Anna Christie Study Guide

Anna Christie by Eugene O'Neill

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Anna Christie went through several revisions before its Broadway debut at the Vanderbilt Theatre on November 2, 1921. O'Neill's first version was a four-act play entitled *Chris*, which opened in Atlantic City, New Jersey on March 8, 1920. Anna's father dominated this play, and Anna and Mat were minor roles. O'Neill called his second version *The Ole Davil*, which provided the outline for the final version. O'Neill's last revisions strengthened the character of Anna and reworked the plot to focus on her. The success of *Anna Christie* helped reinforce O'Neill's reputation as one of the finest American dramatists.

The play focuses on the problematic relationship between a sailor and the daughter he has not seen for almost twenty years. Their relationship becomes complicated by her romantic involvement with another man of the sea and her unveiling of her troubled past. In this compelling account of a young woman's decline and subsequent salvation, O'Neill presents a realistic and painful exploration of family conflict and the harsh reality of women's lives in the early part of the twentieth century. Yet, audiences and critics also praised the play's confirmation of the power of love and forgiveness. Frederic I. Carpenter, in his study of O'Neill's plays, comments that *Anna Christie* is "a serious study of modern life, which dramatizes that mixture of comedy and tragedy most characteristic of life."

Anna Christie was successfully adapted to the screen three times. The second version starred Greta Garbo and is considered by film critics to be one of Hollywood's finest motion pictures.

Author Biography

Eugene O'Neill was born on October 16, 1888, in New York City to James and Mary Ellen O'Neill. The O'Neill's led a transient life as the family followed James's stage career. James was a celebrated actor who became famous for his performance in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The constant traveling and the life of the theatre caused tensions between O'Neill's parents, which were exacerbated by Mary's addiction to morphine, a habit she started after her son's difficult delivery. Their decidedly dysfunctional family had an enormously negative effect on Eugene and his brother Jamie. After surviving his expulsion from Princeton, a suicide attempt, a bout of tuberculosis, and a failed marriage, O'Neill determined to devote his life to writing for the theatre. Familial tensions would become the subject of several of O'Neill's plays, including his most successful, *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *Anna Christie*.

In 1914, with his father's help, O'Neill published *Thirst and Other One Act Plays*. The first staging of one of his plays did not occur until after his involvement with the Provincetown Players in Massachusetts in the summer of 1916. The summer theater premiered his *Bound East for Cardiff*, which enjoyed solid reviews. O'Neill's successful playwriting continued for three decades and secured him the reputation as one of the world's greatest dramatists. When he died of pneumonia on November 27, 1953, in Boston, Massachusetts, he had earned several awards for his work including the Pulitzer Prize in 1920 for *Beyond the Horizon*, in 1922 for *Anna Christie*, in 1928 for *Strange Interlude*, and in 1957 for *Long Day's Journey into Night*; the Gold Medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1923; a Litt.D. (Doctor of Letters) from Yale University in 1923; the Nobel Prize in literature in 1936; and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1957, for *Long Day's Journey into Night.*

Plot Summary

Act I

The play opens in Johnny-The-Priest's saloon in New York City, one afternoon in the fall. Barge captain Chris Christopherson receives a letter from Anna, his daughter, who writes that she is coming to see him. Chris explains that he hasn't seen her since she was five and lived in Sweden. Since he was a sailor who rarely saw his family, Anna's mother brought her to Minnesota to live with her cousins on a farm. When her mother died, she stayed on. Chris insists that it was "better Anna live on farm, den she don't know dat ole davil, sea, she don't know fa'der like me."

When Chris leaves to get food, Anna appears in the bar, "plainly showing all the outward evidences of belonging to the world's oldest profession." She immediately demands of the bartender, "Gimme a whisky—ginger ale on the side. And don't be stingy, baby." As she drinks, she relates details of her past to Marthy, the woman who has been staying on the barge with Chris. Anna explains that when the police raided the house where she worked in Saint Paul, she was thrown in jail, and then she was sent to the hospital. She has come to see her father to get rest but does not expect much from him, since men, she claims, "give you a kick when you're down, that's what all men do." She admits that she hated the farm where her cousins worked her to death "like a dog." After one of her cousins raped her, she escaped to Saint Paul, where she found work as a nanny. She soon became tired of taking care of other women's children, and so she drifted into prostitution. When Chris returns to the bar, the two have an awkward reunion. Chris is thrilled when she agrees to stay with him on the barge.

Act 2

Ten days later, Anna walks on the deck of the barge, "Simeon Winthrop," anchored in the Provincetown harbor, looking healthy and "transformed." She admits to her father that she loves the sea, which angers him. He does not want her to be ruined by her association with it, but she claims it has made her feel "clean." Chris worries that she will marry a sailor, and then experience the extreme loneliness her mother felt.

That night, they rescue four shipwrecked sailors. Anna brings one of them, Mat Burke, a drink, and the two begin to talk. She impresses him when she aggressively holds off his advances, and he soon declares he will marry her. When Chris finds the two together, he becomes angry and vows to keep them apart.

Act 3

When Chris tries to convince Anna that Mat would make a terrible husband, she insists, "it's me ain't good enough for him." Later, Chris attacks Mat during an argument over Anna, but Mat quickly subdues him. Anna declares her love for Mat, but tells him she

can never marry him. When Mat and Chris battle over her fate, Anna, who feels as if she is being treated like "a piece of furniture," explodes and tells them about her past. Chris in "a stupor of despair" and Mat "livid with rage" fall silent with condemnation, which goads Anna into "a harsh, strident defiance." She blames Chris's abandonment of her for her descent into prostitution. She tells Mat that she wanted to keep her past a secret from him, but she loved him too much to deceive him. Insisting that she has changed, and that the sea and his love have cleansed her, she pleads with Mat not to reject her. Mat, however, thinking she has made a fool of him, physically threatens her and then leaves, swearing never to see her again. Chris, recognizing Anna's great love for Mat and her present predicament, is determined to force Mat to marry her. He tells her "dat ole davil sea" is to blame.

Act 4

Two days later, when Chris returns to the barge, drunk, Anna is packed and ready to go back to her life in Saint Paul. Chris admits, "Ay guess it vas all my fault—all bad tangs dat happen to you," and he asks for her forgiveness. Chris tells her he has signed onto a steamer that sails the next morning for South Africa, so he can send money to her. Soon Mat appears wanting to have "a last word" with Anna. When he begs her to admit she had lied about her past, Anna swears that she has changed, and that she hated all the men she was with. Eventually, Mat is able to believe her and to forgive her. The two happily embrace and decide they will marry in the morning. When Anna discovers Mat has signed up for duty on the same ship as Chris, Mat assures her that she will not be lonesome for long, since "with the help of God" they will have children.

When Chris discovers that both he and Mat will be leaving the next morning on the same ship, he again blames the sea. Anna tries to reassure them that "we're all fixed now." She offers a toast to the sea "no matter what." The play ends with the "mournful wail of steamers' whistles."

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Anna Christie opens in a bar in New York City called "Johnny-the-Priest's." The year is not established but it is the autumn season. Johnny-the-Priest, who owns the saloon, gets his name from his choirboy looks. Larry, who is the late shift bartender, arrives for work just as the postman delivers a letter for a man named Chris Christopherson, a sailor using the bar as a mailing address. Johnny accepts the letter and agrees to hold it for Chris.

It just so happens that Chris, who is the captain of a coal barge, has docked in New York and arrives at the bar with a woman named Marthy who lives with him on the barge. Chris is overjoyed to receive the letter, which is from his daughter, Anna, whom he has not seen in fifteen years, when the girl was five years old. Chris didn't see his family much because he worked at sea. Anna and her mother moved to Minnesota when Anna was a small girl. When Anna's mother died, Chris chose to leave his daughter in Minnesota with cousins on a farm.

At Larry's suggestion, Chris leaves to get some dinner because the old sailor has been drinking heavily. Marthy stays behind and gets the first look at Anna, who Marthy assumes is a prostitute at first glance. As the only other woman in the bar, Anna invites Marthy for a drink with her. Soon Marthy reveals her own relationship with Chris and Anna would like more information about her father.

Anna has come to New York for what she hopes will be a restful vacation at the home of her father. Anna is a prostitute in Minneapolis and has just been released from a month's stay in the hospital. World weary and tired, Anna hopes to stay with her father to recover her strength. Anna is not sure of the reception she will get from the father she doesn't really know. Anna is negative about most men who, she believes, just use women, and is a little bit afraid that her own father will fall into this category. Anna shares with Marthy the life she led on the farm where she was worked hard and physically abused. A life in prostitution seemed the only way out and Anna took it. Marthy tells Anna that Chris is a good man who is anticipating a visit with his only child.

At last Chris returns and Marthy wishes Anna well and leaves so father and daughter may get acquainted. Each of them is a little surprised by the other. Anna sees that her father is a crusty old sailor and Chris can see that his daughter is a little haggard from a rougher life than he thought she was living. Essentially though, the pair is glad to be reunited and Chris tells Anna that some time at sea will be therapeutic for whatever ails her.

Act 1 Analysis

O'Neill sets up an important theme of misleading identity in this first act. Describing Johnny-the-Priest, the author claims that the man has the look of the clergy rather than the bar owner he really is. It is eventually revealed that Chris has told Anna that he is a janitor in New York which leads the girl to think that a respite at his home is a possibility. Anna herself is probably the biggest deception in that Chris imagines his daughter to be an apple-cheeked farm girl, when in reality Anna is a prostitute. O'Neill does imply the grace of redemption, however, when Anna and Chris both understand more of the other's truths and are willing to explore their long-lost relationship.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

A week and a half after Anna's arrival, she is on the deck of the *Simeon Winthrop*, the barge her father captains. The barge is currently docked in the harbor of Provincetown, Massachusetts, and it is late at night as Anna stands on the deck staring out into the fog. Chris asks Anna to go below to the cabin because the fog will make her sick, but Anna is enjoying the shroud of fog. She shares with her father that her brief time at sea has made her very happy and she looks remarkably healthier than when she first appeared in New York.

Chris tries to sway Anna away from the sea, warning that it will only ruin her and her health. Her father's recounting of sea disasters of family members does not deter Anna from her enthusiasm. Anna's questions about the lives of the sailor's wives in their family makes Chris even more adamant about deterring her, because he is afraid that Anna will marry a sailor. Chris does not want Anna to suffer the loneliness and hardship that his wife felt with himself gone so much.

As father and daughter talk on deck, Chris hears the cries of a man somewhere in the fog and realizes that a small ship is in trouble. The crew rescues four men who were lost when their own ship ran into trouble, and Chris and Anna tend to the men. One of the men, Mat Burke, is particularly taken with Anna when she brings him a drink of liquor.

