can make the trip.

From June until late in the autumn, O'Neill lives and works there. The household consists of himself, his wife, their three-year-old son, a housekeeper, and the child's nurse.

And here is an interesting fact: O'Neill has a *regular habit* of work. The craving for freedom, for the indulgence of his own desires, which controlled him in his early manhood, is subordinated now to the good of his work. He, who used to be a rebel against routine, voluntarily follows a routine now, in this one direction. Like the rest of us, he has found that he *must* follow a regular habit of work if he is to accomplish anything.

WELL, this is the man who, at twenty, shipped as a common sailor on a voyage that lasted sixty-five days, all of the time out of sight of land. The food was chiefly dried codfish, sea biscuit, sweet soup, and "something they called coffee, and something they called tea."

His quarters below deck were in the forecastle—the "fo'c'sle"—shared by all the seamen of the crew. Practically without ventilation, it reeked of tobacco smoke, wet clothing, and unkempt human beings.

The voyage ended at Buenos Aires; and here again the young man tried his hand at the sort of work which would appeal to most men of his breeding and education. One after another, he got jobs with the Westinghouse Company, the Swift Packing Company, and the Singer Sewing Machine Company. But in each case he either was fired, or else gave it up in disgust.

"The Singer people," he explained, "made about five hundred and seventy-five different types of sewing machines at that time, and I was supposed to learn every detail of every one of them. I got about as far as Number Ten, I guess, before they gave me up as hopeless.

"I had spent a good deal of my time down on the waterfront when I should

have been studying bobbins and needles. Now I went there again, like a boy let out of school; and when my money was gone I shipped on a British vessel bound for Portuguese South Africa. I made the voyage over there and back, then shipped on another British vessel for New York.

"In New York, I lived at 'Jimmy the Priest's'; a waterfront dive, with a back room where you could sleep with your head on the table if you bought a schooner of beer. 'Jimmy the Priest's' place is the original of the saloon in 'Anna Christie.' And an old sailor whom I knew there is the original of 'Chris,' the father in the play.

"Again I hung around the waterfront for a while. There, as at Buenos Aires, I picked up an occasional job aboard a vessel that was loading or unloading. The work was mostly cleaning ship; painting, washing the decks, and so on.

"After a few weeks, or months, I shipped on the American Liner 'New York,' as an able seaman. I made the voyage to Southampton; and as the 'New York' was disabled, I came back on the 'Philadelphia.' But there was about as much 'sea glamour' in working aboard a passenger steamship as there would have been in working in a summer hotel! I washed enough deck area to cover a good-sized town.

"It was on these two voyages that I got to know the stokers, although it did not really begin aboard ship. There is class distinction even among the groups that make up the crew of an ocean liner. But in this case, one group does not regard another as superior to it. Each has a healthy contempt for the others.

"I shouldn't have known the stokers if I hadn't happened to scrape an acquaintance with one of our own furnace-room gang at Jimmy the Priest's. His name was Driscoll, and he was a Liverpool Irishman. It seems that years ago some Irish families settled in Liverpool. Most of them followed the sea, and they were a hard lot. To sailors all over the world, a 'Liverpool Irishman' is the synonym for a tough customer. It was through Driscoll that I got to know other stokers. Driscoll himself came to a strange end. He committed suicide by jumping overboard in mid-ocean."

"Why?" I asked.

"That's it," said O'Neill thoughtfully. "That's what I asked *myself*. 'Why?' It was the *why* of Driscoll's suicide that gave me the germ of the idea for my play, 'The Hairy Ape.'"

He went on to talk about this; and I will tell later some of the things he said about how he writes his plays and the meaning he puts into them. But first let us get through with his personal story.

TWO voyages on an ocean liner sickened him of being an "able seaman" who wielded a mop as a chief implement of his seamanship, so he again hung around the New York waterfront for a few weeks. Then, one morning he woke up to find himself on board a train, with a ticket for New Orleans. He didn't recall having bought it.

