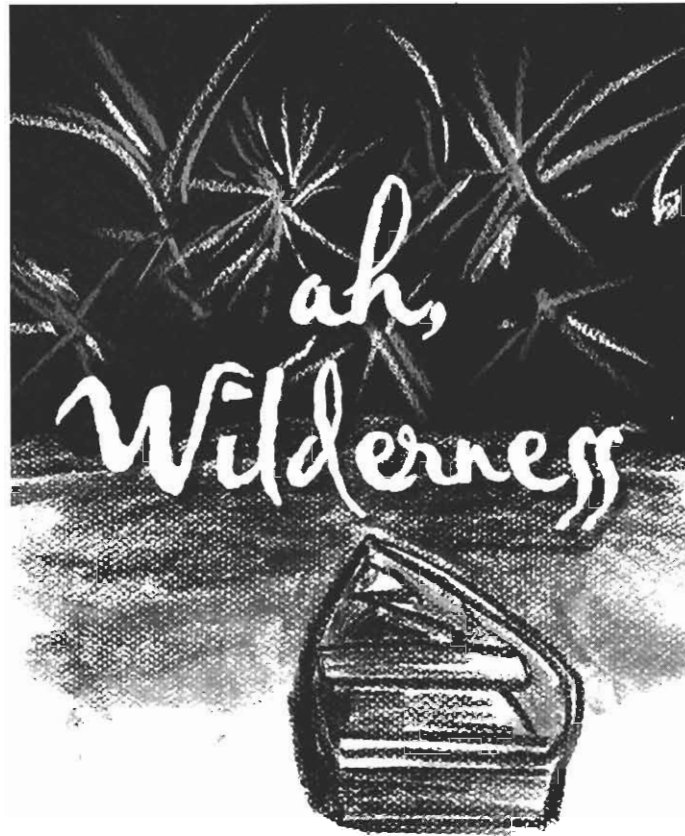


STUDY GUIDE

THE REPERTORY THEATRE OF ST. LOUIS

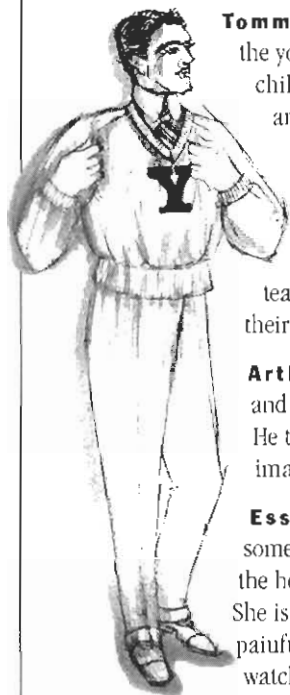


BY EUGENE O'NEILL

C O N T E N T S

- 2. Who's Who
Words to the Wise
- 4. What's the Story
- 6. Bio & Beyond
- 8. A Boyhood Wish
- 9. Shop Talk
Read More About It
- 10. Q & A

• WHO'S WHO? •



Tommy Miller is, at eleven, the youngest of the four Miller children and is full of energy and curiosity.

Mildred Miller is fifteen and the Millers' only daughter. Her favorite pastime is teasing her brothers about their girlfriends.

Arthur Miller is nineteen and a college man at Yale. He takes himself and his image very seriously.

Essie Miller is the fifty-something mother and wife at the heart of this household. She is in the midst of the painful and exciting process of watching her children mature.

Lily Miller is Essie's unassuming forty-two year-old sister-in-law who has the misfortune of wanting something in life that she will never allow herself to have—Sid.

Nat Miller is in his late fifties and is the even-tempered owner of the local paper. As a father, he prefers to guide his children to choices rather than force his own on them.

Sid Davis is Essie's older brother who has never quite made the transition to adulthood. He substitutes charm for responsibility and finds himself empty-handed.

Richard Miller is sixteen and in his mind, the only rational person in his family. He is at once, losing and finding himself.

David McComber is the narrow-minded, overly protective father of Richard's girlfriend, Muriel.

Norah is the good-intentioned but not particularly skilled young serving woman in the Miller house.

Wint Selby is an adventure-loving, wild-living classmate of Arthur's at Yale.

Belle is a recent recruit to the oldest profession in the world.

Muriel McComber is the fifteen-year-old love of Richard's life.



• WORDS to the WISE •

Fresh (kid)—Arthur, feeling very mature, uses this term to indicate that Toumy is badly behaved.

On the tappee—This is Nat's way of asking what everyone's plans are for the day.

Boola-Boola—Originally a Yale University fight song, this phrase came to refer to anything associated with the school, including students like Arthur.

Sachem Club—Sid and Nat attend this club for the most senior members of the Tammany Society, a group that dominated New York City politics for large portions of the 19th and 20th centuries. The name is taken from the title of Native American chiefs.

W.C.T.U.—Sid jokes about being a member of this organization, the Women's Christian Temperance Union,

which was founded in 1874 by women who were concerned about the negative effects of alcohol.

"Nick Carter"—Nick Carter began as a fictional detective who made his debut in 1886 in cheap novels in imitation of Sherlock Holmes. Over the years, the character has evolved with the times and today he is depicted as a James Bond-like super-spy.

"Old Cap Collier"—Collier, an aging detective was another popular hero of pulp fiction created in 1870 by Norman Munro.

Socialism—Nat suspects that Richard has become interested in this social structure which does not allow for private ownership of property, only shared control of goods.