Anna and Mat engage in conversation and share their love of the sea. Ultimately, Mat reveals great affection for Anna and announces plans to marry her. When Chris re-emerges on deck and sees Anna engaged in a close conversation with Mat, he tries to break them up and Anna resists. Only when it is apparent that Mat desperately needs some rest does Anna relent and help the sailor below to a cabin.

Act 2 Analysis

O'Neill uses the interesting technique of casting the sea as another character in the play, giving it the human characteristics of harshness and greed. Chris feels controlled by the sea, which he hates, but somehow cannot escape. When telling Anna that the sea is a hard master and will eventually swallow up any man who lives and works on it, his wrath is like that of a man talking about an enemy. Anna, however, seems washed clean by her time at sea, almost as if the short excursion has been a baptism of sorts into a new way of life, away from prostituting herself in the city.

For Mat, the sea represents liberty and the only place a man with any guts can truly be free. Chris vows not to let Mat's inclinations persuade Anna, and tells the sea that it will not take his daughter into such a hard life.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

It is now a week later and Anna and Chris are again on the deck of the *Simeon Winthrop*. Anna confides her love for Mat Burke, and Chris finds it hard to contain his anger at the idea that Anna has feelings for a sailor. Anna tells her father that although she does love Mat, she cannot marry him, a fact which Chris doesn't challenge but pleases him just the same. Chris feels that Mat is not good enough for Anna, but Anna tells him that it is just the opposite; she is not good enough for Mat. Anna leaves the ship to go down to the dock for a while.

Meanwhile, Mat arrives on board the ship dressed up as if for an important engagement. Chris is contentious, hoping to discourage Mat's affections toward Anna, but Mat is intractable, telling Chris that his plans are to marry Anna this very night. Unable to stand this horrible news, Chris invokes Mat's wrath and the two men eventually fight each other, with Mat overpowering Chris and disarming the old man of the knife he carries.

Anna returns to the ship and finds the two men all disheveled and the room in an upheaval and realizes that they have been fighting. Mat tells Anna that he and Chris have been arguing over her. It is at this point that Anna can no longer hold her secret about her past life and reveals the sexual abuse she suffered at her cousins' farm, which ultimately led her to a life of prostitution. Anna is clear that she blames Chris, as he left her in the care of people who did not love her so that he could pursue his sailor's life without the burden of raising her.

Chris is in disbelief at what Anna has told them, and Mat is filled with anger and condemns Anna for her past behavior. Anna only wanted to tell Mat the truth about her past so there would be no deception between them, but Mat is unable to process this information without making derogatory accusations about Anna, the woman he had hoped to marry that night.

Anna tries to convince Mat that her last few weeks at sea have given her a new outlook on life and that she has no desire to return to her old ways, but he is inconsolable about his lack of judgment of Anna's character. He considers himself to be quite foolish in pursuing Anna as a love interest. Mat swears that he never again wants to see Anna, and leaves the ship, vowing never to return. Chris implores Mat to stay and marry his daughter, but Mat leaves in a fury. Chris follow soon after, headed for a night of drinking to ease his conscience after Anna's accusations.

Act 3 Analysis

O'Neill uses the imagery of a sunny afternoon to foreshadow Anna's upcoming revelations to Chris and Mat. In contrast to the previous scene set in dense fog, the

characters had not yet revealed their true identities with all their flaws exposed. Anna and Chris were just getting reacquainted, and Anna and Mat were in the first throes of love, and the fog was a suitable technique. Now, however, as events move to a climax, Anna reveals her past to her lover and her father in the light of day where there is nowhere to hide anything. Anna felt quite comfortable in the fog in the previous scene, because she could veil her past where no one could see, and she didn't have to face anyone either.

Anna's allegations of her father's part in her troubled youth are hard for the old man to accept, and he ultimately blames the sea, which he uses as the excuse for any trouble in his life. Anna has been washed clean by her time at sea, and is willing to forgive Chris, but the news of Anna's past is too fresh for him and he cannot own up to his part in her rough existence.

Anna is left on the ship abandoned once more in her life, this time by both her father and the man who had professed his love for her. For all their bravado about the strength necessary to withstand a life at sea, it is Anna who is the brave one by confronting the important issues and trying to dissolve any more fog of deception.

Act 4

Act 4 Summary

It is another foggy night two days later aboard the coal barge. Anna sits dejectedly, with her packed bag at her feet, when a knock at the door announces Chris, who has spent the past two days drinking. Anna makes it clear that she has purchased a ticket back to New York, where she intends to return to a life of prostitution. Chris is dejected by the news but realizes there is nothing he can do but accept responsibility for her fallen lifestyle.

Chris has signed on to another steamer where he will be the boss of a crew headed for Cape Town tomorrow. With promises to send Anna money, Chris hopes that she will be able to build a better life than one on the streets.

Secretly, Anna has waited two days past the ticket's date in the hopes that Mat might return and swear his love for her. Anna is both frightened and pleased when Mat appears before her on deck. Hoping to talk with Anna and hear her admit that what she had revealed about her past had been pure fabrication, Mat has come to give the relationship one more try. Anna, however, cannot lie about her past, but can tell Mat that she has sincerely changed and hopes that her change of life direction will move him to tenderness toward her again.

Finally, when Anna passionately admits that she never loved any of the men with whom she had encounters, Mat is moved to believe her. Anna swears to Mat that he is the only man she has ever loved. Mat is able to forgive Anna and the two declare their intentions to marry in the morning.

In an ironic twist, Mat has signed on to the same steamer where Chris will be boss, which means that Anna will be alone on land until the two men return. Mat hopes to have children with Anna very soon, not only as a testament to his virility, but also so that Anna will not be alone.

Chris has mixed feelings about the marriage and the fact that he and Mat will be on the same ship. True to form, Chris blames the sea for this new agony in his life. Nevertheless, the trio drink their beers and toast each other, with Anna assuring them that they're all fixed now. Anna also proposes a toast to the sea and to whatever may come. The scene ends with Chris cursing the dense fog which shrouds everyone's view. Anna and Mat stare at the old man as the sound of a steamer whistle is heard in the background.

Act 4 Analysis

Anna is not sure that she really wants to return to her former life, and waits aboard the ship on the off chance that Mat will return. Mat does come back, but is still unsure of

Anna's true intentions, so he makes her swear on a cross as he makes a leap of faith and decides to trust her. Chris, who blames the sea for every problem, has signed on to a steamer because it has more prestige than running the coal barge.

The characters have all made important transitions, an important theme in the play. After the climax, when Anna's life is revealed and responsibilities are claimed, the fog clears for the trio. However, when they set out on their next journeys, the fog returns as a metaphor for uncertainty once more. O'Neill masterfully uses the imagery of the sea and the fog as the characters work through their issues and embark on new lives. Not completely sure of direction or final destination, the characters realize that at least the personal deceptions have been cleared, and with redemption comes smooth sailing, at least for a little while as is the eternal human condition.

Characters

Mat Burke

Chris Christopherson, Anna's father, rescues Mat at sea. Mat is employed as a stoker (a person who tends a ship's furnace and supplies it with fuel) aboard ocean liners. Thirty-year-old Mat is "a powerful, broad-chested six-footer, his face handsome in a hard, rough, bold, deflant way . . . [and is] in the full power of his heavy-muscled, immense strength." He has very traditional attitudes about women and their place in society, but he loves Anna enough to accept her past. Unlike Chris, Mat believes that his destiny is shaped by his own strength and courage, coupled with the will of God.

Anna Christie

See Anna Christopherson.

Anna Christopherson

When Anna Christopherson (also called *Anna Christie*) first arrives at Johnny-The-Priest's Saloon, she plainly shows "all the outward evidences of belonging to the world's oldest profession. Her youthful face is already hard and cynical." Her hard exterior shields her need for love, which she slowly allows to surface, after she determines that she has been cleansed through her contact with the sea.

Christopher Christopherson

Anna's father Chris is captain of a coal barge and has spent his life on the sea. He is "a short, squat, broad-shouldered man of about fifty, with a round, weather-beaten, red face," twinkling eyes, and "a simple good humor." While his face reveals a nature that is "childishly self-willed and weak," it also shows his "obstinate kindliness." Chris loves his daughter, but he has been too weak to resist the lure of the sea; consequently, he has not taken responsibility for raising her. He is deeply superstitious about the power of the sea, and uses it as an excuse for his poor parenting. However, when Anna is threatened, first by the possibility of marriage to a sailor and then by rejection, Chris's love for her emerges and makes him bold.

Johnny-The-Priest

Johnny-The-Priest owns the bar where Anna and Chris reunite. Johnny is an ironic foil for Anna, whose outward, hard appearance masks her vulnerability.

Marthy Owen

Marthy is a weathered, older woman who exhibits a youthful love of life. She has been living on the barge with Chris. When she understands that Chris is worried about Anna's response to their relationship, Marthy agrees to leave, accepting his rejection and her own relocation with a generous heart.

Themes

Identity

In O'Neill's masterpiece, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Mary Tyrone insists, "None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and. . . . 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." Like *Long Day's Journey into Night, Anna Christie* focuses on the search for identity. But, unlike those in the Tyrone family, *Anna Christie* is able to discover a new sense of self through her contact with the sea and through a loving relationship.

Appearances and Reality

Closely related to the theme of identity in the play is that of appearances versus reality. Both Chris and Anna, at times, appear to be what they are not. Even though when Anna walks into Johnny-The-Priest's, "plainly showing all the outward evidences of belonging to the world's oldest profession," she appears to her father as the innocent child he left behind in Sweden. Mat initially thinks she is Chris's woman, as is apparent when he asks her, "What would [a lady] be doing on this bloody hulk?" He soon, however, decides that he is not fit "to be kissing the shoe-soles of a fine, decent girl" like her. When Anna is honest with Chris and Mat about her past, Chris refuses to hear, telling her, "Don't talk dat vay, Anna! Ay go crazy! Ay von't listen!" Mat, however, immediately accepts what she is saying, and he reacts by rejecting her.

Chris refuses to consider the reality of Anna's past because he loves her and because he is unable to face his role in her descent into prostitution. He admits that he has not been the perfect father to Anna, but he will not take full responsibility for his abandonment of her. That "ole davil sea" gives him an excuse for leaving Anna and her mother and for letting her stay on the farm after her mother dies. Thus, he tries to appear to Anna as a man who wanted to be a good father but was prevented from doing so by the overpowering force of the sea. Mat's rejection of Anna reveals his inability to accept a woman who does not fit the ideal of a wife and illuminates society's restrictive attitudes toward women.

