The American Century Theater
presents

Ah, Wilderness!

by Eugene O'Neill

AUDIENCE GUIDE

Compiled and Edited by Jack Marshall
September-October 2007

About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, and neglected American plays of the Twentieth Century… what Henry Luce called "the American Century."

The company's mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to lose our mooring to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all citizens, of all ages and all points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These study guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

Like everything we do to keep alive and vital the great stage works of the Twentieth Century, these study guides are made possible in great part by the support of Arlington County's Cultural Affairs Division and the Virginia Commission for the Arts.

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The 2007-2008 American Century Theater Season

Ah, Wilderness!-- The First Production

The original 1933 Broadway cast of *Ah, Wilderness!* was…

Nat Miller...George M. Cohan
Essie..Marjorie Marquis
Arthur...William Post Jr.
Richard..Elisha Cook Jr.
Mildred..Adelaide Bean
Sid Davis...Gene Lockhart
Lily Miller...Eda Heinemann
Muriel McComber................................Ruth Gilbert
Belle...Ruth Holden
Nora..Ruth Chorpenning

The tone of the first production of *Ah, Wilderness* was set at once, the second Broadway legend George M. Cohan was cast in the role of Nat Miller. O'Neill was a long-standing admirer of Cohan, who was on the shady side of his amazing life-long show business career. He was best known for starring in his own cotton candy musicals, for which he typically wrote book, music and lyrics. In fact, *Ah, Wilderness!* was the first time Cohan appeared on stage in a play written by anyone else since 1917, when he consented to appear in a World War I fundraiser program. But once he read O'Neill's play, he was hooked. Nat Miller reminded Cohan of his own father (who had been involved in several projects with O'Neill's father) and he perhaps saw himself in Richard. After initially hesitating, he agreed to do the part, and it turned out to be one of his best roles.

"I went on home, and wasn't sure if the deal was off or on. But after an hour and a half I got a telegram and everything was all set," Cohan wrote later. "I realized then that I was going to have an experience that would be new for me in the theater, certainly for the first time since I was a kid: speaking lines written by somebody else! But I had been admiring O'Neill ever since his *Beyond The Horizon* and knew he was the real stuff of the theater"

Like many comedians, Cohan was a gifted dramatic actor. The role of Nat Miller won him honors and accolades. It is a pity that Hollywood didn't preserve the performance by letting Cohan reprise his role in the M-G-M 1935 film adaptation; perhaps if it had, the public today would remember something about the real Cohan instead of instantly thinking of Jimmy Cagney's version of him.

One aspect of the show when it featured Cohan is hard to imagine today. Cohan would frequently play to his fans by ad-libbing extensively, sometimes, according to contemporary accounts, adding as much as twenty extra minutes to the evening. But such liberties were expected of stage legends then, and they were usually granted license to take them. Occasionally Cohan even launched into a spontaneous song...in character, of course.

Playing the juicy role of Sid was Gene Lockhart, who became Cohan's post-show drinking buddy. Lockhart is best known today for his supporting role as Bob Cratchit in the Reginald Owen "A Christmas Carol" (1938), "Abe Lincoln In Illinois" (1940), where he gave an unforgettable performance as Steven Douglas, "Meet John Doe" (1941), "The Sea Wolf" (1941), "The Devil & Daniel Webster" (1941), "Going My Way" (1944), and "The Miracle On 34th Street," playing the politics-minded judge who has all of the letters to "Kris Kringle" dumped on top of him in the film's climax. His Broadway career started in 1917, and his film career included over 110 films, with his last being in 1957. Today he is probably best known for his daughter, June Lockhart, Mrs. Robinson in "Lost in Space" and Timmy's mom in "Lassie," definitely a member of the "TV Mothers Hall of Fame."

Starring in the role of Richard Miller was Elisha Cook Jr., who played important supporting roles in two classic films. He played Wilmer in "The Maltese Falcon" (1941), and Tory, the ex-Confederate and farmer viciously gunned down in a muddy street by Jack Palance in "Shane." Shortly after *Ah, Wilderness!,* Cook left Broadway for Hollywood, where he appeared in over 120 films.

Ah, Wilderness! opened at the Guild Theater on October 2, 1933 and ran 289 performances---a hit by the standards of the Thirties, when a typical Broadway season would have over two hundred productions.

Some critical reactions:

- "O'Neill's play is the season's first dramatic exhibit of any critical importance...a folk comedy of such truth and humor, such gentle and sympathetic raillery and such imaginatively photographic character that it must be given sound rank in the list of O'Neill accomplishments...a rattling good show."

  George Jean Nathan, Judge Magazine

- "It is George M. Cohan the artist who acts in the O'Neill play, giving what is surely the richest performance of his long career...a cast that does full justice to O'Neill in his new mood of retrospection."

  Richard Dana Skinner, The Commonwealth

- "...in the evening to see E. O'Neill's 'Ah, Wilderness!' which I liked and enjoyed better than any other O'Neill play ever I saw, and as well as any other play I ever saw, it being full of tenderness and humor and some of the heart-breakingest scenes that I ever saw, and more than that, all parts acted so perfectly that even a less poignant play might have seemed good. I have never seen Mr. Cohan so good, and nobody else has either."

  F. P. A. The Coning Tower, Herald Tribune

- "I think it is inspiringly to the credit of New York's playgoers and the New York drama critics that they have risen to this fine, simple, American family comedy...inspiringly to the credit of Eugene O'Neill that he felt the urge to write it and to the Theater Guild...that it had the foresightedness and courage to produce it."

Burns Mantle, Daily News

- "Cohan triumphs at the Guild Theater in O'Neill's hit. When the first actor of our stage and the first playwright of the land merge their respective genius and talents the playgoer is sure to benefit thereby. It was and eventful night in the theater - thanks to the Guild, Mr. O'Neill, and Mr. Cohan. The charm of it, the tenderness and the comfort that it offers, a blending so lovely and so compelling that one of us, unaccustomed to such an abundance of delight at one time, left the playhouse filled to the throat, so deeply does the new play impress. By all means, go and live a little again."

