

## Finding Humor and Pathos in Alcoholism

When considering the plays of Eugene O'Neill, the topic of alcoholism inevitably comes into play. The major plays discussed would more than likely include "The Iceman Cometh," "Hughie," "A Moon for the Misbegotten," and his most famous work, "Long Day's Journey into Night." However, one play almost never discussed in this light is "Ah, Wilderness!" Perhaps the omission of this play is a result of its perceived lighthearted nature or because alcohol is mostly relegated to the subplot of "Ah, Wilderness!" Nonetheless, alcohol is prevalent in "Ah, Wilderness," and it is important to understand why O'Neill incorporated it into the play.

In order to fully understand Eugene O'Neill's reasoning behind his inclusion of alcoholism in his only mature comedy, one must have a better understanding of his family life. The son of James O'Neill and Ella Quinlan, Eugene was brought into a world devoid of security and stability. Even though the marriage of James and Ella began triumphant, the many differences between the two eventually drove them apart. His mother was a well-bred, middle-class woman whose shyness forced her into a world of isolation. Deeply loving one another, Eugene and his mother had a close relationship. However, her addiction to morphine created great pain in his life and made it virtually impossible to sustain the power of their relationship. However, he and his father failed to attain the same family bond. His father was an actor who did what he had to do to emerge from poverty and depended on his looks to get him there. While Ella battled with morphine, James drowned his emotions in alcohol and, as a result, became very distant from the rest of the family. As the family drifted apart, Ella chose to spend the last portion of her life in a tiny room with nothing but herself for entertainment, while James became absorbed in his own alcohol-induced self-pity and denial.

Amidst this family turmoil, Eugene was passed around from school to school having to learn the ways of life on his own. His hatred for his father led him to shun Christianity, develop a despairing view of life, and turn to the bottle to forget his problems. In the latter part of his life, Eugene suffered from an illness that gradually broke down his brain cells; this disorder has since been established as a rare side-effect of an excess of alcohol in the system for a prolonged period of time. As the years passed, O'Neill took great pains to continue his career, yet his disease eventually forced him to stop writing. Eleven years after his career ended, O'Neill passed away.

Knowing the background of O'Neill's life, one could easily defend O'Neill's alcoholism and his reasoning for including this subject in his comedy. His probable intention for writing this play was to create the life that he had desired since his youth. However, O'Neill also felt compelled to write honestly about alcoholism, but did not have the strength to focus on the subject while still struggling with it. Perhaps he needed to write about it in a humorous context before he could explore the realities of his life. Shortly after the production of "Ah, Wilderness," O'Neill wrote more in depth about alcoholism in "The Iceman Cometh," "Long Day's Journey Into Night," "Hughie," and "A Moon for the Misbegotten."

In "Ah, Wilderness," The character of Sid Davis creates a somber melancholy that seems to disrupt the intended comedic nature of the play. Although his character is also quite humorous, this humor is based on an alcoholic who is destined to fail and will never win the trust of his true love. Analyzing the text, one can see that the two saddest moments in the play involve Sid: the first occurs at the end of Act I when Lily reacts to Sid's drunken state after

dinner and the second occurs toward the end of Act II when Sid asks for Lily's forgiveness and contemplates suicide when she ignores him. Many critics have speculated that these two moments of depression in the play resulted from O'Neill's inability to avoid including the reality of his own world in the fantasy that he had created.

In addition to Sid's struggle with alcoholism in "Ah, Wilderness," Richard Miller also has a brief encounter with it. After a night of boozing, Richard realizes that alcohol is not as comforting as he had expected. Rather, it makes him sick and only able to forget his problems for a brief period of time. Although the plot-line of the script depicts Richard as reformed after the incident, there is some doubt about O'Neill's intent because the audience does not know whether Richard's realization about alcohol will carry on through the rest of his life. Perhaps, O'Neill wished that he had been as wise as Richard during his youth about alcoholic consumption. Possibly, he may have simply established the beginning of Richard's alcoholic life. Nevertheless, Richard's exposure to alcohol strengthened his relationship with both Sid and his father. The opposite of O'Neill's relationship with his own father, this newly formed bond between the men in "Ah, Wilderness" emphasizes O'Neill's desire to create a fantasy world in his only mature comedy. Whether Eugene O'Neill wrote "Ah, Wilderness!" as an attempt to escape reality or as an attempt to find humor in his own life, the subjects of alcohol and alcoholism are impossible to ignore.

Mathew Boudreaux, Assistant Director