

## *A Great American Playwright*

You may not have heard of playwright Eugene O'Neill. He died in 1953. Most of his plays were serious or even tragic. Yet when critics look at the large number of works he produced and their general excellence, most agree that he is America's greatest playwright.

O'Neill had the theater around him for most of his life. His father was a Shakespearean actor, and the family – his wife, his older son, and young Eugene – often accompanied him on tour. Before he began writing plays, O'Neill worked at various jobs. He was a sailor and a gold prospector as well as an actor.

O'Neill brought new techniques to the American theater. For example, in one play the characters turn aside and speak their thoughts out loud. In another, the characters wear various masks. These show their inner and outer personalities.

Many of O'Neill's life experiences found their way into his plays. Several of his early short plays, for example, were set at sea. *The Iceman Cometh*, a later work, presents a group of alcoholic do-nothings sitting in a bar. Their lives seem modeled on O'Neill's early years. Other famous works deal directly with his immediate family. One, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, is almost a family portrait. It explores the complicated and bitter relations between a vain, loudmouthed father, his morphine-addicted wife, his alcoholic older son, and his sickly younger one. Another, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, deals with the older brother's sad life. O'Neill tries to suggest a way that things might have turned out better.

O'Neill is a major force in American theater. His best works are often put on in influential playhouses. Famous actors vie for the chance to play his roles.

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