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TRANSFIGURING TRAGEDY

**SCHOPENHAUER, STIRNER, AND NIETZSCHE IN
EUGENE O'NEILL'S EARLY PLAYS**

Ryder Thornton



“From his earliest writings, Eugene O’Neill explored *depth* as a dramatic theme and a theatrical effect, insisting that being in the world required a modern re-thinking, even—or especially—on stage in the USA. Ryder Thornton has shown how O’Neill’s inquiry, undertaken by a self-taught playwright who failed to finish his first year at college, can be understood in terms of three of the most formidable philosophers of the nineteenth century and, furthermore, how their ideas led to the artist’s profound reframing of modern drama.”

—**William Davies King**, *Distinguished Professor of Theater and Dance, University of California Santa Barbara*

“*Transfiguring Tragedy* interweaves clear-eyed interpretations of Eugene O’Neill’s three foundational philosophers with masterful readings of the early plays—from the philosophical underpinnings of his earliest one-acts *A Wife for a Life* and *The Web* to the designation of inaugural full-lengths *Bread and Butter* and *Beyond the Horizon* as ‘tragedies of *ownness*,’ to various philosophical syntheses like the Apollonian–Dionysian conflict in his expressionistic tours de force *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. Thornton’s boldly inclusive examination of O’Neill’s naturalistic *Anna Christie* shows how the ever-enigmatic play was inspired by Mencken’s translation of Nietzsche’s *The Anti-christ* and layered with influences that include Nietzsche, Stirner, Eastern philosophy, and Christian symbolism. With a keen intellect, Ryder Thornton has assembled a splendidly researched philosophical cosmology for America’s master dramatist.”

—**Robert M. Dowling**, *author of Eugene O’Neill: A Life in Four Acts*



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Transfiguring Tragedy

This book demonstrates Eugene O'Neill's use of philosophy in the early period of his work and provides analyses of selected works from that era, concluding with *The Hairy Ape*, completed in 1921, as an illustration of the mastery he had achieved in dramatizing key concepts of philosophy.

Analyses of one-act and full-length plays from 1913 to 1921 reveal the influence of the three philosophers and establish that O'Neill was fundamentally a philosophic playwright, even from his earliest dramatic sketches. Specific concepts from Schopenhauer, Stirner, and Nietzsche went into O'Neill's shaping of character arcs, dramatic circumstances, symbology, and theme. Among them are Schopenhauer's concept of will and representation, Stirner's notion of possession, and Nietzsche's principle of the Apollonian–Dionysian duality. These ideas were foundational to O'Neill's construction of tragic irony apparent in his early period plays. The critical concepts of these three philosophers are the major pathways in this study. However, such an approach inevitably reveals other layers of spiritual influence, such as Catholicism and Eastern philosophy, which are touched on in these analyses.

This book is a much-needed introduction to philosophic concepts in Eugene O'Neill's early work and would be of great interest to students and scholars in theater studies and philosophy.

Ryder Thornton is a Senior Professor of Practice in the Department of Theatre and Dance at Tulane University, USA.

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Schopenhauer, Stirner, and Nietzsche in Eugene O'Neill's Early Plays

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This book is dedicated to my loving and supportive wife, Jenny Mercein, and our daughter Eliza.



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Introduction

On Ascension Thursday, May 24, 1900, Eugene Gladstone O'Neill received his first Holy Communion in the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception at Mount St. Vincent Academy, a Catholic boarding school in Riverdale, New York.¹ The five-year Catholic education that he began at age seven culminated in the ceremony assuring his salvation in Christ and was the peak moment for the religious faith he would soon abandon. To inspire spiritual resolve, O'Neill was given a copy of *The Following of Christ*, a translation of Thomas à Kempis's medieval treatise *De Imitatione Christi*. Kempis cautions the reader against the power of temptation, which the young O'Neill already perceived as a force his family members could not withstand. In the book, he marked various passages on the topic, including "Hence it is written in Job: Man's life upon earth is temptation" and "But there is often something [that] lies hid within, or occurs from without, which draws us along with it."² O'Neill began seeking strength through prayer and contemplation, recognizing his family's shortcomings and the unseen forces guiding their fate. His parents were devout Catholics, and his mother had suggested he consider the vocation of the priesthood; however, the personal crises of the family, including her own, would destroy this hope.³ The young O'Neill was reckoning with the reality that his father had sired an illegitimate child, his older brother had become a cynical alcoholic, and his mother was a drug addict. Initially, these realizations deepened his need for reassurance and solace in religion. The following year, he applied himself to religious study to strengthen his faith but eventually abandoned religion altogether. He told his parents it had been useless to them, and he stopped attending church when he was 15.⁴ As he matured, his interest in philosophers seemed to have filled the void left by his lapsed religion. Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy replaced the concept of God with an indifferent cosmic will; Max Stirner's work discussed the tendency of humans to become possessed by controlling forces; and, as Doris Alexander writes, Nietzsche's writings provided "a rhapsodic vision of human