Pierpont Morgan—Richard considers J.P. Morgan, one of the financial world's great leaders, to be an enemy of the state.

Tumbril—These large farm carts were used during the French Revolution to carry prisoners to their execution.

Emma Goldman—Goldman was an extreme anti-government activist from the late 1800s through the first half of the twentieth century.

Carlyle's French Revolution—Thomas Carlyle was a Scottish historian and wrote this popular 1837 book on the mistreatment of France's poor.

Mirabeau, Marat, Robespierre—These French revolutionaries are among Richard's new idols.

Oscar Wilde—A nineteenth-century Irish poet, playwright and one-time novelist, Wilde's theories on "art for art's sake" and his flamboyant lifestyle made him a controversial figure in Victorian England.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol—Convicted of homosexuality in 1895, Wilde spent two years in prison and wrote this poem as a reflection on his time there.

Bernard Shaw—Born in Ireland in 1856, Shaw is considered one of Britain's most influential playwrights. He was also a bold social activist and a respected theatre, music and art critic.

Ibsen—A nineteenth-century Norwegian playwright, Ibsen's realistic portrayal of human behavior earned him the title "father of modern drama."

Swinburne—An English poet and literary critic, Swinburne often wrote on themes of physical love and liberty.

Shelley—Percy Shelley is one of the best-known English romantic poets.

Kipling—Rudyard Kipling, an English writer, is remembered for his short stories set in India, the most famous being *The Jungle Book*.

The Rubaiyat of Omar

Khayyam—This 4000-line poem is the most popular Persian work to be translated into English.

Brass tacks—This phrase can be used in place of "the bottom line." It generally means that what follows it is what is truly important or the details of an argument.

Blasphemous—McComber uses this word to suggest that Richard has no respect for anything.

Hellion—Richard's taste in literature has branded him a troublemaker or a hellion.

Impudence—McComber considers Nat's defense of Richard impudence or careless boldness.

Hiding (give him a...)—McComber thinks that Richard deserves a beating or hiding.

Rumpus—Nat decides that Richard's reading habits are the cause of the disturbance or rumpus.

Anarchist—Richard has made himself out to be an anarchist, or someone who rejects all authority.

Warm lulu—Sid uses this old phrase to say that the poems Richard sent to Muriel are a little too suggestive.

Old-fogey—Richard believes that McComber's conservative beliefs make him an old-fogey or someone who is out of touch with the time.

Spunk—Richard wants Muriel to have the same energy or spunk for life that he has.

Sponging—Lily feels as if she is taking advantage of Nat and Essie or sponging off of them by living in their home.

Piazza—The Millers use this Italian term for their porch.

Swift babies—These babies that Wint describes are all grown up—as young, attractive women.

This after—Wint uses this phrase as slang for "this afternoon."

Dated them up—At the time, this trendy phrase meant to "make a date with."

Rube—Richard doesn't want to be thought of as this kind of unsophisticated person.

Soused—Tommy announces that Uncle Sid is drunk, or soused.

Blarney stone—This stone in Blarney Castle in Ireland is believed to give the power of flattery to those who kiss it.

Lucretia Borgia—An Italian patron of the arts during the Renaissance, Borgia gained a bad reputation as a result of her association with unseemly relatives.

Epicures—Sid uses this term for people with very sensitive taste in food and wine.

Dutch courage—This phrase is used to suggest that someone's courage is false and comes only from alcohol.

Hick burg—Belle repeatedly refers to the town as a "hick burg," implying that it is small and unsophisticated.

Nix—This is a common substitute for "no" at the time.

"Cuts no ice with me"—This phrase means, "it doesn't matter to me."

Dope—During this period, "dope" is used as a substitute for "stuff."

A scream—Something that is "a scream" is very entertaining or funny.

Sweetbreads—This food has a misleading name, as it is neither sweet, nor bread but is made from the pancreas of a young animal, usually a calf.

Whole cheese—Translated to current slang, this phrase might be "da bomb."

Vesta Victoria—A popular performer in British music halls, Victoria was known for her sad songs about love gone wrong.

Hedda—Richard refers to Hedda Gabler, the title character in an Ibsen play, as if she is someone he knows personally.

Ruitions—Essie describes Richard's experience at the bar as ruitions or an uproar.

Bromo Seltzer—The Alka-Seltzer of its day, this mixture offered relief from headache and nausea.

Low dive—Richard enjoys telling Muriel that he went to a disgraceful bar, or a low dive.

Delirium tremens—These severe delusions and tremors are caused by long-term alcohol abuse.

Whited sepulchres—This phrase usually refers to someone who appears attractive and good on the outside but is actually corrupt on the inside.



• WHAT'S the STORY •

Act I, Scene 1

Ab, Wilderness! follows the life of the Nat Miller family in a "large small town" in Connecticut for thirty-six hours beginning on the morning of July 4, 1906. The entire family is



WINSLOW CORBETT AND DANIEL TALBOTT

gathered for the holiday, but each member is celebrating in his or her own way. Tommy, the youngest in the household, is declaring his independence with a bang, lighting firecrackers as soon as his mother, Essie, will allow it. Arthur, on break from Yale University is making up for lost time with his girlfriend, Elsie Rand, and Mildred, his younger sister is going swimming with friends—as soon as she finishes teasing Arthur. Essie and her husband Nat opt to go for a drive (still a relatively new

adventure) with Essie's brother Sid and Nat's sister Lily before Sid and Nat leave for the Schem Club picnic. Richard, fresh out of high school, is the only member of the family who does not seem to be in a rush to get somewhere or do something. Nat calls him three times before he puts down the book that he is reading long enough to have a conversation. Richard's recent interest in such "radical" authors as Shaw, Swinburne and Ibsen concerns Essie, and she urges Nat to take advantage of this opportunity to talk to him. Nat obliges, but both Richard and Essie are surprised to learn that Nat himself has read many of the same books. Essie shames them both, but Nat defends himself and Richard, saying "there's fine things... true things" in the writing. Before they can reach any consensus, Dave McComber, the father of Richard's girlfriend, Muriel arrives at the front door.

