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Beyond the Hill | From the ashes : Yale University to print more than half-century old play

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Yale University, which obtained possession of Eugene O'Neill's "lost" work, intends to print the play next year.

O'Neill, often considered America's greatest playwright and the father of modern American drama, attempted to destroy all copies of his work "Exorcism," a play based on his life works. But O'Neill missed one, according to an article published Oct. 18 on The Guardian's website.

O'Neill is the author of many classic American dramas, such as "Beyond the Horizon," "Anna Christie" and "The Iceman Cometh." His work earned him the Pulitzer Prize four times and the Nobel laureate in literature in 1936. Despite his success, the great playwright was troubled, according to the article.

O'Neill tried to commit suicide at age 24 after his failed marriage to his first wife. Soon after, he contracted tuberculosis and delved into a career of playwriting.



Illustration by Emmett Baggett | Art Director

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After his play was performed a few times by the Provincetown Players, O'Neill wanted every copy destroyed, according to the article. Many speculate that he did this out of his ego. Some say that he felt "Catholic guilt" about the play's content; others believe he was trying not to shame his ill father. Regardless of his intention, O'Neill went about burning every copy he could, according to the article.

Jo Morello, a member of the Eugene O'Neill Society and a playwright herself, said many think that if O'Neill knew what Yale was planning to do, he would be "spinning in his grave."

The recirculation of "Exorcism" raises an important ethical issue as to whether the play should be published against O'Neill's wishes.

"Exorcism," O'Neill's one-act play, portrayed his suicide attempt through protagonist Ned Malloy. Malloy is described as a 24-year-old man suffering from inner disharmony that experiences a rebirth after he fails to kill himself and confides in his friend Jimmy, according to the article.

Joseph Roach, Sterling Professor of Theater and English at Yale, disagrees. Roach said O'Neill chose a public life as a playwright and elected to publicize his personal life by writing himself into his plays.

"I don't believe that 'Exorcism' will reveal any secrets that weren't known or suspected, and in any case, a play is a play — ultimately to be judged as a work of imaginative fiction, not as biography, close to the bone of truth as a play like "Long Day's Journey into Night" (another play by O'Neill) may have been," Roach said in an email.

Morello said Yale should publish the play because it would be a "valuable addition to the canon of his work." Morello has published three plays about O'Neill, and she has articles about this topic in press for the November Eugene O'Neill Society Newsletter and the December issue of *American Theatre* magazine.

Morello argues that "nobody knows the real answers" as to what O'Neill's intentions were, but if he did not want anyone to read his play, he should not have kept a copy that could be passed along through family.

Roach and Morello agree that Yale is doing far more good than harm because by printing "Exorcism" it adds to the legacy of this American talent.

"I don't think that Yale will be much affected by this publication, but I hope that any effects it does have will be positive," Roach said.

Morello agrees and said Yale is simply doing its job and doing it well.

Said Morello: "They are carrying out their mission as an educational institution and also as a repository for the papers of Eugene O'Neill, as established by the O'Neill family."

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