

ARENA'S PAGE

STUDY GUIDE

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THE PLAY

"Then, from all reports, we seem to be completely surrounded by love!" – Nat Miller

Seventeen-year-old **Richard Miller** has a problem. He is desperately in love with the girl next door, **Muriel McComber**. For weeks Richard has been pouring his heart out in racy and romantic letters to her, sending her passionate verses from poets that his parents view as subversive and dangerous.

It is July 4, 1906 and on this day of independence Richard receives a letter from Muriel. His heart breaks as he reads

that she wants nothing to do with him ever again.

In a haze of resentment toward Muriel, his family, and the world, Richard decides to leave for a wild night. With liquor on his breath late at night in a bar, Richard meets some unsavory characters, including a prostitute named **Belle**, who test his principles and cause him to explore what it really means to claim independence and come of age. ●

CHARACTERS AT A GLANCE

The Miller family in *Ah, Wilderness!* are nostalgia-tinged **composite** characters, inspired by O'Neill's family members and neighbors in New London, Conn.

Nat Miller – the decent, hardworking father who loves his family and tolerates their foibles

Essie Miller – the loving and fussy mother who is a little uneducated and worries about Richard

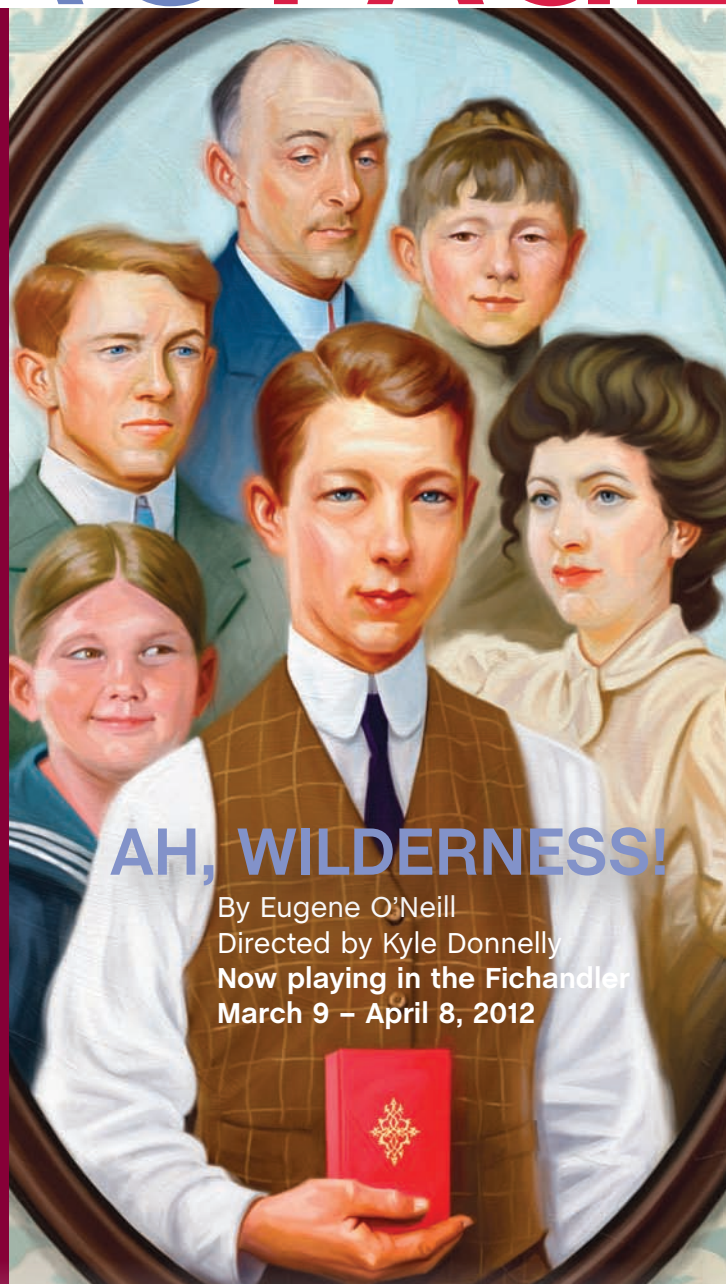
Aunt Lily – Nat's sister, a single school teacher who harbors a love for a man that has hurt her

Uncle Sid – Essie's brother, an alcoholic who has lost jobs and love because of his addiction

Richard Miller – a restless 17-year-old on the brink of adulthood who is about to have his own independence day

Arthur, Mildred and Tommy Miller – the other Miller children

composite character – character created by combining characteristics of multiple real-life people



AH, WILDERNESS!