The whole family dislikes McComber who is known for strictness and a grim outlook, but as the owner of the local newspaper, Nat is obligated to be polite to McComber, one of his largest advertisers. No one is certain what he wants, but they all flee, leaving Nat alone to deal with him. Surly as usual, McComber declares that Richard is trying to "corrupt the morals" of Muriel and presents as evidence a letter from Richard to Muriel, which is little more than love poems that the young man has copied from his favorite authors. McComber, however, doesn't see it this way and tells Nat how he should be raising his son. This infuriates Nat and prompts him to throw McComber out of the house and his ad out of the paper. The McComber's do get the last word, though, as Dave leaves a "Dear John" letter from Muriel for Richard.

Sid eavesdrops on the entire conversation and congratulates Nat for his gusto, but after Nat reads the letter from Richard, he isn't so certain that McComber was wrong. The poetry is surprisingly bold and both of the men term it "very warm." Nat becomes concerned that maybe Richard's intentions toward Muriel are "disgraceful" after all. He calls his son in and asks him outright whether or not he has tried "to have something to do with Muriel... that he shouldn't" Richard is insulted and horrified by the accusation. He defends himself, saying that he would never shame Muriel that way—that he loves her and plans to marry her after he finishes college. Nat is relieved, knowing that he has raised an honest son. Richard explains that he only gave Muriel the poetry because he wanted her to "face life as it is... lead her own life" instead of the one chosen by her father. Nat tries to prepare Richard for the blow of Muriel's letter, but there is little that he can do. The rejection at once angers and wounds Richard, but he tries to hide it from his mother as she and the other adults leave on their drive.

Act I, Scene 2

Hours later, Essie and Lily wait for Nat and Sid to return from the Schem Club picnic for dinner. Sid has a drinking problem that has cost him several jobs and an engagement to Lily, and Lily fears that the picnic may have given him the perfect excuse to drink again. Essie tries to ease her fears by telling her that it is normal for men to get a little "tipsy" on such occasions, but Lily is still anxious.

Richard, who has been brooding alone in the sitting room, wanders out to steal a few olives from the dinner table. While he is up, Wint, one of Arthur's more adventurous classmates arrives at the door. He has made arrangements for a double "date" at a bar and wants Arthur to join him, but when Richard tells him that Arthur is spending the evening with his girlfriend, his plans are ruined. Wint decides to salvage his night by asking Richard to fill in for Arthur. Richard, not wanting to appear anything less than a man in front of Wint, accepts the offer and tells Wint that he has been out with lots of women and is an experienced drinker. In truth, Muriel is the only girl he has ever dated, and he has never drunk anything stronger than soda. Wint believes what he wants to and instructs Richard to meet him at the Pleasant Beach House at 9:30 that night.



ROBERT ELLIOTT AND CAROL SCHULTZ

As Wint leaves, Mildred and Tommy come inside, having spotted their father and uncle coming up the drive. As predicted, Sid is, in Tommy's words, "soused again." This makes for a very interesting dinner, with Sid singing and joking and Nat telling childhood stories that his family has heard hundreds of times. Lily is not amused though and admonishes Sid to "sit down and stop making a fool" of himself. The meal ends with Sid marching off to bed and Richard sneaking out to meet Wint.

Act II, Scene 1

Ten o'clock finds Richard at the bar of the Pleasant Beach House with his "date" for the evening, Belle. Wint has instructed him to entertain her with drinks while he goes to a rented room upstairs with her friend. Belle is not quite a hardened professional yet, but she is experienced enough to manipulate Richard. She knows that he is a novice to this world and pushes him to drink too much. When he refuses her advances out of loyalty to Muriel, she turns cruel and mocking. He gives her money to soothe her, but her gratitude is short-lived. When a new "client" enters, she leaves Richard drunk and alone and works to have him thrown out of the bar. The barkeeper learns that Richard's father owns the newspaper and turns on Belle for pressuring him to serve Richard. He calls her a tramp and throws her out of the bar.

Act II, Scene 2

At the Miller house, Nat and Essie wait anxiously for Richard, who has not been seen since dinner. As eleven o'clock nears, Essie becomes increasingly concerned, but Nat tries to feign confidence for her sake. They are stunned when Richard staggers in the door, drunk and quoting poetry. Nat's first instinct is to punish him, Essie wants to nurse him, but Sid, all too familiar with this experience, assures them that he knows just what to do.

Act III, Scene 1

The following day, Nat returns home from the office at lunchtime to deal with Richard and sends everyone except Sid out of the room. While Essie goes to get Richard, Nat confides to Sid that at the office he received an anonymous note in a woman's handwriting explaining where Richard got drunk and suggesting that he take action against the barkeeper. Sid, from experience, judges that the woman who wrote the letter most likely has a grudge against the barkeeper. Nat agrees but also says that she must have spent time with Richard in order to know who he was. This concerns him even more than Richard's drinking because he has never been able to bring himself to have "the talk" with his son. Their conversation stops when they hear what they think is Richard, but it is actually Essie. She says that Richard was sleeping and she didn't want to wake him. Nat is angry that he has wasted time away from work but also relieved that he can postpone the confrontation a little longer.