Courage and Cowardice

Throughout most of the play, Chris is afraid to face his responsibility for Anna's harsh life. Anna, however, shows herself to be much more courageous than her father. Rather than deceive the man she loves, she is willing to leave him. Finally, though, when Mat refuses to let her go, she garners the courage to admit to her father and to Mat the sordid details of her past.

Change and Transformation

After living with her father for a while on the barge, Anna experiences a transformation. Later, she tries to explain to Mat that "yust getting out in this barge, and being on the sea changed me. . . . and made me feel different about things, 's if all I'd been through wasn't me and didn't count and was yust like it never happened." She explains that the sea and Mat's love have cleansed her of her past. When Mat abandons her, she considers going back to her former life as a prostitute, but she cannot return to prostitution.

Atonement and Forgiveness

All three characters are faced with the choice of whether or not to forgive themselves and each other. After Chris finally admits his failings, he begs Anna's forgiveness. She offers it without hesitation, and she tries to ease his mind by suggesting that fate, not free will, rules their lives. She tells him, "It ain't your fault, and it ain't mine, and it ain't his neither. We're all poor nuts, and things happen, and we yust get mixed in wrong, that's all."

Mat's act of forgiveness is more problematic. Because of his rigid attitudes toward women and their place, he must be convinced that Anna was forced to be with other men, and that she did not have feelings for any of them. Only after Anna swears that she hated all of the men she was with will he forgive her and accept her as worthy of his love.

Style

Realism

O'Neill's first plays were melodramas. He soon rejected the flat characterizations and unmotivated violent action typical of melodrama, and instead he adopted the tenets of realism, a new literary movement that took a serious look at believable characters and their sometimes problematic interactions with society. O'Neill began to use settings and props that reflect his characters' daily lives and to write realistic dialogue that replicates natural speech patterns.

O'Neill's new type of realism rejects traditional forms and digs beneath the surface of everyday reality. In *Anna Christie*, O'Neill incorporates realistic depictions of men at sea and of the interactions between family members. The play explores the tensions that can arise between family members as a result of feelings of abandonment and guilt. It also illuminates the harsh reality of women's lives in the early part of the twentieth century. O'Neill creates in the play a lyrical realism in the problematic romance between Anna and Mat.

Setting

While the play depicts the harsh life of men who live and work at sea, O'Neill also uses the setting symbolically. The sea becomes almost a character in the play as it affects the lives of Chris, Anna, and Mat. Chris claims that the sea is an "ole davil" that controls the lives of men. He tells Anna that a sailor's life is "hard vork all time. It's rotten. . . . for to go to sea" and that sooner or later that "ole davil . . . [will] svallow dem up." Chris conveniently uses the sea as an excuse for his abandonment of Anna, claiming that it continually lured him away from her. He warns Anna not to marry a sailor who would also be tempted by that "ole davil" to be apart from his family for long periods of time. When he finds Anna and Mat together, he vows, "dat's your dirty trick, damn ole davil, you . . . but py God, you don't do dat! Not while Ay'm living! No, py God, you don't!"

Anna, however, regards the sea in a completely different light. After a short time living on the barge with her father, the sun and fresh air out on the water restores her health. The sea also rejuvenates her spiritually, as she notes, when she claims that it has cleansed her of her old life. Anna tells Chris, "I feel so . . . like I'd found something I'd missed and been looking for—'s if this was the right place for me to fit in . . . and I feel happy for once . . . happier than I ever been anywhere before!" The sea also brings Mat to Anna. Mat insists, "the sea's the only life for a man with guts in him isn't afraid of his own shadow. 'Tis only on the sea he's free."

Historical Context

The Emergence of the American Theatre

At the end of the nineteenth century, a group of playwrights that included James A. Herne, Bronson Howard, David Belasco, Augustus Thomas, Clyde Fitch, and William Vaughn Moody started breaking away from traditional melodramatic forms and themes. As a result, American theatre began to establish its own identity. These and other playwrights in the early part of the twentieth century were inspired by the dramatic innovations of Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and George Bernard Shaw. During this period, experimental theatre groups made up of dramatists and actors encouraged new innovative American playwrights. In 1914, Lawrence Langner, Helen Westley, Philip Moeller, and Edward Goodman created the Washington Square Players in New York, and in 1915, playwright Susan Glaspell helped start the Provincetown Players in Massachusetts. The goal of both of these groups was to produce plays that the more conservative Broadway theatres rejected. The most important member of this latter group was Eugene O'Neill, who wrote plays with a uniquely American voice. George H. Jensen, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, notes that "before O'Neill began to write, most American plays were poor imitations or outright thefts of European works." Jensen insists that O'Neill became the "catalyst and symbol . . . of the establishment of American drama."

Realism

In the late nineteenth century, playwrights turned away from what they considered the artificiality of melodrama to a focus on the commonplace in the context of everyday contemporary life. They rejected the flat characterizations and unmotivated, violent action typical of melodrama. Their work, along with much of the experimental fiction written during that period, adopts the tenets of realism, a new literary movement that supported the creation of believable characters with sometimes problematic interactions with society. Dramatists, like Henrik Ibsen, discard traditional sentimental theatrical forms as they chronicle the strengths and weaknesses of ordinary people confronting difficult social problems, like the restrictive conventions nineteenth-century women endured. Writers who embraced realism use settings and props to reflect their characters' daily lives as well as realistic dialogue that replicates natural speech patterns.

O'Neill's long career reflected the shifting styles of the American theatre at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. His early plays were unsuccessful attempts at melodrama. He then turned to realistic depictions of men at sea and later of the interactions between family members. In *Anna Christie*, O'Neill creates a lyrical realism in the problematic romance between Anna and Mat. O'Neill's new type of realism rejects traditional forms, digging beneath the surface of everyday reality. Following the new American doctrine of "Art Theatre," O'Neill incorporated

philosophical themes and unusual forms in his plays. In the 1920s, he experimented with expressionism, most notably in *Emperor Jones and The Great God Brown.*

Critical Overview

Anna Christie earned mostly positive reviews when it opened on Broadway in 1921, which helped it run successfully for 117 performances. The play also earned O'Neill a Pulitzer Prize. Over the years, its critical reputation has remained strong. Critics praise the play's realistic characterizations, especially of Anna and her father Chris. Percy Hammond, in his opening night review of the play for the New York *Tribune*, writes that *Anna Christie* presents the audience with a "veracious picture of some interesting characters in interesting circumstances." Frederic I. Carpenter, in his book on O'Neill, claims that "the character of Chris, 'childishly self-willed and weak, of an obstinate kindliness,' is one of O'Neill's minor triumphs." Several critics have considered Anna a realistic portrait of a street-wise, yet vulnerable, young woman. James Whittaker in his article for the New York *News*, insists that in Anna "O'Neill has his first concrete heroine." Travis Bogard, in his *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, praises O'Neill's characterization of Mat, whom he calls "a true citizen of the sea." Bogard comments that Mat is crucial to the play's naturalistic themes, since he serves as a personification of the sea.

Opinions about the play's ending, however, are mixed. An opening night review in the New York *Sun* voices the sentiments of many critics who find the last act too conventional. Leo Marsh in the New York *Telegraph* praises the play's vitality but criticizes the "apparent compromise" at the end. J. Ranken Towse in his review for the New York *Post* insists that the "incredible" happy ending is "disastrous." In his article for *Freeman*, Ernest Boyd offers the harshest criticism in his conclusion that the play's ending is the "worst anti-climax in the theatre." Ironically, H. Z. Torres in the New York *Commercial* complains that the last act is not happy enough due to the "ugliness and morbidness" of the plot.

Others, however, defend the play's conclusion. John Gassner in his article on O'Neill's plays comments that *Anna Christie*'s ending possesses a "raffish mordancy that suited the subject and tone of the work, and did not impair the effectiveness of this justifiably popular play." In *Eagle*, Arthur Pollock insists that the resolution at the end of the play is a natural extension of the plot. George H. Jensen, in his article on O'Neill for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, determines that O'Neill has been "wrongly criticized" for the play's last act, noting the ambiguous future the main characters have in store for them. However, Carpenter contends that *Anna Christie* is "one of the most perfectly romantic of O'Neill's early works," and most audiences and scholars agree on O'Neill's ability to present a realistic portrait of compelling characters in *Anna Christie*.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Perkins, an Associate Professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland, has published articles on several twentieth-century authors. In this essay, she examines O'Neill's exploration of the naturalistic themes in Anna Christie.

[The wind-tower] was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree . . . the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual —nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, not beneficent, not treacherous, not wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent.

This famous passage from Stephen Crane's short story "The Open Boat," which focuses on four men in a small dinghy struggling against the current and trying to make it to shore, is often quoted as an apt expression of the tenets of naturalism, a literary movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in France, America, and England. Writers included in this group, like Crane, Émile Zola and Theodore Dreiser, expressed in their works a biological and/or environmental determinism that prevented their characters from exercising their free will and thus controlling their destinies. Crane often focused on the social and economic factors that overpowered his characters. Zola's and Dreiser's work included this type of environmental determinism (economic, social, and political forces that restrict our lives, often interfering with our attempts to exercise free will and to shape our own destinies) coupled with an exploration of the influences of heredity in their portraits of the animalistic nature of men and women engaged in the endless and brutal struggle for survival. Eugene O'Neill explores similar naturalistic tendencies in *Anna Christie* in the harsh lives of the play's main characters. Through his story of a reformed prostitute and her relationships with the men in her life, O'Neill raises important questions about how much influence we have over our destinies.

In *Anna Christie* O'Neill presents a naturalistic impression of the forces that continually frustrate human will and action. The naturalistic view proposes that humans are controlled by their heredity and environment, and so they cannot exercise free will. O'Neill questions the validity of this view in his portrait of Anna, who has been shaped by forces beyond her control, but who also may have the will and the ability to change her life.

Several environmental factors contributed to Anna's descent into prostitution. When Chris frequently left Anna and her mother alone in Sweden, her mother transplanted them to her cousins' farm in Minnesota. After her mother died, she was forced to stay on the farm where she was made to work "like a dog," since her father never came for her. After her cousin raped her, she left the farm and took a job in Saint Paul as a nanny. Soon, however, biological and environmental influences propelled her into a life of prostitution.

