


# The Maine Summer of Eugene O'Neill



**B**ecause the playwright Eugene O'Neill, hailed by many as the best American dramatist of the 20th century, spent the summer of 1926 at Belgrade Lakes, his life, and perhaps arguably, the literary world, was changed forever. Had he not summered here in Maine that fateful year, deep in the creation of *Strange Interlude*, he may have not met a certain lady, and he may also have plunged back into a world of heavy drinking. O'Neill had only quit drinking a few months before and he was determined as ever to continue to write. That certain lady, Carlotta Monterey, who would become his third wife, would one day fight to publish one of his greatest plays posthumously, just as he wished it, without changes. Eugene stated that he couldn't have written it without her. The play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, would earn O'Neill a fourth Pulitzer Prize. But we are ahead of our story.

We must travel back to a hotel room in New York City on October 16, 1888, where Eugene O'Neill was born.

Ironically, Portland, Maine, was nearly Eugene's birthplace, because his father, the great Irish actor and matinee star James O'Neill, along with his family, had been in town here for extended performances of *The Count of Monte Cristo* just weeks earlier.

The elder O'Neill, who at the time was king the stage with the great tragedian Edwin Booth, had come to loathe his role of leading man Edmond

BY MATTHEW JUDE BARKER

Dantes in Charles Fechter's adaptation of the Alexandre Dumas novel, having played it more than 6,000 times between 1883 and 1917, resulting in a stultifying but financially secure career.

But now there was the promise of his new son, a promise fulfilled.

**B**y the summer of 1926, young Eugene O'Neill had turned 38 and had already won two Pulitzer Prizes for his plays *Beyond the Horizon*, a four-act tragedy set on a New England farm, and *Anna Christie*. Not only that, O'Neill had already done enough living for three men.

He'd attended Catholic prep schools, flunked out of Princeton after two semesters, married, divorced, and remarried, had three children, mined for gold in Honduras, was a seaman, lived and spent much time in saloons and flophouses in New York, was a newspaper reporter and poet in New London, spent a winter in a sanitarium recovering from tuberculosis, studied playwriting at Harvard, spent a winter at Bellevue after he tried to commit alcoholic suicide, helped found the Provincetown (Massachusetts) Playhouse, and received a gold medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. And on top of it all, he suffered several personal tragedies.

After years of roaring fights with his father, Eugene was able to patch things up with him before he died in 1920. His mother Ella, who became a morphine addict after the birth of Eugene, finally went straight in 1914 and was put in charge of her late husband's estate, which included real estate all over the country.

Eugene's mother died unexpectedly in Los Angeles in 1923. At the time, Eugene's play *The Hairy Ape* was in pre-production. The night the play opened in New York, Eugene's brother Jamie, extremely intoxicated, arrived with their mother's body on the train from Californ-

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ia. Jamie was placed in a sanitarium, battling real and imagined demons, where he died soon after.

Eugene did not want to end up that way. Realizing the terrible paradox of being a great writer and a great drinker, the playwright underwent a brief psycho-analytical period and with only a few slips, never drank again.

The events of 1923 were the basis for O'Neill's last completed play, one of his greatest, *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1943/1947).

In the spring of 1926 Eugene wrote to a friend that he needed new ports of call, especially a place to live and write for the summer. He needed a place to work, relax, and above all stay sober.

Arrangements were made by Eugene's literary agent and summer resident of Belgrade Lakes, Maine, Richard Madden, to preview some properties, who jumped on the telephone. Just a few weeks, a train ride, and a breath of fresh air later, the O'Neills, including his second wife Agnes Boulton, their son Shane Rudraighe, 6, and daughter Oona, not yet 2, arrived and were ensconced in the real estate office of Ervin A. Bean, brother of celebrated outdoorsman L. L. Bean, searching for the perfect lakefront



getaway and perhaps a bit more.

O'Neill was about to embark on one of his strange interludes, the one we all share as residents of the very complex and pine-shored state of Maine.

The O'Neills finally settled on a cottage on Belgrade Lakes named Loon Lodge, a name he relished and commented on to friends. At one point he wrote that, "The

**One day Eugene and Agnes O'Neill visited Miss Marbury, and Carlotta was asked to show Eugene the bathhouse so he could change for a swim.**

above name of our camp is no horrible jest but a fact! After a winter spent at Bellevue, I'll say it looks as if God had taken to symbolism, what? However, I remain not only sane, but also sober."