He storms out of the house, saying that he will deal with Richard when he gets home that night.

Shortly after Nat leaves, Richard nonchalantly wanders downstairs. Essie finds it suspicious that he woke so quickly after his father left but can't resist the urge to cuddle him, offering him Bromo Seltzer. Richard rejects it and any form of consolation. He says that he isn't sorry for what he did but that he will not do it again because it wasn't any fun. Essie is relieved to hear this and leaves to run errands, warning Richard to stay in the house. As she leaves, Mildred returns home with a letter from Muriel to Richard. The note explains that Muriel's father made her write the first letter and that she didn't mean any of it. She says that she loves only Richard and wants to meet him tonight at the beach. He realizes that if he is going to keep this date, his best chance to sneak out is now, while his parents are away. He instructs Mildred to tell Nat and Essie where he has gone if they are worried that he is repeating last night's routine.

Act III, Scene 2

Several hours later, Richard waits anxiously on the beach for Muriel. When he hears her coming, though, he becomes aloof, trying to make her believe that he is ambivalent about their meeting. This plan backfires on him though when she tells him that if he is not interested in seeing her, she will leave. He instantly changes tactics and begs her to stay. He tells her what he did the night before and dramatizes events for more impact. Muriel is disgusted and tries to leave, but Richard explains that he only did those things because he was crushed at losing her. Within minutes, they forgive each other, share their first kiss and start making honeymoon plans.

Act III, Scene 3

Much like the night before, Nat and Essie are waiting at home for Richard's return, but tonight they are not worried because Mildred has told them where he is. They discuss how he should be punished and decide that the best thing may be to threaten him with not going to Yale in the fall, and then relent later. When Richard arrives, he is so dreary-eyed that Essie fears he had been drinking again, but Nat correctly guesses that it is love, not liquor fueling his happiness. Essie leaves the room so that Nat can have the long-awaited talk with his son. Knowing that Richard has already learned his lesson about alcohol, Nat spends only a little time on this topic and then moves on to women. He fumbles his way through a warning against "whited sepulchres," and is relieved to learn that Richard rejected Belle's advances—that in fact, Richard is completely loyal to Muriel. Nat's plans for punishment fall flat though because Richard wants to skip college so that he can marry Muriel sooner. So the "punishment" becomes that Richard must go to Yale in the fall. With this settled, Richard stifles his anarchism long enough to kiss his mother and father good night, and Nat and Essie go to bed, content that their son is "a good boy" after all.



TALBOTT AND KATHERINE SCHOLL

• BIO & BEYOND •



YOUNG EUGENE

1888 Eugene Gladstone O'Neill is born October 16th at the Barrett House in New York City to actor James O'Neill and Mary Ella Quinlan O'Neill.

1888 The Kodak camera is marketed for \$25.



EUGENE AT AGE 7

1895 O'Neill attends New York's Academy of Mt. St. Vincent boarding school.

1900 O'Neill Enters De La Salle Institute, New York City as a day student.

His family summers at Monte Cristo Cottage in New London, Connecticut.

1900 *The Boxer Rebellion* shakes China.

1902 O'Neill enrolls in Betts Academy, Stamford, Connecticut where he begins to write poetry and read drama.

1903 O'Neill discovers his mother's morphine addiction that resulted from complications at his birth and develops a life-long drinking habit of his own. These two events will plague him for years to come and greatly impact his writing. He becomes engrossed in the controversial work of writers such as Ibsen, Shaw, Wilde, Nietzsche and Swinburne.

1906-1907 O'Neill attends Princeton University but is dismissed for "poor academic standing."

1906 *The first Grand Prix motorcar race is held in France.*

1909 James O'Neill sends his son on a mining expedition in Honduras to end his relationship with Kathleen Jenkins, but Eugene secretly marries Jenkins before leaving.



EUGENE O'NEILL JR.

1910 O'Neill contracts malaria in Honduras and returns to New York. After recuperating, he departs for Buenos Aires aboard a sailing vessel, an experience that will later provide him with inspiration for his sea plays. His first son, Eugene Gladstone O'Neill Jr. is born to Kathleen



The Life & Times of Eugene Gladstone O'Neill

Eugene O'Neill was born in a Broadway hotel room on October 16, 1888 and died in a Boston hotel room on November 27, 1953.

The sixty-five year journey in between was often turbulent, often tragic, and always unconventional.

But out of the turmoil came insight, sensitivity, and genius—the twisted road leading to four Pulitzer Prizes, and recognition as America's greatest playwright.

Jenkins. O'Neill returns to New York and takes up residence at Jimmy-the-Priest's saloon, a major source of research for *The Iceman Cometh* and *Anna Christie*.

1912 Depressed by his unsuccessful poetry career and heavy drinking, O'Neill attempts suicide. He returns to Monte



MONTE CRISTO COTTAGE

Cristo in New London and begins working for the *New London Telegraph*. His desertion of wife Kathleen Jenkins O'Neill results in divorce. He is diagnosed with tuberculosis and is hospitalized at the Connecticut state sanatorium.

1912 *New Mexico and Arizona are admitted to the Union as the 47th and 48th states.*

1913 O'Neill spends an additional six months in Wellington, another sanatorium, and writes 8 one-act plays and 1 full-length play while there.