Anna admits that her need for freedom compelled her to leave her position as a nanny. She explains, "I was caged in, I tell you—yust like in yail—taking care of other people's

kids—listening to 'em bawling and crying day and night—when I wanted to be out—and I was lonesome—lonesome as hell. So I give up finally." Her need for freedom, combined with the sexual needs of the men she encounters in the city, contributes to her downfall. She ridicules her father's assumption that there would be "all them nice inland fellers yust looking for a chance to marry" in Saint Paul, when she confesses, "Marry me? What a chance! They wasn't looking for marrying." Anna admits that loneliness prompted her to give in to their sexual advances. As a result of her experiences in the city, she claims that she does not expect much from her father, since men "give you a kick when you're down, that's what all men do." She tries to force her father to admit his responsibility for her fate, when she demands, "and who's to blame for it, me or you? If you'd even acted like a man—if you'd even had been a regular father and had me with you—maybe things would be different."

While O'Neill presents convincing evidence that forces beyond her control have damaged her, he challenges Anna's opinion about "all men" when she comes to live with her father on the sea. Chris welcomes his daughter with open arms and gives her the opportunity to find a new identity. After a short time on the sea, Anna feels cleansed of her old life. She admits, "I feel so . . . like I'd found something I'd missed and been looking for—'s if this was the right place for me to fit in . . . and I feel happy for once . . . happier than I ever been anywhere before!"

Chris, however, believes the sea contains an overwhelmingly demonic force. He continually rants about how "dat ole davil sea" has ruined lives, including his own and Anna's. The sea, thus, becomes an effective excuse for shirking his responsibilities to his daughter. When Chris has a sense of foreboding about Anna, he concludes that the sea has a will of its own. He insists the sea is "hard vork all time. It's rotten . . . for go to sea. . . . Dat ole davil, sea, sooner, later she svallow [everyone] up" who comes in contact with her. Determined, however, to fight the power of the sea when he finds Anna and Mat together, he vows, "dat's your dirty trick, damn ole davil, you . . . but py God, you don't do dat! Not while Ay'm living! No, py God, you don't!" Later, as Anna despairs over losing Mat, Chris tells her that her predicament is not her fault:

it's dat ole davil sea, do this to me. . . . She bring dat Irish fallar in fog, she make you like him, she make you fight with me all time. If dat Irish fallar don't never come, you don't never tal me dem tangs, Ay don't never know, and everytang's all right. Dirty ole davil.

O'Neill exposes the weakness in Chris's attitude toward the sea as he presents irrefutable evidence that Chris's abandonment of Anna contributed to her downfall. Another challenge to Chris's belief comes from Mat, who echoes Anna's feelings about the sea when he tells Chris,

you know the truth in your heart, if great fear of the sea has made you a liar and a coward itself. The sea's the only life for a man with guts in him isn't afraid of his own shadow. 'Tis only on the sea he's free . . . the sea give you a clout once, knocked you down, and you're not man enough to get up for another, but lie there for the rest of your life howling bloody murder.

Anna appears to take control of her own destiny while she is living on the barge. She enters freely into a relationship with Mat, even against her father's wishes, and she stands up to both of them when they threaten her freedom. When Mat uses physical force to try to convince her to marry him, telling her "I'll make up your mind for you bloody quick," Anna is "instinctively repelled by his tone," and tells him, "say, where do you get that stuff." As Mat and Chris battle over her fate, Anna, who feels as if she is being treated like "a piece of furniture," explodes. She insists: "You was going on 's if one of you had got to own me. But nobody owns me, see?—'cepting myself. I'll do what I please and no man, I don't give a hoot who he is, can tell me what to do." Yet environmental determinism soon reexerts its influence over her. After she tells Chris and Mat about her past, Mat rejects her, unable to break free of the social stigma of prostitution.

In the last act, O'Neill continues his questioning of free will and determinism as Anna and Mat reunite. Environmental and biological forces seem to be held at bay when Mat decides that he will marry Anna. Several critics find this apparent "happy ending" to be too forced and conventional. For example, Leo Marsh in the New York *Telegraph* praises the play's vitality but criticizes the "apparent compromise" at the end. In his article for *Freeman*, Ernest Boyd offers the harshest criticism in his conclusion that the play's ending is the "worst anti-climax in the theatre."

Others, however, note the play's ambiguous resolution. John Gassner in his article on O'Neill's plays comments that *Anna Christie*'s ending possesses a "raffish mordancy that suited the subject and tone of the work, and did not impair the effectiveness of this justifiably popular play." George H. Jensen, in his article on O'Neill for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, determines that O'Neill has been "wrongly criticized" for the play's last act, noting the ambiguous future the main characters have in store for them.

The ending does, in fact, perfectly compliment O'Neill's explorations of the question of free will and destiny. Just as he seems to present a traditional, romantic ending to Anna's story, he imbues it with a sense of doom. When Mat insists to Anna, "I've a power of strength in me to lead men the way I want, and women, too, maybe, and I'm thinking I'd change you to a new woman entirely," Anna agrees, "yes, you could." Yet, her fierce sense of independence and her aversion to feeling caged may create problems in their marriage. Also, Mat and Chris are both sailing the next day for South Africa, leaving Anna alone again. While Mat assures Anna that he will return safely, Chris, looking out into the foggy night with a sense of foreboding, insists, "Fog, fog, fog, all bloody time. You can't see where you was going, no. Only dat old davil, sea—she knows." O'Neill seems to echo Chris's sense of doom when he ends the play with the "mournful wail of steamers' whistles."

In *Anna Christie* O'Neill refuses to provide a definite answer to the questions of free will and destiny. He does suggest that environmental and biological influences can sometimes overwhelm us. Anna reinforces this viewpoint when Chris asks for her forgiveness, and she gives it freely, admitting, "It ain't your fault, and it ain't mine, and it ain't his neither. We're all poor nuts, and things happen, and we yust get mixed in

wrong, that's all." Yet Anna has also demonstrated that courage, love, and forgiveness can sometimes help shape destinies.

Source: Wendy Perkins, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

John Antush's essay discusses O'Neill's approach to modernism and postmodernism and how his experimentation challenges the form and in the case of Anna Christie 'explodes' the traditional love story.

When we pause to reassess Eugene O'Neill's contribution to American theatre, what astonishes us is not just the sustained dramatic achievement through the period that we now call "modern" (1920-1956 in America), but the multiple ways he anticipates and lays the foundations for a postmodern dramatic aesthetic. O'Neill spent most of his literary career chipping away at those stage conventions that dominated the nineteenth-century theatre and the popular imagination. From his realistic depiction of man's desire to belong to nature in *Beyond the Horizon*, to his expressionistic portrayal of a possessive god in *The Emperor Jones*, to the naturalism of operative destiny in *Desire Under the Elms*, to the surrealistic symbolism of sex in *Strange Interlude*, to the existential isolation in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, O'Neill's double-barreled critique of the theatre's superficial realism and tawdry artifice underlies his most daring experiments in subject matter and dramaturgy. This sustained attack contains his most important contribution to modernism and anticipates most of the components of postmodernism.

Every new age calls itself "modern," and modernism always represents a revolt from traditional techniques, forms, ways of thinking. What we have grown used to calling "modern" for the last eighty years, however, no longer fits our present situation. So, for want of a better word, we call contemporary dramatic experiments "postmodern." By about 1950 the wartime sense of militant purpose had been diluted by a postwar feeling of drift, random sequence, instinctive response, and chance. This self-canceling interplay of rational purpose, defect, and ignorance seems to inform the meaning and technique of the postmodern dramatic aesthetic. However, the new dramatists, such as Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, Arthur Kopit, David Rabe, Lanford Wilson, and David Mamet, among others, in their need for new forms of expression in the postmodern world, are not so much making radical breaks with established traditions as synthesizing techniques and philosophies from movements as diverse as expressionism and epic theatre to surrealism and existentialism.

The two basic varieties of postmodernism, radical and reactionary, hold up for examination the mimetic purposes of realistic modernism. The more radical postmodernism questions the codes, myths, techniques of modernism. Reactionary postmodernism mines past forms to celebrate them; sometimes it mixes modernist stylistic devices in the name of rebellion, but it reaffirms their value. In the final analysis both radical and reactionary postmodernism deconstruct modernism. Samuel Beckett's strategic use of the familiarizing and stabilizing vaudeville routines in *Waiting for Godot*, for example, self-consciously entertains the audience; but the routines' trajectories, which exist only as reflections of the self-canceling circularity of language, systematically affirm the instability of linguistic constructs, especially as applied to the prevailing social *mythos*. What Beckett does so radically in this play, O'Neill had begun

to do less obviously in his early plays. O'Neill's literary career spans the modern period, and his substantial contributions reflect the fertile diversity of modernism even as his dramatic experiments undermine modernism itself from the very beginning.

In one of his earliest plays, *Anna Christie*, O'Neill successfully makes the sea the occasion of a postmodernist inquiry into the possibilities and limitations of moral judgment, of the traditional love plot, and of dramatic form itself. This apparently realistic text methodically explodes the premises of the traditional modern sea story in which the sea is the neutral backdrop of moral struggle isolating and clarifying man's heroic efforts in an indifferent universe. It also explodes the premises of the traditional love story in which love finds a way over parental opposition and conflicting religious beliefs. O'Neill's relentless probing into the American myths of middle-class morality and romantic love involved him in an elaborate critique of the ways in which popular beliefs are embodied in dramatic structures that encode and propagate those myths. Buried under the theatricalism of his father's theatre is a reductive ideology of morality and sexuality whose entire network of meanings, values, and presuppositions unraveled under O'Neill's close scrutiny. Thus, O'Neill's experimentalism, more than an Oedipal rebellion of realistic modernism, offers an informing postmodern vision that requires careful discriminations of judgment and unsettles the audience.

Anna Christie turns on a pivotal reversal in our perception of the morality of Chris's decision to leave his family and go to sea - an epiphany not shared by Chris himself. Toward the end of the first act, Chris explains to his twenty-year-old daughter Anna, whom he has not seen in fifteen years, why he never came home.

Ay tank, after your mo'der die, ven Ay vas away on voyage, it's better for you you don't never see me! . . . Ay don't know, Anna, vhy Ay never come home Sveden in old year. Ay vant come home end of every voyage. Ay vant see your mo'der, your two bro'der before dey vas drowned, you ven you vas born-but-Ay-don't go. Ay sign on oder ships - go South America, go Australia, go China, go every port all over world many times - but Ay never go aboard ship sail for Sveden. Ven Ay gat money for pay passage home as passenger den - *(He bows his head guiltily)* Ay forgat and Ay spend all money. Ven Ay tank again, it's too late. . . . Ay don't know why but dat's vay with most sailor fallar, Anna. Dat ole davil sea make dem crazy fools with her dirty tricks. It's so.