By chance, father and son arrived there at about the same time. James O'Neill was then playing a tabloid version of "Monte Cristo" in vaudeville. Eugene saw the advertisement, went to call on his father, and the latter persuaded him to take one of the minor rôles in the play. He was with the company until the season ended—hated the whole thing, and, ac-

cording to his own account, was a hopelessly bad actor. When the season was over he went to New London with his father and mother, and got a job there as reporter on a local newspaper.

But now he found that you can't dance, without sooner or later having to pay the fiddler. For about five years he had been dancing to the tune of his desire for a wild life. He had taken what he wanted. Now the bill was presented for payment. His right lung "went bad;" and the doctors, with solemn head-shaking pronounced their verdict: "Tuberculosis! You must go to a sanatorium."

He went, and for six months he had to lead a sane and simple and absolutely quiet existence. It was the first time, in his whole life, that he had taken time to think what he was going to make out of that life. He had known only the wish to crowd it with sensations, experiences—the wish to "live." And in gratifying this wish he had almost lost life itself. Moreover, he was twenty-five years old. In the months of enforced bodily quiet, at the sanatorium, he began really to use his mind.

"Before that time," he said to me, "I had written some poetry. Everybody does that when he is young. And while I was on the New London paper, a man who ran a daily column used to let me write things for it. At the sanatorium I wrote some more poetry. I began to think about my future, too; and before I left there I had made up my mind that I would rather write than do anything else.

"I came out with my health very much improved. Still, I would have to be careful for a long time. So I went back to New London, to my family. When my father's season began and the house was closed, I stayed with some English people who had a place overlooking Long Island Sound. There was a porch facing the water; and I used to sit there and work almost every day. During that first year, I wrote eleven one-act plays and two long plays. Some of them have been produced and many of them have been published.

"I had known the theatre pretty intimately, because of my father's connection with it. But, with me, to know it had *not* been to love it! I had always been repelled by its artificiality, its slavish clinging to old traditions. Yet, when I began to write, it was for the theatre. And my knowledge of it helped me, because I knew what I wanted to *avoid* doing.

"However, I needed to study the technique of play-writing. So, after my year of working by myself, I spent a year in Professor Baker's famous class at Harvard. There, too, I learned some things that were useful to me—particularly what not to do. Not to take ten lines, for instance, to say something that can be said in one line."

"WHEN did you begin to get your plays accepted?" I asked. "There seems to have been quite an interval between your writing of them and their production."

"There was!" he agreed, smiling. "But that wasn't my fault. I sent two of the plays to a well-known New York manager. After two years, having heard nothing from them, I wrote, asking for their return. They came back to me in the original package in which I had sent them. They hadn't even been read.

"Another time, I asked my father, who was a personal friend of George Tyler, to

send two of my plays to him. I thought a little influence might at least get them read. Mr. Tyler's firm failed a year or two later, but it wasn't due to my plays. For when the affairs of the firm were settled up the 'scripts were returned to me; and again they were unread.

"Tyler told me afterward that when they came to him, with a letter from my father, he said to himself, 'Oh! So Jim O'Neill's son has been writing some plays. Well, they can't be any good, because plays by actor's sons *are* never good!' And he put them away in a drawer and didn't even look at them.

"The first recognition of any kind that I received was from 'The Smart Set.' I sent three of my one-act plays to Mencken, the editor. They were all three 'fo'c'sle' plays, not at all the kind of thing 'The Smart Set' prints. I wrote Mencken that I knew this, but that I merely wanted his opinion of them. I had a fine letter from him, saying that he liked them and was sending them to George Jean Nathan, the dramatic critic. I received a letter from Nathan also, and to my surprise the three plays were published in 'The Smart Set'! That was my first ray of recognition.

"Then, one summer I came to Provincetown, and here I met the group that had organized under the name of the Provincetown Players. They had a little theatre in an old building on one of the wharves. It's rather a curious coincidence that my first production should have been on a wharf in a sea town. The piece itself was 'Bound East for Cardiff.' The scene was laid on shipboard; and while it was being acted you could hear the waves washing in and out under the wharf.

