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Irish-American Identity in Eugene O'Neill's Early Plays

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Irish-American identity in Eugene O'Neill's early work, including his "lost" plays. It demonstrates that characters such as Al Devlin in *The Movie Man*, Joe and Nellie Murray in *Abortion*, Eileen Carmody and Stephen Murray from *The Straw*, Robert "Yank" Smith in *The Hairy Ape*, and even the "Papist" child Mary Sweeney in *The Rope* are socially marginalized by American WASPs due to their Irish Catholic backgrounds. In the case of Yank such marginalization eventually convinces him that he is too "animalistic" to find a place in mainstream American society. Like Yank, the Irish-American characters in the other plays being examined find it hard to connect with (or are brutally disrespected by) the WASPs in their lives. Previous discussions of WASP/Irish-American tensions in O'Neill's work have focused primarily on O'Neill's late masterpieces; this article demonstrates that such tensions are a key feature of O'Neill's early work as well.

KEYWORDS: Eugene O'Neill, Irish America, Irish diaspora, drama and theater, ethnic identity

The protagonist of Eugene O'Neill's 1921 play, *The Hairy Ape*, is the Brooklyn-born Robert "Yank" Smith, a stoker on a transatlantic ocean liner whose nickname suggests that he is an all-American man—or, at least, an all-northeastern-American man.¹ However, in scene 3 of the play, Yank complicates our understanding of his national identity. An unseen engineer repeatedly blows a whistle while the stokers are shoveling as hard as they can. Yank assumes that the engineer unjustly believes the stokers are "loafin'" on the job and could work even harder (371). A livid Yank bellows up to the man:

Come down outa dere, yuh yellow, brass-buttoned, Belfast bum,
yuh! Come down and I'll knock yer brains out! Yuh lousey, stinkin',
yellow mut of a Catholic-moiderin' bastard! Come down and I'll
moider yuh! (372)

These threats to the presumably Ulster Protestant engineer make clear for the first time that Yank is from an Irish Catholic background. The remarks are all the more surprising because they reveal that the usually apolitical stoker (who repeatedly dismisses the views of socialists and other campaigners for social justice) is knowledgeable and passionate about Irish sectarian politics.²

The fact that Yank is an Irish-American Catholic is highly significant for a couple of reasons. First, it explains his grudging respect for Paddy the Irishman. (Readers and audience members are not fooled by Yank's repeated insults of the philosophical, old man.) And much more important—in the context of O'Neill's entire oeuvre—Yank's fear that he is a less-evolved "ape" compared to the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) first-cabin passengers resembles the tensions between socially anxious Irish-American Catholics and rich WASPs in O'Neill's late masterpieces *A Touch of the Poet*, *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*.³

I am not the first to posit such an Irish reading of *The Hairy Ape*. Irish theater critic Fintan O'Toole briefly but provocatively notes in his 1997 book *The Lie of the Land* that "all the biological pessimism in O'Neill, even in an early play like *The Hairy Ape* where it is not yet articulated in direct confrontation with the notion of Irishness, is to do with this sense of the primitive savage that lies inside the Irish-American attempt at sophistication. It is to do with the cowboy's fear that he might, after all, be just another Indian."⁴

Yank's Irish diasporic background explains his obsession with what (or who) does (or does not) "belong."⁵ This obsession is a central concern of the play; indeed, it completely dominates the ending, in which a dying Yank is consumed by his ultimate inability to find a place in American society—or, indeed, the world. Having been crushed by a gorilla at the zoo and locked

into its cage, Yank laments that even the secretary at the local branch of the International Workers of the World could not accommodate him or his unique sociopolitical viewpoint. As he dies, Yank keens:

Even him didn't tink I belonged. . . . Where do I get off? Where do I fit in? . . . In de cage, huh? [*In the strident tones of a circus barker*] Ladies and gents, step forward and take a slant at de one and only— [*His voice weakening*] one and original—Hairy Ape from the wilds of— (395)

Yank dies before he can reveal the “wild” place from which he hails. However, we know from his conversation with the English socialist Long earlier in the play that he was “dragged up”—as he puts it with Hiberno-English flair—on the Brooklyn waterfront, the son of two tough, alcoholic, physically abusive “scrappers” who used to make him go to the local parish church on Sunday mornings, even though they were usually too hungover to go themselves (379). Yank worked initially as a longshoreman (like his father before him), before becoming a stoker on the liners, and he left the family home after his mother’s alcohol-related death. These formative years were spent in a milieu quite unlike that enjoyed by Mildred, the daughter of a steel tycoon, who finds Yank so repulsive when she sees him in the stokehold, or by the shoppers and worshippers on Fifth Avenue whose composure and sense of privilege Yank cannot seem to ruffle in scene 5. Clearly, Yank carries a sense of social alienation with him when in WASP settings, the product of his marginalized background as a working-class, Irish-American Catholic.