In Act One Anna (and the audience) tends to judge Chris harshly, seeing his non-decision as a decision of passive weakness, of succumbing to immediate pleasure and evading responsibility for his faraway family. However, Chris's obvious happiness at seeing his daughter, his strong love for her, his desire to make amends and to care for her, and his blindness to the ravages of her ill-spent youth: these tone down Anna's (and the audience's) condemnation. She feels some sympathy as she sees Chris struggle with his guilt; later she feels superior as she witnesses his scruples, rationalizations and evasions. Nevertheless, Chris's own morality, the standard by which he secretly judges himself, calls for him to resist the sea, to prove his manhood and find redemption in a decisive moral commitment to his family. Only in such heroic rationality of purpose can he take charge of his life and shape his individual destiny. Consciously and publicly Chris excuses himself, saying, "Dat ole davil, sea, she make me Yonah man ain't no

good for nobody." But unconsciously gnawing at him is that unspoken standard - the conventional standard by which the audience first tends to judge him - which causes him so much pain and guilt and reinforces other bad decisions.

Through the first of the three major versions of this play, *Chris Christophersen*, this is nearly as far as O'Neill got in his moral vision of men and women in relation to nature and to each other. The reversal occurs gradually as the audience becomes aware of the defect in Chris's morality. His superstitious rationalization of "dat ole davil, sea" to account for deep conflicting inner urges had also led him to believe that after her mother's death five year-old Anna was better off inland with uncaring relatives than near him and the sea. Ironically this moral blindness to Anna's true interests also leads him to excuse Anna's faults. He accepts her unconditionally at the beginning and does not reject her towards the end when he discovers her scandalous past.

Chris's specious morality might pass for an acceptable standard except for Anna. The beginning of Act Two, ten days after her arrival, as Anna, *"healthy, transformed"* and *"with an expression of awed wonder,"* appears on the deck of the barge, *Simeon Winthrop*, hints that O'Neill is playing with a different, more complicated morality in Anna's discovery of the sea.

It's like I'd come home after a long visit away some place. It all seems like I'd been here before lots of times-on boats-in this same fog. . . . But why d'you s'pose I feel so - so - like I'd found something I'd missed and been looking for - 's if this was the right place for me to fit in? . . . And I feel clean, somehow - like you feel yust after you've took a bath. And I feel happy for once - yes, honest! - happier than I have ever been anywhere before!

In *Beyond the Horizon* O'Neill had already suggested an elemental sense of belonging whether to the land or to the sea as an important variable of moral commitment. In *Anna Christie* he elaborates the moral wellsprings of belonging to some such external power, a mystical force, a totem, that brings man into unique relationship with the rhythms of the universe and the source of his being.

Anna and Chris belong to the sea by accidents of geography and genealogy. Raised in a small port town on the Swedish coast, Chris went to sea because there was nothing else for him to do. The sea is in his blood, bred into his and Anna's genes by generations of seafaring ancestors. All the men in Chris's village went to sea. Chris's own father, whom he hardly knew, died and was buried at sea, as were two of Chris's three older brothers and his two sons. The nature of the place where they were born provides only one opportunity to make a living, one outlet for growth, one direction along which the lines of their lives can be charted. In the end Anna comes to realize that she is united to the sea by the blood of generations, and that her true fulfillment can come only by accepting that relationship and living it fully.

Anna has already taken the measure of Chris's morality and recognized her own more intuitive morality when Mat Burke, the shipwrecked sailor, rises like Proteus from the sea. Mat, the true "citizen of the sea," defines in his personality the complex morality of

bringing his deepest natural urges into creative harmony with the external force of the sea. Mat identifies with the sea, sees himself as part of it, and boasts that his great physical strength as well as his strength of character issues from the sea. "And if 'twasn't for me and my great strength, I'm telling you - and it's God's truth - there'd been mutiny itself in the stokehole." And a few lines later, "I'm a divil for sticking it out when them that's weak give up." With the appearance of Mat, Chris's more conventional morality of resisting the external pull of the sea gives way completely to a more perplexing intuitive belief in the vital force Mat shares with the sea. Anna responds to the vitality in Mat's nature and to his instinctive belief in the power he shares with the sea. Mat, in his turn, intuits the same cleanness and *elan vital* of the sea in Anna and is immediately drawn to her. The sea has brought them together and Mat sees that as his destiny. "I'm telling you there's the will of God in it that brought me safe through the storm and fog to the wan spot in the world where you was!"

Anna and Mat have known only abusive sexual relationships during their formative years, so they have serious handicaps to overcome. Seduced by her own cousin on the farm in Minnesota and driven to prostitution, Anna has been exploited by men since her tender years. Mat has known only the cheap waterfront prostitutes that prey on sailors. Both are contemptuous of and defensive toward the opposite sex; both inhabit limiting conventions of gender and project one stereotype after another on each other. Mat's perception of Anna ranges over the gamut of his imagination from angel to hooker to "fine decent girl" whose shoe-soles he is not fit to kiss and back to whore again. Finally he surrenders to her as woman and, with her help, reconciles his role as husband to his vocation as sailor. Anna's reaction to Mat moves from resentment at his intrusion on her idyll, to repulsion at his masculine presence, to contempt for his egotism, to repugnance at his crude advances, to perplexity at his early passion and candor, to amusement at his boyish boasting, to admiration and love, to anger at his possessiveness and ultimately surrender to him and to her destiny as a sailor's wife. Both lovers move through the conventional stages of the romantic love plot of excitation, deferral, and release; but then the sea adds a further dimension of moral skepticism and uncertain possibility.

Just as Chris's very weakness prevents him in the end from doing worse damage to his daughter than he has already done, so Mat's egotism, which originally made impossible his acceptance of Anna's past, rescues him in the end. When Anna tells Mat that he is the first and only man she has ever loved - that not only did she not love all those other men who paid for sex but hated them - Mat finds a face-saving excuse that soothes his bruised ego. "If 'tis truth you're after telling, I'd have a right, maybe, to believe you'd changed - and that I'd changed you myself till the thing you'd been all your life wouldn't be you any more at all." Mat makes Anna swear this is true on a cross given him by his mother; but when he finds out Anna isn't Catholic, he concludes, "If your oath is no proper oath at all, I'll have to be taking your naked word for it and have you anyway, I'm thinking - I'm needing you that bad!" The love plot comes to its conventional close when Mat finds out that Anna is not just an ordinary pagan; she is "wan of them others," a Lutheran. "Luthers, is it? . . . Well, I'm damned then surely. Yerra, what's the difference? 'Tis the will of God, anyway."

For the first three acts early audiences could respond to Anna as the stereotypical "golden-hearted whore" from nineteenth-century melodrama who nobly sacrifices her one chance to marry the man she loves by telling him the truth about her past. Those same audiences could respond to Mat as the conventional reformed womanizer, the sailor with a girl-in-every-port who is transformed by the love of a fallen but virtuous woman. However, the irresolution and ambiguity of the final act express an ambivalent vision of married life beyond the "happy end" of conventional drama, even modern drama (as opposed to postmodern drama).

As a story, the play is rich in poetry and colloquial dialogue; it is ironic and funny but not very interesting, with its stock characters and conflicts, until Chris and Mat fight for possession of Anna in Act Three. Chris tries to validate his claim to Anna as a loving father, genuinely (although mistakenly) concerned for her welfare in preventing her marriage to a "no good fallar on sea." If one looked hard enough one might detect faintly incestuous undertones in Chris's not completely disinterested notions of making up for lost time with Anna. He tells Mat frankly, "Ay don't vant for Anna get married. . . . Ay'm a ole man. Ay don't see Anna for fifteen year. She vas all Ay gat in vorld. And now ven she come on first trip - you tank Ay vant her leave me 'lone again?" The rivalry Chris feels with Mat is paternal, not sexual; the domestic intimacy Chris yearns for is not sexual either. However, the quasi-incestuous insularity of Chris's over-protectiveness shares with Mat the romantic ideal of women as docile child-wives and men as paternal husbands. Mat feels entitled to Anna by the lover's imperative to free her from the obsolete bonds of her misguided father. When Anna refuses to marry Mat but will not give her reasons, Mat tries bullying her. "I'm thinking you're the like of them women can't make up their mind till they're drove to it. Well, then, I'll make up your mind for you bloody quick." In the ensuing argument, Mat tells Chris, "She'll do what I say! You've had your hold on her long enough. It's my turn now." As the two men, even in the heat of their disagreement, slip easily into their common assumption about the social hierarchy and the sexual inequality of women, Anna herself looks on in disbelief.

CHRIS (*Commandingly*) You don't do one tang he say, Anna! (*Anna laughs mockingly.*)

BURKE She will, so!

CHRIS Ay tal you she don't! Ay'm her fa'der.

BURKE She will in spite of you. She's taking my orders from this out, not yours.

The dialogue exposes the underlying assumptions of woman's inferiority and her need to capitulate to man's whims and power. Chris and Mat may argue about whose orders Anna should take from here on out, but they agree that she should take orders from one of them.

The historical response to arranged marriages was a blend of passion and pragmatism in romantic wedlock that was raised to the level of cultural icon in the West by the late nineteenth century. This ideal of romantic marriage based on erotic love has persisted in the drama at least from the Renaissance well into the modern theatre. Novels, plays

and films have increasingly touted the loving companionate marriage as necessary for personal and social well-being; and the sexual hierarchy within marriage thus becomes the foundation for a balanced social order. But encoded in the conventions of even the modern theatre's treatment of sexual relationships is the persistent notion of men and women as hierarchical opposites. Masked in the rhetoric of complementary halves, the modern theatre still portrays men and women as fundamentally opposite, instead of simply different, sexual beings needing each other for completion. Such mutually exclusive depictions of masculinity and femininity reinforce popular notions of dominance and subordination in a patriarchal hierarchy. Implicit in this pattern of thinking is the assumption that Anna, a grown woman, will pass normally from the father/ child authority of Chris to the husband/wife-child domination of Mat. O'Neill evolves a devastating commentary on the ideological abuses underlying male/female relationships by making Anna herself draw attention to the sexual division that locks men and women into antagonistic roles without access to each other's subjective thoughts, feelings and needs. In this scene, Anna, refusing to be trapped any longer in Chris's and Mat's limiting social definitions of gender, rejects the role of subservient childwife. "Gawd," she says, "you'd think I was a piece of furniture! . . . You was going on 's if one of you had got to own me. But nobody owns me, see? - 'cepting myself." Then she proceeds to destroy all the other illusions the two men have about her by revealing her past prostitution. Everything in her past experience - even her rejection and humiliation in past encounters with men, and her subsequent acceptance by her father and love of Mat - all conspire to help Anna make the excruciatingly tough choice between individual identity and maritally prescribed role. She forces Mat and Chris to accept or reject her as she is, not filtered through the lenses of their popular misconceptions. Anna's repudiation of this role and her later redefinition of her relationships to both her father and her future husband expose the limitations of a socially determined identity, rooted in sexual differentiation, that too easily transforms the love relationship into a battle for mastery and possession. By this means O'Neill, following the lead of Shaw, opens a fissure in the prison wall of the deadlocked sexual ideology of marriage by suggesting, not a sexual hierarchical complementariness, but a more precarious balance between sexual equals.