By Eugene O'Neill
Directed by Kyle Donnelly
Now playing in the Fichandler
March 9 – April 8, 2012

Major support for this program is provided by the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation.

Funded in part by the D.C. Commission on the Arts & Humanities, an agency supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts.
The Eugene O'Neill Festival is generously sponsored by Joan and David Maxwell.

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THE PLAY

"It's wrong to blame your brother. He can't help being what the past has made him. Any more than your father can. Or you. Or I." – Mary

It is August 1912, a day in the life of the Tyrone family. They are **Mary** and **James Tyrone** and their living sons, **Jamie** and **Edmund**. Mary has returned from treatment for **morphine** addiction. She is restless and anxious, though her sons and husband try to comfort her. Edmund's coughing fits are getting worse. Tyrone and Jamie try to keep Edmund's illness hidden from the fragile Mary, while preparing for the worst news from the town doctor.

In the face of Mary's addiction and Edmund's illness, the family dredges up the past and its pain. They try to escape into drink after

drink, women, and arguments. They hopelessly point fingers and place blame. Tyrone's acting career prevented them from having a stable home. Tyrone's stinginess caused Mary to get poor treatment, which led to her addiction. Jamie and Edmund have wasted their lives. Loneliness takes hold of Mary, resurrecting a cycle of addiction that threatens to tear the Tyrone family apart.

What will become of the Tyrones as the day turns to night? ●

morphine – addictive pain-reliever and sedative, closely related to heroin

CHARACTERS AT A GLANCE

The characters in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the Tyrone family, are based closely on O'Neill's family.

Mary Tyrone – the mother, a morphine addict who never recovered from her son's death. O'Neill's mother's addiction began after her son's death.

James Tyrone – the father and, like O'Neill's father, a matinee idol (see article) who is an alcoholic.

Jamie Tyrone – the oldest brother who drinks, womanizes and never lives up to his potential. O'Neill's older brother drank himself to death by age 45.

Edmund Tyrone – the youngest brother who suffers from tuberculosis. Compare Edmund to O'Neill's biography.

Eugene Tyrone – the middle child who died in childhood. O'Neill's brother Edmund died at 18 months old.



LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

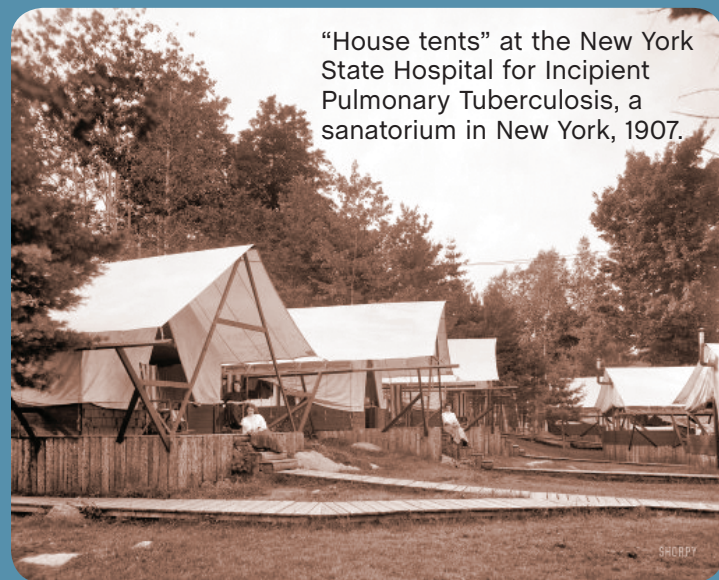
By Eugene O'Neill
Directed by Robin Phillips
Now playing in the Kreeger
March 30 – May 6, 2012

Major support for this program is provided by the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation.

Funded in part by the D.C. Commission on the Arts & Humanities, an agency supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts.
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ADDICTION AND CONSUMPTION TREATMENT IN THE EARLY 1900S

In the early 1900s, substance abuse of any kind was seen as a social failing or character flaw. Nothing was known about genetic predisposition to certain addictive behaviors. Cognitive and behavioral therapies for addiction were in their early stages and would not find a foothold in the medical community until well into the 1960s. Twelve-step programs, like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, wouldn't exist until the 1920s.