IT IS only a trifle over fifteen years since harum-scarum Eugene O'Neill was sent away from Princeton. They have been fifteen of the most extraordinary years on which any man of thirty-four can look back. Some of the things he did seem inexplicable when one sees him now. Once, when he was talking about the men who were his friends along the waterfront and in the fo'c'sle, I said to him, "Why did you do it? Why did you want to be with men of that type?"

"I guess," he said in his slow way, "it was because I liked them better than I did men of my own kind. They were sincere, loyal, generous. You have heard people use the expression: 'He would give away his shirt.' I've known men who actually did give away their shirts. I've seen them give their own clothes to stowaways.

"I hated a life ruled by the conventions and traditions of society. Sailors' lives, too, were ruled by conventions and traditions; but they were of a sort I liked and that had a meaning which appealed to me.

"You might think, for instance, that I would have rebelled at the discipline aboard ship. But 'discipline' on a sailing vessel was not a thing that was imposed on the crew by superior authority. It was essentially voluntary. The motive behind it was loyalty to the ship! Among seamen, at that time, this love of the ship was what really controlled them.

"Suppose, just as an example, that one of the yards was loose, hanging by a thread, so to speak. Suppose a gale was blowing and the captain or the mate ordered two men to go aloft to secure this loose spar. This might be a dangerous proceeding. The men could refuse to do it. And they would be entirely within their rights, because if any complaint was

made of them, or any punishment imposed, they could go before their consul at the next port and justify their refusal to obey.

"Now the motive of the captain, or of the mate, in giving the order, might be simply a wish to save a spar which, if lost, would add an item of expense to the owners of the vessel. But the men who risked injury, or even death, by carrying out the order, would be impelled solely by their love of the ship. They wouldn't care about saving the owners a few dollars, nor about saving the captain's face. They would go simply because of their feeling that they owed the service to the ship itself.

"This feeling, by the way, does not exist so strongly now. Labor leaders have organized the seamen and have got them to thinking more about what is due *them* than what is due *from* them to the vessel. The new type of sailor wants his contract, all down in black and white; such and such work, so many hours, for so many dollars.

"Probably some abuses have been corrected by this new order of things. But under it there has been lost the old spirit. It was more like the spirit of medieval guilds than anything that survives in this mechanistic age—the spirit of craftsmanship, of giving one's heart as well as one's hands to one's work, of doing it for the inner satisfaction of carrying out one's own ideals, not merely as obedience of orders. So far as I can see, the gain is overbalanced by the loss."

"THAT probably will surprise a good many people who know your plays about life at sea," I said. "They undoubtedly think you are trying to arouse pity for the sailor."

"Yes, I know," said O'Neill. "Take the fo'c'sle scenes in 'The Hairy Ape,' for instance. People think I am giving an exact picture of the reality. They don't understand that the whole play is expressionistic.

"Yank is really yourself, and myself. He is *every* human being. But, apparently, very few people seem to get this. They have written, picking out one thing or another in the plays and saying 'how true' it is. But no one has said: 'I am Yank! Yank is my own self!'

"Yet that was what I meant him to be. His struggle to 'belong,' to find the thread that will make him a part of the fabric of Life—we are all struggling to do just that. One idea I had in writing the play was to show that the missing thread, literally 'the tie that binds,' is understanding of one another.

"In the scene where the bell rings for the stokers to go on duty, you remember that they all stand up, come to attention, then go out in a lockstep file. Some people think even that is an actual custom aboard ship! But it is only symbolic of the regimentation of men who are the slaves of machinery. In a larger sense, it applies to all of us, because we all are more or less the slaves of convention, or of discipline, or of a rigid formula of some sort.

"The whole play is expressionistic. The coal shoveling in the furnace-room, for instance. Stokers do not really shovel coal that way. But it is done in the play in order to contribute to the rhythm. For rhythm is a powerful factor in making anything expressive. People do not know how sensitive they are to rhythm. You can actually produce and control emotions by that means alone.