Walter Winchell, Mirror

Eugene O'Neill, (1888-1953)

Edward L. Shaughnessy

From *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1999 [REPRINTED from the June 2005 TACT Audience Guide for *The Emperor Jones*]

"One thing that explains more than anything about me is the fact that I'm Irish." Thus did Eugene O'Neill acknowledge the high importance of his Celtic heritage. Another crucial given in his background was Catholicism. Even after a bitter and permanent break with the church, he would later concede, "Once a Catholic, always a Catholic." It seems quite clear, then, that O'Neill's ethnic and religious inheritance deeply affected his world view and his artistic vision.

Eugene's father, James O'Neill (1846?-1920), who became an American matinée idol, had been driven with parents and siblings from his native Kilkenny in the mid-century famine exodus. He had suffered a deforming

fear of poverty, very likely an effect of his childhood uprooting and penury. The shadow of that trauma would later darken the lives of his wife and sons. This history is relived in Eugene's searing family tragedy, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956).

O'Neill's mother, Ella (Quinlan (1857-1922)), was born in New Haven to immigrants from Tipperary. She enjoyed a privileged convent education at St. Mary's Academy in South Bend, Indiana. But, like James, she confronted a personal nemesis: Ella O'Neill fell victim to morphine addiction, the drug pre-scribed to relieve her pain after Eugene's birth. That event took place in the Barrett House, a hotel at 43rd and Broadway, on October 16, 1888.

"I was nursed in the wings," O'Neill said of the years when he accompanied his parents on tour. Among the most formative influences on the playwright-to-be was surely his father's numbing enslavement (nearly 6,000 performances) to an immensely popular recycling of the Dumas novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo,* a warhorse melodrama that earned James O'Neill a fortune. But the endless repetition of one role precluded his developing an undeniable acting talent. Eugene came to regard his father's theater as false and shallow, but he also gained from his "house" privileges an astonishing knowledge of stagecraft and theater business.

As Ella had been, her sons were boarded at the best Catholic schools: James, Jr., (Jamie (1878-1923)), at Notre Dame prep s, Georgetown, and Fordham; Eugene at Mount St. Vincent in the Bronx and De La Salle Academy in Manhattan. Contented and obedient in their early years, each boy in his turn was devastated when he learned of his mother's drug addiction. To Eugene " . . . it made everything in life seem rotten!" Thus, at fifteen, he lost all belief in a compassionate and personal God. Reluctantly, James entered the young apostate in Betts Academy in Connecticut, and later in Princeton. But, if he had gotten his way, Eugene remained forever haunted by his Catholic sensibility. Again and again his plays offer variations on the themes of sin, guilt, and the search for redemption.

Goaded by Jamie, his "creator," Eugene had spun out of control even before leaving college. Near the end of his first year (1907), failing academically, O'Neill was dropped from the Princeton rolls. Yet, as he always had, he continued to read omnivorously: in addition to fiction and poetry, Emma Goldman's anarchist magazine, *Mother Earth*, Shaw's *Quintessence of Ibsenism,* and selected works of Nietzsche. In 1909 Eugene entered into an ill- advised marriage with Kathleen Jenkins of New York, who bore a son,

Eugene, Jr. In 1911 Kathleen sued for divorce. O'Neill offered little protest, having made no effort to see the boy. He set out for Honduras on a gold-prospecting expedition but discovered there only malaria. Over the next two years he would sign on as ordinary seaman on several voyages: to British, African and South American ports of call. These travels were interrupted by periods of panhandling and dereliction. Whatever good came from these rough adventures was more accidental than planned: an earned certificate as able seaman and, somewhat in the manner of Melville, an appreciation for the sea and ships that would provide material for his art.

By 1911 O'Neill was nearly exhausted by the psychological and physical damage he had inflicted upon himself. For a time he lived the meanest waterfront existence, staying in a flophouse-bar called "Jimmy-the-Priest's." Here he fell into an even more desperate state of personal degradation and once attempted suicide. He would recall this period in *Anna Christie* (1921) and *The Iceman Cometh* (1946). Somehow he managed a rally and moved into his family's New London headquarters in the summer of 1912. He began working as a reporter on the *New London Telegraph*. Still, the dissipation had taken a toll. Diagnosed in November to have a mild case of tuberculosis, Eugene entered the Gaylord Farm Sanatorium, where he remained for five months. This period of enforced withdrawal offered an opportunity for reflection and profitable reading. Earlier, knocking about with Jamie and others, O'Neill had taken advantage of his access to Broadway houses (via James's *carte blanche*). He had seen a great deal of the new drama: Ibsen *(Hedda Gabler*), Shaw *(Mrs. Warren's Profession)* but especially the works of Abbey Theatre playwrights: Synge, Yeats, and Lady Gregory. "It was in seeing the Irish Players (on a first American tour in 1911-1912) that gave me a glimpse of my opportunity. I went to see everything they did. . . ." At Gaylord O'Neill began to read these new playwrights in earnest.

Early Relationships, Personal and Professional

The decade 1914-1924 reveals a period of astonishing self-reclamation in O'Neill's life. These years mark his development from theater tyro to world dramatist. By 1922 he had already won Pulitzer Prizes for *Beyond the Horizon* (1920) and *Anna Christie*. His path of ascendancy was not without dips but it was generally steady. Indeed, James was so impressed by Eugene's efforts that he financed the publication of his son's first book, *Thirst and Other One Act Plays,* and paid his tuition as a special student at Harvard in George Pierce Baker's advanced "English 47," a workshop in playwriting.

In the summer of 1916, in Provincetown, Massachusetts, O'Neill met George Cram "Jig" Cook, specialist in Greek drama, and his playwright wife, Susan Glaspell. Their group included poets, political writers, and idealists of all varieties--in general a crowd sympathetic to the socialist philosophy espoused by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman: Max Eastman and Michael Gold, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Louise Bryant, Hutchins Hapgood and John Silas Reed, et al. Some of them had heard about and asked to read O'Neill's plays. They read *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916): "Then we knew what we were for," said Glaspell. With O'Neill the Provincetown Players vowed to produce new American plays "of artistic, literary and dramatic--as opposed to--Broadway merit."