Yank is not the only example from O’Neill’s early work of an Irish-American who feels less sophisticated and more socially marginalized than his/her WASP colleagues, friends, and relations. Other American-born characters from O’Neill’s early plays who are thus marginalized include Al Devlin in *The Movie Man*, Joe and Nellie Murray in *Abortion*, Stephen Murray and Eileen Carmody from *The Straw*, and even the “Papist” child Mary Sweeney in *The Rope* (104). This article will explore the ways in which these characters struggle to fit in with the WASPs in their lives, and will thereby demonstrate that Irish-American/WASP tensions are a much greater feature of O’Neill’s early work than has traditionally been credited.⁶

In *The Hairy Ape*, when Yank feels disrespected by the IWW secretary, he stoops to calling the Jewish socialist a “Sheeny bum.”⁷ Like many Irish-Americans both before and after him, Yank has elected to discriminate against someone from another marginalized background in the hope of elevating his own tenuous social status. As Noel Ignatiev has compellingly

argued, it was by such means that the Irish in America “became white.”⁸ Yank is not the only Irish-American character from O’Neill’s early work to attempt to boost his own standing by disparaging the member of another marginalized community. Al Devlin, in the 1914 one-act play *The Movie Man*, does so, too.

The Movie Man tells the story of two men from an American newsreel company who are “covering a Pancho Villa–type insurrection” in Mexico.⁹ These two men are the Irish-American cameraman Devlin and his WASP boss Henry “Hen” Rogers.¹⁰ At the start of the play, Rogers is shown to have a highly condescending (indeed, racist) view of the Mexican locals. He refers to a remark made to him in Spanish as sounding “almost like real talk” and says the local women are sexually loose and “so homely the mules shy at them” (187, 190). By contrast, Devlin seems to have great respect for the local culture. Rogers marvels at the Irish-American’s ever-increasing knowledge of Spanish, saying, “you’re getting to be a regular talker of spigoty” (187). He also comments on Devlin’s attraction to the local women, in a comment that once again reveals his racism: he warns Devlin that “one of these Mexican dolls you’re googooing at will carve her initials on your back with the bread knife one of these days” (190).

Devlin casually dismisses these ignorant, bigoted remarks. At one point, he insists to Rogers:

[T]here’s some class to some of the dames down here. You ought to have seen the bear I lamped this afternoon. Some queen take it from me. . . . She had the swellest lamps I’ve ever seen on a dame; and a figure—my boy! My boy! (190)

Rogers is incredulous, responding, “Captain Sweeney of the Marines, please listen!” (190). This response combines the American, anti-Irish slur “Tell it to Sweeney!” with its British navy antecedent, “Tell it to the Marines!”¹¹ Both expressions imply that only the groups being impugned (the Irish or the Royal Marines) are stupid or gullible enough to fall for such a claim. By using this anti-Irish slur when talking to Devlin, Rogers is reminding the cameraman of his marginalized background and thereby hitting on a potential sore spot for the Irish-American. A similar shot across Devlin’s bow occurs earlier in the play when Rogers alludes to the “shanties” that the Mexicans live in—the word “shanties” having strong anti-Irish connotations in early twentieth-century America, where poorer Irish people were often referred to as “shanty Irish.”¹² (This link between the Irish and nonwhite populations also, incidentally, occurs in *The Hairy Ape*: after Yank’s troubling

interaction with Mildred, he stops washing regularly and one of his fellow stokers tells him that all the coal marks on him make him look like “a piebald nigger.”)¹³

