

[O'Neill and Camille: Domestic Drama in “The Web” and “Recklessness”]

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[Abstract] *Early in his career, O'Neill aspired to be a popular playwright. This contrasts with the conventional assessment of O'Neill's ambitions. These earliest plays drawing on popular melodrama and relying on explicitly commercial theatrical inspiration do not fit the established model of the O'Neill who insisted he wanted “to be an artist” or nothing. The plays also draw on the influence of Dumas' La dame aux camélias, O'Neill was been influenced by Ibsen and Strindberg in his later works, but these plays reveal these influences from the start. Finally, they demonstrate that O'Neill had family relationships that had nothing to do with the autobiography in Long Day's Journey into Night. O'Neill intended “Recklessness” as a possible vehicle for his father. O'Neill is better placed in the context of late 19th and early 20th century theatre; continuing to regard him as sui generis, hobbles our understanding of American theatre and O'Neill's genius.*

[Keywords] *Eugene O'Neill; melodrama; feminist drama; domestic drama; “The Web”; “Recklessness”; one-act plays; American theatre; modern drama*

This essay will take up the domestic dramas that O'Neill created with his first plays and will challenge the notion that these works were inspired by any drama that took place in O'Neill's own family. On the contrary, the playwright's earliest works rely on the conventions of the popular theatre of his time. "The Web" and "Recklessness", among his first works, show us that O'Neill was steeped in the conventions of domestic drama, even as he tried to inject elements of the new style of social and psychological drama being created by Ibsen and Strindberg. O'Neill's early dramaturgy is immersed in the middle or lower-class milieu depicted in theatrical productions since Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731) and Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* (1755), and had crowded stages since the middle of the 19th century. There were such dramas before Lillo's and Lessing's, but these plays are generally credited with establishing the conventions.¹ The signal motif of these plays is virtue rewarded and vice condemned; central to domestic drama is the seduction of the innocent woman by the predatory male. Within a few decades, these plays conquered the playhouses of Europe and America. The flower of 19th century melodrama is Dumas' *La dame aux camélias*, his autobiographical novel was published in 1848; he adapted it for the stage in 1852. It has been a phenomenon ever since that has been revived and adapted through the 19th and 21st centuries in every form possible. Some of the play's tropes: the fallen woman redeemed by love, the strangulation of the individual by the bourgeois code, or a tubercular heroine have become dramatic conventions in their own right. O'Neill draws on these and adapts them in "The Web" and "Recklessness." We shall see that doing so was part of his early effort to be successful in the context of the commercial theatre of his day.

While O'Neill's earliest plays "The Web" and "Recklessness" are conventional responses to the melodramatic conventions of the time, with the exception that not all the "villains" are punished. I would also compare them with George Pierce Baker's playmaking rubric for the commercial theatre that O'Neill learned at Harvard, which mandated that plays ought to reflect contemporary social issues. Rose, the protagonist of "The Web," is a prostitute, a perennial figure of concern for reformers. As far as Rose goes, the relevance of "illness as metaphor" and the iterations of Marguerite Gautier ("Camille") matter as well. I would argue that O'Neill is more in harmony with late 19th/early 20th century dramaturgy than not. As we have seen, it is important to link O'Neill to the conventions of his time – there is far too much myth making about O'Neill representing a complete break with his predecessors. Paul Voelker and Travis Bogard have decidedly different views on O'Neill's relationship with Baker. The contemporary correspondence between O'Neill and his then inamorata, Beatrice Ashe, makes it clear that O'Neill bore no animosity towards Baker and in fact respected him, perhaps even feeling affection for him. Voelker's research reveals a more complex understanding of O'Neill as a playwright struggling with his craft – one who is in fact not clear about being "an artist or nothing", as he famously wrote to Baker when applying to join his class. Voelker determines that O'Neill was uncertain of the direction his playwriting ought to take and that in his beginnings he considered comedy.