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grandeur, a meaningful universe to replace the shattered rubble of his Catholicism.”⁵

It is challenging to chronicle Eugene O’Neill’s philosophical education as he was self-taught and often revisited texts to probe ideas that inspired his dramas. Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Stirner were philosophers that O’Neill read and reread. He discovered them outside his formal educational settings long before he began writing plays, and his plays indicate that he returned to their works repeatedly as part of his creative process. While there are clear allusions to these philosophers in his later works, his early works also express his affinity for their ideas. There is a custom in O’Neill’s scholarship of dividing Eugene O’Neill’s plays into three periods: early (1913–1920), middle (1921–1931), and late (1932–1943). This study argues that philosophy inspired his work in the early period and provides analyses of selected works from that era, including one from the middle period (*The Hairy Ape*, completed in 1921) as an example of the full maturation of his talent. The early period plays represent the playwright’s first efforts at synthesizing the ideas of the philosophers he admired and establishing the themes he would return to in the work of his middle and late periods.

An avid reader as a child, O’Neill had cultivated an interest in philosophy early in his life. In the summer of 1906, at age 17, O’Neill could be found in New London reading the works of Schopenhauer or the literature of Émil Zola and Oscar Wilde from a collection of first editions that friend and local doctor Joseph “Doc” Ganey had amassed during his world travels.⁶ Around the same time, O’Neill was patronizing Benjamin Tucker’s Unique Bookshop in New York. There, he discovered Max Stirner’s *The Ego and Its Own* and obtained his first copy of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which he reread every year or so, never losing his fascination with its content.⁷ Tucker was a philosophical anarchist and publisher of radical treatises who had gathered a following of intellectuals and patrons, including O’Neill, interested in radical politics.⁸ O’Neill came to Tucker’s establishment to find what was lacking in his classes at Princeton, where he was becoming increasingly bored with what he called “professorial dry rot.”⁹

When O’Neill entered Princeton, philosophers like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Stirner held an unconventional, if not iconoclastic, appeal as atheistic thinkers. They were a scourge to the romantic ideals that defined the previous generation. Their philosophies sparked arguments like the one in Act 4 of *Long Day’s Journey into Night* between James and Edmond Tyrone. “Where do you get your taste in authors,” shouts Tyrone. “That damned library of yours! (*He indicates the small bookcase at rear*) Voltaire, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Ibsen! Atheists, fools, and madmen!”¹⁰ To the extent that Tyrone’s attitude mirrored that of James

O'Neill's toward his son's intellectual interests around 1912, we can assume that the young O'Neill took to authors who challenged the romanticism, sentimentality, and ethical framework he associated with his father's era. As a playwright, he revolted against melodramatic theater in form, content, and worldview. Sophus Winther observes that O'Neill "consistently" attacked the "exaggerated romanticism" that had characterized American theater a generation earlier.¹¹ His attacks have a conceptual foundation in the works of modern philosophers whose ideas supplanted the Christian beliefs O'Neill resisted in his father's home and the schools he attended as an adolescent.¹² Schopenhauer refuted cosmological arguments proving the existence of God; Nietzsche undermined the foundations of conventional morality; and Stirner declared that life should be centered on the self and not any sense of duty to God, country, or cause.

Biographers have gathered various testimonies of O'Neill holding forth on these philosophers and recommending them to others between 1906 and 1912.¹³ Throughout his life, he maintained an interest in philosophy, which informed his outlook and personal expression long before he became a playwright. His preoccupation with philosophy is evident in his correspondences as a young man. In a letter to Jessica Rippin written in the spring of 1914, for example, O'Neill mentions time spent in the "lofty ether of Nietzsche-Schopenhauer philosophic discussion"; from a distinctly Nietzschean point of view, he argues against the false binaries of moral posturing: "Sin and its punishment, virtue and its reward; piffle upon piffle until everything in the world is turned upside down and all that is delightful is dubbed 'Bad' and all that is disagreeable and ugly 'Good.' The immortal Gods, deliver me from Good and Evil."¹⁴ A year later, he writes to Beatrice Ashe, describing his love for her in language that reflects his exposure to Schopenhauer: "It's just a feeling of being at harmony with Life itself, of having found the Thing-In-Itself, of having reached the ultimate goal of all my striving."¹⁵