By 1918 O'Neill had found his path. He met and married Agnes Boulton (1893-1968), a modestly talented fiction writer. Like O'Neill, she had been married and had one child. But, because each had personal ambitions to fulfill, their relations were never entirely compatible. Shane Rudraighe was born in Provincetown in 1919. A daughter, Oona (later Mrs. Charles Chaplin), was born in Bermuda in 1925. Clearly, O'Neill had not severed his Irish roots.

The Provincetown Players established a regular-season playhouse on Macdougal St. in Greenwich Village. O'Neill, drawing further on his sailing experiences, included three other one-act pieces with *Cardiff* and named the quartet the *S. S. Glencairn* cycle. In November, 1920, the Provincetown offered *The Emperor Jones,* a radically experimental play, starring the gifted black actor, Charles Gilpin, as Brutus Jones. So successful was the production that on December 27 it was moved uptown and began a Broadway run of 204 consecutive performances.

But *The Emperor*'s very success foredoomed the Provincetown's claim on O'Neill. Soon he developed close working relations with two other theater geniuses, critic-director Kenneth Macgowan and designer-producer Robert Edmond Jones (the "triumvirate"). These three organized the Experimental Theatre, Inc., official successor to the Provincetown. They produced an impressive list of O'Neill plays: *Welded,* an adaptation of *The Ancient Mariner, All God's Chillun Got Wings,* and *Desire Under the Elms* (all in 1924); *The Fountain* (1925) and *The Great God Brown* (1926). A little later O'Neill sought the services of the Theatre Guild (a spinoff of the Washington Square Players), with its greater financial resources and professionalism. The Guild staged *Marco Millions* and *Strange Interlude* (in 1928), *Dynamo*

(1929); and, with Robert Jones, *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933) *Days Without End* (1934), *The Iceman Cometh,* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1947).

Bold Experiments, Dark Themes, and a Failed Search for God

In 1926, still married to Agnes, O'Neill met the actress-beauty, Carlotta Monterey (1888-1970), and pursued an affair with her. After their marriage in July, 1929, Carlotta devoted her life to O'Neill, a devotion so fierce that she often alienated his friends and children. Guarding his reclusion (1938-1943), Carlotta acted as gatekeeper of Tao House, their retreat near Danville, California. Here O'Neill wrote his final and greatest plays, including *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night.* Although their relations were often stormy, Eugene and Carlotta remained married. They are buried side by side in Forest Hills, Boston.

Theater historians credit O'Neill with single-handedly bringing a serious American drama into being and with setting new directions in world drama. He is regarded as a bold experimenter, especially in the 1920s, as a playwright who sought to revive the grand tragedy, and as an artist who wrestled with the question of meaning in modern life. For, out of his own experience and as a disciple of Nietzsche, O'Neill concluded that God was dead.

Between 1920-1929, some eighteen original O'Neill plays were mounted in the New York art theaters and on Broadway, an output that virtually guaranteed a certain number of failures. He combined the techniques of expressionism with the themes of naturalism. The arrogant "emperor" Jones rules his West Indies "subjects" until they rebel. As he runs for his life through the moonlit forest, all outer signs of his power shredding with his uniform, the action is intensified by a frantically accelerating beat of tom-toms. In his last moments Jones is found a quivering mass, victim of his own fears. *Jones* is both allegory and psychological realism.

Another triumph of expressionism is *The Hairy Ape* (1922). A modern Neanderthal, Yank Smith, delights in his brute strength, confident that his power "makes de woild move." By accident he discovers that capital, not brute force, controls society; he is merely a replaceable part in the mechanistic order of things. The play examines modern man's dawning recognition that, having lost his harmony with Nature, he has lost his place in the natural order.

Desire Under the Elms, as Joseph Wood Krutch observed, treated "the eternal tragedy of man and his passions." In this, and its theme about the wages of sin, the play is typically O'Neill. Men and women covet what others have: land, gold, sexual partners. To get them, they commit vile and violent acts: theft, adultery, infanticide. American in setting, *Desire Under the Elms* was called a return to high tragedy--Greek in theme, Shakespearean in vision.

Perhaps O'Neill's boldest experiment was to "reinvent" the mask of classical Greek drama. *The Great God Brown,* brilliant but confusing, finally baffles the audience: the actors' repeated masking and unmasking only defeats the viewer's attempts to follow the play's logic. Still, he had bravely accepted the challenge to dramatize Jung's archetypes, the *persona* and *anima.* O'Neill was searching for "god-substitutes" which science, he said, had failed to provide. And the idea of God-equivalents was what he hoped to advance in *Lazarus Laughed* (1927), *Strange Interlude*, and *Dynamo. Lazarus*, virtually unproduceable with its 420 roles, espouses Nietzsche's doctrine of Eternal Recurrence. The hero transcends his fear of death when he comprehends his participation in the cycle of Nature. *Strange Interlude,* a Broadway smash (426 performances) and a best-seller, was a nine-act marathon. In it O'Neill re-claimed the use of asides, a device that permitted characters to speak their inner thoughts as their opposites "freeze," unaware. *Dynamo*, with Lee Simonson's futuristic set and special effects, offered the idea of electricity as a force to be worshipped.

O'Neill produced only three new plays in the 1930s, two that have become classics, the other a bitter failure. *Mourning Becomes Electra* retells the House of Atreus myth, here set in New England but with a Civil War background. In this trilogy the author outdid his *Interlude* demands in a bold presentation of thirteen acts. The evening began at 5:30, was interrupted for dinner, and finished near midnight.

Unlike all of O'Neill's other plays, *Ah, Wilderness,* is all-American in its small town, home-and-hearth charm and its Fourth of July setting and remains a summer stock favorite. It is a picture of the youth and family life the author might have preferred. Richard Miller, a generous but hot-headed adolescent, represents young O'Neill. In the play's 1933 Broadway première (285 performances), the father was played by perennial song-and-dance man, George M. Cohan, whose own father, with James O'Neill, had helped to found the Catholic Actors' Guild. The following year (1934) O'Neill seemed to signal a wish to reclaim his lost faith. In *Days Without End* two actors play

antithetical extremes within a single character (John Loving), one part cynical and sneering, the other searching for his childhood beliefs. The unregenerate self wears a mask and can be heard by the hero (and the audience) but not by the other characters. The play failed, as did O'Neill's search for faith.