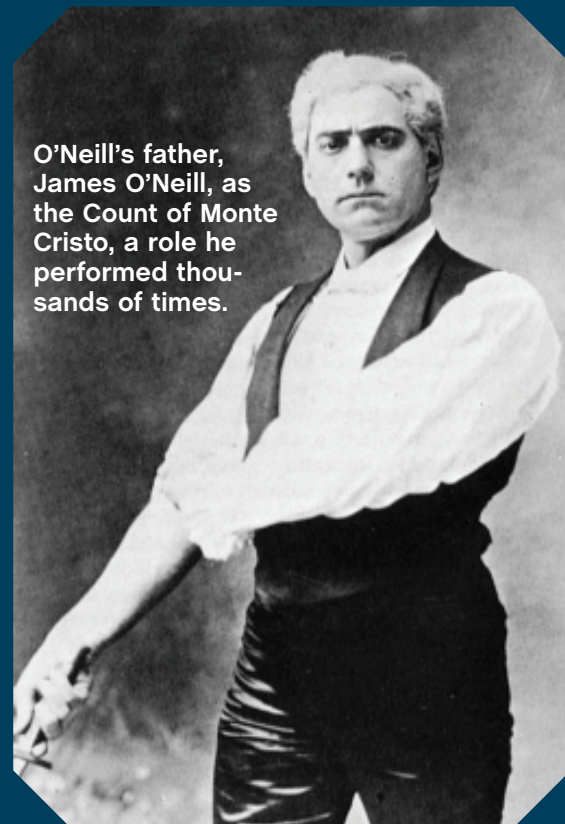
“House tents” at the New York State Hospital for Incipient Pulmonary Tuberculosis, a sanatorium in New York, 1907.

One of the most common prescriptions to treat substance abuse was to isolate the individual in a facility known as a sanitarium. These facilities, usually far away from urban centers, were institutions with highly regimented schedules, strict dietary codes, and exercise plans. These methods were seen as the best ways to fight addiction. However, these treatment facilities were very expensive and reserved to those who could afford them, thus Tyrone's aversion to them in the play.

Treating tuberculosis or consumption followed a similar regimen to the one above. In a pre-antibiotic age, the best cure for consumption was seen as a healthy diet, clean air, and rest to strengthen the body's immune system and ward off the disease. The sanitarium was seen as an ideal institution to treat tuberculosis. Unfortunately this treatment was ineffective in most cases and resulted in an unreliable rate of recovery. ●

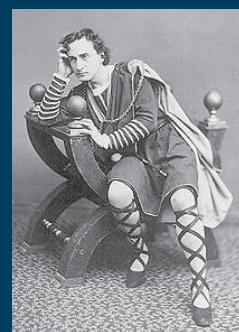
THEATER IN 1912

“The summer will soon be over, thank goodness. Your season will open again and we can go back to second-rate hotels and trains. I hate them, too, but at least I don't expect them to be like a home.” –Mary



O'Neill's father, James O'Neill, as the Count of Monte Cristo, a role he performed thousands of times.

In 1912, professional theater as we know it was still being formed. Towns and cities outside New York had to wait for touring companies to come to town to see performances. Actors therefore spent months at a time traveling the U.S. by train and staying in hotels. James Tyrone travels every year with a company, playing the same role that made him wealthy and famous. He has not, however, had the chance to play additional, more challenging roles, which he regrets. This lifestyle is what makes Mary so unhappy, and she claims it is why she never made a home for the family.



MATINEE IDOL

Edwin Booth was one of the most celebrated American actors of the late 19th century. In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Tyrone glories over his performance of Othello opposite Edwin Booth's Iago. Matinee idols were the stars of the stage and adored by fans, much like today's film celebrities are. ●

BELLE, SEX AND THE EARLY 1900s

“Yes – it won't do to have him getting any decent girl in trouble” – Sid



Prostitution was legal in the U.S. in 1906 but frowned upon. Women like Belle were seen as “fallen” and in need of reform. However, prostitution was a lucrative profession in a time when women either made a pittance working in factories or stayed at home to raise children. It was also dangerous, as women risked abuse, disease and deadly complications from unsanitary abortions. Nat Miller worries that Richard will get an incurable sexually transmitted disease if he has sex with a prostitute.