**H**e at once went to work on *Strange Interlude*, a play he hoped to finish that summer. O'Neill enjoyed relaxing on the lake and keeping up with swimming, which he loved. The locals who saw the tall, dark-haired, impressive-looking O'Neill probably never realized they had a famous playwright in their midst. Workmen built a tar-papered shack for O'Neill away from the cottage itself, where he could escape to write, away from screaming kids and all the other distractions at the cottage, which included a visit by Eugene's eldest child, Eugene Jr., of whom he had seen little over the years.

After his writing sessions, O'Neill would make a beeline for the water and swim almost a half mile to a small point and back again. Only then was he ready for chit-chat.

O'Neill was at first content with his stay at Loon Lodge, but by early August, after a month at the retreat, he began to brood and his writing darkened. His new play was giving him kicks and fits, and he wanted to blame his wife Agnes, his toddler children, and even his son Eugene and Agnes's daughter Barbara from a previous marriage, who had also come to stay for awhile. The older children were eventually shipped away from the lake ahead of schedule.

At the same time, another play, *Lazarus Laughed*, was finding a cool reaction

"WOW."

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from the literary critics in New York, and he feared that for the first time in years he may not have any plays on the boards the coming fall.

O'Neill was all the while resisting the urge to drink and needed to find a distraction from the normalcy of the lodge. Yes, above all, Eugene O'Neill hated normalcy; in fact, since his youth, he had never known such a thing. His *Strange Interlude* in Maine was now not at all conducive to his creativity, he decided. In fact, Maine was spooking him. Something had to give. And it did.

Miss Carlotta Monterey, nee Hazel Tharsing, recently divorced, and once a bit actor in one of O'Neill's plays, came to nearby Long Pond as the summer guest of Miss Elizabeth Marbury, real estate mogul and partner of O'Neill's literary agent Richard Madden. Carlotta was a fetching sight, especially when she appeared in a risqué bathing suit.

One day Eugene and Agnes O'Neill visited Miss Marbury, and Carlotta was asked to show Eugene the bathhouse so he could change for a swim. Although

she admitted she at first felt indifference toward the playwright, a spark was soon ignited. They would often meet by "accident" at the large house of the actress Florence Reed on Great Pond, about a half mile from Loon Lodge. This budding relationship appears to have been strictly platonic at this time; Agnes and Miss Marbury assumed that Carlotta was simply trying to impress a famous playwright.

Eugene O'Neill was impressed all right, going as far as to admit that Carlotta had eyes like his late mother's. By early September he was back on track with *Strange Interlude* and believed he would be able to finish it before their stay in Maine was over. Eugene and family

**By the time summer ended O'Neill had a decent draft completed of *Strange Interlude*. The O'Neills left Loon Lodge (below) on October 10, 1926.**

started taking frequent trips by car around the Maine countryside, often accompanied by guides like Ervin Bean.

Eugene also began to entertain the idea of establishing an O'Neill repertory theater that could support itself. This did not come to fruition, but a theater in New York was named for him, albeit, a few years after his death.

**B**y the time summer had officially ended, Eugene O'Neill had a decent draft completed of *Strange Interlude*. The O'Neills left Loon Lodge on October 10, 1926, and returned to their winter residence in Connecticut. Eugene, completely refreshed and more ambitious than ever, also was rumored to have the address of Carlotta's Manhattan home safely tucked away.

For more than a year Eugene O'Neill spent time in the family residence in Bermuda and made frequent trips to New York to oversee rehearsals of *Strange Interlude*. He also started seeing Carlotta Monterey and realized that his feelings for her were stronger than the ties that bound him to Agnes and his two



children. He eventually left on a steamer, with Carlotta, bound for Europe, where they would spend the next several months. They leased an ancient chateau near Tours, France.


Agnes hoped for a reconciliation, but it never came. A divorce was granted to her on July 3, 1929, on the grounds of desertion, and Eugene and Carlotta were married three weeks later in Paris. In the meantime, *Strange Interlude* had opened on Broadway in January 1928. It was one of the most popular plays of the 1920s and would garner Eugene his third Pulitzer Prize. The summer in Maine had given him another prestigious award, substantial monetary benefits, long-lasting sobriety, and a new wife. Of course he also lost a wife and family in the process.

Eugene O'Neill spent the 1930s completing numerous plays, including *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Ah, Wilderness!*, *Days without End*, and a play set in an Irish saloon like he knew in his youth, *The Iceman Cometh*.