This is not the O'Neill most readers imagine. "The Web" and "Recklessness" were written in 1913, before O'Neill attended Baker's class. I would argue that the atmosphere

of Baker’s class encouraged O’Neill to stop trying to be a conventional playwright – or even becoming a topical one like Baker’s star pupil Edward Sheldon. His great hit *Salvation Nell* (1908), an outstanding version of “the fallen woman saved” type, had become a Broadway sensation starring Minnie Maddern Fiske when Sheldon was barely more than an undergraduate. What is more, O’Neill would likely have been inspired by the classmates, who no doubt, sought the same kind of fame and fortune that Sheldon had found. O’Neill’s appreciative 1925 letter to Sheldon is frequently, if misleadingly, quoted to verify that he was dazzled by the touring Abbey Theatre and Mrs. Fiske’s acting rather than revealing O’Neill’s recognition of his debt to Sheldon:

I was immensely grateful for your wire about [*The Great God*] *Brown*. Your continued generous appreciation of my work during the past years has meant a great lot to me, has been one of the very few things that have gratified me and satisfied me deep down inside. I say this—and I want you to know I say it!—with the deepest sincerity. Your *Salvation Nell*, along with the work of the Irish Players on their first trip over here, was what first opened my eyes to the existence of a real theatre as opposed to the usual—and to me then, hateful—theatre of my father, in whose atmosphere I had been brought up. So, you see, I owe you this additional debt of long standing...

(*Selected Letters* 199)

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of O’Neill’s sentiments. Later in the letter, he expresses his hope that they meet and become friends. What is more, O’Neill had no need to curry favor; by 1925, he was already the foremost American playwright. O’Neill reaches out to Sheldon and admits there is a bond between them.

The usual explanation that Eugene O’Neill is the foundational American playwright is an historiographical problem that confronts the American theatre. By insisting that O’Neill be considered discretely, a topic such as “domestic drama” is cut out of its context and the study of American drama is hobbled. O’Neill’s oeuvre is too often taken to be a thing onto itself. There are studies of O’Neill that place him within the frame of American theatre history, but the prevailing narrative of O’Neill’s theatre is one that would have his plays present at the creation. There was nothing before him and everything since is because of him. Nevertheless, historically, we see that O’Neill emerges during the first quarter of the 20th century, during a time of artistic and social ferment. Partly because of O’Neill’s self-fulfilling assessment of the period, we tend to overlook the tenacity of 19th century theatrical conventions. Throughout O’Neill’s lifetime, the American stage remained crowded with formula dramas, obvious heroes, and poetic justice. It can be argued that the American theatre’s greatest innovation is the integrated book musical perfected in the elephant’s-eye-high corn of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* In spite of the seeming triumph of modernism, mid-20th century absurdism, and generations of critical opprobrium, melodrama – particularly on the screen – remains the dominant performance mode. The persistence of melodrama overwhelms O’Neill’s initial attempts to craft a new style of playwriting under Ibsen and Strindberg’s influence. A look at two of his earliest plays, “The Web” and “Recklessness”, demonstrates how much O’Neill ac-

cepted "show shop" standards of production while revealing that he had read Strindberg and seen Ibsen. O'Neill was fond of using the term, "show shop" as a way of abusing the commercial theatre he knew that churned out what seemed to be an assembly-line style of dramatic "product".

This is not to deny the commercialism of the infamous Theatrical Syndicate and the Shubert Brothers' approach to play production, O'Neill was not far wrong in deriding their industrialized dramaturgy. We can also see another aspect of "domestic drama" in terms of the psychological/autobiographical and "gendered" analyses of O'Neill. Domestic drama (sometimes styled "bourgeois drama") emerges as a genre in the 18th century; such plays first appear as Rousseauvian dramas of *sensibilité* (Fréry 297–298). They developed into the sentimental dramas of the 19th century, which type still holds the stage and screen. English and French strands intertwined to perfect the domestic drama created as well as analyzed by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. A major figure in these plays is the abused or fallen woman, and O'Neill dramatizes two such women in "The Web" and "Recklessness".

Turning to a relevant biographical aspect of O'Neill's early dramaturgy, we find his supposed total rejection of his father's theatre. Most accept O'Neill's dismissal of the theatre of the era as something that produced nothing of artistic merit or subsequent interest. Such acceptance is inadequate; it moves O'Neill closer to myth than history. While I have no desire to kick the dead horse of the death of the author, I do suggest that we desist definitively from taking O'Neill's word as holy writ. Therefore, it is particularly important that we reposition O'Neill within the commercial theatre of his time. Thus we can better estimate what he was part of and have a keener understanding of how he fashioned himself into a great playwright. Even so, we must also recognize that he never completely abandoned the conventions that nurtured his art. The theatre of his father that O'Neill grew up with – and in – was a mass medium; the theatre of O'Neill's youth was a major influence on him, as evidenced by the Gelbs' retitling their revised O'Neill biography: *Life with Monte Cristo*. Nor should we forget Robert Benchley's 1931 review of the original production of *Mourning Becomes Electra* in which he imagined the ghost of James O'Neill calling from backstage: "That's good, son! Give 'em the old Theatre!" (Gelb 28). The start of O'Neill's career is of course chronologically closest to his father's theatre, but O'Neill's finding his way as a playwright clearly relied on the conventions of his father's theatre for direction throughout his career. The characters in his plays should be considered in light of theatrical conventions as much as they have been studied as touchstones of autobiography. O'Neill's "domestic berth" was the playhouse and the dramas he created often have as much, or more, to do with stage conventions as with "real" people or events.

