Dramaturgical Packet
created by Miami University students

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As the world continues to struggle under the reign of coronavirus, it seems as if the theatre is a dying industry. The inability for playgoers to attend in-person plays has now forced production companies to look "beyond the stage to create theatrical experiences using the technology at hand" (Dziemianowicz). Many theatre companies quickly adopted Zoom and other online platforms so that they would be able to provide theatre experiences to people stuck inside their homes during the quarantine. As theatre critic Joe Dziemianowicz demonstrates in "The Best Theatrical Performances During Covid-19 Quarantine," "There's no shortage of streaming content - live and recorded - in the wake of sheltering orders and shuttered stages" (Dziemianowicz). The ability of production companies to provide pre-filmed plays or to stream for viewers over Zoom has modernized the theatre for the pandemic lifestyle.

Not only have large companies been turning to Zoom to keep the art of the theatre alive, but also high schools have taken similar measures. In "Performing in a Pandemic: Taking the High School Play Online," Sequoia Carrillo states, "Teachers and students across the country turned misfortune [coronavirus] into opportunity, creating memorable plays and performances that will live on-line" (Carrillo). The documentation of these plays not only creates lasting time capsules of what it is like during a pandemic, but also the ways in which plays are being performed in the twenty-first century. Many production companies can also be found adapting plays to move them into modern times. They do so by altering plays to reflect "what it's like living through a global pandemic" (Ibid.). For example, Artistic Director of the Eugene O'Neill Foundation Eric Fraisher Hayes describes how he remodeled O'Neill's work during the pandemic: "There will be no physical contact in these plays," he said, due to coronavirus; an action which reflects social distancing rules, but also exemplifies the situation the world is in (Hayes). Making changes such as these allows the plays to become culturally relevant to viewers as they reflect
their own situation with social distancing and the pandemic mixed in with the drama of the stage.

Performing O’Neill’s Abortion during a pandemic is ironic because O’Neill himself lived through the tuberculosis pandemic. O’Neill’s A Long Day’s Journey Into Night (1941) and The Straw (1922) reflect his time in the Gaylord Farm sanitarium for TB. In “Tuberculosis Sanitariums: Reminders of the White Plague: National Trust for Historic Preservation,” journalist Anya Grahn writes: “For centuries, the white plague – also known as tuberculosis (TB) or consumption – was considered an ailment of the poor” (Grahn). O’Neill, much like present playgoers, suffered through a pandemic that affected his health and ability to participate in normal daily activities. It also shaped his artistry, as can be seen in O’Neill giving characters like Murray in Abortion TB symptoms (O’Neill 205).

As people are currently sent to hospitals or quarantined for having the coronavirus, if they can afford it, TB patients were also directed to sanitariums for treatment if they had the money in the early twentieth century (this is a major plot line in the famous last act of Long Day’s Journey Into Night). Howard Markel, an educator and historian, states that while O’Neill had TB, his “low state of mind combined with an appeal made by his physician inspired James O’Neill to cough up the cash and send the young man to a far more posh facility, the Gaylord Farm Sanatorium in Wallingford, Connecticut” (Markel). O’Neill’s recovery was due in part to his ability to afford to go to a good treatment center. The history of O’Neill’s life gives viewers a sense of eerie familiarity as they see how the characters in Abortion were also affected by a pandemic, specially Murray. Today, the knowledge of sanitariums “contribute to our understanding of private and public efforts to combat the White Plague in the early twentieth century,” much in the way that public health announcements about testing, quarantining, and hospitalization for coronavirus will contribute to historians’ understanding of the current Covid pandemic (Carrillo).

Both the coronavirus and TB cause the ill to be isolated from the rest of the population and carry a negative stigma surrounding the sick. Therefore, in many ways, O’Neill experienced what present-day infected people are going through. To perform his plays, especially the so-called lost plays, during a pandemic is similar to placing the viewer back in 1913 when O’Neill was living through the TB pandemic. The viewing of Abortion online by the Eugene O’Neill Foundation may make the spectator feel as if history is literally repeating itself as they notice signs of TB in Murray and relate to the character’s social dilemmas concerning morality.

Works Cited


In *Abortion*, O'Neill creates a world almost too real to watch by portraying Jack as a character not only affected by his duty to his family, but also as a product of his social class (O'Neill 217). O'Neill’s own tumultuous past with Kathleen Jenkins, his first wife, and the son he abandoned, Eugene Jr., may have pushed O'Neill to contemplate an unwanted pregnancy and to vividly point out class differences in this play. Moreover, O'Neill's refusal to initially pay for the abandonment of his son, Eugene Jr., is mirrored by Jack, who tries to pay away his actions to Nellie. The similarities between O'Neill's life and Jack's do not reduce *Abortion*'s impact, but instead strengthen it by grounding the work in culturally relevant commentary. O'Neill's fascination with class distinction in *Abortion* creates a dramatic statement about Nellie's agency that is reflected in his own autobiographical experiences.

Not only does knowledge of O'Neill's history make the play more contextualized in its time period, but it also redefines the characters' personalities. O'Neill's own fight against class systems leaves viewers to wonder whether *Abortion* holds more power as an inseparable inversion of his life or as a piece of art, without connection to the author. Philip Weissman, author of "Conscious and Unconscious Autobiographical Dramas of Eugene O'Neill," argues that "[n]o paper on O'Neill … can fail to mention the fact that his dramas embody an amazing amount of psychoanalytic insight, often related o his own specific conflicts" (Weissman 450). O'Neill's father was drawn to the upper-class in a different
manner than Jack’s dad, who is only upset by Jack’s costly dalliance, stating, “The wages of sin are rather exorbitant” (O’Neill 214). According to this logic, Jack may sin, but only because he has the power to pay his way back to ‘respectability.’ O’Neill intertwines his own story into this one-act play by creating a universe in which Jack’s agency is dependent on his wealth, opposing the way in which O’Neill rejected wealth in his early life. Jack may “try – with all my [his] strength” to “become worthy” of his fiancé, but he is only worthy due to his economical-power in the first place (209).

Jack’s agency is linked to his social class, but even with all of his privileges he fails to prosper. In “Eugene O’Neill’s Abortion and Standard Family Roles,” Lesley Broder writes: “with one payment to the doctor, all his [Jack’s] sins seem to be expunged. Access to abortion is dependent on economic power and is used as a means to preserve the nuclear family” (Broder 52). In many ways, Jack is a foil to O'Neill: whereas Jack goes to his dad for support, O'Neill rebelled against his own father who “had always badgered him to settle down and make a living” (Weissman 446).

Both O’Neill and his characters in Abortion grapple with class struggles. O’Neill’s play centers around a wealthy college baseball player, Jack, who has just won a championship game on the most tragic day of his life. Jack has a beautiful fiancée, Evelyn, a loving family, and a large fan base on this unnamed ivy-league campus. Yet, Jack has not faced the despicable way he treated Nellie, as if he could pay her away. “There was nothing for me to do but grin and pay,” Jack tells his father (O’Neill 214). He has not looked into his soul as the titular character in Dorian Gray did when he saw his morality decay in a self-portrait. Nellie’s brother Murray, who visits Jack, provokes Herron, Jack’s friend, to utter the first social commentary about the working class: “Probably some fresh ‘townie’ who thinks Jack’s indebted to him because he recovered a stolen baseball bat or something and wants to put the acid on him for a dollar or two” (205). Herron’s comment sets the tone for the play, creating an other-ing effect between the wealthy students and the impoverished ‘townies.’

O’Neill’s sympathetic view of the lower-class shines through when he dares to give the ‘townie’, Murray (a clear stand-in for O’Neill, based on character description), a voice: “I’ve always hater yuh since yuh first come to the house. I’ve always hated all your kind. Yuh come here to school and yuh think yuh c’n do as yuh please with us town people” (217). O’Neill portrays the weight of the class struggle in Herron’s and Murray’s lines: the contempt from the rich for the poor and the hatred the impoverished have for the rich. It could be said that O’Neill is able to execute Jack’s character so well in Abortion because he himself was born into a privileged life but gave up that power to preserve his art (although he was far from being sinless). In “Eugene O’Neill as Social Critic,” Alexander argues that “O’Neill particularly stresses the personal weakness of those who strive for wealth” (Alexander 357). Jack uses wealth and popularity to hide his wrongdoings to Nellie, contrasting with O’Neill, who gave up his wealth early on and had a private public life.

"In addition to exploring class struggles, O’Neill reimagines what it means to have agency for working-class female characters in Abortion."

