

ANALYSIS

Anna Christie (1921)

Eugene O'Neill

(1888-1953)

“*Anna Christie*...by no means reveals the greatest depth and furthest range of O'Neill's powers and ambitions. But if it lacks the scope of several of its author's later works, it has the merit of comparative compactness; and if it does not probe as deeply into human nature, it is also free from their more troublesome obscurities, their schematization of psychological forces, and their tragic straining. A fairly simple human drama, it provides emotions more or less readily accessible to the reader. Its pungently colloquial speech and its seedy heroine represent the early portion of O'Neill's career, when he rooted the American theatre in naturalism. The play also suggests some of the characteristics of his later writing—namely, his poetic vein, present here in his feeling for the sea, his concern with obsessed characters, and his saturnine sense of fatality in human experience.

Anna Christie grew out of an earlier written play, *Chris* or *Christopherson*, produced unsuccessfully and withdrawn during its tryout tour. As Barrett H. Clark, O'Neill's biographer, explains, ‘In its final version *Anna Christie* is a play about a woman. It was in the beginning a play about the woman's father.’ One objection that has been raised is that the play suffers from this shift in emphasis. Another is that Anna's story bears too much resemblance to the fallen-woman drama we associate with old-fashioned sentimental plays. Critics have also questioned the ‘happy ending’ and suspected O'Neill of compromising the integrity of his play in the manner of Henry Arthur Jones and other pseudo modernists.

O'Neill was particularly troubled by the last charge and wrote George Jean Nathan expressing regret that the conclusion, in which Anna and the sailor are reunited, gave a ‘happy-ever-after’ impression that he never intended. ‘And the sea outside—life—waits,’ he wrote. ‘The happy ending is merely the comma at the end of a gaudy introductory clause, with the body of the sentence still unwritten.’ He added that he had once thought of calling the play *Comma*, and complained that it was impossible to project clearly the ‘sincerity of life pent up in the trappings of theatre.’ That is, he feared he had not pointed up sufficiently the tentativeness of the happy reunion, in spite of Anna's father's foreboding last speech, the Irish sailor's doubts about the non-Catholic Anna's faith, and the implication that although the characters ‘have had their moment, the decision still rests with the sea...’

Whether there is any way of reconciling different and seemingly unfused aspects of the play is open to question. So friendly a critic as Barrett H. Clark does not think there is. More than a quarter of a century after the production of the play, however, George Jean Nathan, who had been the first to raise points of criticism, could write: ‘*Anna Christie* is a new and forceful handling of a familiar theme, deep in its characterizations, driving in its firm composition, and etched with real observation and understanding.’ Since this is the considered opinion of a critic who was as eagle-eyed in 1947 as he was in 1920, it bears thinking about. As Eleanor Flexner has suggested in her *American Playwrights 1918-1938*, O'Neill is at his best when, as in *Anna Christie*, his creative instinct is emotional rather than intellectual in origin.

Anna Christie did not deal primarily with ‘ideas’—at which O'Neill was no master—but with living people trapped by their circumstances. They are shown trying desperately to wriggle out of a net of fate partly of their own making, partly woven by the environment to which they succumbed, and partly knotted by a destiny undefined but poetically sensed by O'Neill. We may add the possibility that the crudity of the play—that is, a certain incomplete fusion of emphases—makes *Anna Christie* all the more genuine by giving it a feeling of ‘life observed’ rather than of ‘play plotted’.”

John Gassner

A Treasury of the Theatre: From Henrik Ibsen to Arthur Miller
(Simon & Schuster 1935-57) 788-89

“*Anna Christie* (1921) opens as Chris Christopherson, a former sailor and now skipper of a New York coal barge, is awaiting a reunion with his daughter Anna, whom he has not seen since she was a child. Since the death of the mother the girl has lived with relatives on a Minnesota farm and later, as Chris thinks, as a nurse in St. Paul. When Anna appears on the scene it develops that, through poverty and boredom, she has fallen into a life of sin. She has been no ordinary prostitute, however; amid all her transgressions she has maintained an inward purity. Upon meeting, father and daughter are awkward, yet tender toward each other; both are anxious to conceal their unsavory pasts. Chris resolves to give up the low life he has been leading in taverns and saloons and devote his time to taking care of his daughter.

The two take up housekeeping on the barge, and for a time both seem to find a new purpose in life. Then Mat Burke, a shipwrecked sailor, comes aboard the barge. With his lively Irish spirit he begins flattering Anna, and soon the two are in love. When Chris learns of this he is enraged; he hates the sea to which he has sacrificed his life and will have nothing to do with sailors. Now the ‘old devil sea’ is threatening to steal his daughter from him and make her life miserable as that of his own wife—Anna’s mother—was. Anna, however, still retains her sense of honor in spite of the degradation she has been through. She feels her life has made her unworthy to marry Burke, and in spite of her love she confesses her past to him. Burke is enraged, charging he has been tricked; but Chris now demands that he marry her.

In the last act both men, their ideals shattered by Anna’s confession, decide to go back to sea again; unknown to each other, they both sign on the same ship. But Anna, purified in Burke’s love, swears her old life is behind her and that she will always be true to him. They decide to be married, and Chris blesses the union. Chris and Burke, having signed articles, must still go to sea; the ‘old devil’ in its sinister way has caught them anyhow. But Anna has been morally regenerated, and the three are friends; the play ends on an optimistic note. The chief interest in this drama lies in the psychological contrast between the three principals and in Anna’s moral crisis and eventual regeneration.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 343-44

“*Anna Christie* is a play which proceeded splendidly for one full act but then went to pieces in the effort to become a full-length play. The tragedy of ‘old devil, sea’ and its victory over Chris Christopherson was spoiled by the comedy of Anna and her Irish boy friend. Two one-acts do not make an integrated full-length play, and O’Neill confessed his own dissatisfaction with the result. Nonetheless *Anna Christie* remains a landmark. Such richly colloquial dialogue had not been heard in the American theater before. Here the genteel tradition—of Clyde Fitch and the rest—ended, and the rhythm of modern life—in a sense Whitman himself would have recognized—was heard on the New York stage.”

Eric Bentley
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 561

“This is another of the innumerable literary variations on the theme of Mary Magdalene redeemed. Anna’s father, a crusty old captain of a coal barge, hopes to save his daughter from ‘dat old devil sea.’ She lives on a farm, but suddenly appears on the barge, on which the captain lives with an old drab named Marthy. The latter immediately realizes that Anna is ‘no good,’ and Anna readily admits her sins. Father and daughter leave New York on the barge and pick up a boatload of shipwrecked sailors; one of them, Mat Burke, falls in love with Anna. When she tells him her past he leaves her and gets drunk. But the play closes on the possibility that Anna may still be saved. The play is a ‘slice of life,’ but has overtones of mysticism and symbolism.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)