In his earliest plays, O'Neill may even have been attempting to create late-career vehicles for his father, keeping his playwriting all in the family. James went out of his way to praise his son's first work intimating to a reporter that he might perform in "A Wife for a Life" (Alexander 181). Contrary to Eugene's self-pitying stance that his father disliked his plays, James pressed them on his old friend the producer George Tyler. The

Gelbs recount how James not only approached Tyler, but Holbrook Blinn as well; he also discussed his son’s talent and the possibility that the plays could be performed with Brandon Tynan, a young actor James admired (Gelb 412–413). What is more, if one shifts the emphasis on the character of Arthur Baldwin in “Recklessness” from being based on James O’Neill and instead regards it as a part *intended* for James O’Neill, a new dimension to the concept of “domestic drama” comes in here. There was no part for James in “The Web”, but considering Rose, the prostitute in “The Web”, as suffering from tuberculosis à la Camille rather than Eugene², is another approach that frees us from the biographical trap.

Again, in spite of the myth that O’Neill appeared magically with a trunk full of plays on a Provincetown beach, thoroughly debunked by Gary Jay Williams, we should consider the playwright as part of the American theatre, not only as someone who rejected every part of it. It would have been good sense for O’Neill to attempt to craft a star-turn for his father. We cannot know whether James O’Neill came to be contemptuous of *Monte Cristo*, and there is no source other than Eugene to indicate that he felt that way. Irrespective of the “reality” of James O’Neill’s level of regard for *Monte Cristo*, it is clear that he sought other roles later in his career. If the son had written a successful play for his father, both would have benefitted. Imagine the publicity possibilities.

One should consider James O’Neill’s management of his career: performing in every sort of playhouse, adapting his script to different formats – including film, marketing all manner of souvenirs, and the actor’s image, and recognize that this was an incremental part of the emergence of the entertainment industry, rather than brand him a betrayer of some aesthetic orthodoxy. It is also wrong to accuse James O’Neill of representing an outmoded performance style. The late 19th century’s melodramatic conventions were seamlessly integrated into cinematic presentations. One melodramatic convention that *Monte Cristo* does not employ is the activist heroine. However, the majority of this era’s popular plays were of this type (Booth 10). Eugene O’Neill grew up in a theatrical milieu where this genre was the model. Throughout his career, he would create strong roles for women. He does so from the outset.

The conventional wisdom about the “Broadway show shop” style of industrialized theatre that O’Neill despised warrants further reexamination. Working-girl melodramas used the convention of the activist heroine into the 20th century: *Nellie the Beautiful Cloak Model* (1906) relied on it to great effect, even in the 1924 film version. The film has an interesting finale in which the “film” is revealed to have been a performance of the play in the theater. The working-girl melodrama was a sub-genre of sensational melodrama that flourished through the first quarter of the 20th century. A particularly lurid example is *Edna, the Pretty Typewriter* (1907).³ Edna leaps from an office window to escape her boss’s advances, landing on the elevated railway tracks and falling unconscious. It was also adapted into a novel with illustrations inspired by the stage production (Rainey 109). Rose in “The Web” is very much this type of working girl. Rose’s domestic situation is not the conventional one of the time. She is single-mother/sex worker. She is also the family moneymaker, supporting Steve, her lover and pimp.

Such melodramas were formulaic, if popular types of plays. Nevertheless, oversimplifying 19th century melodrama has led to misunderstanding the modern theatre. Thomas Postlewait and Jacky Bratton, and others, have dissected the “Manichean” binary that overlooks any possibility of complexity in melodrama. Indeed, Bratton reminds us that the genre has been under attack by literary critics since its arrival in the late 18th century. It is necessary to rehearse the postmodern plea that “melodrama” ceases to be a pejorative and becomes a description. Contrast the connotations of melodramatic with “tragic” or “comic”. If a play is labeled a tragedy, it is presumed to be of highest quality. Conversely, “comedy” alone is merely a generic distinction. People recognize that comedies may be good, bad, or indifferent. Few though, outside of a specialized drama seminar, know that there are legions of low-grade tragedies. One hardly thinks that George Washington’s favorite play, Joseph Addison’s *Cato*, would have much of a run today.