Lonely Journey to Olympus

Although he was named the 1936 Nobel laureate in literature, O'Neill's reputation was, ironically, in decline. Between 1934-1946, he would have no Broadway premières. Yet the period 1935-1943 may have been his most fruitful. For five years he was occupied with plans for a massive family saga that would cover 150 years. Called *A Tale of Possessors, Self-dispossessed,* it would trace the corruption of the American soul by greed. But ill health and a sense that he had lost focus caused O'Neill to shelve the project in late 1939. Of eleven projected plays, only two manuscripts have survived: *A Touch of the Poet* and *More Stately Mansions*. The late Travis Bogard, eminent O'Neillian, observed, "(The *Tale*) was a work of astonishing scope and scale. . . . Nothing in the drama, except Shakespeare's two cycles on British history, could have been set beside it."

At Tao House, forgotten but left in welcome seclusion, O'Neill mined the tragedy of his own past and found universal themes in his personal experiences. Now, with a full understanding of the sorrows of his parents and brother, he came to fathom the fate of everyman: to be caught in the nets of time. In these straits he located his family, his colleagues and friends, himself. Two, perhaps three of his final works, have entered the world's canon of great drama. *Long Day's Journey into Night* gives us four characters (the O'Neills, here named Tyrone) who torture each other in a kind of internecine warfare. In this towering tragedy we can see the dilemma of the human family: One is denied love and therefore withholds love. In this profitless enterprise, one is always self-defeated.

"*The Iceman* is a denial of any other experience of faith in my plays." The pessimism of the play is terrible, for it confirms that God is dead. Comfort is found only in the self-deception that one's life has a purpose. In Harry Hope's Raines-Law flophouse, the "hell hole" where O'Neill himself attempted suicide, one survived only by regarding the life of his fellows as hallowed. O'Neill had never regained faith, but he found at Hope's, not the debris of the cosmos, but the "best friends I ever had." The Irish-Catholic O'Neill had not lost his identity; he saw life as a vale of tears. The dynamics of these last plays is the confessional. In *A Moon for the Misbegotten,* Jim Tyrone (Jamie)

confesses his heartless binge in response to the death of his mother. In *Hughie* a second-rate Broadway sport, in a momentary casting aside of pathetic bravado, accepts his need for human connection.

O'Neill's final decade was his own hell. He had long suffered a degenerative palsy (akin to Parkinson's) that increasingly robbed him of his capacity to write. Losing that, he had lost his *raison d'être*. Her role as protector of the artist's privacy thus cancelled, Carlotta had now become supernumerary. In these grey years they often fell to quarreling, but she remained with him until his death (in another hotel room). The 1946 production of *The Iceman Cometh,* ballyhooed for the playwright's return to Broadway, received only a mediocre reception. The next year *A Moon for the Misbegotten* stumbled in its Columbus tryout and closed in St. Louis.

An O'Neill revival began in 1956 and has hardly abated. That year *Long Day's Journey* was given its world première by the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. *A Touch of the Poet* (1957) and *More Stately Mansions* (1962) also premièred there. O'Neill's reception in Sweden had been a genuine phenomenon since the 1923 Scandinavian première of *Anna Christie*. In May, 1956, a revival of *The Iceman Cometh* (565 performances at Circle in the Square Theatre, directed by José Quintero and starring Jason Robards, Jr.) received rave reviews. In November *Long Day's Journey* was given its American debut at the Helen Hayes Theatre (390 performances).

O'Neill stands as a giant in the modern theater, even if he has seldom won unqualified support from the critics. To the literati his faults have been grievous: grandiloquence (dialogue), forced seriousness of situation (bathos), and adventures in philosophy (issues beyond his depth). O'Neill himself had wished for the grace of language: he recognized that he seldom attained literary heights. Yet he has drawn the approval of audiences worldwide throughout the century. Actors vie for parts in O'Neill and credit him with an uncanny sense of theatricality and a genius of character motivation. All have praised his uncompromising integrity in the face of demands to cut his plays to win easy popularity. No other playwright has documented so profoundly as O'Neill did the arch theme of modern drama: the individual's anguish as he clings desperately to old answers in the face of a ubiquitous challenge to faith.

Asked in 1946 if he had returned to the faith of his boyhood, O'Neill replied, "Unfortunately, no." He had spoken with finality and honesty. Yet a kind of religious sensibility had apparently remained a part of his nature.

Something serious in the theater was reborn with Eugene O'Neill, who saw the playhouse as modern man's last temple.

Filtering America's Past ThroughSunlight: Eugene O'Neill's Ah, Wilderness!

By Yvonne Shafer
St. John's University

Eugene O'Neill is known as America's greatest tragic playwright, but one of his most popular plays, Ah, Wilderness!, created a picture of our country set in 1906 in which the lives of the characters and the aura of their town is filtered through sunlight. Visually and linguistically the comedy represents an age of innocence and charm. Set on the Fourth of July, it celebrates an America as yet untouched by world war, widespread poverty, divorce, and other social ills that now form a part of our memory of the twentieth century. O'Neill said he had presented the "real America." Depression era audiences accepted this view when it premiered and hoped for a return to those happy times. The vision of life constructed by O'Neill has continued to appeal to audiences as a hopeful representation of past reality during the vicissitudes of World War II, the Cold War, and Viet Nam. In recent times, it has charmed audiences with its depiction of a past which O'Neill, himself did not experience and which, in the wake of recent tragedies and the contemporary ironic view of life, seems paradoxically to be both real and imaginary.