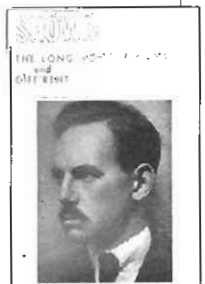
1914 James O'Neill pays for the publication of his son's first collection, *Thirst and Other One Act Plays*. O'Neill attends drama scholar George Pierce Baker's workshop in playwriting at Harvard.



ROBERT EDMUND JONES

1916 O'Neill and fellow artists including Susan Glaspell and Robert Edmund Jones found the Provincetown Players on Cape Cod. The company produces his plays: *Bound East for Cardiff* and *Thirst*. Later in the year, *Bound East for Cardiff* and *Before Breakfast* are produced in New York.

1917 In New York, the Playwrights Theater produces O'Neill's plays: *Fog*, *The Sniper*, *In the Zone*, *Ile* and *The Long Voyage Home*.



1918 In Greenwich Village O'Neill meets writer Agnes Boulton. They move to Provincetown on Cape Cod and are married on April 12.



1918 *The armistice ending the First World War is signed in November.*

1919 O'Neill's second son, Shane is born to Agnes Boulton.

1920 O'Neill makes his Broadway debut when *Beyond the Horizon* is produced at the Morosco Theatre. The play wins a Pulitzer Prize. James O'Neill dies and is buried in Saint Mary's Cemetery in New London. The Provincetown Players produce *The Emperor Jones*, becoming the first white theatre company to cast a black actor in a lead role.

1921 *Gold, The Straw, and Anna Christie* are produced in New York. O'Neill writes *The Hairy Ape*.

1922 Mary Ella Quinlan O'Neill, O'Neill's mother, dies in California and is buried in Saint Mary's Cemetery, New London. *The First Man* and *The Hairy Ape* are produced. *Anna Christie* is awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

1923 O'Neill's brother, Jamie dies from complications of alcoholism and is buried in New London. O'Neill is inducted into the National Institute of Arts and receives the gold medal for drama. Together with Kenneth Macgowen and Robert Edmund Jones, O'Neill founds the Experimental Theatre.

1924 The Experimental Theatre produces *Welded, All Gods Chillum Got Wings* and *Desire Under the Elms* Off-Broadway. O'Neill's daughter, Oona, is born to Agnes Boulton.

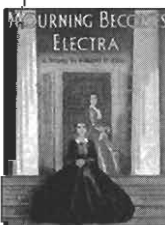
1924 *The first Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade is held in New York City.*



EUGENE AND CARLOTTA

1926 O'Neill meets actress Carlotta Monterey and begins an affair with her. *The Great God Brown* is produced by the Greenwich Village Theatre. O'Neill begins seeing a psychotherapist. The journal that he keeps for the doctor serves as a blueprint for *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

1928 *Lazarus Laughed, Marco Millions, and Strange Interlude* are produced. *Strange Interlude* is awarded the Pulitzer Prize. O'Neill travels to Europe and the Far East with Carlotta Monterey.



1929 O'Neill and Agnes Boulton are divorced, and he marries Carlotta Monterey in Paris.

1931 The O'Neills return to the United States. *Mourning Becomes Electra* is produced.

1931 *Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse debuts as a comic strip figure.*

1933 *Ab, Wilderness!* debuts on Broadway starring George M. Cohan.

1936 O'Neill is awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature but cannot accept the award in person due to poor health.

1937 The O'Neills move to Danville, California and live at Tao House.

1937 *Germany opens its Buchenwald concentration camp.*

1939 O'Neill writes *The Iceman Cometh*.

1941 O'Neill writes *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

1943 O'Neill severs ties with his daughter, Oona, when she marries Charlie Chaplin who is 37 years her senior.

1943 *American Broadcasting Co. (ABC) is created by millionaire Edward Noble.*



CHARLIE AND OONA CHAPLIN

1945 The O'Neills return to live in New York City.

1946 *The Iceman Cometh* is produced, the last of O'Neill's shows to be produced on Broadway while he is living.

1947 *A Moon for the Misbegotten* is produced and becomes the last of O'Neill's works to be produced during his lifetime.

1948 The O'Neills move to Boston and buy a cottage on Marblehead Neck overlooking the ocean. *Summer Holiday*, a musical film version of *Ab, Wilderness!* is produced by MGM.

1950 Eugene O'Neill Jr. commits suicide.

1950 *President Truman advises the Atomic Energy Commission to proceed with the development of a hydrogen bomb.*

1951 The O'Neills make one final move, to the Shelton Hotel in Boston. Eugene's illness effectively cuts him off from the world.

1953 Eugene Gladstone O'Neill dies November 27th and is buried in Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston. Neither of his surviving children attend the funeral.

1956 *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is produced and is awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

1956 *Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. leads a boycott of public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama in protest of racial discrimination.*

1959 *Take Me Along*, a musical adaptation of *Ab, Wilderness!* is produced on Broadway.

Photographs courtesy of The Hammerman Collection and eOneill.com.



a BOYHOOD Wish

By Christa Skiles

Eugene O'Neill often is acknowledged as this country's greatest playwright, a four-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize for drama and the only American dramatist to earn the Nobel Prize for literature. O'Neill's own tortured family history (an absent actor father, an alcoholic brother and a mother addicted to morphine) is familiar to many theatergoers, brought to the stage with unblinking honesty in the author's tragic masterpiece *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. But, in *Ab, Wilderness!*, though O'Neill was quick to emphasize that this earlier play was more "wishing out loud" than recollection, he, nevertheless, found numerous autobiographical inspirations. In his only comedy, O'Neill shows us, through his depiction of the Miller family, a more compassionate and idealized view of small-town family life.