Erasing the distinctions within melodrama reduces our ability to analyze plays. It also leads to lacunae in our understanding of O’Neill’s early career. Consider a playwright universally revered in the 21st century, Samuel Beckett. If one applies two objections of traditional criticism to melodrama: reliance on emotional appeal and being ridiculously untrue to “real life” one ought to ask how much is read into *Waiting for Godot* and wonder about the likelihood of finding Vladimir and Estragon in one’s living room? By all of this, I am not claiming a place on the slope of Parnassus for “The Web” and “Recklessness”. Rather, I would ask that the mandarin approach to dramaturgy, which only recognizes plays on the level of *Endgame* or creations by a performance artist such as Marina Abramović as being worthy of comment, expand to take up the entire range of plays. “The Web” and “Recklessness” warrant examination because they definitively challenge the myth that O’Neill was instantly a revolutionary dramatist. They show us explicitly that he developed from a conventional playwright immersed in popular theatre, not only in Ibsen and in Strindberg.

In the letter describing his father’s death, two decades before *Long Day’s Journey*, in which James O’Neill seems to regret bitterly his entire existence (*Letters of Eugene O’Neill* 132), O’Neill is sketching the character of James Tyrone. This is not the only legacy from his father that obtains here. One can infer that Eugene was even better at manipulating his image than his father ever dreamed of being, and that he did so without any press agents. What other playwright has been on the cover of *Time* magazine four times? Yet his earliest plays were little more than potboilers (unsuccessful at that, they were never produced in his lifetime – though “Recklessness” was made into a film). Thus if one contrasts the latter-day O’Neill’s obsessive rejection of his father’s theatre, with the beginning of O’Neill’s career, we see not so much a consistent divide, but rather a connection. O’Neill may think of himself as a firebrand, torching his father’s ready-for-kindling theatre, but he is building on that theatre’s foundations, not destroying it. This is not to say that O’Neill did not move beyond the conventions of the commercial theatre. On the contrary, after he failed at writing plays that largely subscribed to its conventions, he rejected the trappings of the popular theatre and became wholly uncompromising, unwilling to change even the punctuation of his plays, let alone any dialogue.

One aspect of O’Neill’s playwriting that is consistent and “modernist” from the start is his use of voluminous stage directions. Rejecting biographical considerations of what inspired O’Neill and focusing on the technical aspects of how he constructed plays furthers our understanding of his domestic dramas. For a consideration of the playwright’s stage directions, Ingarden’s *Nebentext* – “side text” (208, 377), is useful here.⁴ Even though such instructions, and in O’Neill’s case, character descriptions, are ignored by directors and are sometimes a problem for readers unfamiliar with stage conditions, their inclusion in the published texts of scripts is a singularly telling reminder of the decline of performance in the last century. The two most important dramatists writing in English in the first half of the 20th century, Shaw and O’Neill are famous – or notorious – for their intricately detailed stage instructions. Both authors had a motive though, one that is part of the tradition inaugurated by Ben Jonson, the earliest English playwright to prepare an edition of his works, to insure that their plays were adequately translated from something to be beheld by spectators to something held in the hands of readers. The published versions were intended for “domestic consumption” via purchase or through lending libraries. Nevertheless, the inclusion of stage instructions by O’Neill was not something he handled with any particular self-consciousness; nonetheless, we are aware of his growing frustration with the productions of his plays and culminating in his (flouted) desire that no actors ever portray the Tyrones of *Long Day’s Journey into Night*.⁵

Nonetheless, O’Neill’s particular knowledge of stagecraft and his obsessive concerns about the physical productions of his plays make his stage directions especially instructive. Moreover, one may assume that O’Neill the playwright sought to guide his readers as much as he wished to direct the staging of his plays. Therefore, keeping in mind that theatrical exigencies usually require that an absent playwright’s wishes be ignored; the reading of O’Neill’s stage directions in the library is for practical purposes much more significant than their use by directors or actors. A particular aspect of this significance is brought up by Ingarden (232). He makes an interesting argument about the *Orientierungszentrum* (“center of orientation”) that stage directions create. He questions the conventional notion that readers imagine themselves in a theatre, and instead argues that a reader functions the same way with a play that he or she does with any other text, abetted by the “presence” of an invisible narrator. O’Neill takes this role for himself through his stage directions.