The play is often described as a "dream play" and, in fact, is both literally and figuratively that. O'Neill woke one morning to find that he had literally dreamed the entire play, complete with title, and made a complete outline for it that day. Figuratively, the play is a dream of what American life in a small town was in 1906. As such, it has been perceived as a play of almost total innocence and naiveté, a world filtered, as it were, through sunlight. It is also generally described and remembered as a charming picture of the innocence of youth and young love. In the following pages I am going to analyze the

actuality of these perceptions. Beginning with the play itself, one may ask if it is indeed so very innocent and naïve and sunny. Next, since the play is often described as autobiographical, with O'Neill serving as his own model for Richard, how valid is that idea? Finally, since the time that passed after World War I and the movement of America into the Depression affected the reality of the perceptions of this period of pre-war prosperity, how accurate is the depiction? Finally, I will examine the reality of the period in which O'Neill wrote the play and the effect of the play on audiences and critics of that time and then do the same with the period of the end of the twentieth century in which the play was successfully revived at Lincoln Center.

A close reading of the play reveals that it is indeed a comedy, but far from the light-hearted fairly shallow piece of entertainment as it is often described. The simple story concerns a newspaper editor Nat Miller and his wife Essie and their nearly seventeen year-old-son, Richard. The young man fancies himself a rebel and has read Swinburne and other controversial writers, sending excerpts of their work to his innocent young girlfriend, Muriel. When her father learns of it, he imprisons her at home and demands that Nat punish Richard. In the course of the play the Fourth of July is celebrated, Richard is lured to a hotel frequented by prostitutes and their customers, and finally meets with his Muriel in the moonlight on the beach where they share their first kiss and vow to love one another. The last scene is a touching reconciliation between Richard and his parents and then them alone in the moonlight as Nat says, "Well, Spring isn't everything, is it, Essie? There's a lot to be said for Autumn. That's got beauty, too. And Winter–if you're together."

Barrett H. Clark, a critic who both encouraged and admired O'Neill, wrote in one of the first major studies of the playwright (revised in 1947): "There are no philosophical implications in this simple serious comedy, and there is scarcely a hint of ironic intention; it comes rather as a quiet interlude in the work of a playwright who had not so far in his writing career been content to use the theater merely as a means of showing character detached, as it were, from the ulterior complications of human existence. At first glance his view may seem accurate, but there are dark elements in the play as a whole, particularly in the second act. Before the play opened George M. Cohan (who gave his finest performance as a serious actor as Nat Miller), gave an interview in which he stated that he felt the play provided evidence that the public wanted literature, not light entertainment. The interviewer said that Cohan talked banter about everything except the play, over which he "waxed serious .

. . almost pious." Cohan said, "It's a study in human nature, I guess you would call it a comedy, but it's got a tragic theme–no . . . it's got a serious note in it."

One of the social problems which form the underpinning of the comedy is that of drinking. It comes up at the beginning of the play on the morning of the Fourth of July as Nat Miller and his brother-in-law, the irrepressibly comic Sid, discuss their plans to go to an annual picnic for men only. Both Mrs. Miller and Lily Miller his "old-maid" sister indicate concern about the drinking which will take place there. Sid had been engaged to Lily, the name signifying her purity, sixteen years before but she broke it off because of his drinking. For this period, neither of the women is unusual in her concern about drinking. We think of Prohibition as a failed experiment which came after World War I. In fact, the problems of alcoholism for both adults and youth were so serious that long before that many states passed prohibition laws. Many people of intelligence and sophistication supported movements against the particular problems associated with the heavy drinking of men, and the increasing amount of drinking by women. In other words, the temperance movement was not supported only by extremists wielding axes. The concerns were reflected in plays and novels in which depicted the ruin of family life and the deep concern about the drinking among young persons. In 1907, one year after this play is set, Tennessee's "Four-Mile Law," which made it illegal to sell liquor within four miles of a school, had been put into effect in many major American cities.

The play actually presents drinking as a serious problem, but the audience tends to remember the comedy associated with Sid's drunkenness. The heights of the comedy, the scenes which absolutely delight audiences, are those in which Sid and Nat come back from the picnic. O'Neill says Nat is "mellow" enough to give his wife a "smacking kiss" and "slap her jovially on her fat buttocks" in front of his children and the servant. Sid is so drunk that he is in a daze. Nevertheless, he is able to make jokes and turn the Fourth of July lobster dinner into a hilarious disaster with him eating lobster shells and making a wonderful comic exit as he leaves to sleep off his drunkenness, forgetting that he had promised to take Lily to the fireworks.

As indicated, this is an extremely funny drunk scene. However, the act as a whole is constructed rather like a one-act play that moves from comedy to a tragic note. In that sense it has the structure which O'Neill later described as his plan for "The Iceman Cometh":

“It’s struck me as time goes on, how something funny, even farcical, can suddenly without any apparent reason, break up into something gloomy and tragic . . . a sort of unfair non sequitur, as though events, as though life, were being manipulated just to confuse us; a big kind of comedy that doesn’t stay funny very long. I’ve made some use of it in The Iceman. The first act is hilarious comedy, I think, but then some people may not even laugh. At any rate, the comedy breaks up and the tragedy comes on.”

When Sid exits, everyone laughs, even Lily, but she jumps from her seat and says, “That’s just it–you shouldn’t–even I laughed–it does encourage–that’s been his downfall–everyone is always laughing, everyone always saying what a card he is, what a case, what a caution, so funny–and he’s gone on–and we’re all responsible–making it easy for him–we’re all to blame–and all we do is laugh!”

Of course Lily is right. Sid is back in town because he was fired for drunkenness–drink has ruined his hopes of marriage to Lily and his chances of keeping a job. He has also lost his self-esteem as revealed when he responds to Richard’s vow never to drink again. He says, “with drowsy cynicism–not unmixed with bitterness at the end,”

“Seems to me I’ve heard someone say that before. Who could it have been, I wonder? Why, if it wasn’t Sid Davis! Yes, sir, I’ve heard him say that very thing a thousand times, must be. But then he’s always fooling; you can’t take a word he says seriously; he’s a card, that Sid is.”

