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Eugene O'Neill's "Ah, Wilderness!" As a Challenge

A B S T R A C T

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill is foremost American dramatist and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936. *Ah, Wilderness!* is a comedy by American playwright Eugene O'Neill that differs from a typical O'Neill's plays in its happy ending for the central character, and depiction of a happy family in turn of the century America. It is O'Neill's only well-known comedy. The first Broadway production of the play, as well as the subsequent touring production, were both successful. Since then, it's become a mainstay of community repertoire. This paper endeavors to prove that Eugene O'Neil challenged himself in writing a comic play unlike his other plays of dark and harrowing life such as *Desire Under the Elms* (1924). *Ah, Wilderness!*

(1933), a light farce-comedy, dubbed by the Left as "an ocean of whipped cream," positively, wittily, sentimentally, and sympathetically depicts an American middleclass family at the beginning of the twentieth century. The paper starts with an introduction to the subject, then the discussion that shows the analysis of the selected play by following the character-analysis approach, and finally, to be ended with a conclusion that sums up the finding of the discussion.

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يوجين أونيل "آه، البرية" كتحدي !

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الخلاصة:

يوجين جلادستون أونيل هو أول كاتب مسرحي أمريكي وحائز على جائزة نوبل للأدب عام 1936. آه البرية! هي كوميديا للكاتب المسرحي الأمريكي يوجين أونيل تختلف عن مسرحيات أونيل النموذجية في نهايتها السعيدة للشخصية المركزية، وتصوير عائلة سعيدة في نهاية القرن في أمريكا. إنها الكوميديا الوحيدة المعروفة لأونيل. كان أول إنتاج في برودواي للمسرحية، وكذلك إنتاج الجولات اللاحقة، كانت

ناجحة . منذ ذلك الحين ، أصبحت الدعامة الأساسية في ذخيرة المجتمع. تنتهي الورقة لإثبات أن يوجين أونيل تحدى نفسه في كتابة مسرحية هزلية على عكس مسرحياته الأخرى للحياة المظلمة والمروعة مثل (1933). **Desire Under the Elms (1924)** ، كوميديا هزلية خفيفة ، أطلق عليها اليسار اسم "محيط من الكريمة المخفوقة" ، يصور بشكل إيجابي وبارع وعاطفي وتعاطف عائلة أمريكية من الطبقة الوسطى في بداية القرن العشرين. تبدأ الورقة بمقدمة للموضوع ، ثم المناقشة التي توضح تحليل المسرحية المختارة باتباع نهج تحليل الشخصية ، وأخيراً تنتهي باستنتاج يلخص نتيجة المناقشة. الكلمات المفتاحية: يوجين أونيل ، المسرح الأمريكي ، تحليل الشخصية ، أه ! البرية.

Introduction

Eugene O'Neill is among several artists who have inspired psychoanalytic investigation for decades. Both his plays and his personality have provoked analytic interpretations, and there is no reason to assume that the process is withdrawing. In O'Neill's early writings, he concentrated heavily on the one-act form of play. His hard work led to great success with the production of his full-length play, *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), for which he won his first Pulitzer Prize. The play is similar to the one-act form in its structure, but by adding a poetic and well-spoken character, O'Neill was able to reach high dramatic moments.¹

Eugene O'Neill is a famous American dramatist best known for his unrelentingly sad works and his focus on adult themes and settings. Ah! In its humorous approach to family difficulties, *Wilderness* is the biggest outlier in the O'Neill canon. Even though it was not written with a young adult audience in mind, the play evocatively evokes bittersweet recollections of growing up in the early twentieth century. Indeed, the play is better understood as an American nostalgic family comedy, a type of romantic comedy in which a previous time, frequently the author's childhood environment, serves as the backdrop, with genuine and evocative elements projected.²

In *Ah! Wilderness*, however, this paper hypothesizes that O'Neill purposefully picked a different tone and approach than in the past, one that is challenging. Thus, this play is a challenge in his career. He put himself to the test by writing his last play, *Ah Wilderness!*, in a comedic style. His remarks on the play place it squarely in the category of American nostalgia family comedy. In *Contour in Time*:

The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (1988), Travis Bogard quotes O'Neill as saying that *Ah! Wilderness* was "the way I would have liked my boyhood to have been"

and “a nostalgia for a youth I never had.” Yet, O’Neill’s statements ignore the play’s many autobiographical details. The house in which the play is set is based on the O’Neill summer cottage, with the same rooms as those used for the setting of *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. Richard, moreover, seems closely patterned on the playwright himself both in description (“sensitiveness . . . restless, apprehensive, defiant, shy, dreamy, self-conscious intelligence) and in his forbidden reading choices.³

He was one of the first to employ American vernacular and to focus on people who were disadvantaged by society, and he was one of the first to apply psychological and social realism to the American theatre. Before O’Neill, American theatre consisted mostly of melodrama and comedy; he was the first playwright in the United States to treat drama as an artistic and intellectual genre. He took it extremely seriously; no one can accuse O’Neill of frivolity. Of more than 50 finished plays, O’Neill wrote just one ostensible comedy, *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933), and even its plot hinges on drunkenness, prostitution, revenge and repressed desire. Of course, most of O’Neill’s plays involve drunkenness, prostitution, revenge and repressed desire; *Ah, Wilderness!* is the only one that manages a happy ending, although *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1946) does admit the possibility of forgiveness, a conclusion that for O’Neill seems downright giddy.⁴

Indeed, O’Neill’s adolescent devotion to Edward FitzGerald’s somewhat racy version of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* led him to the title of the play, based on a slightly modified version of the following familiar lines: *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!* O’Neill’s change of “Oh” to “Ah” underscores the play’s emphasis on nostalgic longing. The playwright’s dedication to depicting adolescence’s “wilderness” with a sigh of desire and love for Richard and his parents as they assist him in his path toward fruitful maturity is shown in the title.⁵

Although not primarily intended for young adults, *Ah! Wilderness* can be enjoyed by this age group because of its sensitive depiction of adolescent and parental interactions. Perhaps for young readers, the most accessible of O’Neill’s plays, the drama effectively reveals the positive qualities of American nostalgic family comedy and provides an interesting comparison to other works in the genre, including such plays as *Clarence Day’s Life with Father* (1920) and *John Van Dronten’s I Remember*

Mama (1944) and such television shows as *Happy Days* or *The Walton’s*. What

sets *Ah! Wilderness* apart from many other American nostalgic family comedies, however, is O'Neill's refusal to allow the work to become overly sentimental.⁶

Characters are likeable and well-intentioned, albeit funny, and characterisation takes precedence over action, with children playing a key part. The nostalgic family comedy's audience or reader frequently believes that the past depicted in the play is somehow better than the present, lamenting the loss of ideals and the passing of a simpler way of life. O'Neill is a virtuoso at recalling precise recollections from his boyhood. The play is rich in its creation of the past, whether it be through lyrics to famous songs of the period, the usage of slang, attention to details regarding Fourth of July celebrations, room furnishings and clothing, or the proverbial double-standard morality in respect to gender issues.⁷

The romantic comedy genre allows each dramatist to investigate how the bourgeois social system stifles an individual's desire. In *Ah, Wilderness!*, there are several references to prison. Period of Adjustment's partners descends into domesticity as the earth breaks way beneath them, despite its outward celebration of freedom. Indeed, no other plays in the O'Neill and Williams canons so singlemindedly beat the bounds of hetero-normativity. At stake in *Ah, Wilderness!* is whether the family structure can tamp adolescent Richard Miller's burgeoning sexuality until he can be constrained by the institution of marriage.⁸

The play is about adolescence and adulthood, harmless rebelliousness and exploration, and strong family connections that provide stability and love in the spirit of tolerance and understanding while allowing the opportunity for growth and individuality. The drama also has the magnificence of romantic poetry and emotional music, as well as the beauty of emotions and intellectual thoroughness. "Miller's favourite epithet, 'darn,' sprinkled throughout the play, consistently makes any domestic explosions—actual fireworks or political ones unthreatening ('Darned youngster!'). Before Richard's political critique of Independence Day, we are warned by Miller that his son's 'red meat nowadays . . . is love poetry and socialism'"⁹. "The play was outside O'Neill's experience, autobiographically. . . . It described . . . the happy boyhood and adolescence which he might have had, but which the tragic background of his family's life had made impossible. The play is, therefore, partly a comedy of wish fulfilment"¹⁰

Discussion

The major characters are likeable but not without flaws. Richard is presented as

an intelligent and enthusiastic, if rebellious and impetuous, teenager whose commitment to ideal goals and high romantic standards save him from temptations that might ruin his future. Essie and Nat are wise but sometimes overindulgent parents, puzzled by their children's, especially by Richard's, actions.