In addition to exploring class struggles, O’Neill reimagines what it means to have agency for working-class female characters in Abortion. Jack receives his influence not only through his family’s wealth, but also through his status as a part of a well-to-do family. His privileged place in society is determined by perceived social power based in wealth, sex, white privilege, and familial units. O’Neill makes a powerful statement concerning agency by not having Nellie in the play and also by only displaying her as acted upon by the male characters (O’Neill 216). Jack even says, “I did what I thought was best for her,” exemplifying how he acted
upon Nellie based on his own judgement, not in accordance with her (217). In Abortion, agency becomes an ideal surrounded by promiscuity, and upper-class purchase, a dirty thing held by those who only want to possess. As Broder has shown, "The grotesque and unnecessary nature of the deaths that frame the play is magnified by the celebrations in Jack's honor occurring as the plot unfolds" (Broder 52).

While the working-class characters, Nellie and Murray, do not have power to impose upon the elite characters in the play, their sense of justice becomes more powerful when Murray dares to call out Jack. O'Neill's use of agency in this drama seems to play upon his own struggle to find freedom in a grotesque and unfair world. This concept is intensified by the absence of Nellie who is only acted upon by others. In relation to Jack's privileges, Nellie is stripped of all agency, and is only redeemed through Murray's sense of duty when he confronts Jack (O'Neill 216). It seems as if Nellie is honored by this act. However, Murray is just another pawn in the class system: "He offered me money, lots of it, to keep my mouth shut, and i took it - the money he got from you - blood money!" (218). No longer does he act in accordance with duty for his sister; rather, he becomes another pay out. O'Neill portrays Nellie's character, one without wealth and agency, in a manner that honestly depicts what it meant to be a woman in the nineteenth century, and in many ways, in the present time.

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"In relation to Jack's privileges, Nellie is stripped of all agency, and is only redeemed through Murray's sense of duty when he confronts Jack."
Eugene O’Neill’s *Abortion* was written forty-one years after the Comstock Laws, sweeping federal prohibitions on the dissemination of material related to abortions or birth control, were passed (1873), and eighty-five years after New York became the first state in the union to put a ‘post-quicking’ abortion ban in place. Despite this, abortion was prevalent throughout all aspects of American society. In *When Abortion was a Crime*, Leslie J. Reagan cites a doctor as stating in 1911 that “those who apply for abortions are from every walk of life, from the factory girl to the millionaire’s daughter; from the laborer’s wife to that of the banker, no class, no sect seems to be above ... the destruction of the fetus” (Reagan 23). The sheer prevalence of this phenomenon - one subject to a notable dearth in documentation due to the oppressive nature of the relevant laws - can be seen in the comment that “a study of ten thousand working-class clients of Margaret Sanger’s birth control clinics in the late 1920s found that 20 percent of all pregnancies had been intentionally aborted” (23).

Clearly, then, despite the fact that abortions and birth control (and, for that matter, any public mention of them) were illegal, they were still rather common.

As to who in particular was getting abortions, Reagan writes that “most of the women who had abortions at the turn of the century were married,” but that “the image of the seduced and abandoned unmarried women dominated turn-of-the-century newspapers and popular thinking” (Ibid.). Arguably, then, the depiction of abortion in *Abortion*, in which the young, naive Nellie Murray is ‘seduced and abandoned’ by the respectable Jack, was both the exception rather than the rule, and more a reflection of popular culture than life. As Americans were increasingly living in cities rather than in the country (by 1920, for the first time in American history, the majority of Americans lived in urban areas), and more women were taking active roles in public life, such narratives - for Reagan - can be understood as a reflection of fears...
surrounding “the city and the changing roles of women” (Ibid). In spite of evidence showing that the overwhelming majority of women who sought abortions were married, it was the cases of single women having abortions alone made it to the popular press and the notice of writers like Eugene O’Neill. If, then, O’Neill was aiming for verisimilitude, he appears to have drifted away from this end and found himself in the wilds of melodrama in this early one-act play.

A major plot point in O’Neill’s Abortion is Jack’s callous abandonment of his girlfriend from another class, Nellie, to have an abortion by herself. Drawing on this, one might conclude that abortion was a lonely, scary, and confusing experience for the average woman, and for many it indeed was. However, for many women, this does not seem to have been the case; in 1918, a physician is quoted by Reagan as having “observed a ‘matter of fact attitude’ about abortions among ‘women of all ages and nationalities and ... of every social status’” (25). It seems, then, that meek and unmarried Nellie who faced tragic consequences because of neglect and possible malpractice, and who was manipulated into getting an abortion by her ‘lover’ Jack, is not representative of the majority of women who sought such procedures. Rather, as indicated by the 1916 warning of a physician to his colleagues that “a woman will read up on some disease which she knows sometimes gives the indication for abortion, and will try to impress the doctor that she is deathly ill,” it seems that it was women who were in the drivers’ seat, who were forced to take matters into their own hands and use whatever means necessary to get doctors to perform abortions (64). While this warning might be an exaggeration based in sexist ideas of cunning and manipulative women, it certainly indicates that women could and did independently use their wit to get abortions. Given this, it seems that O’Neill painted a narrative of abortion that was relatively uncommon in his time to make Jack the hero and agent who arranged a terrible fate for his erstwhile romantic partner, leaving Nellie as the victim.

In Abortion - at least according to Murray - Jack is the one who arranges for Nellie’s abortion. Despite this, as Reagan states, “parents, especially mothers, often played a crucial role in the effort to obtain an abortion when their daughter was unwed,” a situation forming a stark contrast with the narrative of Abortion, where it is seemingly just Jack and his wealthy father who make the abortion happen (27). Indeed, the possibility of Nellie’s mother having helped her is dismissed; Jack characterizes her as being merely “a silly woman who would be the last to suspect anything” (O’Neill 213). Although, as Margaret Sanger’s efforts to spread information would testify, not all women were well-informed about abortion, O’Neill contravenes a body of evidence which suggests that women were more often than not well-up on information regarding birth control and matter-of-fact in dispensing it to their peers. By having Murray put the blame squarely on Jack in saying that he “sent[her] to a faker of a doctor,” O’Neill erases the female networks of support that would in all likelihood have been available to Nellie and replaces them with his guilt-wracked male hero (216).

In this way, Abortion is characterized by a vision of the pregnancy termination process that puts Jack in the driver’s seat of the narrative. While surely Nellie’s story is not implausible per se, its realist bona-fides certainly suffer in the story’s adherence to a narrative more inclining toward popular narratives around abortion than actual fact, something surely influenced by Abortion’s status as the first major American play dealing with the issue.

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The Double Standard of Disgrace in Abortion

By Henry Roach

In Abortion, one of the drivers of the plot is Ivy-League college student Jack's frantic attempts to get Murray, the brother of his erstwhile lover, to keep the issue of Nellie's botched abortion quiet. He paints a pitiful picture of the disgrace that would fall on his well-to-do family in the event that the news he had paid for an abortion got out, imploring the consumptive Murray to think of the psychological trauma that would befall his mother if the matter became public.

This, though, does not appear to be reflective of how blame was assigned in the aftermath of abortions in early twentieth-century American culture. Historian Leslie J. Reagan writes of this representative incident: "'Death before dishonor,' the mother reportedly declared, 'my daughter is not going to be disgraced all her days, and the man to go scot-free'" (Reagan 28). Beyond being another example of the strength of female (specifically mother-daughter) networks of support, which is absent from O'Neill's play, this example demonstrates the gendered distribution of blame. Reagan shows how the double standard existed in the realm of abortion in particular, and sexual activity more generally, during the Progressive Era. The mother, Reagan argues, thought correctly that "bearing an illegitimate child would stigmatize her daughter for life while the boyfriend could experience sexual pleasures without hurting his honor" (28). On the one hand, then, in Abortion O'Neill has indeed highlighted a serious problem for unmarried women who became pregnant; in encouraging Murray to keep the matter quiet, Jack begs him to "for your ... sister's good name, for your family's sake ... keep this thing quiet" (218). It is certainly a credible assertion that Nellie's honor would be tainted by the knowledge that she not only had gotten pregnant out of wedlock, but also got an abortion.

