

## ANALYSIS

*Beyond the Horizon* (1920)



Eugene O'Neill

(1888-1953)

“The two protagonists, Robert and Andrew Mayo, brothers on a New England farm, are markedly different in character. Andrew, strong, prosaic, and efficient, is a born farmer; his father confidently trains him to take over the farm after he is gone. Robert, sensitive and idealistic, detests the rude life of the farm; his long spells of illness and a year at college have set his imagination to working. He dreams continually of a romantic existence ‘beyond the horizon’ he can see from the farmhouse window. In order to improve his health it is decided that an uncle, Captain Dick Scott, will take him on a voyage to distant parts of the world. Rob is excited by the prospect of traveling to the Orient and the South Seas; he looks forward to the imminent fulfillment of his romantic reveries. But on the night before his departure he and Ruth Atkins, fiancée of his brother Andrew, accidentally discover their love for each other. Swept away by his emotions, he gives up the sea voyage and promises to spend his life taking care of Ruth and her infirm mother. Andrew, bitter, impulsively goes to sea in Rob’s place.

But through the ‘accident’ of Rob’s romantic infatuation for Ruth each of the main characters of the drama has been forced to betray his own nature. Rob, dreamy and inefficient, is a poor farmer, and under his management the farm rapidly degenerates. After his father dies the family becomes virtually bankrupt, and Rob’s frustration makes him twisted and morbid. Andrew sees little adventure in the hard life at sea; what would have seemed romantic to Rob is only drudgery to him. Ruth, hard-working and loyal but insensitive, would have made an ideal wife for Andrew; tied to the idealistic Rob, she soon becomes dejected and slipshod. Rob and Ruth, however, find a certain consolation in their daughter Mary, who resembles Rob in personality.

When Andrew returns after three years his love for Ruth has faded, and he feels his place is not on the farm. He goes off to Argentina and becomes wealthy through trading and speculation. The paralyzed Mrs. Atkins, shrewish and petulant, makes life miserable for both Rob and Ruth. The disasters follow one after the other; their baby dies, and Rob's lungs become diseased. Still an idealistic dreamer, Rob looks ever forward to a better life 'beyond the horizon,' but his dream has become virtually a pathological delusion. In the final act Andrew returns from South America and finds a specialist to treat Rob; he confesses that through gambling in grain (i.e., betraying his true nature as a man of the soil) he has lost most of his fortune. The specialist gives Rob little chance to survive, but before he dies he tells Andrew and Ruth they must marry after he is gone. Then he drags himself out onto the road where, lying on the edge of a ditch, he can see the sun setting over the horizon he has never crossed.

The message of *Beyond the Horizon* is that each of us must follow out his own nature to its fulfillment; not to do so is to bring misery to one's self and to others. The main dramatic interest lies in the character of Rob: soft-minded, impractical, and indecisive, he nevertheless has a truly poetic sensitivity which might have brought him fame and happiness had he lived according to his nature."

Donald Heiney  
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"Two brothers on the Mayo farm love the same girl; she marries one, the other goes to sea. Then the girl thinks she is in love with the one she didn't marry, but on his return is disillusioned. He leaves once more to go to the Argentine, where he makes and loses a fortune in grain. Returning, he finds that matters have gone from bad to worse on the farm. His brother tells him they have all been failures. As he dies he is, however, happy at last, 'with the right of release—beyond the horizon.' An immature work, the play nevertheless won a Pulitzer Prize."

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

Michael Hollister (2015)