Nonetheless, their patience and compassion, as well as their love for each other and their family, allow them to lead Richard through his problems toward maturity without causing unnecessary family stress. Sid Davis and Lily Miller are the play's most memorable characters in many respects. They're doomed lovers whose wedding plans have been postponed due to Sid's drinking problems and persistent connection with loose women. O'Neill sets these comic realizations up as contrasts to Richard and his sweetheart, Muriel.¹¹

All of Sid's drunken antics, however amusing to the family and the audience, cannot disguise the seriousness of his condition, which has hampered his job and love life. Richard rejects a similar way of life for himself not only because of his negative reaction to his first drinking, but also because of his comprehension of what booze has done to his uncle. Although this play is set in the era of the playwright's adolescence, O'Neill's growing-up years were considerably different from those of the Miller children. O'Neill traces some of the difficulties of the tragic relationships in his own family in such plays as *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1947).¹²

By including Sid's unrelenting alcoholism and its codependency effect on the other family members, O'Neill keeps the tragic elements that are so pervasive in his other plays close to the surface of this comedy and keeps the drama from becoming hopelessly overemotional. O'Neill's tragedy *Long Day's Journey into Night* can be profitably read as a contrasting but parallel play about a family (O'Neill's own) whose members fail to come to grips with relationships in the constructive manner portrayed by the Millers. *Ah! Wilderness* is a domestic comedy in four acts, centring on Eugene O'Neill's nostalgic memories of turn-of-the-century family life in New England. The play is structured around the growing-up experiences of Richard Miller as he rebels against small-town morality in his reading, politics, and idealistic romance.¹³

Richard is able to avoid temptation and accept the pleasant aspects of his household environment because of strong family ties and patient parental

attention. The action takes place over the course of two days, commencing on July 4, 1906. In Act 1, as the family prepares to celebrate the holiday, Richard is at odds with the others, ranting idealistically against capitalism and quoting passages from "racy" and "avantgarde" authors. His reading is the springboard for the play's development. When some quotations that Richard has shared with his sweetheart, Murie McComber, are discovered by her father, Mr McComber does not only try to prevent Muriel from further contact and communication with Richard but also demands that Mr Miller discipline Richard harshly.¹⁴

Richard's reaction to his father's rebuke, as well as his break-up with Muriel, are both examples of idealistic martyrdom. Richard continues his scorn and pessimism about life during the family lunch, with comedic relief provided by the interactions of the old suitors, Sid Davis and Lily Miller. He eagerly anticipates a prohibited night out with one of his brother's pals and the opportunity to be with his brother's friends and the chance to be with a "fast" woman. Richard, on the other hand, only succeeds in getting himself recklessly drunk in a saloon with a prostitute. Despite kissing Belle, he fights the desire to accompany her upstairs to a room. Richard's inebriated return to his house is met with parental disapproval, but Uncle Sid, realizing that Richard is very unwell as a result of the side effects and having experienced the repercussions of excessive drinking himself, accompanies Richard to the hospital.¹⁵

Despite the prospect of discipline the next day, Richard's mother, Essie, begins to feel sad for her son. Richard was also obliged to compose the break-up letter after learning that Muriel still loves him. Richard, ever the romantic, defies his parents' wishes once more, slipping out the next night for a secret encounter with Muriel on the beach. In this contrasting scene to the saloon meeting with the prostitute, Richard and Muriel commit themselves to undying love and innocently exchange a kiss. When Richard returns home, his regret about his night at the saloon and his commitment never to drink again or get involved with "fast" women.¹⁶