The issue with O'Neill's characterization is that he implies that Jack's honor is under serious threat; as O'Neill scripts it, Jack says that "society [is] ... suffering from a case of the evil eye which sees evil where there is none," with its morality "forcing [him] into evasions" (O'Neill 213). Of course, this behavior is included by O'Neill to show how hard Jack works to avoid ultimate culpability for his actions, but I feel that something is amiss here. Implicitly, Jack - since he seems to see the need for 'evasions' - feels that his actions are wrongly seen as evil by the society in which he lives, a feeling contradicting the general lenience exercised toward male indiscretions (a lenience balanced by a terrible intolerance toward female indulgences of the same nature). O'Neill, by representing Jack as someone who had something significant to lose in this situation, did a disservice to real women such as Nellie who had to deal with a gendered 'evil eye' while their male lovers didn't. Additionally, O'Neill missed an opportunity to indict Jack even further for the privilege he has in comparison to the woman he discarded.

Thus, by not drawing a line between the kinds of shame society attached to women and men regarding abortion at the time, O'Neill elides a significant difference. By not fully understanding the gendered dynamic in play, O'Neill both gave women the short shrift and eliminated the possibility of the play's potential to come to grips with male privilege.
"By not fully understanding the gendered dynamic in play, O'Neill both gave women the short shrift and eliminated the possibility of the play's potential to come to grips with male privilege."

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Ryan Hayes rehearsing the Eugene O'Neill Foundation's production of Abortion. Photo credit: Teresa Morley
The early 1900s saw a drastic change in the perception of women and the construction of their sexuality. Women of lower classes were increasingly leaving their homes and making money for themselves or their families. This movement from the home into industry sparked a distinct anxiety in American society surrounding their emerging gender identity and perceived influx of sexuality into a predominantly single-minded society. Ruth Alexander, in her book *The Girl Problem*: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930, labels these young women as “new women,” due to their refusal of stagnant gender norms and movement into working society. Despite the variety of the work they did and their racial, ethnic, and class diversity, Alexander explains that “All the ‘new women’ challenged masculine dominance, redefining the place of women in society and in their families” (Alexander 2). This ‘new woman’ is the type of woman which we find ourselves examining in Eugene O’Neill’s early one act play, *Abortion* (1914).

Alexander’s book *The Girl Problem* examines the risk involved with the rebellious emerging sexuality of working and social women. To do so she studies cases of incarcerated women from between 1900 and 1930 and examines the events which undertook their jailing. Though women of the upper class were met with punishment for their rebellion, “it was usually girls of low status who suffered public reproach” (Alexander 12). More often than not, their actions and budding sexuality were framed as problematic for upper-class women who were able to maintain distance from the label of ‘female delinquency’ in their privatization of their frivolity. It was not that these upper-class women were maintaining the notion of girlhood purity, but rather that they had the means to express their sexuality privately and with less stigmatization than working-class women.

At the turn of the twentieth century working-class women were being arrested and accused of prostitution at alarmingly high rates. New York City’s amending of the vagrancy law in 1915 “relieved New York’s courts of having to prove both the absence of lawful employment and participation in illicit sex before they convicted women of vagrancy” (Alexander 56). Moreover, the alternate definition of prostitution broadened to encompass the promiscuous crowds of women as well as those engaging in sexual practices without procurement of monetary payment and in privacy. This change disproportionately affected working-class women due to their inability to hide their sexual practices to the same extent of upper-class women. Moving the regulation of sexuality into both the public and private spheres allowed police the grounds on which they were able to remove suspected sexually immoral women from the public.

By the late 1910s and 1920s the “girl problem was spreading into the middle class” in the United States (Alexander 59). The anxiety of a spreading sexualization in American society was then proved warranted and is represented in *Abortion* (1914). Young women of every
class wore scandalous clothes, enjoyed unchaperoned dating, and reduced familial influence. The spread of promiscuity was blamed on working-class women, who first showed an increased public display of sexuality. Families were warned middle-class women would soon be “on the same ‘road to destruction’ as their less affluent sisters” (Alexander 59). In combination with emerging scientific support of women’s sexual independence, middle-class women’s engagement with increasingly publicized sexual practices frustrated middle class reformists and forced further condemnation on young working-class women.

O’Neill centers *Abortion* around a young woman named Nellie who is not physically present throughout the actual plot of the play. Her pregnancy and eventual termination of it, however, are discussed at length by men of distinct economic classes: Murray (lower class), Jack, and his father (both upper class). The discussion of her predicament by the three men encapsulates the point O’Neill is attempting to make: Nellie’s sexuality and perceived promiscuity is regulated by gender norms associated with each economic class.

The conflation of sexual purity with women’s respectability was heavily tied to the Victorian notion of exalting the Virgin Mary while also delegating women as inferior in the household. Regardless of the roots of perceiving female delinquency as a deviation from purity, however, men were allowed more leniency in their exploration of sexuality. As Heather Corrina explains in her essay “An Immodest Proposal,” “men are allowed and encouraged to have a sexuality that exists separately from their reproductive processes and spousal arrangements,” (Corrina 213). Women’s sexuality, however, is taboo still today. What progress has been made was enacted by working women who bore the punishment for sexual delinquency whether warranted or not. “Chastity was the measure of a young woman’s respectability, and those who engaged in premarital intercourse, or, more importantly, dressed and acted as though they had, were classed as promiscuous women or prostitutes” (Peiss 215). Lower-class women were denied respectability because of their inability to perform the role of a chaste woman in both appearance and in cultural capital. Lower-class and working-class women were judged more harshly and forced more controversy surrounding sexuality even if they were not engaging in the situations of which they were accused.

“Not only is O’Neill demonstrating the clear double standard surrounding women and their perceived promiscuity in *Abortion*; he is also extrapolating that the way men viewed women during this time was heavily influenced by their class.”

Not only is O’Neill demonstrating the clear double standard surrounding women and their perceived promiscuity in *Abortion*; he is also extrapolating that the way men viewed women during this time was heavily influenced by their class. This is best demonstrated in the difference between Jack’s perception of Nellie as opposed to his perception of his own fiancée, Evelyn. In his description of Nellie, Jack claims the following: “For she is a sweet, lovely girl in spite of everything, and if I had loved her the least particle, if I had not been in love with Evelyn, I should certainly have married her” (O’Neill 212). He also says in a conversation with Evelyn: “I shall try-with all my strength- in the future, Evelyn, - to live as you have said and become worthy of you” (209). Using the difference between his interactions with two women, O’Neill...
shows how Nellie’s class gives Jack the perceived privilege to ‘ruin’ her. While it is not expressed explicitly in the text, it can be inferred that Jack and Evelyn have not engaged in any sexual activity. Through the vast difference in the two relationships, O’Neill displays the way by which women’s sexuality was tied to their class. Jack views Nellie as inferior and because of her class status that presumes she is promiscuous and treats her correspondingly.

Nellie is unable to obtain access to a safe abortion, even when financed by Jack’s father. More than her lack of access to professional medical help, her class dictates her lack of respectability in the minds of the men around her. Nellie’s economic standing simultaneously implies her inability to refuse Jack’s advances and his suggestion of an abortion. Believed to be one of Alexander’s “delinquent daughters,” Nellie’s sexual impurity is implied by the men in the play. It is easy for Jack and his father to identify her not as a victim to her sexual interaction, but rather as a delinquent, tempting Jack Townsend into acting beneath his class and giving into what he refers to as “the male beast who ran gibbering through the forest after its female thousands of years ago” (O’Neill 212).

Nellie’s brother, Murray, however, believes Nellie to be a victim of classism by saying: “Yuh c’d ruin her and throw her down and no one say a word because you’re a swell college guy and captain of the team, and ain’t good enough for yuh to marry” (O’Neill 216). Jack seemingly disputes this notion by claiming he would marry her if not for his love of Evelyn. However bold his proclamation, his comparison of Nellie to Evelyn implies otherwise. When examining Nellie’s relationship to his and Evelyn’s, Jack describes the affair to be “horrible and loathsome” (212). Nellie’s social and economic class taints their relationship in its entirety and makes the idea of marrying her impossible in his mind. Rather than his love for Evelyn being the driving force behind his refusal of Nellie, it is instead his clinging to social status that motivates Jack.

Nellie’s economic misfortune simultaneously darns her to be a woman ‘ruined’ as well as a woman unworthy of love. Jack’s social status in his and his father’s opinion allows him the space to ignore moral obligation to Nellie and their unborn child.

Neither Jack nor his father mention Nellie’s name directly throughout their discussion. They refer to her not as a person, but rather through her sexual actions. Knowing nothing of Nellie other than her relationship with his son, Jack’s father says the following: “This young woman was hardly of the class you have been accustomed to associate with, I presume” (O’Neill 213).