As we will shortly see, O'Neill hit upon a structural device that would complement this perspectival innovation. But an advance glance at traditional marriage-plot structure will help to show that innovation's appropriateness.

Modern marriage plots, whether they focus on courtship or marital discord, have traditionally employed the same structural dynamics. Courtship plots commonly follow the pattern of attraction, opposition, and resolution ending in marriage. (Boy finds girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl.) And marital discord plots confront the marriage partners with a series of internal and external obstacles that must be overcome before the partners can live "happily every after." Of course that ideal stasis is not always achieved. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* creates an uneasy awareness of marital abuses; Strindberg's *The Father* complicates the pattern by reducing the institution of marriage to total war-to-the-death for mastery; and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, emphasizing the "locked" condition of wedlock, proceeds to chart the psychological distance between the mismatched mates whose conflict can never be

resolved because their author, lacking the imaginative capacity to ameliorate their impossible situation, abandoned them to the limbo of an unfinished work. However, whether the specific marriage is salvageable or not, the *institution* of marriage is still held up as an ideal. Even in apparent satires on the married state, it is individual weakness and not the gender-related issues of marriage per se that is questioned. O'Neill's very different agenda could not be accommodated within the thesis-antithesis-synthesis structure of the traditional, formulaic marriage trajectory. And the aforementioned solution, a device that O'Neill uses to notable effect, is the open-ended conclusion - a technique often utilized by modernist writers in response to the nineteenth century's modes of closure.

The open-ended text does not satisfactorily resolve the issues it poses, because ambiguity is part of its meaning; instead, it passes its tension on to the viewer or reader, who must actively respond to the disturbing questions left unsolved. The intended consequence is to unsettle the audience and make them critics of, rather than unwitting perpetuators of, the thinking implicit in the marriage plot convention. The viewer who unconsciously accepts such fictional representations as natural or unproblematic becomes a victim of the text's underlying ideology. This strategy deflects the viewer's attention from the seductive satisfaction of emotional release to the more painful contradiction of patriarchal marriage that the text of the play offers up for critique. Thus O'Neill's structural and perspectival techniques might be seen as a pro- to post-modernist inquiry into the assumptions of the modern marriage plot.

Anna's problematic optimism at the end of the play illustrates a singularly postmodernist opening up of traditional concepts of marital identity roles. After the reconciliation of the three principals, Anna announces the astounding news that Mat and Chris have signed on to the same ship. She assures them that it is all right, that she will not be lonely, that being a sailor's wife runs in the family. "I'll get a little house somewhere," she says, "and I'll make a regular place for you two to come back to - wait and see." The three drink to their future together - Anna and Mat drink happily, but Chris is subdued. Soon Chris's gloom begins to infect Mat. "It's funny," says Chris. "It's queer, yes - you and me shipping on same boat dat vay. It ain't right. Ay don't know - it's dat funny vay ole davil sea do her vorst dirty tricks." When Mat concedes he may be right, Anna puts her arm around Mat and says *"with determined gaiety,"* "Aw say, what's the matter? Cut out the gloom. We're all fixed now, ain't we, me and you? . . . Come on! Here's to the sea, no matter what! Be a game sport and drink to that!" She and Mat defiantly drink her toast to the sea. Chris, however, has the last word. As the other two stare at him he mutters, "Fog, fog, fog, all bloody time. You can't see vhere you vas going, no. Only dat ole davil, sea - she knows!"

On the surface, Anna's role as wife and daughter seems conventional enough by social and literary standards alike. This play is not an instance of wild but unessential gender role reversals, like Anna going to sea as a stoker while Mat stays home to care for the children. Rather, the socially prescribed gender roles are more subtly undermined, in their subordination to more important individual drives, and in their adaptation to meet the sometimes conflicting requirements of the newly emerged, tripartite psychic relationship. Both Chris and Mat perceive their love of the sea as a masculine trait:

Chris as masculine weakness, Mat as masculine strength. In sharing her love of the sea with her men, Anna manifests the bisexuality C. G. Jung claims we all inhabit. Not only do men and women physiologically secrete both male and female hormones; they also share masculine and feminine psychological archetypes called the *animus* and the *anima*. Conditioned by the sex glands and chromosomes, these archetypes make it possible for us to understand and respond to members of the opposite sex: they exist in us at birth as a predisposition formed by the racial memory of ancestral experiences between the sexes. Man intuits something of the nature of woman through his *anima*; woman apprehends man through her *animus*. However, the *animus* and the *anima* may sow confusion if the archetypal image is projected onto the partner without perceiving the discrepancies between this ideal and the actual person, as Mat and Anna both did at first. Mat and Anna's gradual adjustment of the demands of their collective unconscious to the actualities of their individual differences is a process of sexual maturation.

In dismantling the traditional roles of wife and daughter, Anna has redesigned these roles to fit her own individual needs for personal fulfillment. By telling them the truth about herself, Anna has gambled and won; but her victory - a victory over self rather than the two men - is not a question of marital supremacy. It is victory of her own authentic relationship *to* the two men. However, the role that Anna assumes in playing out her own marriage drama must still take into consideration the relative blindness of Mat and Chris to their new roles. Out of this restructuring of marital roles along the lines of equality, mutual respect and affection, a tiny wedge has been driven into their socially constructed identities based on sexual differentiation, and this validates the possibility of a happy ending.

O'Neill knew he had to give the play its happy ending. As he wrote in a letter to the *New York Times,*

In the last few minutes of *Anna Christie* I tried to show the dramatic gathering of new forces out of the old. I wanted to have the audience leave with a deep feeling of life flowing on, of the past which is never the past - but always the birth of the future - of a problem solved for the moment but by the very nature of its solution involving a new problem. . . . It would have been so obvious and easy - in the case of this play, conventional even - to have made my last act a tragic one. It could have been done in ten different ways, any one of them superficially right. But looking deep into the hearts of my people, I saw it couldn't be done. It would not have been true. They were not that kind. They would act in just the silly, immature, compromising way that I have made them act; and I thought that they would appear to others as they do to me, a bit tragically humorous in their vacillating weakness.

However, instead of an ending with a sense of closure and consequent stasis about it, O'Neill made the text a living affair with a sense of life going on beyond the end. Yes, there will be life after marriage for Anna and Mat; but such happiness as they may find will only be achieved by the same kind of openness and good sense they have shown in getting this far. Writing in the *New York Times* on November 13, 1921, Alexander Woollcott summed up the dissatisfaction of the critics with the ambiguity of what they felt was a "faint-hearted" ending. "It is," he wrote, "a happy ending with the author's

fingers crossed" - which is exactly the truth about marriage that the critics could not accept but which audiences applauded through a highly successful (for its day) Broadway run of 177 performances, a blockbuster road tour, numerous revivals, and several movie versions.

This play is only one example of how O'Neill took elements from his father's Victorian theatre, transmuted them in the modernist experimentations of his day, and plotted the direction for much of the postmodern drama that followed him. His innovations in dramatic form helped close the gap between life and plot. His example inspired others, like Arthur Miller in *After the Fall* and Edward Albee in *A Delicate Balance*, to explore married life beyond the traditional happy ending as a means of exposing myths of gender and enlarging the boundaries of the theatre.

Source: John V. Antush, "Eugene O'Neill: Modern and Postmodern," in *Eugene O'Neill Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Spring 1990, pp. 14-25.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Winifred Frazer looks at the influence the sea and the sea god, Poseidon, have on Anna Christie's characters, their lives and fate.

Eugene O'Neill, more than any other American playwright of his time, had a feeling for myth and its enactment in ritual and drama. Witness his use of masks, his recognition of the power of a syncopated drum beat, his understanding of Oedipal family relationships, his satirical outlook on man's worship of the machine rather than of his essential Dionysian or Appolonian nature, his intuitive feeling for choric responses, his clear portrayal of the life-God Eros and the death-God Thanatos in conflict and collusion, his worship of the earth mother, his awe of the primal father, his feeling for resurrection in both Biblical and pagan mythology, his sense of the timeless and the cyclic, and his comprehension of the rites of passage to manhood.

But perhaps Poseidon presided over his psyche more than any other God. As a young boy, in a widely reproduced photograph, he gazes winsomely to sea from his seat on a large rock near the O'Neill's New London waterfront home. And the last house the dying playwright owned was at Marblehead on the rocky Massachusetts coast, where the eye had a vast wide-angle view of the Atlantic Ocean and the ear was assaulted by the battering of the waves against the concrete sea wall below the house. In between, O'Neill lived on the sand dunes at the tip of Cape Cod in a remodeled Coast Guard Station which the waves eventually carried into the sea, and in a mansion-sized "cottage" on the Georgia coast at Sea Island, where the sea was murky and warm. His sea voyages in the years 1910 and 1911 to Argentina, Africa, and England affected him deeply. According to the Gelbs, he learned to stand watch on the highest yardarms and found it the most exalting experience of his life. Also, the only physical activity he seems to have enjoyed was swimming - which he could do for long distances far from shore in icy water.

O'Neill's effusions about the ocean are among the most lyrical in his plays. Paddy in *The Hairy Ape* remembers with a holy joy the clipper ship days when men who were sons of the sea sailed the ships, until sons, sea, and ship became one. And in *Long Day's Journey into Night* written two decades later, Edmund can hardly find words to express his ecstacy: "I became drunk with the beauty and singing rhythm of it [the ship on the sea], and for a moment I lost myself - actually lost my life. I was set free! I dissolved in the sea. . . ." Swimming in the sea was also a religious experience: "When I was swimming far out . . . I had the same experience. . . . Like a saint's vision of beatitude." And O'Neill at one time had expected "the grand opus" of his life to be an autobiographical play called *Sea-Mother's Son.*

To the Greeks, Poseidon, the God of the Sea, and brother of Zeus, was second only in importance to this God of Gods. A sea-faring people honored Poseidon by a great temple at Sunion, the rocky cape at the tip of the coast, south of Athens. The Earth-Shaker could calm the waves by riding upon them in his golden car, and in his three-pronged trident lay the power to shatter cities. This Bull-God secretly fathered Theseus,

who had a special feeling for coming earthquakes created by his God-father. Poseidon, at Theseus' command, destroyed the falsely accused Hippolytus as he drove his chariot along the rocky coast of Greece. God of salt waters and of fresh, Poseidon contended with other Gods for domains of earth, could send sea-monsters and tidal waves inland, and was a power to be reckoned with by all the peoples of the Aegean.