Miller also worries about Richard's relationship with Muriel, because he thinks he might be trying to ruin her. Premarital sex and pregnancy were serious social taboos for women, in part because there were no effective forms of birth control. If a woman or girl were to get pregnant, it would impact her chances of being able to marry in the future. ●

RICHARD'S LIBRARY



Richard's parents are scandalized when they see the selection of rebellious books Richard is reading, which challenge the social mores (values) of their time. Today, these writers are considered among the most important of their time.



Oscar Wilde – Irish poet and playwright. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is his most well-known novel. Wilde was sentenced to hard labor and imprisoned at Reading Gaol (prison) in 1895 for homosexuality. Richard's mother refers to Wilde as wicked trash.



George Bernard Shaw – Irish literary critic, playwright, and socialist. His plays, while often comedic, addressed social and economic issues of the times and helped bring serious drama back to the British stage. He was heavily influenced by Henrik Ibsen.



Henrik Ibsen – Norwegian playwright who has had a major influence on Western theater. Many of his works are tragedies dealing with the realities of domestic life, behind the façade that families present to the public. His play *Hedda Gabler* is often referenced by Richard.

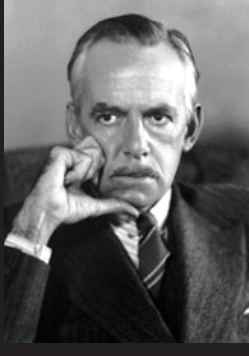
a! **ACTIVITY** The coming-of-age genre is one in which a young person transitions to adulthood through an experience causing a loss of innocence. Write a short coming-of-age story based on your experience. Be as true-to-life or imaginative as you wish. ●

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!

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam – Iranian poem written by Omar Khayyam in the 10th century. A *rubaiyat* is a four-line poem stanza. It was translated by Edward FitzGerald, first appearing in 1859. *Ah, Wilderness!* comes from the 12th verse of the poem.

a! **ACTIVITY** Analyze this passage from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Why did O'Neill choose this passage for the title of his play? Why did he change the words from “Oh, Wilderness” to “Ah, Wilderness!”? Use a poem or song lyric to devise the title of your autobiography. Compile them as a class into a “reading list.”

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



Eugene O'Neill was born in 1888 in a Broadway hotel. His father, James, was an actor, so Eugene's early life was spent on tour. He finished prep school, but he was expelled

from Princeton after his first year. He then took various jobs and traveled for the next several years. He got malaria in Honduras and eventually **tuberculosis**, which forced him to spend time in a sanatorium (see article).

O'Neill began writing plays in 1913. In 1916 his short play *Bound East for Cardiff* was produced in New York, which reintroduced tragedy to the New York stage. At that time Broadway plays were mostly melodramas and comedies. He won the Pulitzer Prize for three plays: *Beyond the Horizon* in 1920, *Anna Christie* in 1922, and *Strange Interlude* in 1928. In 1936, O'Neill was the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. He received a fourth Pulitzer Prize after his death for *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, which is considered his masterpiece.

O'Neill's life was fraught with tragedy, which is evident in his plays. His mother was a morphine addict. His father and older brother were alcoholics. All three of them died within three years of each other. He was divorced twice. Both of his sons committed suicide. He disowned his other son after he was arrested for heroin possession. He disowned his daughter for marrying Charlie Chaplin (a film star) when she was 18 and Chaplin was 54. He was often depressed and had attempted suicide twice.

He eventually lost his ability to write, and he died in 1953 in a Boston hotel room. His last words were "I knew it. I knew it. Born in a hotel room, and God damn it, died in a hotel room." ●

tuberculosis – a contagious infection of the lungs that can spread to other organs, including the kidneys, spine and brain. TB can be fatal.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN O'NEILL'S PLAYS

THE MONTE CRISTO COTTAGE



The Monte Cristo Cottage in New London, Conn., was the O'Neill summer home, where they lived when they were not on the road with the touring theater company. It was named for the play, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, that O'Neill's father performed in for much of his acting career.

It is the setting first for *Ah, Wilderness!* and later for *A Long Day's Journey into Night*. Today it is a museum and national Landmark, managed by the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. ●



ACTIVITY O'Neill is known for his detailed stage directions. Read O'Neill's stage directions at the beginning of one or both plays. Draw a set design of the sitting room per his description. Choose colors and add details that convey the atmosphere of the play.