Nellie belongs to a specific group of women whom Mary Odem identifies in her book *Delinquent Daughters* to be perceived as the root cause of an increasingly sexual society. As she explains: “Working-class daughters became the focus of great social anxiety. Their move outside the home was linked to a host of social problems…. It was in response to these fears that middle-class reformers organized their nationwide campaigns to demand state regulation of female sexuality” (Odem 3). These regulations included age-of-consent laws, police involvement, and, as Eugene O’Neill explores, further criminalization of abortions and birth control. Nellie, a working-class woman, is financially independent from her parents and so maintains a somewhat unconstrained existence. Her class position, however, simultaneously allows her autonomy and limits her individuality. O’Neill’s audience is able to forgive Nellie her sexual immorality through the way O’Neill frames her. She is not a promiscuous or shameful woman; rather, she has fallen victim to the constraints of her male companion. Leslie Broder in her book *Challenging Maternal Inevitability: Abortion, Careers, and Abandonment in the Nuclear Family, 1879-1939*, argues that “texts that deal with abortion present characters that uphold standard family roles” (Broder 2). O’Neill does not remove the play from the
trope Broder outlines, but rather centers the play around a commitment to this stereotypical family norm. Nellie seemingly does not want to disrupt marriage as an institution or the idyllic image of the nuclear family due to the way the male characters of the play frame her. According to her brother, she has fallen in love with a man who doesn’t love her back, and in the eyes of the Townsends is a respectable girl if not for her sexual engagements. Their framings of Nellie make her redeemable in the eyes of a twentieth century audience.

Eugene O’Neill’s *Abortion* (1914) demonstrates the ways by which women’s sexuality was regulated during the 1910s. Though many of the topics O’Neill touches on in his writing were radical during his time, his representations of women, or lack thereof, are indicative of an internalized misogyny noticeable throughout many of his other pieces.

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"Nellie’s economic misfortune simultaneously damns her to be a woman ‘ruined’ as well as a woman unworthy of love."
Many of Eugene O'Neill’s plays have critiqued the inner workings of American society and the downfalls of humanity. In his lost play, Abortion (1914), O’Neill addresses classism and sexism present in American society, and how humanity is held in perpetual captivity of such oppressive forces. These issues can be seen in the play’s inclusion of class privilege impacting education and medical care, which provides insight not only into O’Neill’s historical era, but also modern manifestations in the United States.

As framed by O’Neill, Jack, Lucy, and Evelyn are characters who belong to upper-class white American society and benefit from their educational paths and privilege, while Murray and Nellie (lower-class characters) are products of systems of oppression that excluded access to higher education. Reforms in American education were made between 1894-1915, and the goals of such reforms in the Progressive Era were to create education systems that would inform children of “proper” American values. Additionally, with the rise in immigration due to the introduction of the Industrial Revolution that brought “More than 25 million immigrants [into] the United States between 1870 and 1916,” public education was meant to ‘Americanize’ immigrant children and make sure that all children had some form of basic or common education in the elementary level due to compulsory attendance laws (“History of the United States Industrialization and Reform”).

Yet, in practice, the goals in expanding education still only benefited wealthy white families and primarily their male counterparts. Elite colleges essentially concretized existing socioeconomic dynamics by conferring valuable privileges like education and connections upon the - almost always wealthy - people who could afford them. Indeed, "by concentrating on the offspring of wealthy families, ministers, and a few others, prestigious eastern colleges, especially Harvard, played an important role in the formation of a northeastern elite with great power" ("Educational Reforms"). With the inherent class privilege of education benefiting the upper-class since the nineteenth century, it is no surprise that poorer and immigrant families in the early 1900s required their children to contribute to the family's financial security; therefore, high school education weeded out most of the economically disadvantaged individuals. That being said, by 1900, some working-class families attempted to push their children into high school education in order to obtain a better life. Unfortunately, most of the financial benefits of a university degree were largely accessible to the wealthy white population and some middle-class populations in America.

Some upper-class female characters in Abortion, like Lucy (Jack’s sister) and Evelyn (Jack’s fiancée), had the opportunity to go to elite educational institutions. But rather than portray their educational experiences, O’Neill instead centers the plot around Lucy and Evelyn celebrating the success of their brother and fiancé, Jack.
When Jack enters the play for the first time after a big athletic win, Lucy exclaims, “Hail to the hero!” and “Evelyn comes over and sits on the arm of Lucy’s chair,” as if to be a united front. Evelyn continues this doting behavior by telling Jack: “You were so cool, so brave. It struck me as a symbolical of the way you would always play, in the game of life - fairly ... I loved you so!” (O’Neill 209). While Evelyn and Lucy yield to submissive female gender expectations and their successes are not mentioned, women across the country were rallying for the right to vote, entering the workforce after men left for World War I, and the financially privileged portion of them were seeking higher education. Additionally, as Audrey Dentith has observed, “Academic educated women would pursue their studies or take jobs as teachers while other women could find work in mills, or factories. Sometimes young women took jobs in mills or factories to save money for their education” (Dentith 276). The growth in educational opportunities for these privileged women also challenged the status of women’s existing place in the domestic sphere (as defined in the cult of domesticity), which “would do more to better women’s standing in society than the right to vote” (Ibid.). Thus, the movement of lower-class women into manufacturing jobs whilst privileged women rose into higher paying positions both upset the domestic sphere and also continued to heighten gender tensions in America.

O’Neill highlights the class divide by denying Nellie a presence on stage and focusing on the upper-class characters Evelyn and Lucy. On one hand, Evelyn and Lucy may have been unaware of their privileges as wealthier educated women because they were still submitting to gender expectations when supporting their brother’s (and boyfriend’s) success. On the other had, Jack represents the epitome of the hetero-cis-white patriarchy who is well aware of the power of his privilege must suffer the consequences of his actions. In relation to his affair with Nellie, he admits, “I have played the scoundrel all the way through. I realize that now... at the time the whole thing seemed just a pleasant game we were playing” (O’Neill 21). Here he is acknowledging his wrongdoing, but then next claims, “I have paid and I am sure the result of it will be to make me a better man, a man more worthy to be Evelyn’s husband” (214). Thus, his remorse contains weak intent due to him recognizing his privileged position as untouchable, making him O’Neill's perfect target for the consequences of his actions that follow in the play.

Who else was excluded from the privileges of higher education during the Progressive Era? Minority and immigrant groups. “African Americans in the Southern states had to attend segregated schools with inferior resources, since the states typically gave such schools only nominal support” (“America at School”). Thus, racial minorities and immigrant families were at a disadvantage when it came to education, thus perpetuating racist, classist, and sexist forces in American society in the early 1900s.

Just as lower-class individuals like Murray and Nellie had a lack of educational opportunities, so they also had a dearth of medical care options. Murray suffers from tuberculosis, as can be seen when he first enters the play and described as a “slight, stooped shouldered, narrow-chested, young fellow of eighteen, with large, feverish, black eyes, thin lips, pasty complexion, and the sunken cheeks of a tuberculosis victim” (O’Neill 205).

"Just as lower-class individuals like Murray and Nellie had a lack of educational opportunities, so they also had a dearth of medical care options."
Similarly at a disadvantage, Nellie was influenced into undergoing an abortion surgery. By acknowledging both characters’ medical care disadvantages, we can see how “education affects health precisely because those with more education have higher incomes,” and thus, greater medical care benefits (Marmot). That was made obvious by the fact that “Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909), believed health insurance was important because ‘no country could be strong whose people were sick and poor.’ Even so he didn’t lead the charge for stronger healthcare in America” (Griffin).

Dangerous work conditions in the early twentieth century led to more injuries, yet public healthcare would not be included in the U.S. until after WWI.

In addition to the lack of healthcare for low income Americans during the Progressive Era, the move to urban spaces for manufacturing jobs (due to lack of education), often meant less than ideal housing with unsanitary environments both in the home and the workplace. Additionally, the infant mortality rate (a valid measure of adequate health care) was much higher in lower income regions of America during the early 1900s (Marmot). O'Neill captures these societal challenges by portraying Murray as susceptible to the brutality of TB and Nellie at risk for an illegal abortion. Jack describes Murray and Evelyn’s bleak home life to his father when he explains, “[Evelyn’s] father is dead. Her mother is a silly woman who would be the last to suspect anything. She has two sisters, both youngsters under ten, and one brother [Murray] about eighteen, a machinist or something of the sort who is only home for weekends.” Significantly, Evelyn “and her brother support the others” (O’Neill 213). Thus, the lack of education rendering a stable home life sheds new light on the fate of Nellie’s unborn child had she not chosen abortion.