The women in the play are also concerned about Richard and other young men drinking. Richard is lured into his drunk scene by a Yale freshman, “the hell-raising sport type.” He has dated up “a couple of swift babies from New Haven” and wants to have Richard buy drinks for one of them, Belle, while he takes the other, Edith, upstairs for sex. In the event, Richard does drink a beer, then a drink that Belle tells the bartender to doctor so it will make him drunk. Again, O’Neill creates very funny drunk scenes both in the bar and at home. Richard quotes poems and passages from Hedda Gabler causing his mother to burst into tears and exclaim, “Oh, it’s too terrible! Imagine our Richard! And did you hear him talking about some Hedda? Oh, I know he’s been with one of those bad women, I know he has–my Richard!”

In Richard’s case it seems drink is unlikely to ruin his life as it has Uncle Sid’s. He is so sick and feels so terrible that his father, mother, and his sweetheart Muriel are all convinced that he will avoid drink in the future. His father and

Uncle Sid, however, are more concerned about another social problem that is suggested in the play. That is the question of prostitution and venereal disease.

An interesting contrast to O'Neill's reputedly innocent and naïve picture of 1906 is Booth Tarkington's novel "Seventeen." In his utterly charming picture of the life of the period there are no prostitutes, no drinking, and the worst papa has to put up with is ukuleles and talk about love. In O'Neill's play there is quite a different tone—truly a much more sophisticated and knowing tone. Anyone familiar with O'Neill's plays knows that the presence or discussion of prostitutes (who are often sympathetically depicted) is fairly constant from the early plays to the last. In this play Richard is shown with Belle, a woman who says she usually charges ten dollars to go upstairs, but is willing to go up with him for only five dollars because he is so handsome. (Carrying our minds back, we have to remember that five dollars was a lot of money then.) The place in which they are drinking is absolutely sordid, the back room of a hotel where "they only charge you two dollars to go upstairs." The description of the room concludes, "A brass cuspidor is on the floor by each table. The floor is unswept, littered with cigarette and cigar butts. The hideous saffron-colored wall-paper is blotched and spotted." O'Neill depicts Richard as distressed by the proposal to go upstairs and disturbed by the obvious decadence of Belle, rather than excited. In fact, he tells her that she should reform. However, his doctored drink and her kisses are warming him until they are interrupted by the fortunate entrance of a traveling salesman (calling to mind a role played with success by O'Neill's brother, that habitué of whore houses, Jamie). He provides a more likely customer than Richard and the scene in which the increasingly drunk Richard spouts poetry and the salesman encourages him for fun is a fine piece of comic writing. The salesman finally tells the bartender that Richard is under age and he is roughly thrown out. As in the lobster dinner scene, the mood swiftly changes after the salesman reveals the name of Richard's father and leaves to be sure the young man gets on his trolley safely:

Bartender: (viciously) God damn the luck! If he ever finds out I served his kid, he'll run me out of town. (He turns on Belle furiously.) Why didn't you put me wise, you lousy tramp, you!

Belle: Hey! I don't stand for that kind of talk—not from no hick beer-squirter like you, see!

Bartender: (furiously) You don't, don't you! Who was it but you told me to hand him dynamite in that [sloe gin] fizz? (He gives her chair a push that almost throws her to the floor.) Beat it, you—and beat it quick—or I'll call

Sullivan from the corner and have you run in for street-walking! (He gives her a push that lands against the family-entrance door.) Get the hell out of here–and no long waits!

Belle: (opens the door and goes out–turns and calls back viciously) I'll fix you for this, you thick Mick, if I have to go to jail for it. (She goes and slams the door.)

Bartender: (looks after her worriedly for a second–then shrugs his shoulders) That's only her bull. (Then with a sigh as he returns to the bar) Them lousy tramps is always getting this dump in Dutch!

The passage would not have seemed out of place in Anna Christie or The Iceman Cometh and is a far cry from Tarkington's Seventeen. The problem of "bad women" in American society was a source of great concern not only because of the supposed immorality involved, but because of the danger of venereal disease. In The Iceman Cometh Hickey says that his many nights spent with prostitutes caused him to "pick up a nail" which he then passed on to his innocent wife. In Ah, Wilderness! O'Neill refers obliquely, but darkly to the problem. Lily tells Essie Miller the reason she broke off with Sid and never could marry him, despite her love for him: "It's sixteen years since I broke off our engagement, but what made me break it off is as clear to me today as it was then. It was what he'd be liable to do now to anyone who married him–his taking up with bad women." Essie's weak defense is that Sid always claimed he was drawn into a party and "never had anything to do with those harlots." A more realistic picture of the danger is drawn in the discussion between Sid and Nat on the fifth of July when the revengeful Belle has sent a note describing the events of the evening before. Sid, displaying the knowing quality of Jamie O'Neill, says, "She's one of the babies, all right–judging from her elegant language." However, he resents Nat's implication that he corresponds with all the tramps in town and might recognize the handwriting. He clearly knows the Pleasant Beach Hotel, describing it as "nothing but a bed house." Concerned, he says, "I hope you're wrong, Nat. That kind of baby is dangerous for a kid like Dick.–in more ways than one. You know what I mean."

Again, O'Neill's comic approach to the material obscures the seriousness of the problem when Nat attempts to talk to Richard about it. His whole speech relates to the reality of sexual drives, the long history of prostitution, and the dangers of contracting a disease and how to avoid it, but the speech is so disjointed and he is so embarrassed that it is one of the comic highlights of the

play. Again, O'Neill subverts the danger of overt seriousness through his craft as a writer of comedy. Nevertheless, the dark elements are suggested in the play and Brooks Atkinson asked O'Neill in 1933 if the play could not have been a tragedy as likely as a comedy.

Turning to the question of autobiography, it is frequently taken for granted that O'Neill was depicting himself in the character of Richard and that the play is essentially about young love. It has often been suggested that his sorrow over the long lost early love Beatrice Ashe is the keynote and inspiration for the play. However, there are few similarities between Richard and the young O'Neill. The chief similarities are that both young men were interested in radical writers and engaged in revolutionary talk and the similarity in age: Richard is nearly 17 and in 1906 O'Neill was 17. But O'Neill's romance with the young Beatrice Ashe, too innocent and proper to respond to his passion, occurred when he was nearly 26, had been married and divorced, and had fathered a son. Writing in 1945, O'Neill discussed his manner of writing and said that the play had been easy to write as it all came to him in a dream and he had some memories to help him. "Of these (contrary to legend) few were autobiographical. The idea that Richard in the play resembles me at his age is absurd. I was the exact opposite."