In *The Movie Man*, Devlin has a choice when it comes to how to react to Rogers’s provocative allusions to his marginalized background. He can express a thorough solidarity with the Mexicans as fellow marginalized people, or, by contrast, he can trade on his “whiteness,” making perfectly clear to the WASP Rogers that—whatever his sympathies with the Mexicans—he is definitely not to be confused with them. Ultimately, he chooses the latter (less admirable) course. After some of Rogers’s teasing, Devlin refers to the Mexican General Virella as “that greaser.”¹⁴ And, at the end of the play, after he has been spurned by a Mexican beauty, Devlin says:

Some nerve to that greaser chicken giving a real white man the foot!
[*Scornfully*] I got a good slant at her this time. She isn’t much to look at after all. Back in God’s Country we’d use her photo for a before-taking ad. (201)

These are just the kind of racist remarks that Devlin’s friend Rogers routinely makes, and they firmly position Devlin as “a real white man” from “God’s Country.” As such, Devlin expects Rogers to warmly welcome these comments. However, since the two men last met, Rogers has fallen for the same Mexican beauty that Devlin has just insulted. Therefore, Rogers responds “indignantly” to the insults, exclaiming, “Al, you always were a simp!” Then, calming himself down a bit, he “grumblingly” suggests that Devlin needs glasses and, finally, he “cheerfully” and condescendingly dismisses Devlin as “all wrong” in his opinions about the young woman (201). Devlin was on the back foot at the start of the play because he was too kind to the Mexicans, and now he is in trouble for having insulted one of them. O’Neill is making it clear that it is the WASP Rogers who determines what is socially acceptable and what is not, and that it is up to Irish-Americans to figure out and keep abreast of what mores and values are being prescribed by their WASP social superiors.

In order to emphasize this contrast between a supposedly superior WASP and inferior Celt in *The Movie Man*, O’Neill calls upon evolutionary biology as he would later in *The Hairy Ape*. Just as Yank worries that he is a less-evolved ape compared to the WASP millionaires (revealing O’Neill’s own biological and social anxieties), Rogers and Devlin are contrasted in a way that suggests one is a better physical specimen than the other. In the stage directions, we are told that the Saxon Rogers is “tall, blond, [and] clean-

shaven” while the Celt Devlin is “short, dark, with a good-natured *irregular* face” (185, emphasis added). This Saxon/Celt physical contrast is repeated in another O’Neill one-act from 1914, the vastly underrated *Abortion*. In this play, the WASP college baseball hero Jack Townsend is described as

a well-built handsome young fellow about twenty-two years old, with blond hair brushed straight back from his forehead, intelligent blue eyes, a good-natured, self-indulgent mouth, and ruddy, tanned complexion. He has the easy confident air of one who has, through his prowess in athletics, become a figure of note in college circles and is accustomed to the deference of those around him. (162)

By contrast, the working class, Irish-American “townie,” Joe Murray, is described as

a slight, stoop-shouldered, narrow-chested young fellow of eighteen, with large, feverish, black eyes, thin lips, pasty complexion, and the sunken cheeks of a tuberculosis victim. (160)

The tuberculosis is, of course, a nod to O’Neill’s own compromised health as a young man. However, in the play, even more damning than the supposed physical deficiencies faced by Murray and Irish-Americans like him is the degree to which they are socially and economically at the mercy of rich WASPs like the Townsends. Murray has come to Townsend’s dorm room to avenge the death of his sister, Nellie, who died from complications associated with a backstreet abortion that Jack made her undergo after he got her pregnant.

During the scene in which Jack Townsend and his father privately discuss the abortion, it is clear that they regard Nellie Murray and her family as being from some lower species. Jack acknowledges that she was a “sweet, lovely girl,” but he also says that the “affair [with Nellie] seemed so horrible and loathsome” when he compared it to his engagement to the socially polished WASP Evelyn (169). Jack adds, emphasizing biology again:

Do you suppose it was the same man who loves Evelyn who did this other thing? No, a thousand times no, such an idea is abhorrent. It was the male beast who ran gibbering through the forest after its female thousands of years ago. (170–71)

In other words, Jack believes that it was his less-evolved self that stooped to sleep with someone like Nellie. While Jack’s father remains skeptical about

this biological theory, he does make his social and ethnic snobbery clear by suggesting that sleeping with Nellie did show “a lack of . . . good taste” on Jack’s part. After all, he adds, “this young woman was hardly of the class you have been accustomed to associate with.” (171).