After O'Neill began writing drama, he was fortunate enough to befriend the amateur philosopher and philosophical anarchist Terry Carlin, whom he met in 1915 when both were helping Hippolyte Havel with his anarchist periodical, *Revolt*.¹⁶ Carlin was well-read and commanded a deep knowledge of Western and Eastern philosophical literature. He is credited with introducing O'Neill to mysticism and Indian philosophy.¹⁷ One can only speculate on the nature of their intellectual discussions; however, in Carlin, O'Neill would have found a mentor unlike any in the halls of Princeton or the home of his Irish Catholic family.

We cannot know the precise list of philosophic texts O'Neill had read by 1913, the year he wrote his first play, but by literary analysis, this study makes the case that the ideas of Schopenhauer, Stirner, and Nietzsche were driving forces behind his early dramatic writing. As I will illuminate in

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Chapter 1, even in his very first work for the stage, *A Wife for a Life*—a piece the playwright later disparaged as “not a play” and “not a vaudeville skit, either” but “nothing”¹⁸—there is clear evidence of influence from the philosophers he admired. While much has been written regarding O’Neill’s use of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer in his middle and late career works, the philosophical content of his early plays has not been sufficiently evaluated. Stirner’s impact on O’Neill has been examined in biographical studies, but these studies have yet to be complemented with Stirnerian analyses of the plays. The chapters that follow attempt to fill these lacunae with close readings of the characters, narrative structures, symbols, and subtextual elements that generate distinctly philosophic themes.

The title of this book is inspired by O’Neill’s belief that modern theater could transfigure commonplace characters into tragic heroes worthy of comparison to the protagonists of Greek drama. Over a quarter century before Arthur Miller argued that tragedy is the outcome of protagonists “securing personal dignity” and tragic flaws were “not particular to grand or elevated characters,” O’Neill had committed himself to dramatizing the tragic suffering of everyday individuals—“ignoble, debased lives”—and revealing how such suffering dignifies them.¹⁹ He once characterized his artistic drive as stemming from the

profound conviction ... that it is possible—or can be!—to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures of the stage.²⁰

To achieve the transfiguration of tragedy, O’Neill drew upon the philosophers who had captured his imagination as a young adult. Through them, he acquired a unique point of view as a playwright, enabling him to fashion modern people enduring struggles with fate without implying reverence to religious ethics.

Three philosophical concepts became central to O’Neill’s playmaking in his early career: “ironic life force,” “possession,” and “belonging.” “The ironic life force” is a term O’Neill uses in the stage directions of his 1913 play *The Web*. It captures the quality of irony and blind striving will as a force behind life, which O’Neill derived from Schopenhauer’s philosophy. The notion of a cosmic will as the origin of sublime experience, operating without didactic purpose and confounding moral postulation, was foundational to O’Neill’s conception of fate in modern drama. “Possession” is a term Max Stirner uses in *The Ego and Its Own* to describe how ideologies and external forces can take control of individuals and rob them of autonomy or what Stirner labels “ownness.” “Belonging” is

a concept O'Neill explores throughout his career and is the central theme of *The Hairy Ape*. To belong is to harmonize with one's environment by balancing individuality with the realization of being a part of a larger overwhelming force—to find one's place, as O'Neill once put it, as an "infinitesimal incident" of cosmic will.²¹ O'Neill's concept of belonging draws from Nietzsche's arguments on Greek tragedy outlined in *The Birth of Tragedy*, particularly the idea of "failed individuation" and the Apollonian-Dionysian conflict. The antithesis Nietzsche observed in ancient Greek culture between the individual drive to fashion one's self-image (Apollonian) and the self-forgetfulness of feeling at one with nature (Dionysian) was a continuous source of inspiration for O'Neill's tragedies. Edmund describes the sensation of belonging to his father in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. "I belonged," he declares, describing an experience at sea, "within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself!" (3:812). Anna has a similar experience when she encounters the sea in Act 2 of "*Anna Christie*." In Act 3 of *Beyond the Horizon*, Robert Mayo references belonging when he tells his brother, Andy, what a mistake he made by leaving the farm: "You used to be a creator when you loved the farm. You and life were in harmonious partnership." In *The Hairy Ape*, stoker Yank Smith validates his existence in industrial society by proclaiming that he "belongs," yet he soon discovers the emptiness of this assertion and the reality of his alienation.