There is certainly evidence to support that view. Thanks to Jamie, O'Neill had been introduced to alcohol and to prostitution at an early age. He began drinking at fifteen and, as is well known, had terrible problems with alcohol until he quit in 1926. It is also well known that his family life was quite unhappy. In New London he spent much of his time drinking beer with some other young boys and going to the twelve brothels in New London. The Gelbs describe these as "rickety wooden structures flanking the police station." James O'Neill was so concerned about both Eugene and Jamie that at one time he felt he should warn the parents of some "impressionable daughters to keep them away from his profligate sons." A long way from Nat Miller's view of Richard.

However, if one shifts from the view of the play as primarily about youth and young love, there is more to reflect on in terms of autobiography than has generally been discussed. While the play seems to center on Richard and his frustrated romance with Muriel, in fact, the play in performance, from the earliest production to the present, focuses much more on Nat Miller, his philosophical stance (especially regarding radical literature and in contrast to the Muriel's conservative father), and to his love for his wife, the mother of his

six children. At the time O'Neill wrote the play he had been through incredible difficulties: the problems of his parents and his brother and the unhappiness of their deaths, two divorces, the scandal and publicity of his flight with Carlotta Monterey, and difficulties of getting his major plays produced. At the time he woke with this dream, this play of a happy family, he was in a sense recently arrived in a safe harbor. The Theatre Guild was producing his plays, he had received critical success, and, most importantly, he was happily living in the home in Georgia which his wife Carlotta had created and which was devoted to making it possible for him to work. There were other elements related to his age. Around the Fourth of July in 1931 he had visited his old home in New London. He later wrote, "Perhaps it is because I am growing old that I begin to look back fondly on my youthful days in a part of the country that was my one real home in those times." Now he had a real home and wrote to screenwriter Robert Sisk, "We are very happy about it. It really is a peach of a place. First home I've ever built. So it's a proud new thrill." The letter was interrupted because he was "full up with visitors." On the Fourth of July in 1932 he had the happiness of entertaining his son Shane and his son Eugene O'Neill, Jr. with his bride, Betty. In contrast to the accepted picture of O'Neill as the distant father who ignored his children and spent his days in melancholy, he wrote that he "was on the hop leading fishing and swimming parties—and talking parties." Brooks Atkinson who interviewed O'Neill immediately after the premiere of Ah, Wilderness, gives a further picture of his mood and outlooks at this time! Noting that O'Neill was then forty-five, he wrote,

Mr. O'Neill is a little grayer around the temples and the lines are a little more firmly drawn on his face, but his eyes have the luster of a man who is in good health and spirits and who is eager to go on vigorously with the job. It is this interviewer's private opinion that the tension has relaxed a good deal. Mr. O'Neill seems to be having a pretty good time; like a good many of the rest of us he can laugh without brilliant provocation.

Atkinson concluded that "his soul was in excellent condition." Given O'Neill's circumstances at the time of the writing, the most meaningful autobiographical element might well be the love between Nat and Essie. The play can be seen as a love song to Carlotta. The play ends, not with the scene between Richard and Muriel, but between the 59 year old Nat and his plump wife who is in her fifties. Even the reference to the death of young love is not dark—Essie says maybe the romance with Muriel won't last (as O'Neill's with Beatrice Ashe did not), but concludes, "Well, anyway, he'll always have it to

remember—no matter what happens after—and that's something." At this time O'Neill was 45 and Carlotta was only somewhat younger. When the play was published, he inscribed her copy with the lines about mature love.

Before production began he wrote the director, Philip Moeller, "I know we're going to have a lot of fun doing this play." After it opened, he wrote to Kenneth Macgowan,

"You will remember those good old days as well as I, and you much have known many Miller families. I had a grand time writing it—also a grand time rehearsing, for the cast, taking it all in all from bits to leads, is the best I have ever had in a play. They really make it live very close to what I imagined it. A most enjoyable experience in the theatre, all told—and how the damn thing moves young, middle-aged and old! It's astonishing. And a proof to me, at least, that emotionally we still deeply hanker after the old solidarity of the family unit."

Indeed, the play did move the audiences and critics. It is interesting to see how it was perceived in 1933. It is easy to imagine how welcome this overtly comic play was to Americans. Deep in the Depression, with unemployment high and plays closing for lack of audiences, this play drew crowds first in New York, then when Cohan took it on tour, and then on a West Coast tour with Will Rogers as Nat Miller. By 1932, American industry was turning out less than half its 1929 volume, crop prices had dropped, and "on a single day in April, 1932, one-fourth of the state of Mississippi fell under the auctioneer's hammer." An anonymous critic who had returned to New York from a tour of the country, seeing the "busted banks and idle factories" concluded that the play was just was the country needed—"people's minds everywhere are too harassed with real, and to many, hitherto unheard-of worries" that constructs of unhappiness on stage were not what was needed. "Even another 'Strange Interlude' would be just a bit too much." So he wrote that this play with its warmth, humor, and tenderness was more than welcome "as the packed and delighted theater sufficiently indicates." (He also notes that it answered some recent criticism of the Theatre Guild by being a positive view of America by an American playwright.) Walter Winchell praised the play for the "tenderness and the comfort that it offers" which brought a lump into his throat. Many of the critics commented on the "truth" in the play. One critic wrote, "The deep emotion of his writing, the simplicity of his tale, and the sweetness of its telling combine to lift 'Ah, Wilderness!' to a grace that is true and right and compelling. Not knowing, I think, whether to laugh or cry, the

First Audience had the decency to do both." He concluded that "without antiquarian insistence," O'Neill showed all the ingratiating detail of that life and time.