To turn another theoretical page, there are those who would insist that “The Web” and “Recklessness” offer sociological constructions of women in a patriarchal society that represent gender hegemony. What is more, one would do well to resort to O’Neill’s, a male playwright’s, stage directions for understanding female characters as “presentations” – in Ingarden’s sense. He writes, “For what exists and occurs in the represented world attains thereby the character of something *presented* [Ingarden’s emphasis], of something displayed for someone, regardless of whether this is explicitly indicated in the text or the directions” (Ingarden 232). I would differ from Ingarden and shy from equating stage directions with a novelist’s descriptions. The playwright’s directions draw on theatrical conventions, not literary ones.

Stage directions are authorial commandments given to real people (the performers) though ultimately impotent ones, since as we know, directors routinely dispense with them and set or lighting designers generally employ them only as points of departure. Therefore, let us focus upon the reader of the drama and the way that O’Neill directs him or her to perceive his women physically. While “The Web” is not a much of a play, it does present us with a female character possessing thematic and emblematic resonances. The character of Rose Thomas is useful for indicating that O’Neill’s histrionic presentation of his women is very much of a piece with his hegemonic concerns as a patriarchal playwright. There is no better way to comment on the commodification process inherent in dramaturgical constructions of the female than through the representation of physicality. In reviewing the presentation of female actions and appearances, we see the sorts of fashions that social codes of figuration and movement go through.

Despite the tone of this diction, it is not the aim of the present study to use O’Neill’s feminine constructions for socio-politico-theoretical purposes. It is also significant that much of melodrama and its conventions, as discussed earlier, are identified with female protagonists and imperatives. This may also be part of the reason melodrama is undervalued and underappreciated, in spite of its omnipresence. Dramatic literature is primary source material for insights into cultural presentation; therefore, it is as evidence of social reportage that one best examines the means by which O’Neill’s women are displayed. One should emphasize the “display” (in Ingarden’s sense) of characters in this study rather their “portrayal”. This emphasis is appropriate because there is a second level of “commandment” inherent in the playwriting process: the explicit nature of stage instructions to an actress who will play the role. Even if the instructions will never be followed, they are the attempt of the playwright to impose his will, to “engender” his vision of his character. In O’Neill’s case, the actress is being told by a man how to act like a woman created by a man. The problematic nature of these levels of illusion is self-evident. If we are to overcome presuppositions about the nature of the male playwright and the female character – note the absence of the possessive here – or rather, that the possessive is much more than adjectival in this instance. Then we must assume that O’Neill is not consciously setting out to enslave women via characterization. In “The Web”, Rose is disembodied; she is archetypified by her prostitution and motherhood. It is a sacred melodramatic convention that an unwed mother must die and no prostitute’s heart, however golden, can beat for long. Unlike Katie Johnson and Sheila Hickey Garvey though, I would not argue that O’Neill is stuck in the conventions coming out of “Camille”, which they believe override all depictions of the so-called “fallen woman” genre.

This argument is limited by a misunderstanding of the possible variations of the “fallen woman”. Stephen Stanton’s more nuanced reading of the variations on “fallen woman” conventions is informed by looking at the text of Dumas *fils*’ original *La dame aux camélias*. Stanton seems to have anticipated how Anglophone critics too readily conflate the prostitute and the courtesan, and his catalogue is a solid refutation of categorical elision. Stanton indexes the various types: “*femme galante* [the original term identified by Dumas himself], *femme entretenue*, *lorette*, *petite dame*, *cocotte*, and so on... for such women

Dumas coined in 1855 the name that became the title of perhaps his best play, *Le demi-monde* (Stanton xxx-xxxi). O’Neill’s Rose is a *cocotte*, far removed from *la femme galante*. Or to put a finer point on it, she is a *pierreuse*, the lowest level of prostitute, the “streetwalker”. In his 1997 study *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth Century France*, Charles Bernheimer draws on the contemporary nomenclature of Alexandre Parent du Châtelet. He was a 19th century Parisian official who exhaustively catalogued the varieties of the city’s prostitutes, providing even more gradations than Stanton does. Bernheimer opts for two essential categories: prostitute and courtesan. Mildred, the bitterly discontented wife in “Recklessness” could be classified as a type of courtesan. It is clear that she has married for money, or worse, was virtually sold to her wealthy husband by her family.