Although it is important to note that upper-class individuals had these educational privileges, healthcare during this time period was still not as adequate as it should have been for most Americans. When TB hit America during the early 1900s, it afflicted not just the lower class, but also middle and upper-class families. While the upper-class had the privileges to send loved ones to pricey sanitoriums that gave them better chances of survival, lower class families sometimes had no means of sending families to nicer facilities, which often turned out to be a death sentence. O’Neill himself was privileged enough to receive the proper care for his battle with TB. As Dr. Howard Markel observes, “Regardless of the medical, economic or social circumstances of the patients each facility admitted, the majority of American tuberculosis sanatoria were framed by strict rules on how patients should act, sleep, dress and exercise; what they should eat and when; and even with whom they should and should not associate” (Markel). Unfortunately, if patients’ health did not improve, they were often sent to facilities for the ‘incurables’ so that the cure rate at better facilities did not lower to retain its paying customers; this is portrayed in O’Neill’s play The Straw (1922). Lower-class individuals moreover did not have the luxury to stop working to avoid the consumption spread nor the financial ability to be admitted into facilities to heal from TB. Thus, O’Neill’s inclusion of Murray in Abortion, who was suffering from consumption, and Nellie, who lacked access to a safe abortion, highlighted how American classism affected inequities in education and medical care.

Another way in which O’Neill highlights the class privileges of an Ivy League education and, in turn, its consequences of access to medical care can be seen in how abortion is represented in this play. No matter what social class, women were undergoing illegal abortion procedures if they could find someone to facilitate them or dangerously administer it themselves. In spite of the fact that the Comstock Law of 1873 banned such occurrences and abortion drugs, they occurred nonetheless, notes Ravitz: “[B]efore abortions were
banned, a woman known as Madame Restell ran abortion businesses from New York to Philadelphia and Boston. Her main clientele, Reagan wrote, were "married, white, native-born Protestant women of upper and middle-classes" (Ravitz). That being said, "Access to abortion is dependent on economic power and is used as a means to preserve the nuclear family" (Broder 52). Unfortunately, Nellie is not part of the middle-class or upper-class, and cannot afford abortion services; her pregnancy out of wedlock and social class are a threat to the nuclear family of the Townsends. Additionally, while lower-class women like Nellie were at a disadvantage for abortion and reproductive rights, racist and sexist forces in Progressive Era America were pushing maternity onto white women to further eugenicist ideals. Thus, in Abortion, Jack embodies the notions of sexism, classism, and racism by his paying for an abortion procedure for a financially underprivileged woman whose illegitimate child would threaten gender expectations, class status, and the nuclear family balance.

“I believe many of the themes and issues in the play Abortion are topical. Issues of class and status never seem to go out of style.”

--- Eric Fraisher Hayes

If this sounds familiar, that is because the world that O'Neill critiques in Abortion is still eerily similar to modern day America. Today higher levels of education are still more attainable by middle or upper-class individuals even though affirmative action exists. There is still a degree of racism surrounding college admissions and sexism within higher education, leaving the hetero-cis-white patriarchy of the upper class still in a position of privilege. With higher education comes white collar jobs that afford these privileged individuals with better medical insurance plans, even though working-class individuals still have unions fighting for such privileges. As students attending Miami University, the Ohio law affects us personally. In 2019 most abortions became illegal in the state of Ohio by the passing of the Human Rights Protection Act, also known as the "heartbeat bill" (SB 23). “The six-week abortion ban known as the ‘heartbeat bill’ is now law in Ohio. That makes Ohio the sixth state in the nation to attempt to outlaw abortions at the point heartbeat activity can be detected” (Rosenberg). While this bill includes an exception to save the life of a woman if the pregnancy proves to be a danger to her life, it does not provide exceptions for cases of incest or rape. Moreover, this legislation makes it virtually impossible for a woman to undergo a legal abortion due to the short timeframe one has to recognize an unwanted pregnancy. That being said, months after the passing of this Act, a federal judge blocked the "heartbeat" law, but the Ohio Right to Life President Mike Gonidakis said: "The Heartbeat Bill has the potential to be the vehicle that overturns Roe v. Wade. We know that this temporary restraining order is just a step in the process to finally seeing Roe reconsidered" (Heisig). Yet, due to the court’s blockage, Ohio abortion law remains and abortion is still legal (21.5 weeks after a woman’s last period).

But, the battle continues, as government officials still aim to prevent abortions from being legal altogether. This especially affects the poor: "When care is unavailable, the harm falls hardest on those struggling financially or those who already face significant barriers to health care – young people, people of color, people in poverty, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, and people of varying immigration status" (“SCOTUS Update, June v. Russo”). On July 8, 2020 the Supreme Court passed a mandate that companies can make broad religious and moral exemptions to providing coverage for contraceptives, which closely relates to the lack of reproductive healthcare access in 1914 (Keith). After this ruling, Justice Ginsburg estimated that 70,500 - 126,400 people will lose access to contraceptives, which will
undoubtedly impact the lives of intersectional women the most. Now, the Trump Administration is continuing to forge a path of overturning the Affordable Care Act, which would remove healthcare coverage for over 23 million Americans. Interestingly enough, "Republicans have long said their goal is to 'repeal and replace' the Affordable Care Act but have yet to agree on an alternative," which parallels our nation's lack of consistent national healthcare plan dating back to Theodore Roosevelt's problematic plan of action (Stoleburg). Thus, the effects of class privilege in relation to inequalities in education and medical care, as portrayed in O'Neill's Abortion, can be seen in modern society.

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“Yuh c’ld ruin her and throw her down and no one say a word because you’re a swell college guy and captain of the team, and ain’t good enough for yuh to marry”

--Joe Murray, Abortion

"Lost Plays" // Tao House // Eugene O'Neill Foundation
The Emerging “Charity Girl”

By Faith Deevers

Kathy Peiss, in her piece “Charity Girls and City Pleasures,” explores how working-class girls were able to enjoy social autonomy without the financial means of an upper-class woman. Central to this increased sociality was the custom of “treating.” Treating was a tradition where women, particularly of the lower class, relied on men of a higher class to provide them with gifts, whether it was paying for a ticket, refreshments, or entertainment for the night in exchange for sexual favors of varying degrees. The institution of “treating” was ambiguous in its use, raising the question of whether it was most beneficial to the treaters or the treat-ees. However, Peiss explains the ability of women to receive ‘treats’ was a perceived reflection of their desirability. “Gaining men’s treats placed a high premium on allure and personality” (Peiss 14). In other words, the ability to finesse a relationship of treating was directly representative of a desirability far beyond that of marriage. The relationships being pursued by these women were not necessarily for the purposes of locating a spouse, but rather for experiencing amusement. The women Peiss describes were a direct threat to the Victorian-centered notion of courting, whereby perusal of men was on the basis of intended marriage and the middle-class notion of respectability.

The women who accepted favors in lieu of finances for sexual engagements were coined under the term “charity girls.” They were differentiated from prostitutes on the grounds that they did not accept money for their sexual favors but rather reciprocated the favors which came with “treating” with their sexual engagement. “Charity girls” inhabited liminal spaces between prostitution and sexual purity, which confused and frustrated social reformists. It is because of this confusion the women were deemed delinquent, as historian Ruth Alexander illuminates in her book The Girl Problem. The ambiguity of the “charity girl” forced further regulation of women’s sexuality and complicated society’s perception of the working-class woman.

In order to entice notice from a potential suitor, working-class women began wearing clothes which drew attention to themselves: clothing and accessories like high-heeled shoes, gaudy jewelry, elaborate outfits, and dramatic makeup. Many aspects essential to this appearance were tied heavily to the physical perception of the prostitute. While their appearance demanded attention from men willing to “treat” them, it also garnered the attention of police in their examination of the “girl problem.”