O'NEILL'S MURIEL

A photo from Marion Welch's scrapbook
Eugene O'Neill Collection. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

At 17 Eugene O'Neill had frequent correspondence with a young lady named Marion Welch. This relationship inspired O'Neill as he crafted the characters of Richard and Muriel in *Ah, Wilderness!* The language of O'Neill's letters to his "Dear Marion" was peppered with romantic phrases and loving flourishes, much like Richard's manner of speaking with Muriel. An excerpt from one of O'Neill's letters dated July 24, 1905:

somnambulant – sleepwalking

Ma Chere "Boutade"...

I cannot say how much I missed and still miss you. New London has now relapsed into a **somnambulant** state, which is far from pleasing and all on account of your departure. ... Well the sand in my hourglass is about run out and I must "put on the brakes." Please send me your photo with the other pictures and thus make me even more than I am now.
Your Eternal Slave,
Eugene O'Neill

THE COMEDY & THE TRAGEDY

O'Neill has said that *Ah, Wilderness!* (his only comedy) and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (his most celebrated play) have autobiographical elements.

O'Neill said of *Ah, Wilderness!*, "It was a sort of wishing out loud. That's the way I would have *liked* my boyhood to have been."

Long Day's Journey into Night was so close to his story that O'Neill stipulated *Long Day's Journey* was not to be published until 25 years after he had died. At that point all the characters involved would be dead. However, his third wife and widow allowed the play to be performed and published in 1956, three years after his death. ●

MORPHINE AND ADDICTION

"I hope, sometime, without meaning it, I will take an overdose. I could never do it deliberately. The Blessed Virgin would never forgive me, then." – Mary



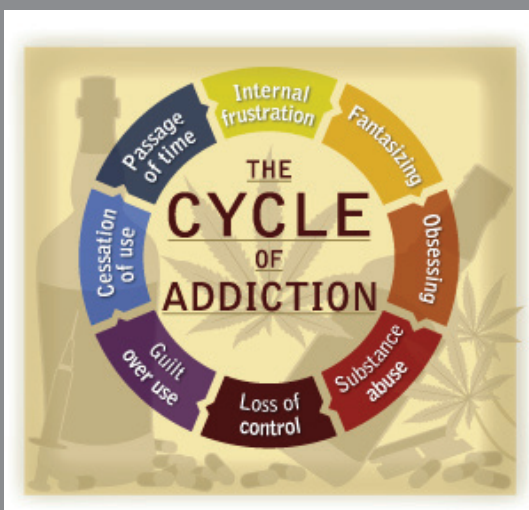
Drugs like morphine and heroin that are controlled today were once sold alongside aspirin.

Morphine is a powerful sedative drug named for Morpheus, the Greek god of dreams. It belongs to a group of narcotics called opiates. The word opiate derives its name from a drug called opium that is made from poppy plants. Opiates have been used for medical or illicit purposes for thousands of years.

Starting in the 1830s, doctors in the U.S. and Europe began prescribing morphine to the general public as a pain reliever, not knowing or thinking of the long-term effects. This practice caused more than 400,000 cases of "Soldier's Disease" (what we would now call "addiction") during the Civil War.

Searching for a less addictive substitute to morphine to combat epidemic levels of addiction in the U.S., Bayer (the same company that sells aspirin today) created and marketed heroin, which is more addictive and now illegal in the U.S. Morphine currently requires a prescription for use because of the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act of 1914, which regulates its sale. ●

ADDICTION



In *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *Ah, Wilderness!* there are characters with addictions. They use drugs and alcohol to cope with problems in their lives. Eventually the body develops a tolerance to the substance abused, and more of the drug is required to achieve the same effect. This can result in an overdose or, in the case of alcohol, liver failure or alcohol poisoning.

Addiction is a cycle that affects not only the addict, but his or her loved ones. ●

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1. What is the nature of home and family?
2. How does addiction affect individuals and their loved ones?
3. What is the relationship between autobiography and art?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

On the Web

- An Electric Eugene O'Neill Archive: eoneill.com
- Eugene O'Neill Theater Center: theoneill.org
- Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site: nps.gov/euon
- Addiction: mayoclinic.com/health/drug-addiction/DS00183/DSECTION=symptoms
- *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*: classics.mit.edu/Khayyam/rubaiyat.html

Film

- *American Experience's Eugene O'Neill*, PBS, 2006
- *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Egami, 1987

Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.
Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum.

Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

Enjoy the show!



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