

56 QUOTATIONS



Eugene O'Neill

(1888-1953)

Eugene O'Neill is the greatest American playwright, author of by far the greatest number of theatrical masterpieces and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936. He grew up in the theater and as an artist he raised American drama to the level of ancient Greek tragedy using the experimental techniques of modern Expressionism. He was as innovative in the drama as William Faulkner was in the novel. In 1920 he began as a Romantic with *Beyond the Horizon* and as an Expressionist with *The Emperor Jones*. However, his most popular plays are Realistic and Naturalistic: *Anna Christie* (1921), *The Hairy Ape* (1922), and *Desire Under the Elms* (1924). In *The Great God Brown* (1926), using masks, he became very experimental and his Expressionism increased. *Lazarus Laughed* (1927) is poetic, repetitious, Dionysian, and rarely performed. *Strange Interlude* (1928) is a Modernist play in 9 acts—much too long to be performed after its premier--employing stream-of-consciousness asides, a technique comparable to that used by Joyce in *Ulysses* (1922). Many critics consider his best plays *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), using the “mythic method” advocated by T.S. Eliot, *The Iceman Cometh* (1946), and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), the long heart-wrenching tragedy of his own family. The following quotations convey his tortured family life, his sense of isolation, his intense romanticism, his integrity, and his struggle with metaphysical questions, like his fellow sailor Melville:

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, the quest, Romanticism, transcendent consciousness, beliefs, Naturalism, happiness, morality, the iceman, truth, intoxication, last years, the playwright today, rejection of Progressivism, Freud and Jung, pessimism, intentions, poetic drama, mystic, Man and God, mystery, ancient Greek fate, masks, critics, cutting length, censorship, Hollywood, curtain, death, epitaph:

YOUTH

My first seven years were spent mainly in the larger towns all over the U.S.... I knew only actors and the stage. My mother nursed me in the wings and in dressing rooms.

It was a great mistake, my being born a man. I would have been much more successful as a seagull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must be a little in love with death!

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue.

If a person is to get the meaning of life he must learn to like the facts about himself—ugly as they may seem to his sentimental vanity—before he can learn the truth behind the facts.

Life is a solitary cell whose walls are mirrors.

I will be an artist or *nothing!*

THE QUEST

The sea hates a coward.

Man's loneliness is but his fear of life.

It's a great game—the pursuit of happiness.

Obsessed by a fairy tale, we spend our lives searching for a magic door and a lost kingdom of peace.

ROMANTICISM

Suppose I was to tell you that it's just beauty that's calling me, the beauty of the far off and unknown, the mystery and spell which lures me, the need of freedom of great wide spaces, the joy of wandering on and on—in quest of the secret which is hidden over there—*beyond the horizon!*

TRANSCENDENT CONSCIOUSNESS

I lay on the bowsprit, facing astern, with the water foaming into spume under me, the masts with every sail white in the moonlight, towering high above me. I became drunk with the beauty and singing rhythm of it, and for a moment lost myself—actually lost my life. I was set *free!* I dissolved in the sea, became white sails and flying spray, became beauty and rhythm, became moonlight and the ship and the high dim-starred sky! I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself! To God, if you want to put it that way.

And several other times in my life, when I was swimming far out, or lying alone on a beach, I have had the same experience. Became the sun, the hot sand, green seaweed anchored to a rock, swaying in the tide. Like a saint's vision of beatitude.

BELIEFS

Our lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father!

He couldn't design a cathedral without it looking like the First Supernatural Bank!

NATURALISM

None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self forever.

HAPPINESS

Happiness hates the timid! So does science!

One should be either sad or joyful. Contentment is a warm sty for eaters and sleepers.

Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back.

MORALITY

They's two kinds of stealing. They's the small kind, like what you does, and the big kind, like I does. Fo' the small stealing dey put you in jail soon or late. But for de big stealin' dey put your picture in de paper and yo' statue in de Hall of Fame when you croak. If dey's one thing I learned in ten years on de Pullman cars, listenin' to de white quality talk, it's dat same fact.

THE ICEMAN

The iceman cometh.

When men make gods, there is no God.

We are such things as rubbish is made of, so let's drink up and forget it.

TRUTH

To hell with the truth! As the history of the world proves, the truth has no bearing on anything. It's irrelevant and immaterial, as the lawyers say. The lie of a pipe dream is what gives life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us, drunk or sober.

INTOXICATION

Drunken with what? With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will. But be drunken.... If you would not feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and crushing you to the earth, be drunken continually.

LAST YEARS

The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future too.

There is not present or future, only the past, happening over and over again.

I am so far from being a pessimist...on the contrary, in spite of my scars, I am tickled to death at life.

When you're 50 you start thinking about things you haven't thought about before. I used to think getting old was about vanity—but actually it's about losing people you love.

A man's work is in danger of deteriorating when he thinks he has found the one best formula for doing it. If he thinks that, he is likely to feel that all he needs is merely to go on repeating himself...so long as a person is searching for better ways of doing his work, he is fairly safe.

[Her] love and tenderness gave me the faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play—write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for all. [*Long Day's Journey into Night*]

The old like children talk to themselves, for they have reached that hopeless wisdom of experience which knows that though one were to cry it in the streets to multitudes, or whisper it in the kiss to one's beloved, the only ears than can ever hear one's secrets are one's own!