- The "large, small-town in Connecticut" that serves as the setting for *Ab, Wilderness!* clearly represents New London, the O'Neill family's own summer home. Eugene's father James, a successful touring actor, shuffled the family from city to city, from boarding school to hotel. New London was the only permanent home the family ever knew.
- In addition to idealizing O'Neill's own family, the Millers of *Ab, Wilderness!* resemble two of New London's other households. John McGinley, a friend of James O'Neill, encouraged the actor to purchase his property in New London. The patriarch of one of the town's large families and a reporter for one of its newspapers, the *New London Day*, he was a neighbor to the O'Neill's. Eugene admired the family's closeness, pulling several of the Miller children's names directly from members of the McGinley family. Frederick Latimer was the editor of the *New London Telegraph*, where Eugene worked shortly as a reporter and as a contributor of poetry. Eugene O'Neill considered him the first person truly to encourage his writing and to tolerate his rebellious political views.
- O'Neill frequently brushed aside the idea that any similarities existed between himself and Richard Miller in *Ab, Wilderness!* "The idea that Richard in the play resembles me at his age is absurd," O'Neill said. "I was the exact opposite... I had no youth." But the truth is that O'Neill did share many of the characteristics he ascribed to the young Richard. In 1906, when the play is set, O'Neill was roughly the same age as Richard, and, he too was about to head off to college (although to Princeton, not Yale.) Acquaintances of that time described O'Neill as a dreamer and a romantic, but one with a rebellious side, all qualities exemplified by Richard in the play. O'Neill liked to say that his portrait of Richard was inspired by the personality of his friend, Charles Hutchinson Collins. Both young men were fond of poetry and shared a passion for the works of what were then considered to be scandalous authors. O'Neill described their place in New London society as "twin disreputables in the village gossip."
- Muriel McComber, the object of Richard Miller's affections in *Ab, Wilderness!*, is in reality a composite of three New London girls that Eugene O'Neill dated over his time there. In 1905, he enjoyed a brief infatuation with Marion Welch, the daughter of a doctor from Hartford who was visiting a friend in New London. It was O'Neill's first documented romance. He experienced a more serious relationship with Maibelle Scott during the fall of 1912. Theirs was a passionate romance, complete with clandestine meetings, parental disapproval and earnest plans for marriage. Intense but short-lived, the romance ended when O'Neill became ill with tuberculosis. The third inspiration for the character of Muriel likely was Beatrice Ashe, the most serious romance of the three, which lasted from 1914 to 1916. O'Neill wrote to Beatrice of his intentions to marry her while he was studying playwriting at Harvard. However, Ashe felt oppressed by both his neediness and his inability to keep his promises to her to stay sober and ultimately dissolved the relationship.

• SHOP TALK •

The physical layout of the Millers' home in *Ah, Wilderness!* is strikingly similar to that of the Tyrone residence in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, lending further credence to theories that O'Neill's writing portrays both the childhood that he knew and the one denied him. Critic Travis Bogard writes:

The sitting room of Nat Miller's house and the living room of the home of James Tyrone in Long Day's Journey Into Night are in their plan substantially the same, as is the geography of the unseen house beyond it. There are two sets of double doors at the rear, those on the right opening onto a well-lighted front parlor and the stairs to the upper part of the house, those at the left opening onto a dark back parlor, through which access is gained to the dining room and kitchen. . . . and, although the number and kind of chairs, windows and books differ slightly, the only specific indication of difference is that the wallpaper of the Miller's house is "cheerful," a quality absent from the Tyrone household.



The other significant difference between the two—which O'Neill does not immediately reveal in his stage directions—is that the Miller's home exists as a sort of "dream walking," while the Tyrone house is unsettlingly real. As a result, scenic designer Joseph Tilford's concept for The Rep's production of *Ah, Wilderness!* reflects a dreamlike state rather than stark naturalism. While concrete pieces, such as chairs and tables, help establish

specific locations (the play takes us from the Miller's sitting room to the dining room to a bar to the beach and back to the sitting room) a tranquil background of cirrus clouds transitions us easily among them, serving equally well as the sprawling horizon at the oceanfront or a the sky of a bright July afternoon. As in dreams, selective detail suggests reality to us, but at the same time allows for rapid shifts from scene to scene. This fluidity, combined with the backdrop puts a soft filter on all of the action that we see framed within a classical border, reminding us that the Millers' is a world aspired to and strived for, not necessarily one attained.

Read More About It

We encourage you to examine these topics in-depth by exploring the following books, Web sites and videos.

Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill by Travis Bogard. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972. This critical text explores O'Neill's use of the stage as means of self-exploration and autobiographical exorcism. The full text is also available online at www.eoneill.com.

O'Neill: Life With Monte Cristo by Arthur and Barbara Gelb. New York: Applause, 2000. This husband and wife team wrote one of the first biographies of O'Neill in 1962 and now has revised that work, with *Monte Cristo* as the first of a three volume set. This piece covers in detail O'Neill's formative years, up through the age of 29.

The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill edited by Michael Monheim. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. A solid collection of critical essays, this volume will provide a budding O'Neill scholar with a good introduction to the field.

