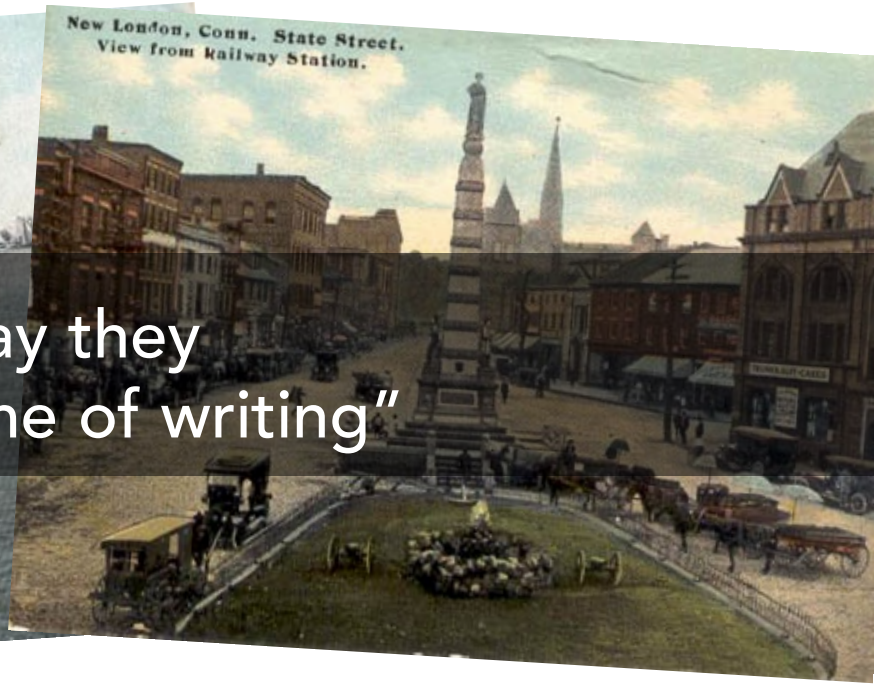
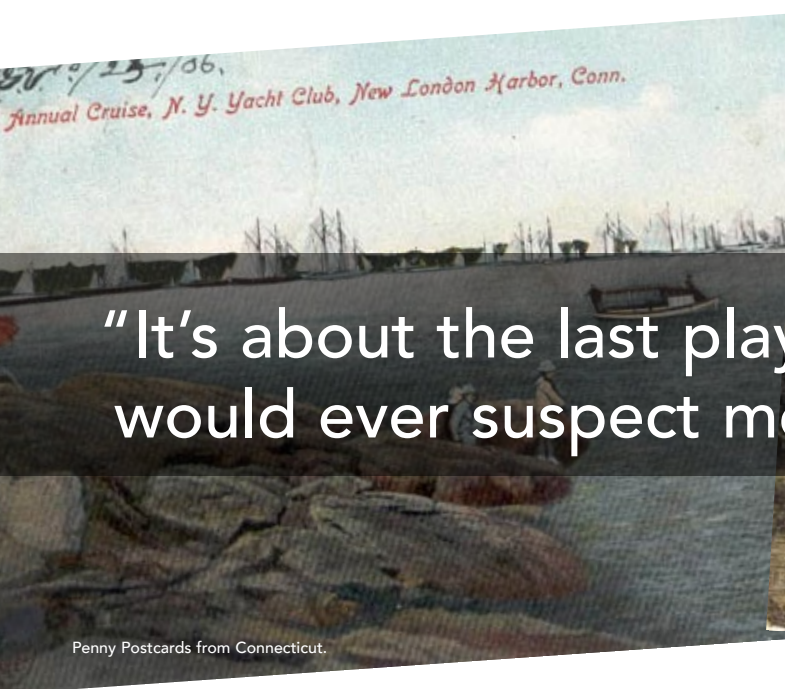


# Eugene O'Neill on *Ah, Wilderness!*



“It’s about the last play they would ever suspect me of writing”

I dashed off a first draft of another play in September. It came on me all of a flood and working every day 8:30 to five or six I got the whole thing off my chest in one month. It’s no idea you have ever heard me talk of—and is quite different from anything I have ever done. It came so easily that I’m scared of it—afraid to go back and read it—even so diffident that I’ll save telling you the details until I go back and find I like it. Of course, I know I’ll find a lot to do on it even if it turns out worth while [sic]. As for whether I will ever allow it to be produced, granted it’s good, that will be another difficult decision to make.