O'Neil

"In 'Beyond the Horizon,' there are three acts of two scenes each. One scene is out of doors, showing the horizon, suggesting the man's desire and dream. The other is indoors, the horizon gone, suggesting what has come between him and his dream. In that way I tried to get rhythm, the alternation of longing and of loss.

"Probably very few people who saw the play knew that this was definitely planned to produce the effect. But I am sure they all unconsciously *get* the effect. It is often easier to express an idea through such means than through words or mere copies of real actions. Sometimes I try to do it in the one way, sometimes in the other. If I thought there was *only* one way," he said with a smile, "I should be following the mechanistic creed, which is the very thing I condemn."

"Just how do you get, and work out, an idea for a play?" I asked.

"Oh, the idea usually begins in a small way," he said, "I may have it sort of hanging around in my mind for a long time before it grows into anything definite enough to work on. The idea for 'The Emperor Jones' was in my mind for two years before I wrote the play. I never try to force an idea. I think about it, off and on. If nothing seems to come of it, I put it away and forget it. But apparently my subconscious mind keeps working on it; for, all of a sudden, some day, it comes back to my conscious mind as a pretty well-formed scheme.

"When I finally get to work I write the whole play out in long hand. Then I go over it, and rewrite it in long hand. Then I type it, making a good many changes as I go along. After that, I like to put it away for a few months, if possible; then take it out and go over it again. There wasn't any difficulty in doing this until recently," he said with a laugh. "When I began writing, I would have put my plays away for a few *years*, without anyone knowing or caring. It is getting to be different now."

"Is that one of the dangers of success?" I asked.

"I hardly think I am in much danger," he said. "A man's work is in danger of deteriorating when he thinks he has found the *one best formula* for doing it. If he thinks that, he is likely to feel that all he needs is merely to go on repeating himself. I certainly haven't any such delusion. And so long as a person is searching for better ways of doing his work he is fairly safe."

IT SEEMS a strange transformation—this change from the Eugene O'Neill, who used to hang around dives like Jimmy the Priest's, to this man who is already placed in the front rank of American dramatists. "The most significant playwright in America," as one English critic called him. No one can do the kind of work he is doing without having some sort of a fundamental scheme of life: a creed, a philosophy—call it whatever you want to. I asked him once what it was.

"Well," he said, "I suppose it is the idea I try to put into all of my plays. People talk of the 'tragedy' in them, and call it 'sordid,' 'depressing,' 'pessimistic'—the words usually applied to anything of a tragic nature. But tragedy, I think, has the meaning the Greeks gave it. To them it brought exaltation, an urge toward life and ever more life. It roused them to deeper spiritual understandings and re-

leased them from the petty greeds of everyday existence. When they saw a tragedy on the stage they felt their own hopeless hopes ennobled in art."

"Hopeless hopes?" I echoed.

"Yes," said O'Neill, "because any victory we *may* win is never the one we dreamed of winning. The point is that life in itself is nothing. It is the *dream* that keeps us fighting, willing—living! Achievement, in the narrow sense of possession, is a stale finale. The dreams that can be completely realized are not worth dreaming. The higher the dream, the more impossible it is to realize it fully. But you would not say, since this is true, that we should dream only of easily attained ideals. A man wills his own defeat when he pursues the unattainable. But his *struggle* is his success! He is an example of the spiritual significance which life attains when it aims high enough, when the individual fights all the hostile forces within and without himself to achieve a future of nobler values.

"Such a figure is necessarily tragic. But to me he is not depressing; he is exhilarating! He may be a failure in our materialistic sense. His treasures are in other kingdoms. Yet isn't he the most inspiring of all successes?

"If a person is to get the meaning of life he must 'learn to like' the facts about himself—ugly as they may seem to his sentimental vanity—before he can lay hold on the truth *behind* the facts; and that truth is never ugly!"