Long Day's Journey Into Night by Eugene O'Neill. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976. This autobiographical play was published posthumously and earned O'Neill his fourth and final Pulitzer Prize. Many

critics have argued that the playwright's real life could be found in a synthesis of the families in *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

"As ever, Gene": The Letters of Eugene O'Neill to George Jeon Nathan transcribed and edited, with introductory essays by Nancy L. Roberts and Arthur W. Roberts. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987. Nathan was a prominent editor and drama critic in O'Neill's time and one of the writer's greatest champions.

A Wind is Rising: The Correspondence of Agnes Boulton and Eugene O'Neill edited by William Davies King. Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000. Boulton was O'Neill's second wife and a fiction writer in her own right. Their letters offer perspective on their

marriage as well as their individual growth as writers.

"Love and admiration and respect": The O'Neill-Commins Correspondence edited by Dorothy Commins. Durham: Duke University Press, 1986. Saxe Commins was the chief editor at Random House Publishing and a friend to O'Neill and his third wife, Carlotta.

www.eoneill.com This comprehensive site is maintained by a local radiologist and O'Neill collector, Dr. Harley Hammerman. With essays, photographs and an online forum, it is well worth a visit.

Summer Holiday directed by Rouben Mamoulian. MGM Home Entertainment, 1948. This musical adaptation of *Ah, Wilderness!* stars Mickey Rooney and Walter Huston.



These questions and activities are designed to help students anticipate the performance and then to build on their impressions and interpretations after attending the theatre. The activities and questions are divided into “**Before the Performance**” and “**After the Performance**” categories. While most of the exercises provide specific instructions, please feel free to adapt these activities to accommodate your own teaching strategies and curricular needs. To assist you in incorporating these materials into your existing curriculum, we have provided the numbers of some of the corresponding Missouri Knowledge Standards and Illinois Learning Standards.

• Communication Arts •

Before the Performance

1 Do you ever use the words of others (song lyrics, poetry, movie quotations or books) to help express how you feel? In *Ab, Wilderness!* Richard Miller routinely quotes from his favorite authors when his own words don't quite convey how he is feeling. Bring a song, poem or excerpt from a book that has special meaning for you and share it with your classmates. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA5, CA6 IL: 1, 2, 4, 5)



2 *Ab, Wilderness!* is placed very specifically in time, on the Fourth of July, 1906. What symbolic significance, if any, do you think that this date has? Based on this setting, what kinds of themes do you expect to be explored in the play? Make a list of your predictions and save it to refer to after you have seen the play. (MO: CA1, CA4, CA7 IL: 1, 3, 5)

3 Have you ever done something that was uncharacteristic of you (not something you would normally do) simply to get a reaction from your parents, friends, boyfriend or girlfriend? What was the result? Write about your experience in a brief private journal entry. (MO: CA1, CA4 IL: 1, 3, 5)

After the Performance

4 The title of the play is taken from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, a twelfth-century Persian poem translated by Edward Fitzgerald in 1859:

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh Wilderness were Paradise enow.

Discuss the significance of the title, including O'Neill's variation from “Oh” to “Ah” in the context of this verse. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA4, CA6, CA7 IL: 1, 2, 4, 5)

5 Throughout the play, Richard quotes (and sometimes misquotes) his favorite writers. What do you think these choices indicate about his view of the world? Consider each of the following quotations and write what you think it reveals about who Richard is or how he wants others to perceive him. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA4, CA7 IL: 1, 2, 3, 5)



Richard: Nay, let us walk from fire unto fire
From passionate pain to deadlier
delight—
I am too young to live without desire,
Too young art thou to waste this summer night—
(*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Oscar Wilde)

Richard: Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard.
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!
(*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Oscar Wilde)

Richard: “Oho,” they cried, “the world is wide,
But fettered limbs go lame
And once, or twice, to throw the dice
Is a gentlemanly game
But he does not win who plays with Sin
In the secret House of Shame!”

Richard: Something was dead in each of us.
And what was dead was Hope.
(*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Oscar Wilde)

6 O'Neill wrote the following notes for a sequel to *Ab, Wilderness!* in 1934, with plans for the play to be set around 1920. However, he never wrote the piece.

Sid has become reformed drunk—doctor told him he would die—combination of puritanical disapproval of drink—complacent self-righteousness—but underneath attacks of unregenerate longings for good old days—still 'star' reporter

Essie is dead—died in [19]19—worry over sons in war brought on illness—cancer—and never got over shock of Arthur's death in [19]18—be was captain

Lily manages house since Essie's death

Mildred is getting divorce—lover—feels no responsibility toward two children

Tommy has been U.S. aviation

Notice that no specific mention is made of either Nat or Richard, arguably the two central characters of the play. Make your own predictions about what these two characters might be doing in 1920, 14 years after the end of *Ab, Wilderness!*. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA4, FA1, FA2 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 26)

• Fine Arts •

Before the Performance

1 O'Neill wrote that *Ab, Wilderness!* was, for him, a sort of "dream walking." At the same time, though, the action of the play takes place in what would appear to be a realistic setting: a living room, a dining room, a bar and a beach. As a scenic designer, how would you combine these two, seemingly conflicting directives from a playwright? To get an idea of the flow of action, read "What's the Story" on pages 4 and 5. Then imagine that you are designing the set for this play. What would be your design concept—the visual idea that ties the whole production together? Prepare a design presentation for your class in which you will explain how you plan to represent each of the four locations in the play. Include visual aides. These may be your own drawings of the set, photographs indicating what your choices are or artwork that conveys the overall concept. Be prepared to field your classmates' questions about your design choices. (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, CA1, CA2, CA4, CA6 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26)

After the Performance

2 The world of love and romance is still relatively new to Richard and he is not entirely comfortable relating to young women. Compare and contrast his interaction with Belle in the bar scene with his conversation with Muriel in the beach scene. What does Richard want or hope to accomplish in each of these scenes? How does he go about achieving these goals? What does O'Neill reveal about Richard through his choices in these scenes? Have a group of classmates perform the excerpts that follow to help you answer these questions:



ACT II, Scene 1

BELLE: If this isn't the dearest burg I ever struck! Bet they take the sidewalks in after nine o'clock. Say, honestly, Kid, does your mother know you're out?