One of the reasons why so many reviewers have overlooked *Ah, Wilderness subversive's* component is that the author himself reinforced the notion that his comedy was a respite from more serious problems. *Ah, Wilderness!* was described as "purely a drama of nostalgia for youth, a sentimental, if you want, the evocation of the atmosphere of the feeling of a former period" by O'Neill in a letter to his eldest son. whatever may be said against it, possessed a lot which we badly need today to steady us." O'Neill claimed that the play portrayed the family he wished he had grown up in, one that embodied solid middle-class values:

“My purpose was to write a play true to the spirit of the American large small-town at the turn of the century. Its quality depended upon atmosphere, sentiment, an exact evocation of the mood of the dead past. To me, the America which was (and is) the real America found its unique expression in such middle-class families as the Millers, among whom so many of my generation passed from adolescence to manhood.”¹⁷

While Richard Miller, the central character of *Ah, Wilderness!* lives in a kinder, gentler world than that of his creator, he undergoes a similar journey. O'Neill describes him as “Going on seventeen, just out of high school,” having “a restless, apprehensive, defiant, shy, dreamy, self-conscious intelligence about him. This intelligent youth, on the verge of a new life at Yale, desperately wants to be seen as an adult. He, like O'Neill, explores “radical” literature and ideas, determined to rebel against something. But, Alas, unlike O'Neill, his life has failed to produce any real injustice against which he can rail, so he looks to society at large: “The land of the free and the home of the brave! Home of the slave is what they ought to call it—the wage-slave ground under the heel of the capitalist class, starving, crying for bread for his children, and all he gets is a stone! The Fourth of July is a stupid farce!”¹⁸

Richard tries to be cynical and radical in his views on society and his literary choices, and he thinks he's being sophisticated and forward-thinking in his attempts to broaden Muriel's mind, but what he wants is quite conventional: to try kissing, go to university, marry Muriel, and, in general, do manly things (such as going to parties and getting drunk like his revered father and uncle). And, of course, when tragedy strikes (in the form of Muriel's rejection), he doesn't do something “advanced” as his mother puts it, but rather leaps upon the opportunity to get drunk in the company of a prostitute.¹⁹

Richard is ultimately too grounded and idealistic to lose his footing in this dangerous area. He says afterwards that he “won't do it again . . . not because I think it was wicked or any such old-fogy moral notion, but because it wasn't any fun. It didn't make me happy and funny like it does Uncle Sid. . . . But I'm not sorry I tried it, once”.²⁰ Unlike O'Neill, he exits relatively unhurt, with only a hangover on his mind, and the audience is assured that, as he suffers through the desert of puberty, Richard will more likely follow his father's mild route than that of his Uncle Sid. Ironically, Richard learns in an evening what Sid hasn't

been able to understand in decades. Sid, although being well into maturity, continues to make childish blunders. He appears to aspire to what Nat and Essie Miller have, but instead of following Nat's responsible lead, he spends his time drinking, womanizing, and failing to find work.²¹

He's divided between the ideas that his actions are immature and that they are manly : He recognizes he doesn't measure up to Nat, who, despite his occasional binge drinking, is a good family guy with a steady job; yet, he feels obliged by peer pressure to show his manhood by frequenting bars and brother . He has "the Puckish visage of a Peck's Bad Boy who has never grown up," according to O'Neill, and he hasn't. Sid is a manifestation of O'Neill's drunken elder brother, who appears in numerous other plays in a less innocent form, whereas Richard is a happier version of O'Neill. "Modeled on Jamie, whose alcohol rendered him the uproarious buffoon and whose sobriety found him submissive and crestfallen, Sid is here freed from the mask of savage cynicism which the far more insecure Jamie could never escape. Sid dominates the stage when he is on it, as does Jamie in all his dramatic variants".²²

But *Ah, Wilderness!* is not simply wish-fulfilment or a sugar-coated version of O'Neill's personal history: "Despite the determination to evade . . . there is also the determination to forgive. The forgiveness is perhaps most apparent in his characterization of Jamie in *Sid Davis*. . . . Sid's characterization suggests a [true] forgiveness, one which refuses to whitewash, to bend his brother's better qualities into saintliness. Appealing as he is, Sid will remain the rest of his days a drunk and ne'er-do-well". And one can expand that statement to say that O'Neill's portrait of Richard shows O'Neill's determination to laugh at his youthful foibles and even forgive himself.²³

In *Ah, Wilderness!*, O'Neil put himself to the test by steering "queer Richard" toward the heteronormativity required to support the play's generic marriage narrative. The drama inducts Richard into his father's sexual double standard, in which gay desire is not a separate choice, as if to exorcise the ghost of same-sex desire.