— Letter to his son Eugene O’Neill Jr., November 11, 1932

[*Ah, Wilderness!*] has very little plot. It is more the capture of a mood, an evocation [of] the spirit of a time that is dead now with all its ideals and manners and codes—the period in which my middle teens were spent—a memory of the time of my youth—not of *my* youth but of the youth in which my generation spent youth—there is very little actually autobiographical about it except a few minor incidentals which don’t touch the story at all. The title, in strict confidence is *Ah, Wilderness!* [...] It’s not a play one can explain. Moreover I haven’t looked at it since I finished. Don’t get the impression I feel I may not *like* it. I have an immense affection for it. But whether it is enough of a play to carry across what I mean in it in a theater is something I’m not deciding for a long while yet. Perhaps if I give you the subtitle you will sense the spirit of what I’ve tried to recapture in it “A Nostalgic Comedy of the Ancient Days when Youth was Young, and Right was Right, and Life was a Wicked Opportunity.” Yes, it *is* a comedy ... and not deliberately spoofing at the period (like most modern comedies of other days) to which we now in our hopeless

befuddlement and disintegration and stupidity feel so idiotically superior, but laughing at its absurdities while at the same time appreciating and emphasizing its lost spiritual and ethical values. ... But what pleasure I got out of writing it! It was such a change from the involved and modern and tragic hidden undertones of life I usually go after. It’s about the last play they would ever suspect me of writing. And, really, let me confess it, I think it’s pretty damned good, too.

— Letter to Eugene O’Neill Jr., January 14, 1933

It is purely a play of nostalgia for youth, a sentimental, if you like, evocation of the mood of emotion of past time which, whatever may be said against it, possessed a lot which we badly need today to steady us. I mean, not the same thing, that’s dead; but the inner reality of that thing conceived in terms of life today. The good idea of the simple old family life as lived by the typical middle class hard working American of the average large-small town which is America in miniature—the coming of the new radical literature of that day to youth (Shaw, Ibsen, Wilde, Omar Khayyam, etc.)—that’s what I’ve tried to do in the play. A play about people, simple people of another day but real American people. But you will see better than I can explain when you read it. *And a comedy!* It’s damned funny (at least to me!). But it makes me weep a few tears, too.

— Letter to Eugene O’Neill Jr., May 13, 1933

Don’t think of this play as a New England play!!! It isn’t, you know, in any essential respect—and near- to-New-York Connecticut never was real New England, as any New Englander will tell you. It could be laid in the Middle or Far West with hardly the change of a word. There are no



Penny Postcard from Connecticut.

colloquialisms in it, I think, that aren't general American small town. ... I happened to have my old home town of New London in mind when I wrote—couldn't help it—but New London, even in those days was pretty well divorced from its N.E. heritage—was lower Conn., in fact, with New York the strongest influence.

— Letter to Philip Moeller  
(American stage producer/director/playwright/screenwriter)

I was writing about general types of people of that period in any large small-town, and not particular persons. And I make it a point never to put real people I have known into my plays. All my characters are my own fabrication. They may have certain points about them which resemble, at times, certain traits in persons I have known, but the whole character is never true to that of any actual person. [...] What has set them off is that I call the play "A Comedy of Recollection," but I meant recollection of general family life, etc. of that period, as contrasted with today, and not recollection of any specific family. The "Millers" in my play are like thousands of families in America of that time.

— Letter to Grace Rippen, October 16, 1933

I hope you liked my nostalgic adventure into comedy in *Ah, Wilderness!* I think it should hand you many reminiscent grins. You will remember those good old days as well as

I, and you must have known many Miller families. I had a grand time writing it—also a grand time rehearsing, for the cast, taking it all in all from bits to leads, is the best I ever had in a play. They really make it live very close to what I imagined it. A most enjoyable experience in the theater, all told—and how the damn thing moves young, middle-aged and old! It's astonishing. And a proof to me, at least, that emotionally we still deeply hanker after the old solidarity of the family unit. [...]

These two plays [*Ah, Wilderness!* and *Days Without End*] will, I know, set you to wondering what sea change has come over me. The truth is that, after [*Mourning Becomes Electra*] I felt I had gone as far as it was in me to go along my old line—for the time being, at least. I felt that to try to top myself in various other phases of the old emotional attitude would be only to crucify my work on what had become for the time an exhausted formula. I felt a need to liberate myself from myself, so to speak—to see and express, if possible, the life preserving forces in other aspects which I knew from experience to be equally illustrative of the fate in human beings' lives and aspirations. In short, I felt the justice in the criticism that my plays in toto were too one-way and presented only one side of the picture, and that, if only to bring out that tragic side by contrast, I ought to express the others.

— Letter to Kenneth MacGowan, October 16, 1933