The notion of truth expressed in the critical reaction is interesting because there was an immediate tendency to compare the play with Tarkington's popular 1916 novel Seventeen. Gilbert W. Gabriel began his review by saying "all the dolts in creation and criticism will begin by saying Eugene O'Neill has turned Tarkington." As indicated above, Tarkington's delightful tale is in an entirely different mode, broadly funny and without a serious note or reference to social problems—a long way from the Pleasant Beach Hotel. John Mason Brown noted the difference, saying, "O'Neill does not cheat to get his laughs. He refuses to content himself with superficialities or to indulge in the tempting distortions by means of which Mr. Tarkington, Mrs. Franken and a score of others have won easy chuckles when handling slightly similar themes." At the same time, O'Neill expressed his opinions about the play in interviews and letters. He obviously viewed it as something more than a toss-off comedy written as a break between serious work. He clearly viewed it as a play that was both real and imagined from a distance. He wrote to Eugene O'Neill, Jr. that it was:

"An evocation of the mood of emotion of a past time which, whatever may be said against it, possessed a lot which we badly need today to steady us. I mean, not the same thing, that's dead; but the inner reality of that thing conceived in terms of life today. The good idea of the simple family life as lived by the typical middle-class hard working American of the average large-small town which is America in miniature—the coming of the new radical literature to youth (Shaw, Ibsen, Wilde, Omar Khayyam, etc.)—that's what I've tried to do in the play. A play about people, simple people of another day but real American People . . . And a comedy! It's damned funny (at least to me!). But it makes me weep a few tears, too!"

Similarly, he wrote to Saxe Commins:

"There were innumerable such people in these United States. There still are, except life has carried us out of their orbit, we no longer see or know them, our gaze is concentrated either above or below them. But if America ever pulls out of its present mess back to something approaching its old integrity and uniqueness, I think it will be owing to the fundamental, simple homely decency of such folk, no matter how much corrupting, disintegrating influences have spoiled it since the War."

Pleased by the success of the play, O'Neill wrote Macgowan, "I knew it would hand you a reminiscent chuckle. It's a play which seems to hit all ages and classes one way or another—even, judging from letters and talks—the modern college youth whom I thought would be sure to be superior. The production goes merrily along—looks good for the rest of the season." Little did he suspect how merrily it would go along. It was published in Burns Mantle's Best Plays series as one of the ten best plays of the year. There were two movie versions, an almost instant revival by the Theatre Guild and the play has been performed constantly throughout the world ever since 1933. I was amazed by the sheer number of programs and advertisements for productions that are in the files at Lincoln Center. One of these was a highly successful 1997 production of the play by the National Asian American Theatre Company with Ron Nakahara as Uncle Sid.

Not surprisingly the events of the twentieth century and the strong presence of irony in much of contemporary writing and criticism affected critical response to the 1997 production of Ah, Wilderness! at Lincoln Center. In the mostly favorable critical response there was a recognition of the darker elements in the play—partly as a result of the material in biographies of O'Neill and his late plays. Fintan O'Toole, heading his review "Happy days are here again in a positively winning revival" wrote, that it was "less a comedy than an elegy for a warm, safe, lost world" and that director Daniel Sullivan "does full justice to that wistful undertow beneath the play's pleasant surface." Michael Feingold, too, noted that "his staging pushes the dark side into the foreground." Donald Lyons wrote, "O'Neill in a comic vein was still O'Neill, and the glorious production of 'Ah, Wilderness!' at the Vivian Beaumont makes palpable the darkness enveloping the little island of light that is the Miller family . . . There's a subtly dry, ironic quality to the dialogue, as if it were being filtered through memory."

Naturally, some critics found the play old-fashioned and sentimental. Not surprisingly, Robert Brustein weighed in on the negative side, calling the play "an old warhorse" which seemed very long. In response to the questions raised in the play, he asked, "Who cares?" He concluded that the play is too comfortable and asked, "Did that lost Eden of ideals and manners and codes ever really exist?" Jonathan Kalb found the play annoying because it wasn't funny, but people were laughing. Sneering at the dialogue, he said, "The reminiscence is so glassy-eyed, sappy, and psychologically superficial that it simply won't stand, either as a portrait of precocious adolescence or a sepia snapshot of 1906 New England." Reflecting the Zeitgeist of America in the

nineties, he said that O'Neill could not have believed in the optimism in the play any more "than he did in faeries" and that sitting through the play was "like suffering through a nightmare of 'niceness.'" Peter Marks, while writing a highly positive review, nevertheless reflected some of the same Zeitgeist, saying that the play seemed a "mild brew" but that perhaps it is just "that a really nice family is less interesting than a really vicious one." Nevertheless, he found the evening delightful as did Westsider critic, D. L Lepidus, who noted that although the evening was three hours long "it seems a lot shorter than most two-hour plays." Audiences agreed and the play was a big success, even without superstars to draw them in. Chris Jones offered a good summation of the production:

A warm and accessible production of one of the most commercially viable of Eugene O'Neill's familial sagas, Daniel Sullivan's vibrantly staged and thoroughly entertaining Lincoln Center revival of "Ah, Wilderness!" has both the creative integrity and the contemporary spark necessary to attract audiences beyond O'Neill devotees.

In creating this comedy, O'Neill was drawing on his knowledge of playwriting absorbed from years of theatre-going as a child and a young adult, his studies with Baker, and his years of writing and rewriting plays. He created a play which had Depression audiences laughing and still speaks to audiences with memories of Viet Nam, assassinations, and terrorist attacks. His skill allows us to view this "happy time" and enter into it for the length of the play.

Beneath the happiness is the darkness of the time in which the play was written, the darkness of his own life, and the serious implications of Omar Khayyam's poems: "Yet, Ah, that spring should vanish like a rose, that youth's sweet-scented manuscript should close." Great craftsman that he was both in comedy and tragedy, O'Neill filtered the darkness through sunlight through most of the play and bathed it in moonlight at the end.

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by Tennessee Williams (1964) Ruinous romance unfolds with the fascination of a car wreck in the playwright's re-imagined *Summer and Smoke.*
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by Robert McElwaine (World Premiere) Only the humanity of John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev stands between a desperate peace and thermonuclear war.
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