To a sea-faring man like Chris Christopherson, the God of the waters is the power that rules his life. Believing it devilish, still he is unable to keep away from the sea. Claiming that carrying coal on a barge between New York and Boston is not a sea job, nevertheless he is upon the waters. And further emphasizing his paradoxical attitude, he extols life on the barge for its sun, fresh air, good food, moonlight, and beautiful sights of passing schooners under sail, while in almost the same breath cursing the sea. O'Neill himself, in "Ballard [*sic*] of the Seamy Side," written after his sea voyages, complains about the hardships of a sailor's life, but makes the refrain of each stanza: "They're part of the game and I loved it all." And in *The Iceman Cometh* the derelicts are sunk in a Bottom-of-the-Sea Rathskellar, which is also a haven. The Gods change form also in *The Great God Brown*. The Dionysian part of Dion Anthony becomes continually more sneering and Mephistophelian, while the Christian part becomes more strained, tortured, and ascetic.

But the Fate which the Gods mete out is inevitable. Larry, the bartender, in the play's opening scene, listens skeptically to Chris's denunciation of the sea and his tale of protecting his daughter from its malevolent influence through her inland upbringing. "This girl, now," he prophesies, "'ll be marryin' a sailor herself, likely. It's in the blood." Generations of sea-faring men cannot produce a daughter who is not attracted to it. As surely as the Mannons are cursed by their Fate as New England Puritans, so are the Christophersons by the Sea. Chris's ardent hope that Anna will marry some "good, steady land fallar here in East" is obviously not in the cards. In fact Chris himself belies the wish by singing in expectation of that happy event. "My Yosephine, come board the ship," - a most unlikely song for a "land fallar."

When Anna enters, she intimates that the open sea is the world for her by revealing that she "never could stand being caged up nowheres." The Fate of the characters is thus exposed in the opening scene, and as in Greek tragedy, the play consists of its unfolding. Old Marthy, in spite of her admiration for Chris, does agree that he is nutty on the one point of avoiding the sea and bursts into "hoarse, ironical laughter" when she learns that it is living on a farm that has made Anna a prostitute. But when Chris later learns the truth, far from seeing the irony, *he* attributes her fall in some mysterious way to the old devil sea. And he is perhaps not far wrong, for although she first exclaims, "Me? On a dirty coal barge! What do you think I am?" and Larry also exclaims, "On a coal barge! She'll not like that, I'm thinkin'" still it turns out that Anna experiences a magical transformation under the Sea God's spell.

It's like I'd come home after a long visit away some place. It all seems like I'd been here before lots of times - on boats. . . . I feel so - so - like I'd found something I'd missed and been looking for - 's if this was the right place for me to fit in. . . . I feel clean. . . . And I feel happy for once. (II)

Chris has forebodings, but Anna chides him for his fear that he is a fool for having brought her on the voyage and comments satirically that whatever happens is God's will. Chris "starts to his feet with fierce protests," shouting, "Dat ole davil sea, she ain't God."

But Chris is unavailing against Poseidon's potency, for at that moment, with the full irony of Fate, an incarnation of the Sea God arises out of the fog to board the barge. Michelangelo couldn't have portrayed him better. Mat Burke, dressed in nothing but a pair of dungarees, is a "powerful, broad-chested six-footer, . . . in the full power of his heavy-muscled, immense strength." He is "handsome in a hard, rough, bold, defiant way," and "the muscles of his arms and shoulders are lumped in knots and bunches." Like Poseidon, he is not backward about proclaiming his strength. With scorn for the other sailors who went out of their minds with fear and weakness, he tells Anna that they would all be at the bottom of the sea except for "the great strength and guts is in me." When one storm after another raked the seas over the leaking ship from bow to stern, he alone prevented mutiny in the stokehole. By a "kick to wan and a clout to another," which they feared more than the sea itself, he kept the men going beyond human endurance. Now, in spite of going without food and water for two days and two nights and rowing continuously with the others lying in the lifeboat, Mat boasts, "I can lick all hands on this tub, wan by wan, tired as I am!" (II) Mortal man could hardly fit the role of the Earth-Shaker better than Mat Burke.

Anna, he first thinks, is "some mermaid out of the sea," and later a Goddess, whose "fine yellow hair is like a golden crown on your head," but in either case, he was destined to find her: "I'm telling you there's the will of God in it that brought me safe through the storm and fog to the wan spot in the world where you was!" In spite of having been placed in the wilderness to die, Oedipus meets Laius at the appointed crossroads. Anna's inland upbringing does not thwart her predestined encounter with Mat. Admitting to a "bit of the sea" in her blood, which Mat senses, Anna announces with some pride that all the men in her family have been sailors and that all the women have married sailors too. Mat's response is fervent: "It's only on the sea you'd find rale men with guts is fit to wed with fine, high-tempered girls the like of yourself." Chris hears words of courtship with open-mouthed desperation. Then recognizing his old antagonist, he shakes his fist with hatred at the sea, and illustrating the dramatic irony of man pitted against the Gods, swears, "Damn your dirty trick, damn ole davil, you! But py God, you don't do dat! Not while Ay'm living!" (II) Anna, fathered by generations of sea men, can not be reclaimed by the land. "Digging spuds in the muck from dawn to dark," Mat and Anna agree, is for the sodden in spirit. It is not a fruits-of-the-vineyard God which they worship, but the uncontrolled, violent, yet clean, God Poseidon. The same is true of Chris in reality. He had become sick in a land job and had had to go back to the "open air" of the sea to regain his health.

Criticism of the play has been that it is Chris's play through the first two and a half acts and Anna's and Mat's play thereafter, that Mat Burke is a somewhat comic Irishman, and that the ending is a happy one, which distorts the theme of the inevitable fate of those who live on and by the sea, which Synge so well shows in *Riders to the Sea,*. But in spite of its critics, *Anna Christie* survives as a popular play (and musical and movie).

Perhaps, looked at in the light of Greek myth, it has a unity which it seems to lack if viewed merely as a naturalistic American drama.

Acts II, III, and IV take place on the barge at sea, where actors and audience feel surrounded by this salty medium in the breeze, the fog, and the sounds of steamers and fog-horns. Mat emerges from the Sea itself, and if he is seen as an Irish Poseidon, he holds together the theme of the old devil sea as fate and the theme of Anna's rejuvenation by sea and love. And after all, there is a good bit that is comic about the Gods - at least Aristophanes thought so - and many a playwright has regaled us with the tale of Zeus and Amphitryon. So the fact that O'Neill's God speaks with an Irish lilt - "Isn't it myself the sea has nearly drowned . . . and never a groan out of me till the sea gave up and it seeing the great strength and guts of a man was in me" (III) should not mean he is not to be taken seriously. Like Zeus in the form of Amphitryon, or Poseidon when he came to Theseus' mother in a sea cove, Mat is determined to father heroes. What you are "needing in your family," he tells Chris, is a man like himself, "so that you'll not be having grandchildren would be fearful cowards and jackasses the like of yourself." (III) Anna does become the central figure in the second half of the play, fought over "like a piece of furniture" by Chris and Mat and there is considerable humor in Mat's dismay that she, "wan of the others," has taken an oath upon his sacred Catholic crucifix. Emphasis on the young characters, however, does not lessen the importance of Chris, whose happiness depends upon his daughter's welfare. Chris suffers the tragic effect of her revelation that she has been a prostitute. It is he who comes to a self-understanding (admittedly not of the soul-shaking proportions of the Greek hero) that he has not avoided the fate of the Christophersons.

As for the happy ending - Act IV closes, like Acts II and III, with Chris cursing that "ole davil, sea." And his foreboding words, with which Mat agrees, "I'm fearing maybe you have the right of it for once, divil take you" seem more like the "comma" with which O'Neill said he intended to close than a period declaring a happy marriage for Anna and Mat. Anna has so confounded her father and suitor by the story of her past that they have stumbled ashore for a two-day orgy with the God Dionysius. She has been tempted to leave for New York, but the sea has pulled her back - its power and cleansing effect an antidote to her misery. It has also had its effect on the men: Chris, having decided that he is a no-good "Yonah" has offered himself as a propitiating sacrifice by signing on as bosun of the *Londonderry*, a steamer sailing next day for Cape Town, half a world away, whereas Mat has unknowingly signed on the same ship as stoker - thus leaving Anna alone again.

Added to the presentiment of the play's last lines - "Fog, fog, fog, all bloody time. You can't see where you vas going, no. Only dat ole davil, sea - she knows!" - is the "muffled, mournful wail of steamers' whistles." (IV) It is a sombre mood on which the curtain falls. The fact that Mat and Anna seem momentarily destined for happiness does not make them less dependent on whatever fate the God Poseidon metes out to them. O'Neill knew that Driscoll, the stoker on whom he had modeled Mat and Yank in *The Hairy Ape*, had drowned himself at sea. And the original Chris had drowned by falling between the piles of the dock one night on his way to the barge. Just as Poseidon sent his sea-son Mat Burke out of the depths into Anna's life, so he will remove him and

Chris from it according to his will. As in the Greek dramatic trilogies, no more than a comma is needed at the end to indicate the inevitably tragic continuation of the story of a House.

In *Anna Christie* it makes no difference whether one is Swedish or Irish, Lutheran or Catholic, bosun or stoker, if he goes to the sea in ships, Poseidon controls his life. Since the early version called *Chris* was on a road tryout in early 1920, at the same time that *Beyond the Horizon* was on trial in New York, O'Neill must have concluded that neither the land, which ruins Robert Mayo, nor the sea, which ruins Chris, bestows favors on human kind, and Anna seems destined for destruction by both. In plays like *Bound East for Cardiff, The Long Voyage Home, Ile, and The Hairy Ape*, the characters, although buffeted or ruined by the sea, do not blame their fate upon it. And it has been claimed that Chris uses the sea as a scapegoat for his own irresponsibility. But if, as Thomas Mann says, myth is "the pious formula" into which human traits flow from the unconscious, then Poseidon is as real as the psyche in determining man's fate. Whatever defect *Anna Christie* may seem to have because of Mat's overpowering presence in the last part of it is countered by his being an agent of the same powerful God who rules the Christophersons.