I love every bone in their heads.

THE PLAYWRIGHT TODAY

The playwright today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it—the death of the Old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new One for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with. It seems to me that anyone trying to do big work nowadays must have this big subject behind all the little subjects of his plays or novels, or he is simply scribbling around on the surface of things and has no more real status than a parlor entertainer....

REJECTION OF PROGRESSIVISM

As we progress, we are always seeing further than we can reach. I suppose that is one reason why I have come to feel so indifferent toward political and social movements of all kinds. Time was when I was an active socialist, and, after that, a philosophical anarchist. But today I can't feel that anything like that really matters. It is rather amusing to me to see how seriously some people take politics and social questions and how much they expect of them. Life as a whole is changed very little, if at all, as a result of their course.... The birth-cry of the higher men is almost audible, but they will not come by tinkering with externals or by legislative or social fiat." Interview, *Century Magazine* (January 1922)

FREUD AND JUNG

Diff'rent [1920] whatever its faults may be, has the virtue of sincerity. It is the truth, the inevitable truth, of the lives of the people in it as I see and know them. Whether it is psychologically exact or not I will leave more dogmatic students of Freud and Jung than myself (or than Freud and Jung) to decide.... *Diff'rent*, as I see it, is merely a tale of the eternal romantic idealist who is in all of us—the eternally defeated one.... I have been accused of unmitigated gloom.

PESSIMISM

Is this a pessimistic view of life? I do not think so. There is a skin deep optimism and another higher optimism, not skin deep, which is usually confounded with pessimism. To me, the tragic alone has that significant beauty which is truth. It is the meaning of life—and then the hope. The noblest is eternally the most tragic.... Only through the unattainable does man achieve a hope worth living and dying for—and so attain himself. He with the spiritual guerdon of a hope in hopelessness, is nearest to the stars and the rainbow's foot.... Damn the optimists anyway! They make life so darned hopeless! Letter to *New York Tribune* (13 February 1921)

I am so far from being a pessimist...on the contrary, in spite of my scars, I am tickled to death at life.

INTENTIONS

It's not in me to pose much as a 'misunderstood one,' but it does seem discouragingly (that is, if one lacked a sense of ironic humor!) evident to me that most of my critics don't want to see what I'm trying to do or how I'm trying to do it, although I flatter myself that end and means are characteristic, individual and positive enough not to be mistaken for anyone's else, or for those of any 'modern' or 'pre-modern' school. To be called a 'sordid realist' one day, a 'grim, pessimistic Naturalist' the next, a 'lying Moral Romanticist' the next, etc. is quite perplexing—not to add the *Times* editorial that settled *Desire* once and for all by calling it a 'Neo-Primitive,' a Matisse of the drama, as it were!

So I'm really longing to explain and try and convince some sympathetic ear that I've tried to make myself a melting pot for all these methods, seeing some virtues for my ends in each of them, and thereby, if there is enough real fire in me, boil down to my own technique.

POETIC DRAMA

The *makings* of a poet. No. I'm afraid I'm like the guy who is always panhandling for a smoke. He hasn't even got the makings. He's only got the habit.

But where I feel myself most neglected is just where I set most store by myself—as a bit of a poet, who has labored with the spoken word to evolve original rhythms of beauty, where beauty apparently isn't—*Jones, Ape, God's Chillun, Desire*, etc.—and to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives.

MYSTIC

And just here is where I am a most confirmed mystic, too, for I'm always, always trying to interpret Life in terms of lives, never just lives in terms of character.

MAN AND GOD

Most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God.

I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind—Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it—Mystery certainly—and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and 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 on the stage. Of course, this is very much of a dream, but where the theatre is concerned, one must have a dream, and the Greek dream in tragedy is the noblest ever! Letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn (1945)

MYSTERY

It is Mystery—the mystery any one man or woman can feel but not understand as the meaning of any event—or accident—in any life on earth...[that] I want to realize in the theatre.

ANCIENT GREEK FATE

Is it possible to get modern psychological approximation of the Greek sense of fate into such a play which an intelligent audience of today, possessed by no belief in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by?

MASKS

I hold more and more surely to the conviction that the use of masks will be discovered eventually to be the freest solution of the modern dramatist's problem as to how—with the greatest possible dramatic clarity and economy of means—he can express those profound hidden conflicts of the mind which the probings of psychology continue to disclose to us.

CRITICS

Why can't you remember your Shakespeare and forget the third-raters. You'll find what you're trying to say in him—as you'll find everything else worth saying.

It is a terrible, harrowing experience for a playwright to be forced by his own conscience to praise critics for anything.... There is something morbid and abnormal about it, something destructive to the noble tradition of what is correct conduct for dramatists.

CUTTING LENGTH

You'll be happy to learn I cut fifteen minutes. I've decided to cut out the third intermission.

CENSORSHIP

Censorship of anything, at any time, in any place, on whatever pretense, has always been and always will be the last resort of the boob and the bigot.

HOLLYWOOD

No O'Neill. [response to offer]

CURTAIN

Go and get the unfinished manuscripts and let's sit in front of the fireplace and burn them.

DEATH

Born in a hotel room—and God *damn* it—*died* in a hotel room!

EPITAPH

There is something to be said for being dead.