This book argues for an appreciation of O'Neill based on his talent for synthesizing the variables of philosophy and religion. There are additional literary and metaphysical influences, Catholicism and Vedantism, for example, that are also touched on in this volume, but to be all-inclusive is beyond its scope. Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Stirner were selected as focal points because of how central their paradigms are to O'Neill's work. Close readings reveal that the playwright could graft these paradigms and others in a complementary way, enabling the reader to access the plays from different philosophical angles. For example, the chapter on "*Anna Christie*" examines its diverse philosophic content as Nietzschean, Stirnerian, Christian, and Vedantic. The main contention of this book is that O'Neill was fundamentally a philosophic playwright. Even in works considered examples of realism, like the *Glencairn* plays, the author's hand is directed by philosophy.

The chapters of this book address the plays in roughly chronological order. In [Chapter 1](#), I examine the historical context of O'Neill's connection to philosophy and then outline the central concepts of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, focusing on their approach to tragedy. The overview of Schopenhauer's philosophy includes the concepts of "will and representation," "the sublime," and "the pure subject of knowledge." After introducing Nietzsche's ideas from *The Birth of Tragedy*, the chapter explores

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his disagreement with Schopenhauer on the issue of pessimism and tragedy and how O'Neill aligns with Nietzsche's approach. A close analysis of selected one-act plays from the early period follows, revealing the influence of the philosophers. [Chapter 2](#) begins with the historical context surrounding the cycle of plays set aboard the S. S. *Glencairn* and follows with an analysis of each play. Through analysis, I reveal how the influence of Joseph Conrad and the author's Catholic background complement his application of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, resulting in dramatic pieces that are both slices of maritime life and philosophic parables. [Chapter 3](#) addresses the construction of O'Neill's early full-length tragedies and how the author drew heavily from Max Stirner's concepts of "possession" and "egoism." An analysis of three early full-length plays from a Stirnerian perspective demonstrates how each dramatizes a crisis of "ownness"—a core principle of philosophical anarchism and the topic of Stirner's foundational text, *The Ego and Its Own*. [Chapter 4](#) explores how *The Emperor Jones* engages Nietzsche's conception of tragedy, Schopenhauer's concept of the sublime, and Stirner's concept of sacredness as power. The chapter also explores the play's indictment of American colonialism and O'Neill's problematic characterization of an African American, which ignited tensions with lead actor Charles Gilpin. In [Chapter 5](#), I analyze the influence of multiple philosophic traditions on O'Neill's second Pulitzer Prize-winning play, "*Anna Christie*", which includes Nietzsche, Stirner, Eastern philosophy, and his Catholic sensibility. The chapter also examines the likelihood that O'Neill took inspiration for the play from H. L. Mencken's 1920 translation of Nietzsche's *The Antichrist*. The final chapter analyzes the eight scenes of *The Hairy Ape*, focusing on Nietzschean elements and their primacy to the concept of belonging. Schopenhauerian will and Stirnerian possession also play a part in O'Neill's Expressionist approach to the disharmony between what the playwright labeled "primitive pride" and "the mechanistic development of society."²² The analysis reveals how O'Neill's imagery and symbolism are inspired by Nietzschean concepts, including the Apollonian-Dionysian duality and the great blonde beast, which O'Neill applies to critique modern humanity's subjugation of nature and stratification of society.

The early plays demonstrate a sensitivity to realistic detail and an imagination for what is beyond sensory perception, which culminated in Expressionist experiments. O'Neill's eagerness to rend the veil of romanticism and expose coarse circumstances and amoral impulses always brought audiences closer to an understanding that life itself is a veil, and behind it lie the mysterious dynamics of fate with which human beings eternally struggle. In a 1919 letter to Barrett H. Clark, O'Neill referred to this aspect of his writing as "my feeling for the impelling, inscrutable forces behind life which it is my ambition to at least faintly shadow at

their work in my plays.”²³ This book aims to appreciate O’Neill’s sensitivity to these forces and his attempts to render them effective between 1913 and 1921.