Moving into urban areas increased the pace by which relationships occurred and made the Victorian concept of courting less feasible. Cramped living spaces, apartments, and tenements housing limited familial control “over their daughters’ sexuality” (Peiss 15). Prevalent in American culture, the fallen woman trope was also rampant in American theatre, which staged women’s fall into moral impurity. Professor Katie Johnson, in her book Sex for Sale, writes: “These cautionary tales warned young women against crossing proscribed boundaries to explore their sexuality, develop independence, or strike out to the city to find work” (Johnson 6). The urban setting was a backdrop for social anxiety regarding female sexuality. Their expansion into an increasingly social sphere paralleled an expansion of female autonomy and a resulting rejection of the 1900s gender norms. The choice to pursue a more relaxed style of
social relations can and should be understood in regard to larger issues of class and gender which created the framework for the dynamic of the "Charity Girl" system. Single working women were normally wage-earners for a few years before they pursued marriage, supporting their families or in limited cases supporting themselves. For those women, the wages they earned were barely enough to survive, let alone support any sort of social excursion. Self-supporting women had to sacrifice essential items to their livelihood in order to pay for amusements; under these conditions, treating was not only a "viable option," but also a necessity (Peiss 15). Before the appearance of the "Charity Girl," says Peiss, "women would have had to weigh their desire for social participation against traditional sanctions regarding sexual behavior" in social settings (Peiss 16). The installment of "Charity Girls" allowed more leniency in socially acceptable behaviors and provided women more autonomy over their actions. In addition to this increased flexibility among social spheres, the labeling of "Charity Girls" provided a more nuanced measuring of respectability. Their ambiguous promiscuity and importance amongst the 1900s public scene allowed deviation from "the strict measurement of chastity employed by many middle-class observers and reformers" (Ibid.). In other words, the varying degrees of sexual engagement in and amongst the "Charity Girls" created a more nuanced, although still problematic, understanding of gendered respectability in American society.

The emerging "Charity Girl" forced American society to reconsider its definition of sexual impurity and to lessen the sexual limitations placed on women. The very institution of "treating" was the framework by which working-class women were able to formulate more flexibility in their construction of sexuality and refusal of stagnant gender norms without which women would not be afforded the same sexual leniency they see today.

Works Cited


"The emerging 'Charity Girl' forced American society to reconsider its definition of sexual impurity and to lessen the sexual limitations placed on women."
It has been over one-hundred years since Eugene O'Neill’s *Abortion* was first written, but it seems as though the United States is still having the same debates that this play ignited. The lack of autonomy for women in the play leads to grave consequences after Jack decides the actions that are taken on his girlfriend’s body. The best example of the lack of women’s voices in the play comes paradoxically from a character who tragically does not have any lines: Nellie. By highlighting multiple issues arising from lack of access to safe abortion, O’Neill portrays how women had limited choices over their lives in this early one-act, which continues on today.

When *Abortion* was written (1914), women did not have the right to vote in the U.S. (nor would they, until 1920), and there was no access to legal, safe abortions. There were sparks of suffragette action, and also activism to advance birth control, but when it came to who actually had a voice or power in Progressive Era society, the answer was mostly white, upper-class men. For most women their sphere of influence was in the realm of domesticity, and their choices were limited. Take Nellie, the main--yet absent--character from Abortion, for example. Nellie became pregnant due to the lack of birth control, which was the norm for women at the time, until Margaret Sanger and other reformers advocated for its legalization. “Sanger saw her personal tragedy writ large in the lives of poor, immigrant women. Lacking effective contraceptives, many women, when faced with another unwanted pregnancy, resorted to five-dollar back-alley abortions” (PBS). This mission that Sanger had--the will to find safer solutions to unwanted pregnancies--is reflected in *Abortion*, as Nellie is one of those “poor, immigrant women” whom Sanger wished to save.

With the female perspective regarding abortion absent in
this play, there's little evidence that O'Neill was actually advocating for the rights of women. Indeed, Nellie has no lines in the play, creating the lingering question of whether she actually had a choice in what happened to her. The people who decided that Nellie get an abortion were Jack Townsend (her ‘lover’) and John (Jack’s dad). Abortions were illegal in 1914 and extremely dangerous: “Women forced miscarriages through back-alley abortions or self-harm, which included the use of ‘knitting needles, crochet hooks, hairpins, scissors, and button hooks to induce miscarriage and terminate pregnancies, often causing serious injuries to themselves or death’” (2019). In the Townsend’s case, in order to rid the family of this unwanted baby, they paid $200 (approximately $5,000 in today’s dollars), for a procedure that wasn't well performed by a “dirty skunk” and a “quack,” as Murray calls him (216).

I would argue that women are presented in Abortion as nothing more than assets or deficits. Jack wants to marry Evelyn because she has money and abandons his girlfriend, Nellie, because she is from the working class. Nellie is therefore trapped in the realm of domesticity, especially when contemplating having an unwanted child. She never speaks about her own life; her story is instead told by her brother, Murray.

There are other absent women in the play, such as Nellie’s mother, who, like her daughter, is mentioned but never appears. Even though she has lines, Mrs. Townsend does not have a complex role, and she practically disappears after the first few pages. These women serve as talking points, but are never the ones doing the talking.

When Jack’s father finds out about the botched abortion, which he paid for, he tells his son: “Let’s forget all about it. All’s well that ends well. You’ve learned your lesson” (O’Neill 214). If one family in the play represents the sexism of the early 1900s, it is the Townsends. John and Jack in particular believe themselves to be untouchable socially, so long as there is not a scandal, and they do everything in their power to keep it that way. Jack’s father urges his son to make sure that there is not “any immediate relations who would be liable to discover the unfortunate termination of your (sarcastically) love affair” (O’Neill 213). John’s comment makes apparent that O'Neill is against the father’s callous views of abortion and Nellie, as the quote is dripping with contempt.

The lacking voice of women in society has not been resolved, however. People now who identify as male, especially white, upper-class men, have a privilege that could easily be used in the same way as the Townsend men. In general, women have learned to keep their mouths shut to protect men, and men have learned to exploit their privileges to protect themselves, so the question of who speaks for and defends women is still unanswered.

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"I would argue that women are presented in Abortion as nothing more than assets or deficits."
A PICTORIAL HISTORY OF ABORTION
BY HENRY ROACH & ISAAC WEYCKER

Throughout the course of our nation’s history, abortion has been a controversial issue. Eugene O’Neill’s one-act play Abortion (1914) points out some of the stark contrasts and gendered consequences of this medical procedure. This essay will take the reader on a brief journey through the history of abortion in select American media, which will help them to understand the historical and cultural contexts that are vital in order to fully appreciate and understand O’Neill’s play.

In the decades before the Supreme Court decision of Roe v. Wade in 1973, doctors and other health specialists performed the procedure for women in secret. As Jessica Ravitz demonstrates, “Even after abortions became illegal ... they just weren’t advertised the same way. Practitioners did their work behind closed doors or in private homes. Or women without means resorted to desperate--and often dangerous or deadly--measures” (Ravitz 3). The caricature from the National Police Gazette from 1847 (see fig. 1) captures the negative attitudes towards women who performed and received abortions in the mid nineteenth century, and how the police were mobilized against them as well. While the figure of the demonized abortionist comes a few decades before the time period of O’Neill’s play, the image nonetheless epitomizes the cultural perspectives of the era that vilified women and their bodies.

Despite the constant attempts from government and powerful people to halt the performance of abortions, they occurred nonetheless. Figure 2 depicts an advertisement from the late nineteenth century for Pennyroyal pills, an insecticide that was an accepted drug to induce an abortion.

Fig. 1: Madame Restell, noted abortionist, vilified in an 1847 edition of the National Police Gazette

Fig. 2: Promotional Pamphlet, Chichester’s English Pennyroyal Pills, Philadelphia, ca. c.1870-1900, Bella Landauer Collection of Business and Advertising Ephemera, New-York Historical Society Library.
The advertisements for these pills could not explicitly associate themselves with abortion, as the procedure was still illegal, so the promotions were aimed towards women with “female troubles.” This drug would cause a woman to menstruate and make the uterus contract, ultimately flushing out the fetus in an attempt to terminate the pregnancy.

Add Fig. 3: Advertisement, Faber’s Golden Female Pills, Philipsburg Mail, August 17, 1893

Figure 3, an advertisement for Faber’s Female Golden Pills, is another advertisement that attempted to mask its true purpose. The ad claims that this drug is “twenty times worth its weight in gold” and is for “female irregularities.” The use of italics for both “monthly” and “female irregularities” signals the secret code behind such advertisements, which was clear to women who needed abortions.