He also began work on his most famous play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, completed in 1941. The writing of the play took a great emotional toll on Eugene. It was about his family, but thinly disguised as a play about a family named Tyrone. There was James Tyrone, a stingy, aging matinee actor; Ella, his wife, a morphine addict; Jamie, an alcoholic; and "Edmund Tyrone," a drifter wasting away from consumption.

The play was dedicated to Carlotta, on their 12th wedding anniversary. Eugene said, in part, "Dearest: I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood. A sadly inappropriate gift, it would seem, for a day celebrating happiness. But you will understand. I mean it as a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me the faith in love that enabled me to face my dead [father] at last and write this play—write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for all the four haunted Tyrones."

The play was an ode to his long-gone family, for sure, but also an ode to all that was, or could have been, an ode to himself both as a lost 24-year-old and years later as a world-famous dramatist. The play was produced in 1956, three years after his death, and received incredible acclaim. O'Neill's career was still operating well into the 1960s as countless critics and readers discovered



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or rediscovered him. We continue to discover him, 50 years after his death.

It can be argued that Eugene O'Neill outlived the curse of his family, but not actually. By the late 1940s he had uncontrollable shaking in his hands, either from Parkinson's disease or from years of hard drinking.

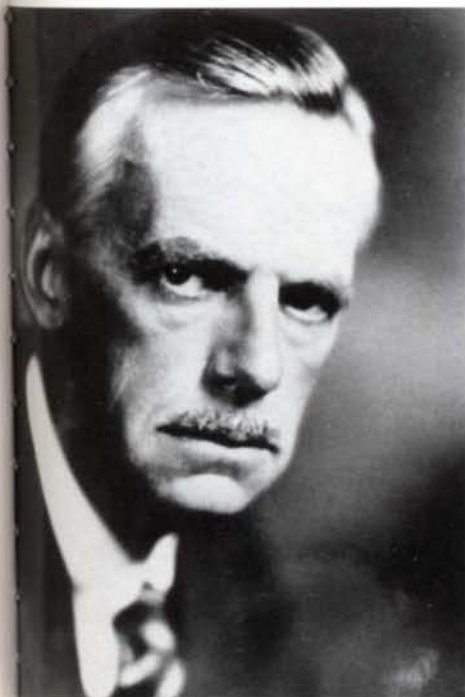
**B**ut as recently as 1998 an article appeared about a group of doctors who concluded that he suffered from a lifelong, congenital tremor. Whatever the tremor was, it finally forced him to stop writing altogether by the time he was 57, with *A Moon for the Misbegotten* the last play he got to see grace the stage.

O'Neill's daughter Oona, debutante of the year (1942) at the Stork Club in New York, went to Hollywood as an aspiring actress and met Charles Chaplin.

Chaplin's political and personal life had ended his career, and he was 36 years older than Oona when they married.



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This so disturbed Eugene that he never spoke to his daughter again. But she had a happy marriage with Chaplin, had eight children, and died in 1991.

**At 57, his son Shane, who had turned to alcohol and drugs, threw himself out of a Brooklyn apartment window. The playwright was devastated.**

Eugene's son, Eugene Jr., after receiving his doctorate and teaching the classics at Yale, turned to alcohol and communism and committed suicide in 1950. The playwright was devastated. His son Shane also turned to alcohol and drugs, bounced from one job to another, and at 57 threw himself out of a Brooklyn apartment window.

In 1948 Eugene and Carlotta renovated a cottage at Marblehead Neck in Massachusetts and in 1951 moved to a suite in the Shelton Hotel in Boston. Eugene donated many of his manuscripts and papers to Yale. He died in the hotel on November 27, 1953, at the age of 65.

Before his death he must have often recalled that summer in Maine that literally changed his life and, arguably, the literary world forever. Eugene Gladstone O'Neill, drifter, seaman, playwright, man of dreams and nightmares, found eternal sleep in Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston.

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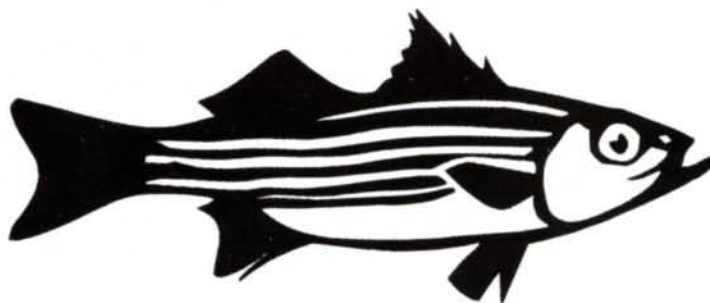
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