Awaiting Muriel on a strip of beach along the harbour on the night of July 5th, Richard vents his sexual confusion in the light of his earlier, shameful escapade with the prostitute, Belle:

"Where was I this time last night? . . waiting outside
the Pleasant Beach House . . . Belle . . . ah, forget
her! . . now, when Muriel's coming . . . that's a fine

time to think of—! . . . but you hugged and kissed her
. . . not until I was drunk I didn't . . . and then it was
all showing off . . . darned fool! . . and I didn't go
upstairs with her . . . even if she was pretty . . . aw,
she wasn't pretty . . . she was all painted up . . . she
was just a whore . . . she was everything dirty . . .
Muriel's a million times prettier anyway . . . Muriel
and I will go upstairs . . .”²⁴

Richard's monologue exposes his struggle to accept adult sexual conventions, particularly the psychological difficulty of combining male sexual desire with idealized feminine purity. To maintain their status as desirable marriage mates, "good girls" like Muriel must remain pure, which may impede sexual fulfilment, but "bad girls" like Belle pander to desire and are, as a result, likely to frustrate sexual fulfilment. Richard rehearses the cultural dichotomy whereby women are either virtuous or despicable depending on their perceived sexual behaviour. Richard can dally with a prostitute and remain marriageable; Muriel can't be both filthy and decent at the same time. Richard is oblivious to the fact that Muriel and Belle's polar sexual identities are merely coincidental. Indeed, both "nice beach" characters beg to be played by the same lady. Both are required to support heteronormativity, which, by implication, separates sexual pleasure from reproduction effort even while insisting that the former can be found in the latter.²⁵

At first look, the resolution of *Ah, Wilderness!* appears to be unsatisfactory. It looks to support the bourgeoisie. O'Neill's remark promotes ideals. Richard's basic decency—or lack thereof—is in doubt. He is unable to take Belle to bed because of his sexual orientation, and by the conclusion of the play, he has repented of his earlier drunken actions and reconciled with charming, neurotic Muriel, much to the delight of his worried parents. Having dismissed Richard's adventures as adolescent high jinks, the play ushers Richard and Muriel toward the marriage bed refused to Sid and Lily. For their part, Nat and Essie close the play standing together in a romantic echo of Richard and Muriel until “they move quietly out of the moonlight, back into the darkness of the front parlour.”²⁶

Ah, Wilderness! encourages reviewers and audiences to either incorporate them into the larger themes of their author's work or dismiss them as amusing tangents. He wishes to pay homage to his one comedy form while emphasizing his ambiguous subversive undercurrents by arguing that this drama is best understood as an ironic issue play that challenges the forced heterosexuality it

pretends to encourage. Whether consciously or unconsciously, O'Neill uses romantic comedy to bring the form's hidden tensions to the surface.²⁷

The structure of this play is identical to that of the previous one. Richard Miller (has -a stick) must choose monogamous heterosexuality against the gay impulses or at least sexual confusion, whereas Nat Miller is oppressed by the gender standards he defends. Wilderness, oh, Wilderness! marriage, maturity, and stability are celebrated rather than marriage, maturity, and stability. Analyzes the psychosexual harm produced by heteronormativity's imposed yet always vexing reproduction throughout society. Despite its author's confusing comments, the play needs to be taken seriously as a comedy that embraces and queers the genre to which he belongs.²⁸

Conclusion

The discussion of the subject matter of this paper shows that *Ah, Wilderness!* is a challenging comedy play. And that comes following the beforementioned hypothesis that this paper presents. It is a play about growing up and finding one's rightful position in life; it has the feeling of an early television sitcom at moments, but unlike a sitcom, O'Neill does not leave the audiences with the clichéd message that its characters will eventually find their proper place in life. Although *Ah, Wilderness!* has a lot of tenderness, it also has a lot of the gloom that O'Neill was better familiar with. He challenged himself by shifting from sad play to compose *Ah, Wilderness!*, the sole masterpiece of comedic drama, and by incorporating queer theory into the creation of his characters.

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