RICHARD: Aw, cut it out, why don't you—trying to kid me!

BELLE: All right. I didn't mean to, dearie. Please don't get sore at me.

RICHARD: I'm not sore.

BELLE: You see, it's this way with me. I think you're one of the sweetest kids, I've ever met—and I could like you such a lot—if you'd give me half a chance—instead of acting so cold and indifferent.

RICHARD: I'm not cold and indifferent. It's only that I've got—a weight on my mind.

BELLE: Well, get it off your mind.

ACT III, Scene 2

MURIEL: Oh, I was a fool ever to come here! I've got a good notion to go right home and never speak to you again!

RICHARD: Aw, don't go, Muriel!

Please! I didn't mean anything like that, honest, I didn't! Gee, if you knew how broken-hearted I was by that first letter, and how darned happy your second letter made me—!

MURIEL: I don't believe you! You've got to swear to me.

RICHARD: I swear!

MURIEL: Well, then, all right, I'll believe you.

RICHARD: Gosh, you're pretty tonight, Muriel! It seems ages since we've been together. Gosh Muriel, it sure is wonderful to be with you again!

MURIEL: I'm glad—it makes you happy. I'm happy too.

(MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, CA1, CA2, CA5, CA6

IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26)

3 O'Neill structures the play so that Richard actually has two immediate models for adult romantic relationships: Essie and Nat, and Lily and Sid. Based on his behavior towards Muriel and his conversations about her, which pair, if either, do you believe has had a stronger influence on Richard's concept of love and marriage? List examples of his actions as evidence for your conclusion. (MO: FA2, FA3, CA1, CA2, CA4, CA5 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26)

4 O'Neill has included several scenes in the play in which characters ask to be forgiven. Identify at least three such scenes and note the result in each case. Does the character receive forgiveness or not? If so, does his or her behavior change as a result, or does the forgiveness perpetuate the negative behavior? Based on the three scenes you have chosen, what do you think the play's attitude toward forgiveness and punishment is? (MO: FA2, FA3, CA1, CA2, CA4, CA5 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26)

• Social Studies •

Before the Performance

1 In *Ab, Wilderness!*, Eugene O'Neill is not writing about his childhood as it was, but as he would have liked it to be. Essentially, he is creating a utopia, or an ideal world, using elements from his own past. Imagine your own ideal world. What would it be like? Create a travel brochure for this world. Include information about how people relate to one another, what the system of government is, what people do for entertainment and anything else that you feel is important for visitors to know about this place. (MO: SS3, SS6, CA1, CA4, IL: 1, 3, 5, 14, 15, 16, 18)



2 O'Neill scholar Stephen A. Black writes of the Millers, the main characters in *Ab, Wilderness!*: "it is not a perfect family, but it is a family that 'works.' That is, if the task of a family is to prepare its young for independence and parenthood, this is a successful family." What, in your opinion, is the "task of a family?" What is the family's function in society? What is your own role within your family? Has your role changed over time? Address these questions in a journal entry. (MO: SS6, CA1, CA4 IL: 1, 3, 5, 18)

After the Performance

3 O'Neill's subtitle for the play is "A Nostalgic Comedy of the Ancient Days When Youth Was Young, and Right was Right, and Life Was a Wicked Opportunity." How accurate a portrayal of the time period do you think this is? Research 1906 America to learn what life was like then, particularly in a "large small-town." Imagine that you are Nat Miller, editor of the local newspaper. Create the front page of the paper for July 4, 1906. Make your lead stories a combination of real events discovered in your research and invented ones based on the world that O'Neill creates for you in the play. (MO: SS2, SS7, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA5 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 16, 18)

4 Although the play is set in 1906, O'Neill wrote it in 1933, when the country was in the midst of Prohibition and the Great Depression. Americans had also recently witnessed political strife in Europe, including the 1917 Russian Revolution and the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany. Interestingly, O'Neill's only comedy was written at a rather dark time in history. How do you think these world events might have influenced his writing about the earlier

world seen in the play? Form a group with two other people from your class, with each of you researching one of the following aspects of 1933: politics, economics or social structure. Using the information that each of you uncovers, create a group hypothesis explaining the impact of current (1933) events on O'Neill's writing of *Ab, Wilderness!*. Present your theory to the rest of the class. (MO: SS2, SS3, SS4, SS6, SS7, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA6, FA5 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 14, 15, 16, 18, 27)

5 Clearly, the family unit plays a central role in O'Neill's vision of 1906. How has the concept of family changed in the past 100 years? Compare and contrast the positions taken by the Miller family on the following issues with those of your own family or a contemporary family you know: discipline, education, personal accountability, coming of age, and parent-child relations. When possible, cite specific examples from the play and your own family's life. (MO: SS2, SS6, CA1, CA2, CA4, CA5, FA5 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 18, 27)