During the Progressive Era, when almost all of the political power in the country was controlled by white males, the main focus of debates surrounding abortion was not always the safety or perspectives of the women who were most affected by abortion regulations. “The antiabortion views written into statutes nationwide and asserted by the leaders of medicine not only did not reflect reality, but were hostile to the attitudes and behavior of many Americans” (Reagan 45). Margaret Sanger was one of the leading female forces in the fight for legal and proper birth control for women, and opened the first birth control clinic in 1916. This would ultimately result in her arrest, but it helped start a major movement in reproductive rights. Sanger felt that abortion should be avoided at all costs, but also that women should be able to decide when they wanted to bear a child; therefore, legal birth control should be available for all women. In 1921 Sanger created the American Birth Control League, which has evolved into the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Sanger’s work connects directly with the plot that O’Neill crafts in Abortion, as we are able to see the different ways that each gender is treated when the decision to perform an abortion is decided, with women usually getting the short end of the bargain.

Add Fig. 4: “What Every Girl Should Know,” New York Call, Feb. 9, 1913.

![Image of advertisement for Faber’s Golden Female Pills](Philipsburg Mail, August 17, 1893)

![Image of advertisement for Faber’s Golden Female Pills](Philipsburg Mail, August 17, 1893)

![Image of advertisement for Faber’s Golden Female Pills](Philipsburg Mail, August 17, 1893)
The 1916 silent film Where Are My Children? was the first motion picture in the United States to represent the issue of abortion (see fig. 6). Both sides of the debate were portrayed, as the husband in the story is an attorney fighting against birth control while his wife is performing surgeries and providing birth control. The advertisement shows a man seemingly asking his wife in an angry tone, “Where are my children?!”, as she cowers in fear of her husband’s reprimand. This advertisement sheds light on the gendered hierarchy of households in this time period, as men were deemed the leaders of the house and therefore the children were his. This relates directly to the topic of abortion, as men wanted the children to be “theirs” only if they were ready to take care of the child, while women were forced to keep a baby no matter the situation. We are able to see this dynamic in O’Neill’s Abortion, as the star baseball player Jack is seemingly relieved of his duties as the father when the abortion is completed, while Nellie must suffer the ramifications of such a serious, and dangerous, procedure.
Section 1142, New York State Penal Code

“A person who sells, lends, gives away, or in any manner exhibits or offers to sell, lend or give away, or has in his possession with intent to sell, lend or give away, or advertises, or offers for sale, loan or distribution, any instrument or article, or any recipe, drug or medicine for the prevention of conception, or for causing unlawful abortion, or purporting to be for the prevention of conception, or for causing unlawful abortion, or advertises, or holds out representations that it can be so used or applied, or any such description as will be calculated to lead another to so use or apply any such article, recipe, drug, medicine or instrument or who writes or prints, or causes to be written or printed, a card, circular, pamphlet, advertisement, or notice of any kind, or gives information orally, stating when, where, how, of where or by what means such an instrument, article, recipe, drug or medicine can be purchased or obtained or who manufactures any such instrument, article, recipe, drug or medicine, is guilty of a misdemeanor, and shall be liable to the same penalties as provided in section eleven hundred and forty-one of this chapter” (People v. Sanger 1918).
L. 1872, Chap. 181 - An act for the better prevention of the procurement of abortions and other like offences, and to amend the laws relative thereto.

Any person who shall hereafter willfully administer to any woman with child, or prescribe for any such woman, or advise or procure her to take any medicine, drug, substance or thing whatever, or shall use or employ, or advise or procure her to submit to the use or employment of any instrument or other means whatever, with intent thereby to produce the miscarriage of any such woman, unless the same shall have been necessary to preserve her life or that of such child, shall, in case the death of such child or of such woman be thereby produced, be deemed guilty of a felony, and upon conviction shall be punished by imprisonment in a state prison for a term not less than four years or more than twenty years” (The Revised Statutes of the State of New York, 1882).

§2: “Any woman pregnant with child who shall take any medicine, drug, substance or thing whatever, or shall use or employ, or suffer any other person to use or employ, or submit to the use or employment of any instrument or other means whatever, with the intent thereby to produce the miscarriage of the child of which she is so pregnant, unless the same shall have been necessary to preserve her life or that of such child, shall, in case the death of such child shall be thereby produced, be deemed guilty of a felony, and upon conviction shall be punished by imprisonment in the state prison for a term not less than four years or more than ten years” (The Revised Statutes of the State of New York, 1882; bolding added for emphasis).
First passed in 1829 and later revised several times, the New York State ban on abortion was still on the books when Abortion was written (1914). The law laid out provisions for prison terms of up to twenty years for doctors or midwives who facilitated abortions, as well as for up to ten years for the women who solicited them. This law was still in effect when Abortion was first staged in 1959, and abortion would only be decriminalized in New York in 1970, three years before the landmark Roe v. Wade case (Buell 1991).

In addition to bans on abortion itself, there were also several statutes put into place regulating how abortion could be discussed and advertised. One telling passage from the New York State Penal Code stipulated that anyone who “causes to be written or printed, a card, circular, pamphlet, advertisement, or notice of any kind, or gives information orally” concerning abortion to be guilty of a misdemeanor (Court of Appeals of the State of New York 4). Perhaps the best indication of the moral light this offense was seen in is the fact that the punishment was directly derived from section 1141, which criminalized the purveyance of obscene materials to minors. In the July 1919 edition of her publication Birth Control Review, Margaret Sanger questioned this ban on discussing abortion, which, she stated, “prohibits anyone whatsoever from communicating to any person information concerning contraceptives” (Sanger).

Desiring to “see American womanhood freed from forced maternity,” Sanger rejected the widely-held assumption that “universal knowledge of contraceptives would lead to immorality” (Ibid.).

Interestingly, Sanger herself was imprisoned for violating this very law in 1918, after having provided women with contraceptives and information regarding birth control. This arrest came in the midst of, and was actually part of, Sanger’s quest to overturn the Comstock laws, a series of laws passed by various states (in whose footsteps section 1142 follows) criminalizing the public discussion or advertisement of

Fig. 7: “The Compass of the Home,” a Spanish translation of Family Limitation by Margaret Sanger, 1922
abortifacients or contraceptives. Sanger had, through her Brownsville Clinic in Brooklyn, been publishing a pamphlet entitled “What Every Girl Should Know,” which provided accurate information regarding birth control (thus violating the law) and was suppressed (see fig 4). When, in 1916, a policewoman came into Sanger’s clinic, Sanger felt that her “opportunity to challenge the Comstock laws” had finally arrived (Cox 2005). After being found guilty, Sanger appealed, and in The People of the State of New York vs. Margaret H. Sanger Judge Frederick Crane of the New York State Court of Appeals ruled that “there is no doubt of the constitutional power to stop public ‘clinics’ where [contraceptives are] furnished” (People v. Sanger 1918). Clearly, though the court did not specifically opine on the “wisdom and justice” of the law, holding that that was a matter for legislators, the legal establishment in New York was more than willing to uphold laws like section 1142 (Ibid).

Given this fraught legal climate, those who facilitated abortions during this period of illegality (anyone from doctors to traditional midwives) had to be very careful about how they advertised themselves, as the section of the New York State Penal Code printed above indicates. In such advertisements - specifically in figure 4 - euphemisms such as “suppressed menstruation” and “female irregularities” were subbed in for what they actually offered: various birth control methods and abortifacients. Often, advertisers would give a ‘warning’ to the public that pregnant women ought not use their contraceptive or abortive products, serving not as an attempt to dissuade women from use, but rather to persuade women of the efficacy of the product. Historian Anne Hibner Koblitz remarks that “nineteenth-century customers would have understood this ‘warning’ exactly as the sellers intended: as an advertisement for an abortifacient preparation” (44).

Two rather interesting observations can be drawn here: first, that there was indeed a gray market of abortifacients and birth control materials, and second - and most crucially - there was a significant audience of women who could and did ‘read between the lines’ and take advantage of the services offered to the canny reader.

Despite, then, the draconian restrictions placed upon abortion, birth control, and advertisements related to the same, there were still a significant contingent of patent medicine companies and activists like Margaret Sanger who were often able to work around these laws. Women in need, it seems, had family planning and reproductive health resources at their disposal even in a period where one could be imprisoned for even publicly discussing birth control. Of course, given the fact that - as a gray market - there was little regulation or industry standardization taking place, the kinds of hucksters referenced in Abortion had free reign.

Works Cited


The New York State Court of Appeals. The People of the State of New York v. Margaret H. Sanger, CTAPPs - NY Courts, 1918.


Figure 8: Flyer for Sanger’s Family Planning and Birth Control Center (often called the Brownsville Clinic), translated into Hebrew and Italian.