Though Rose falls into the prostitute category, she does share something with Mlle. Gautier and rather than focus on “fallen” womanhood, I would emphasize the confluence of disease. Rose in “The Web” is dying of tuberculosis and denying it even more emphatically than Marguerite Gautier.

Susan Sontag’s volumes detail the illness trope’s function and its use in the extra-medical sense. They concentrate on social and literary discourse and are interesting as far as they go. However, she is more concerned with putting forth general principles than in making specific applications. *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) does review traditional imputations of tuberculosis: feverish intensity toward life in general and sexuality in particular. Yet neither this work, nor its follow-up, *AIDS and its Metaphors* (1989), offer more than Sontag’s fondness for literary arcana with a nod to the cultural trends that Sontag perceives. One would think that it is also a *donnée* that O’Neill would have a “special” relationship with this disease, given that he himself was afflicted with it. However, there are several other 20th century authors whose tuberculosis offers no special insights into the disease: Anton Chekhov, Somerset Maugham, George Orwell, Katherine Mansfield, Thomas Wolfe, and Simone Weil, among others. It is the contention here that O’Neill is not so much drawing upon his personal experiences with “the con” as he is employing consumption as a dramatic typification.

In the earliest part of O’Neill’s career, we may mark the tension between the melodramatic modes of Victorianism that the structure of a play such as “The Web” imposes upon O’Neill’s characterization of Rose and the abhorning conflict of the “new woman”. Rose may be more proto-flapper than new woman, but she is also an archetypal fallen woman. For her part, Mildred clearly has some sense of feminist consciousness. It is not only that she loves Fred, her chauffeur; she knows her subservience to her husband, Arthur, is wrong. She describes her objectification: “[he] looked upon me as a plaything, the slave of his pleasure, a pretty toy to be exhibited that others might envy him his ownership” (“Recklessness” 58).

Whereas in “The Web”, the conventions of Rose’s disease impel limitations. O’Neill describes her:

Rose Thomas, a dark-haired young woman looking thirty but really only twenty-two, is discovered sitting on the chair smoking a cheap Virginia cigarette. An empty beer

bottle and a dirty glass stand on the table beside her. Her hat, a gaudy, cheap affair with a scraggy, imitation plume, is also on the table. Rose is dressed in the tawdry extreme of fashion. She has earrings in her ears, bracelets on both wrists, and a quantity of rings—none of them genuine. Her face is that of a person in an advanced stage of consumption—deathly pale with hollows in under the eyes, which are wild and feverish. Her attitude is one of the deepest dejection. When she glances over at the bed, however, her expression grows tenderly maternal. From time to time, she coughs—a harsh, hacking cough that shakes her whole body. After these spells, she raises her handkerchief to her lips—then glances at it fearfully.

(“The Web” 35–36)

What then are we to make of the playwright’s choices for this “side language”? O’Neill’s stage directions are given with the audience’s perspective – the actor is ignored in this fashion. This is significant in that it allows us, as readers, to better envision O’Neill’s staging, making him an assertive “invisible narrator”. It demonstrates O’Neill’s obsessiveness and his insistence on authorial control. This is the salient example of O’Neill as a “literary” playwright. However, these lengthy descriptions are not so much narrative devices as guides for the reader. Again, this shows his total reliance on his theatrical background, presenting theatrical not literary conventions.

In the early 21st century, we have learned to be skeptical of such Wagnerian control, but nonetheless the playwright as auteur is certainly not an extraordinary concept. This seems especially so if we recall the treatment accorded O’Neill, not only by the Provincetown Players, but also by his first co-producers, Kenneth MacGowan and Robert Edmond Jones, and ultimately by the Theatre Guild. With these examples in mind, one recognizes the playwright’s power. What playwright today can boast of such deference? Is such control-obsession patriarchal? Perhaps, it is, if isolated in relation to such a character as Rose in “The Web”. By adumbrating melodramatic techniques with his own tubercular concerns, O’Neill augments the whore-mother with the conventional attributes of consumptive literary character, and here of course *La dame aux camélias* is paramount in the playwright’s design.

Again, I would stress that the differences between Rose the bedraggled streetwalker and Marguerite the dazzling courtesan are so great as to frustrate such an analogue; the illness connection is a better one in this case. O’Neill creates both a framing device for his characterizations of Rose and for the play itself as a whole. Both are rooted in a gendered structure of control and submission. How does Rose move and speak? How are we meant to perceive her? How is an actress supposed to portray her? These questions are not usually asked by any but the most diligent reader – or by potential performers or directors. Even if we go beyond Trudy Drucker’s dismissal of Rose as an independent character, we must deal with her as a personage. Indeed, Drucker’s identification of Rose’s problematic individuality is in itself an unsatisfactory discussion of Rose as a dramatic construction.