Some may dispute my claim that the Murrays in *Abortion* are definitely Irish. After all, etymologically, the surname Murray can be of either Irish or Scottish origin. That said, people of both Irish Gaelic and Scottish descent bear the surname in Ireland, and, as a result, it is one of the country’s most common surnames—whether it is found among the Gaels of the West or the Ulster Scots of the North. (Indeed, it was the fifteenth most common surname in Ireland in 2014.)¹⁵ O’Neill clearly thought of it as a thoroughly Irish name: when he reused it for the male hero of the 1919 play *The Straw*, he has Irish-born character Bill Carmody describe the surname as being “Irish as Paddy’s pig!”¹⁶ That hero—Stephen Murray—confirms to Carmody that he is indeed of Irish descent and, as in the other plays discussed, O’Neill once again suggests that being from an Irish background places a person at an angle to mainstream American society. Leaving aside Murray’s hostility toward complacently middle-class WASPs such as Fred Nicholls, there is O’Neill’s description of the young man’s character in the stage directions. O’Neill writes that Stephen’s “manner, as revealed by his speech—nervous, inquisitive, alert—seems more an acquired quality than any part of his real nature.” This suggests someone who wears a social mask, and who has to be ever “alert” to his social surroundings if he is going to fit in. The anxiety over whether or not he is passing explains the “nervous” quality to his speech (211).

While Stephen is on the defensive when faced with WASP society, Bill Carmody’s daughter, the American-born Eileen, has ingratiated herself with local WASPs, thanks to her lovely manners and warm nature (which stand in contrast to the venal selfishness shown by her Irish-born father and stepmother). Two WASPs who are particularly fond of her are the aforementioned Nicholls—her fiancé at the start of the play—and Dr. Gaynor. However, during a private conversation between these two men, they reveal their snobishness and their distaste for people like the Carmodys, even as they give Eileen their seal of approval. In the case of Fred, this approval does not last: when she is diagnosed with tuberculosis, he cannot wait for her to get better so he can break off their engagement without it seeming connected to the disease. It is as if the diagnosis, with its taint of Irish poverty (“consumption”), has woken him from a dream, and he wonders how he ever could have gotten himself so inveigled with someone from Eileen’s background (206).

Later in the play, Eileen breaks off the engagement, thereby letting the selfish and snobbish young man off the hook.

In the plays analyzed thus far, the Irish-American characters are held back or marginalized socially by WASPs whom they have met by interacting with wider American society. In the case of the 1918 one-act play *The Rope*, the young, red-haired girl Mary Sweeney is despised by a WASP within her own household. Her Bible-bashing, Protestant, maternal grandfather, Abraham Bentley, despises her for her Irish blood (her father is an Irishman called Patrick Sweeney). Indeed, Bentley refers to her as a “Papist brat” and the “spawn o’ Satan” (104). That said, her Irish father is not admirable, either—he is a hard-drinking, abusive, greedy man. Interestingly, O’Neill uses Mary at the end of the play to punish both the WASP and Irish Catholic sides of her family for their avarice and their frequent recourse to violence.

What are we to make of this? In O’Neill’s eyes, is the half-Irish, half-WASP Mary a superior human specimen to the two ethnic groups that helped produce her? Perhaps. In O’Neill’s unfinished play cycle, *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*, he seems to imply that America’s prosperity (if not its ability to resist materialism) will be enhanced if people like the Irish Melodys and the WASP Harfords join forces. Similarly, in these early plays he seems to suggest that both ethnicities are in need of an improvement that their rival social group can bring. For example, in *The Hairy Ape*, Yank may be portrayed as less evolved and more ape-like than the WASPs, but it is also made clear that America’s WASP stock is past its prime. Mildred herself admits to her aunt, “I’m afraid I have neither . . . vitality nor integrity. All that was burnt out in our stock before I was born” (368).

Similarly, in *Abortion*, Nellie and Joe Murray may be socially marginalized and (in the case of Joe) physically quite unwell, but both have been admirably hard workers who have been financially supporting their younger siblings in the wake of their father’s death. And just as Nellie showed great courage in her final hours, her brother Joe does too when confronting the man responsible for his sister’s demise. By contrast, the WASP characters may be pleasant, polished, and self-assured, but the WASP males are moral hypocrites and the WASP women relatively vacuous. Most damningly of all, Jack Townsend—in an act of great moral cowardice—commits suicide at the end of the play rather than face the social shame and legal justice associated with his role in Nellie’s death.