A Note on Translations

To engage with the relevant philosophers, I have consulted contemporary and first English translations of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Stirner. I have also used Max Müller’s 1883 translation of *The Upanishads*. As the objective here is to appreciate the influence of philosophical texts on Eugene O’Neill’s plays, it is appropriate to read those texts as they would have appeared to the playwright. Therefore, whenever possible, I quote from the English translations that would have been available to O’Neill in the early 1900s. However, for the sake of comprehension, some of my explanations of philosophic tenets are based on recent translations and secondary texts by contemporary scholars. In the case of Schopenhauer’s *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, the only existing English translation in O’Neill’s lifetime was R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp’s 1883 publication, which translated the title as *The World as Will and Idea*. As the book in the English-speaking world today is known as *The World as Will and Representation* and is titled as such in E. F. J. Payne’s 1958 translation, to avoid confusion, I refer to the book by that title, though passages from the Haldane and Kemp translation appear in this text. Regarding Nietzsche’s work, nearly all the quotations are from the first authorized English translations published in the Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, edited by Oscar Levy. One notable exception is *The Antichrist*, cited frequently in [Chapter 5](#) concerning O’Neill’s play “*Anna Christie*.” Nietzsche’s book was first translated in 1896 by Thomas Common, but I quote from H. L. Mencken’s 1920 translation, which, I argue, O’Neill read while working on his play. Passages from *The Birth of Tragedy* are from William A. Hausmann’s 1909 translation with additional references to Ronald Speirs’s 1999 translation published in the Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy series. When quoting from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I refer to the 1896 translation by Alexander Tille—the only one available to O’Neill in 1907—and Thomas Common’s 1909 translation—the first authorized one. (Years later, O’Neill would read the work in its original German with the help of a dictionary.²⁴) Tille and Common both originally translated the title as *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and the text appears in the notes and bibliography under that title; however, the book is referred to in the body of this study as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and modern reprints of Common’s translation have changed “*Spake*” to “*Spoke*.” Max Stirner’s *The Ego and Its Own* was translated into English by the individualist anarchist Steve Byington in 1907.

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This translation remains popular today and is part of the Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought series, edited by David Leopold. All quotes from that source are from this edition.

Notes

- 1 Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill, Son and Playwright*, 1st Cooper Square Press ed. (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 76.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 77. Excerpts from Thomas à Kempis's *The Following of Christ* are quoted in Sheaffer. O'Neill was probably given a popular English translation of the text. For a complete translation, see Thomas à Kempis, *The Following of Christ: In Four Books*, trans. Richard Challoner (London: J.P. Coghlan, 1779). Interestingly, in Act 2, Scene 2 of *The Great God Brown*, the character of Dion Anthony reads from Thomas à Kempis's text "like a priest, offering up prayers for the dying" (2:503).
- 3 Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Down the Nights and Down the Days: Eugene O'Neill's Catholic Sensibility* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 19.
- 4 According to Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill learned of his father's scandal from his brother Jamie, who was already growing disillusioned with his parents and began bearing a "destructive influence" on O'Neill when he was as young as ten. Following his Holy Communion, the young O'Neill "deluded himself into believing that he was still firm in his faith, by applying himself with unprecedented zeal to his studies and by doing particularly well in the subject of religion." The Gelbs also compare John Loving's crisis in *Days Without End* to this period in O'Neill's youth. See Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 70–73.
- 5 Doris Alexander, *The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 103.
- 6 Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill: Life with Monte Cristo* (New York: Applause, 2000), 199.
- 7 In a letter to critic, poet, and essayist Benjamin De Casseres, O'Neill writes that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* "has influenced me more than any other book I've ever read." Moreover, he adds, "I reread it and am never disappointed ... (That is, never as a work of art, aspects of its teaching I no longer concede.)" The remark illustrates O'Neill's attachment to Nietzsche and a continuing re-assessment and refinement of his appreciation. See Eugene O'Neill, *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill*, ed. Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 245–46.
- 8 Robert M. Dowling, *Eugene O'Neill: A Life in Four Acts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 50.
- 9 Doris Alexander, *Eugene O'Neill's Creative Struggle: The Decisive Decade, 1924–1933* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 15.
- 10 Eugene O'Neill, *Complete Plays*, ed. Travis Bogard, 3 vols. (New York: Library of America, 1988), 3:799. Subsequent references to O'Neill's plays in this study are to this edition. Volume and page numbers are given in parentheses.
- 11 Rophus Keith Winther, *Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961), 8.
- 12 Stephen A. Black, *Eugene O'Neill: Beyond Mourning and Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 89.