Conversely, Charles Fish, in one of the only lengthy discussions of “The Web” emphasizes O’Neill’s technical skill in creating theatrical effects via characterization. We ought not to look at these characters as biographical creations – we must look at them

as stage worthy roles – or “parts” if you will. In this case, Rose is part of one man’s psychic and gendered conduit to a new stage of melodrama, his first play. Even if O’Neill wrote on the cover page of the manuscript, “‘The Web’ is not the first thing I wrote for the stage. I had some time before dashed off in one night a ten-minute vaudeville skit, afterwards destroyed” (Törnqvist 6). Or, if we may stipulate that Rose is a “working girl” then what we have in “The Web” is O’Neill’s intense variation on the “working girl” melodrama (or perhaps a “bad girl” play – see Rainey’s and Mayer’s articles). This also draws on the 19th century convention of the *grisette*, the lone young woman forced to find work in the city and soon set upon by rogues. Early in “The Web”, Rose rues her failed attempt at “that job thing”. The best known of such plays is *Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl*, opened in 1871, revised and revived in 1906 (Bordman 77); there is also the song “Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl” introduced by Marie Dressler in the comedy *Tillie’s Nightmare*, 1909 (Bordman 211) that poked fun at the genre. Westgate makes the case that “The Web” is an awkward attempt by O’Neill to respond to contemporary progressivism’s concern for women’s status (68).

In 1917, four years after O’Neill wrote “The Web”, Sheldon wrote an adaptation of *La dame aux camélias* for Ethel Barrymore that was advertised as a “Camille for the 20th Century”. Edward Sheldon (1886–1946) was presumed to be America’s greatest playwright at the beginning of the century. Because Sheldon seemed to be an innovator, he was one of the most highly regarded playwrights of his day. The author of both critically acclaimed and popular plays, Sheldon, for the moment, appeared to have linked the show-shop and the more idealistic dramaturgical realms. He stands as one of the most significant American playwrights before O’Neill, a status afforded to Sheldon by O’Neill himself. As noted, earlier, O’Neill wrote to Sheldon in 1925 crediting *Salvation Nell* with giving him the opportunity to see the potential of theatre to be something “truly artistic and real” (Letter to Edward Sheldon). Years later, after Sheldon’s death, O’Neill and his wife Carlotta would move into his New York apartment (*Son and Artist* 570).

In contrast to “The Web”, the milieu of “Recklessness” is entirely conventional and bourgeois. It takes place in the mountaintop summer home of a wealthy married couple. No better indicator that O’Neill was capable of writing a commercial play is the fact that “Recklessness” was filmed in 1933 as *The Constant Woman*, earning O’Neill \$5,000 (Bogard, *Contour in Time* 22). While this play and “The Web” have always stood in the shadow of the one-act plays that he wrote as the “Glencairn cycle”, “Recklessness” shows us more than O’Neill simply attempting to create a vehicle for his father. It also reveals that he was a close reader of Strindberg. The superficial resemblances between some of the characters in “Recklessness” and *Miss Julie* have been noted, and it does have a more than a hint of Ibsen’s *Doll House* in it as well. What is more though, Mildred, the miserable wife in “Recklessness”, is another variation on the fallen woman. As a wealthy man’s wife, she would seem to have achieved precisely the station in life that the ambitious courtesan desires. However, it is “Camille” with a nightmare ending: Here the husband is Armand as middle-aged boor who revels in confining his Marguerite in a gilded cage. In addition, the unavailing love triangle of Mildred, Fred and “Gene”, the maid, has been

traced as a steal from *Miss Julie*. The conversation between Arthur and Mildred has been likened to the climactic one between Torvald and Nora in *A Doll House*.⁶

While one may be on to something when reflecting on tuberculosis in "The Web", the autobiographical speculation that "Recklessness" has been subject to represents the extremes to which psychological/autobiographical critical sleuthing can go. Because the maid's name is "Gene", one critic is convinced that the play is evidence of some sort of latent homosexuality: "unconsciously, at least, he seems to mean her to represent the homosexual Oedipal lover, who loves his father possessively, is jealous of the father's lover (his mother), and wants to do away with his rival" (Black 15). Another scholar, Virginia Floyd, is convinced that O'Neill suspected his mother of adultery and that Arthur and Mildred are stand-ins for James and Ella. She is also convinced that the set for "Recklessness" prefigures the Tyrones' living room, both of course deriving from Monte Cristo Cottage. As is the case with too much of O'Neillian analysis, the only possible explanation for anything that happens in any of his plays is assumed to have its roots in O'Neill's own "family drama". The idea that O'Neill was perhaps trying to establish himself as a professional playwright and might have written the play as a vehicle for his father does not obtain for such critics because they are trapped in the amber of mid-twentieth century psychological realism.

