

ANALYSIS

Lazarus Laughed (1927)

Eugene O'Neill

(1888-1953)

"*Lazarus Laughed* is similar in mood and theme but is even more radical in technique [than *The Great God Brown*]. Lazarus, the Biblical figure who was raised by Christ from the dead, returns to his people affirming the message he has learned through his unique experience: 'There is only laughter! Fear is no more! Death is dead!' Eventually taken to Rome, Lazarus is killed along with his wife Miriam, assuring his followers to the end that 'There is no death.' In the final scene even his murderer, the mad emperor Caligula is convinced of his message, and is grief-stricken at the thought, 'I killed him and I proved there is death!' This remarkable play, written in a form of free verse, was produced by the Pasadena Playhouse in 1928 and has since been performed only occasionally by amateur and experimental groups; its extremely expressionistic form and its iconoclastic theme make it impractical for commercial production."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 347

"*Lazarus Laughed* is probably the most ambitious American play ever written by a gifted playwright. It cries out to be compared with the work which presumably prompted its writing, Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. ('This book,' writes O'Neill's second wife, Agnes Boulton, 'had more influence on Gene than any other single book he ever read. It was a sort of Bible to him, and he kept it by his bedside...') Both works would ring out an old era, and ring in a new. Both authors would denounce the old era with the terrifying finality of a Jeremiah and, in hailing the new, reach the highest peaks of ecstasy. Nietzsche, however, was a master of ideas, and was not attempting drama. In *Lazarus* the ideas are too few and too grandiose ever to become active and interesting, while not enough is done by way of dialogue, action, and character to give us a real play. And if O'Neill had not had much success in depicting self-division, it was a false way out that he found in *Lazarus* when he picked a hero who was not divided.

O'Neill's Lazarus has little to do with the Biblical character and a great deal to do with the Greek god whom Nietzsche had already opposed to Christ: Dionysus. Following Nietzsche, O'Neill takes Christianity to be life-denial, the religion of Dionysus to be life-worship. One worships life and denies death. In that perhaps rather peculiar sense, one believes in immortality. 'The fear of death,' O'Neill wrote, 'is the root of all evil, the cause of all man's blundering unhappiness. Lazarus knows there is no death, there is only change. He is reborn without that fear. Therefore he is the first and only man who is able to laugh affirmatively. His laughter is a triumphant Yes to life... And life itself is the self-affirmative joyous laughter of God.'

Whatever we make of this as philosophy, we can hardly make much of it as theater or psychology. Theatrically, O'Neill asks laughter to do more than laughter *can* do. For an actor to be laughing so often and so loudly when he isn't even amused is to court confusion, even assuming he can keep it up. Laughter is not a pretty noise or a majestic one, a fact that is related to the psychic side. Laughter is not a suitable symbol of, or outlet for, affirmation because there is so much about it that is inherently and unmistakably negative. Laughter sounds aggressive for the good reason that it *is* aggressive. It is difficult to hear roars of laughter in which one is not personally involved without wishing to shut them up."

Eric Bentley
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 566-67

“This play apparently was performed only once—in Pasadena, Calif., April 9, 1928. It must have placed a strange burden on the actors, because of the great amount of laughing they must do in reply to the exigencies of the theme. Irving Pichel, who took the leading role at Pasadena, on one occasion laughed without interruption for four minutes.

When Jesus brings back Lazarus from the dead he immediately begins to laugh, as a symbol of his profound joy in living, ‘the Eternal Life in Yes.’ His laughter infects others, and he goes about preaching a creed of love and eternal life, symbolized in laughter. He proceeds to Rome, where he even converts some of the Roman Legionnaires—but not Caligula and Tiberius. His wife Miriam is poisoned, he himself is tortured and burnt in the amphitheater, but still affirms that there is no death. There are seven choruses, wearing masks. O’Neill himself, it is said, considered this his most successful play, and at least one critic, Oscar Cargill, agrees with him. Cargill made a striking analysis of the relationship of the play to Carl Jung and Nietzsche, especially in the latter’s stress on the Dionysian.”

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

Michael Hollister (2015)