Source: Winifred L. Frazer, "Chris and Poseidon: Man Versus God in *Anna Christie*," in *Modern Drama*, Vol. 12, No. 3, December 1969, pp. 279-85.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Frederick Carpenter theorizes on Anna Christie's popularity despite its flaws and suggests that its acclaim comes from its genuine mix of comedy and tragedy.

Anna Christie, produced exactly one year after *The Emperor Jones*, proved almost as popular. It was enthusiastically reviewed, and it ran for 117 performances, and it won for its author his second Pulitzer Prize. It was quickly made into a silent movie, and in 1929 was remade into a "talkie," with Greta Garbo in the title role. Thirty-three years later a large jury of film critics at the Seattle World's Fair voted this one of the fourteen best motion pictures ever produced in America. And this cinematic excellence suggests a reason for the play's popularity: it is one of the most perfectly romantic of O'Neill's early works. But the fact that both *Beyond the Horizon* and *Anna Christie* won Pulitzer Prizes, while two much better plays of the same period—*The Emperor Jones* and *Desire Under the Elms*—were passed by, suggests an ironic commentary on official taste.

In spite of its popularity *Anna Christie* suffers from obvious faults, which were emphasized by George Jean Nathan before the play was produced. Written by fits and starts, it lacked unity. Two years before final production an earlier version had been tried out in Atlantic City under the title of *Chris*. In this play the character of Anna's father had dominated, while both Anna and her lover remained minor. After several attempts at revision, O'Neill finally withdrew the early play, and later rewrote it with a newly conceived Anna in the title role. But in the process the center of action had shifted, the characters had changed, and the ending had become doubtful. Popular critics, of course, were delighted to find an O'Neill play that seemed to end happily. But many condemned its "sentimentalism," and O'Neill, after several attempts to defend it, finally decided against the play. In 1932 he stipulated that it must not be included in the selection of his best *Nine Plays.*

The main plot describes the conflict of Chris Christopherson, the captain of a small barge, and his daughter Anna. He has tried to protect her from "dat ole davil, sea," by having her brought up by cousins far inland in Minnesota. But, unknown to him, one of these cousins has seduced her, and she has drifted into prostitution. Now she visits him in New York for the first time, and he sees with dismay that she loves the sea. He tries bitterly to prevent this love and also her love for a young Irish sailor, Mat Burke. Finally she tells him the truth about her own past, and he reacts by getting drunk and signing on an ocean-going ship. Like his prototype, the "square-'ead" Olson of the *S. S. Glencairn*, he succumbs to his destiny as homeless child of the sea.

Meanwhile the sub-plot describes the love affair of Anna and Mat Burke, the sailor. Immediately attracted to him, she nevertheless realizes that he may cease to love her if he learns about her past. But she forces herself to tell him, as well as her father, declaring that she has never really loved anyone before him. He also reacts by getting drunk and signing (by chance) on the same ship as her father. But, when Mat finally returns to confront her again, he becomes convinced of her true love. At the conclusion

they go off to marry, knowing that on the next day he must leave on "the long voyage" away from home. Love triumphs, but the future remains bleak.

The character of Chris, "childishly self-willed and weak, of an obstinate kindliness," is one of O'Neill's minor triumphs. Without any understanding of himself and without any realistic love or responsibility for this daughter whom he has never seen for fifteen years, he yet imagines that merely by shielding her from the sea he can protect her. In his "obstinate kindliness" he seems the perfect foil for the earlier "emperor" Jones, with his equally obstinate worldliness. But the character of Mat Burke, at the other extreme, is that of a romantic Irishman whose primitive innocence and blind love for Anna never seem quite credible. The romantic unreality of Mat weakens the play.

Between the realistic Chris and the unrealistic Mat stands *Anna Christie*. Unlike Chris, her character had developed very slowly in O'Neill's imagination; but, unlike that of Mat, it is now fully realized. Its complexity foreshadows the later characters of O'Neill's major plays, who seem both realistic and archetypal. Moreover, Anna is that typical figure of modern literature—the prostitute with a heart of gold. She possesses a clear intelligence which sees through the childish illusions of her father, and a perfect integrity which will not let her deceive her lover. Like Dostoevski's ideal prostitute in *Crime and Punishment*, Anna seems to stand above the sordid world and to become an instrument for its salvation. Also like Dostoevski's heroine, she has been called "sentimental." Why should a girl so pure in heart have taken to prostitution in the first place?

The character of Anna is crucial. She is drawn from life, but is larger than life. Like Dostoevski, O'Neill knew his prostitutes: her speech and her mannerisms are wholly convincing. And the actual details of her regeneration from the effects of her past are copied from letters of the former mistress of O'Neill's best friend, Terry Carlin. But beyond this, the deeper motivation of Anna's prostitution is derived from O'Neill's own psychological experience. Her childhood neglect by her father, her loneliness in alien surroundings, her seduction by a relative, and her drifting into prostitution—all reflect O'Neill's own feeling of desertion by his own parents, his loneliness at boarding school, the influence of his own brother, and the resulting profligacy of his own youth. The central theme of the play is the irresponsibility of Anna's father, which for a time drove the heroine into prostitution, but it did not destroy her.

Like the character of Anna, the ending of the play has been criticized for its mixed nature. It is not tragic, but it is true to life. Replying to criticism, O'Neill wrote: "It would have been so obvious and easy . . . to have made my last act a tragic one. It could have been done in ten different ways. . . . But looking deep into the hearts of my people, I saw that . . . they would act in just the silly, immature, compromising way that I have made them act." The play is not a tragedy, and should not be damned for its "failure" as one. Like the later *Strange Interlude*, it is a serious study of modern life, which dramatizes that mixture of comedy and tragedy most characteristic of life. Even for O'Neill, life was not always pure tragedy.

The apparent confusion and destiny of *Anna Christie* may be resolved by considering it as a serious romantic drama of character. The three central characters are all children

of the sea, and each grows to understand and to accept his destiny. Anna has not only become regenerated by the sea, but has learned to accept her own past. Chris has stopped fighting the sea, and mutely accepts Anna's final assurance: "It's all right, Mat. That's where he belongs." And Mat agrees: "'Tis the will of God, anyway." At the end they all drink: "Here's to the sea, no matter what!" Obviously none of them is happy, and none expects happiness. Chris exclaims at the end: "Fog, fog, fog, all bloody time!" But they remain true to their inner natures, and they at last "belong."

Source: Frederick Ives Carpenter, "The Early Plays: Romance," in *Eugene O'Neill*, Twayne Publishers, 1964, pp. 93-96.

Adaptations

The 1930 Hollywood version was advertised with the tag line, "Garbo Talks!" It was directed by Clarence Brown, written by Frances Marion, and starred Greta Garbo as Anna and Charles Bickford as Mat.

A German film of the play was also produced in 1930 starring Greta Garbo. Jacques Feyder, using a German version of Frances Marion's script, directed this movie. Theo Shall played Mat.

Topics for Further Study

Read O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* and compare its themes to those in *Anna Christie*.

Explore biographical details about O'Neill, especially those that concern his life on the sea and his relationship with his family. What autobiographical elements can you find in the play?

Investigate common attitudes toward prostitution in the first few decades of the twentieth century. How similar are those attitudes to today's attitudes?

How does the relationship between Anna and Mat reflect the changing role of women in the early part of the twentieth century?

Compare and Contrast

Early 1920s: Some Americans consider the Russian Revolution an important humanitarian development. Others, however, fear it to be a communist threat to American democracy.

1926: Joseph Stalin becomes dictator of the Soviet Union. His reign of terror will last for twenty-seven years.

1991: President Mikhail Gorbachev orders the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and a new Commonwealth of Independent States is formed by the countries that formerly made up the Soviet Union.

1921: Margaret Sanger founds the American Birth Control League. Other important social changes for women include the ability to vote, to receive higher forms of education, to smoke and drink, and to wear clothes that do not restrict their movements.

Today: Women are guaranteed equal rights under the law.

1921: Approximately 900,000 immigrants enter the United States in the fiscal year ending June 30. After World War I, Americans are afraid of the influx of immigrants who are willing to work for lower wages and so could threaten American jobs.

Today: Americans' concern over the economic impact of immigrants continues.

1921: As a result of overproduction by American farmers, prices fall eighty-five percent below 1919 highs.

Today: Many small farms are going bankrupt or being swallowed up by large farming conglomerates.

What Do I Read Next?

In the expressionistic *The Hairy Ape* (1922), O'Neill explores naturalistic themes in his depiction of the disillusionment of a seaman.

Stephen Crane's short story, "The Open Boat," (1898) depicts the struggles of four shipwrecked seamen to reach shore.

Long Day's Journey Into Night, first performed in 1956, is O'Neill's finest study of domestic interaction and offers insight into O'Neill's own tragic relationship with his family.

Stephen Crane's novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1896) presents a harrowing account of the effects of poverty and prostitution.

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) chronicles the tragic life of a young woman who rebels against puritanical social doctrines.

Further Study

Hackett, Francis, Review in *The New Republic*, November 30, 1921, p. 20.

This review focuses on the play's style and its mixture of "pathos and romance."

Macgowan, Kenneth, Review in the New York *Globe*, November 3, 1921.

Macgowan comments on the style and structure of the play in this opening night review.

Mantle, Burns, Review in the New York *Mail*, November 3, 1921.

This reviewer analyzes the play's realism.

Bibliography

Bogard, Travis, *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, Oxford University Press, 1972.

Boyd, Ernest, Review in *Freeman*, Vol. 4, December 7, 1921, p. 304.

Carpenter, Frederic I., "Chapter 3: The Early Plays: Romance," in *Twayne's United States Authors Series Online*, G. K. Hall, 1999.

Gassner, John, "Eugene O'Neill," in *American Writers*, Vol. 3, Scribner's, 1974, pp. 385-408.

Hammond, Percy, Review in the New York *Tribune*, November 3, 1921.

Jensen, George H., "Eugene O'Neill," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 7: Twentieth-Century American Dramatists*, edited by John MacNicholas, Gale Research Inc., 1981, pp. 139-65.

Marsh, Leo, Review in the New York *Telegraph*, November 3, 1921.

Pollock, Arthur, Review in *Eagle*, November 3, 1921.

Review in the New York *Sun*, November 3, 1921.

Torres, H. Z., Review in the New York *Commercial*, November 3, 1921.

Towse, J. Ranken, Review in the New York *Post*, November 3, 1921.

Whittaker, James, Review in the New York *News*, November 13, 1921.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Drama for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535