Whether or not O’Neill believed that Irish-American Catholics and WASPs should mix (for the benefit of both groups), these early plays demonstrate—as much as the late masterpieces—that O’Neill shared many of the social anxieties found in the work of important Irish-American writ-

ers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, John O'Hara, Mary McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor, John Kennedy Toole, and M. G. Stephens.¹⁷ In works by all of these writers, Irish-American Catholics struggle as they attempt to fit into WASP-dominated social settings, raising questions about how much people from Irish cultural backgrounds should adapt in order to truly belong in America.

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NOTES

1. Eugene O'Neill, *Early Plays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 356. Subsequent page numbers appear in the text.
2. Yank's Irishness is clearly linked to the fact that the character was inspired by an Irish-born stoker named Driscoll that O'Neill knew in New York. Incidentally, this real-life figure also inspired the creation of Driscoll, the Irish seaman, from O'Neill's S.S. *Glencairn* plays. See Robert M. Dowling, "Driscoll," in *Critical Companion to Eugene O'Neill: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), 78.
3. O'Neill, *Early Plays*, 376, 377, 378, 383, 384, 388, 391, 393, 395.
4. Fintan O'Toole, *The Lie of the Land: Irish Identities* (London: Verso, 1997), 38.
5. O'Neill, *Early Plays*, 362, 364, 366, 377, 380, 382, 385, 386, 387, 390, 394, 395. Subsequent page numbers appear in the text.
6. Important and insightful examinations of the social struggles endured by the Irish-American characters in O'Neill's work customarily focus primarily on the late plays. They also usually pay significantly more attention to Irish-born characters than to Americans of Irish descent (who are, of course, the main focus of this essay). See, for example, Robert M. Dowling, "Irish/Irish Americans," in *Critical Companion to Eugene O'Neill: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), 627–37; Edward L. Shaughnessy, "O'Neill's African and Irish-Americans: Stereotypes or 'Faithful Realism'?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill*, ed. Michael Manheim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 148–63; Thierry Dubost, "The Last of Ireland: Becoming American Irish in O'Neill's Plays," *Études Irlandaises* 23, no. 2 (1998): 9–26. It should be noted that, while Dubost focuses mainly on the late classics, he also devotes a significant amount of space to Paddy from *The Hairy Ape*. That said, Paddy is, of course, Irish-born—in other words, not Irish-American in the same sense as the Brooklyn-born Yank or the other characters analyzed in this essay.
7. O'Neill, *Early Plays*, 391.
8. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

9. Jeffrey H. Richards, introduction to *Early Plays*, by Eugene O'Neill (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), xvii.
10. Eugene O'Neill, *Ten "Lost" Plays* (Toronto: Dover, 1995), 184. Subsequent page numbers appear in the text.
11. For information on these expressions, see "Tell It to Sweeney," *Tell It to Sweeney: The Straight Dope on the 20s, 30s and 40s*, <https://tellsweeney.wordpress.com/tag/tell-it-to-sweeney/> (accessed November 9, 2017). See also "Tell It to Sweeney," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., vol. 20, ed. James Louis Garvin, Franklin Henry Hooper, and Warren E. Cox (New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica Company, 1929), 796.
12. O'Neill, *Ten "Lost" Plays*, 186. For the "shanty Irish," see William V. Shannon, *The American Irish: A Political and Social Portrait* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 142.
13. O'Neill, *Early Plays*, 374.
14. O'Neill, *Ten "Lost" Plays*, 188. Subsequent page numbers appear in the text.
15. See "Murray Surname," *Forebears*, accessed July 12, 2017, <http://forebears.io/surnames/murray>.
16. O'Neill, *Early Plays*, 215. Subsequent page numbers appear in the text.
17. I am referring, of course, to works such as *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and "The Bridal Party" (1930) by F. Scott Fitzgerald; *Appointment in Samarra* (1934) by John O'Hara; *The Company She Keeps* (1942) and *The Groves of Academe* (1952) by Mary McCarthy; "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" (1955) by Flannery O'Connor; *A Confederacy of Dunces* (completed 1969, published 1980) by John Kennedy Toole; and *Still Life* (1977) by M. G. Stephens.