James O'Neill may have been ambiguous about his son's first efforts, but this did not prevent him from asking friends and colleagues to assess the plays. He also did what he could to influence producers, one of whom, Holbrook Blinn, might have produced "The Web" and "Recklessness" as part of a planned series of new one-act plays. Unfortunately, Blinn's financial collapse cancelled the project (Sheaffer, *Son and Playwright* 290). From a 21st century perspective, it is extraordinary that anyone could think it more plausible that speculation around a son's suspicions that his mother had an affair, as opposed to finding a way of getting his father a contemporary part in a "modern" play, was the more likely inspiration for "Recklessness". Floyd argues that O'Neill's motivation for Fred's, Mildred's lover, being a chauffeur stems from the O'Neills' discord. The distrust of the chauffeur is related to the "evidence" offered by the offstage character Smythe, the chauffeur in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Floyd asserts that dialogue from that play may have been based upon family discussions about the O'Neills' chauffeur, and worse. Therefore, Floyd argues, Mrs. O'Neill may have actually had an affair, or at least that her son suspected as much.

Earnest Freudian insights into any alleged domestic drama in the O'Neill family aside, the two love triangles in "Recklessness" allow the playwright to make the frequently referenced parallels to Strindberg and Ibsen. The former of course, is more important. *Miss Julie* is the greatest servant-problem play ever written; Mildred's suicide follows on Julie's. Fred, the chauffeur, has little to offer compared with Jean, the valet, and Fred's death seems but a catalyst for Mildred's. Therefore, in terms of domestic drama, "Recklessness" is the more conventional example than "The Web". Unless of course one takes into account the policeman's odd final line of "The Web": "Mama's gone. I'm your mama now" ("The Web" 54). Both plays nevertheless are object lessons in contex-

tualizing O’Neill’s development as playwright. Here we can see how he both embraced and pushed aside certain contemporary conventions while attempting to bring innovation to the commercial theatre of his time. Clearly dissatisfied, he would reject this approach and move on, but briefly, he was a thoroughly conventional crafter of domestic dramas.

[Notes]

- 1 It is not possible to review the 18th century codification of domestic drama or *le drame bourgeois* here. There are almost as many sub-genres lying between comedy and tragedy, as there are categories of prostitutes in the 19th century register of the Paris police. The classification of dramatic genres undertaken in the 18th century, for our purposes, is best considered through the prescient work of Louis-Sébastien Mercier. He argues for plays that reject the classical unities, respond to their time, and, consonant with Herder, reflect the national cultural aspirations. For an introduction to his ideas, see Davis, Chapter VII, “Louis-Sébastien Mercier”. For extended discussions of the controversies surrounding the origins of domestic drama and its theory as developed in England, France and the German states, see Burnetts, Kies, Nolte, Shudofsky, Bevis, Finn, Soloski, and Szondi and Mendelsohn.
- 2 O’Neill contracted tuberculosis and went to the Gaylord Sanatorium in 1912. During his enforced confinement, he wrote his first plays (Gelb 388–389).
- 3 A “typewriter” at that time was what we would call a “typist”. Edna was not a machine.
- 4 In 2011 and 2014, the New York Neofuturists presented two plays fashioned from O’Neill’s *Nebentext*: “The Complete & Condensed Stage Directions of Eugene O’Neill.”
- 5 O’Neill wrote to his publisher, Bennett Cerf, on 13 June 1951: “*Long Day’s Journey into Night* [t]hat, as you know, is to be published twenty-five years after my death – but never produced as a play” (O’Neill, *Selected Letters* 589).
- 6 There is a third possible influence. O’Neill may be writing a serious variation on a successful 1910 farce, *The Upstart* by Tom Barry. The play was a vehicle for Jane Cowl who played a discontented minister’s wife who runs off with her chauffeur. The results are riotous.

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