Read-through of "The Lost Plays" in the Tao House courtyard. Photo: Teresa Morley
In Abortion, one of the drivers of the plot is Ivy-League college student Jack’s frantic attempts to get Murray, the brother of his erstwhile lover, to keep the issue of Nellie’s botched abortion quiet. He paints a pitiful picture of the disgrace that would fall on his well-to-do family in the event that the news he had paid for an abortion got out, imploring the consumptive Murray to think of the psychological trauma that would befall his mother if the matter became public.

This, though, does not appear to be reflective of how blame was assigned in the aftermath of abortions in early twentieth-century American culture. Historian Leslie J. Reagan writes of this representative incident: “‘Death before dishonor,’ the mother reportedly declared, ‘my daughter is not going to be disgraced all her days, and the man to go scot-free’” (Reagan 28). Beyond being another example of the strength of female (specifically mother-daughter) networks of support, which is absent from O’Neill’s play, this example demonstrates the gendered distribution of blame. Reagan shows how the double standard existed in the realm of abortion in particular, and sexual activity more generally, during the Progressive Era. The mother, Reagan argues, thought correctly that “bearing an illegitimate child would stigmatize her daughter for life while the boyfriend could experience sexual pleasures without hurting his honor” (28). On the one hand, then, in Abortion O’Neill has indeed highlighted a serious problem for unmarried women who became pregnant; in encouraging Murray to keep the matter quiet, Jack begs him to “for your sister’s good name, for your family’s sake... keep this thing quiet” (218). It is certainly a credible assertion that Nellie’s honor would be tainted by the knowledge that she not only had gotten pregnant out of wedlock, but also got an abortion.

The issue with O’Neill’s characterization is that he implies that Jack’s honor is under serious threat; as O’Neill scripts it, Jack says that “society [is] ... suffering from a case of the evil eye which sees evil where there is none,” with its morality “forcing [him] into evasions” (O’Neill 213). Of course, this behavior is included by O’Neill to show how hard Jack works to avoid ultimate culpability for his actions, but I feel that something is amiss here. Implicitly, Jack - since he seems to see the need for ‘evasions’ - feels that his actions are wrongly seen as evil by the society in which he lives, a feeling contradicting the general lenience exercised toward male indiscretions (a lenience balanced by a terrible intolerance toward female indulgences of the same nature). O’Neill, by representing Jack as someone who had something significant to lose in this situation, did a disservice to real women such as Nellie who had to deal with a gendered ‘evil eye’ while their male lovers didn’t. Additionally, O’Neill missed an opportunity to indict Jack even further for the privilege he has in comparison to the woman he discarded.

Thus, by not drawing a line between the kinds of shame society attached to women and men regarding abortion at the time, O’Neill elides a significant difference. By not fully understanding the gendered dynamic in play,
O’Neill both gave women the short shrift and eliminated the possibility of the play’s potential to come to grips with male privilege.

Works Cited


"O’Neill, by representing Jack as someone who had something significant to lose in this situation, did a disservice to real women such as Nellie who had to deal with a gendered ‘evil eye’ while their male lovers didn’t."
Abortion
by Eugene O'Neill

Performed and filmed at Tao House, Danville, California
Produced by the Eugene O'Neill Foundation
October 2020

CAST LIST

Jack Townsend---------------------Ryan Hayes
Mr. Townsend---------------------John Tessmer
Mrs, Townsend-------------------Cynthia Lagodzinski
Lucy Townsend--------------------Emily Keyishian
Donald "Bull" Herron--------------Kyle Goldman
Joe Murray------------------------Will Long

Directed by Eric Fraisher Hayes

*Note: While Eric Fraisher Hayes's production eliminated the role of Evelyn, there are some interesting ways that she is incorporated into our conceptualization of the play, which is covered in the following section.
Inspired by the current roles that class and gender play in American society, we wanted to explore the ways in which the staging of Abortion could be conceptualized today. It is hard not to notice the parallels between what O'Neill wrote in the early twentieth century and our chaotic year of 2020.

The following production concept, with casting breakdowns and contextualizations, is intended for a possible staging of Abortion that grapples with notions of sexism, classism, and racism; it moreover incorporates current events such as the effects of COVID-19, Presidential politics, and contemporary debates regarding the still controversial topic of abortion. Our production concept was created before we were able to view the Eugene O'Neill Foundation’s 2020 production of Abortion--and it opened up a wonderful dialogue with director Eric Fraisher Hayes.

“I am curious about how you and your classmates are approaching the play. I would love to hear some of your thoughts about how to make it more contemporary.”

--Eric Fraisher Hayes

SETTING
As described by O’Neill: When the play opens, "The study of the suite of rooms occupied by Jack Townsend and Donald Herron on the ground floor of a dormitory in a large eastern university of the United States" (O’Neill 203).

Although the text never specifically states what college Abortion takes place at, it can be assumed that it is an Ivy League institution, based on the relative location in the U.S. and the wealthy description of it: “On either side of the door, leather covered divans with leather cushions. In the right corner to the rear, a table with an electric reading lamp wired from the chandelier above. Books, periodicals, pipes, cigarette boxes, ash trays, etc. are also on the table” (O’Neill 203). These fixtures would not be found in typical universities, but could be assumed to be in more prestigious schools.

Now in 2020
This play would still take place at an Ivy League college, because it is more likely to have a clear class divide than state schools. Such a setting has the ability to underscore the issues that are discussed in Abortion. Our rendition would incorporate the current pandemic in which we find ourselves. COVID has created even more divides in our country, and a constant question is: who can get this? Not only do party-goers and anti-maskers get the disease, but so do essential workers. People who cannot afford to miss any work are a lot more
likely to catch an illness than people who can quarantine. We highlighted this with Joe Murray, described below. To some degree this character recognizes his privilege, but he is also a puppet that cannot control the actions or consequences following his use of the powers that classism grants the upper-class, including his father.

**JACK TOWNSEND**

*As described by O’Neill:* “Jack is 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” (O’Neill 206).

*Now in 2020*

This character should embody the upper-class privileged white man in a form none other than a young Eric Trump (although the play would be set in 2020, his character needs to be college aged so it could not be his current, thirty-six-year-old self). To some degree this character recognizes his privilege, but he is also a puppet that cannot control the actions or consequences following his use of the powers that classism grants the upper-class, including his father.

**JOHN TOWNSEND (Jack’s Father)**

*As described by O’Neill:* “He is a tall, kindly old man of sixty or so with a quantity of white hair. He is erect, well-preserved, energetic, dressed immaculately but soberly” (O’Neill 209).

*Now in 2020*

This character should embody toxic masculinity and merciless class privilege in a form none other than President Donald Trump. This character, unlike his son, is fully aware of his privileges as a rich man in America, and couldn’t care less about the consequences. This is similar to how President Trump in 2020 does not refrain from expressing himself in the most unfiltered brutish, sexist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, and classist ways. Unlike his son, he feels more control in his position of power and uses it to exploit those beneath him in social status.

**MRS. TOWNSEND (Jack’s Mother)**

*As described by O’Neill:* “A sweet-faced, soft-spoken, gray-haired lady in her early fifties. She is dressed in dark gray” (O’Neill 204).

*Now in 2020*

This character should embody the hyper-feminine, traditional notions of middle-aged womanhood. Her style of dress and demeanor should embody the upper-class suburban “Karen” type. This character could be played as Melania Trump, as she embodies her class privilege while also submitting to normative gender roles as a doting wife and mother. In other words, she remains silent except to support her son or husband in this play.

**LUCY TOWNSEND (Jack’s Sister)**

*As described by O’Neill:* “She is a small, vivacious blond nineteen year old, gushing with enthusiasm over everything and everybody. She wears an immense bouquet of flowers at the waist of her dark blue dress” (O’Neill 204).

*Now in 2020*

For our production concept, this character should embody hyper-femininity, youth, class privilege, and obliviousness to her position in society. In keeping with the other characters’ relations to the Trump family, one could cast her as Ivanka Trump, who is
well educated and embodies the pinnacle of white female privilege. Expensive taste in clothing and near perfect skin, body, and hair should be used to fully reveal her submissiveness to sexist beauty norms as well as her obliviousness to classism.

EVELYN SANDS
As described by O'Neill: “Evelyn is a tall, dark haired, beautiful girl about twenty years old. Her eyes are large and brown; her mouth full-lipped; resolute; her figure lithe and graceful” (O’Neill 206).

Now in 2020
This character should embody modern notions of hyper-feminine style, youthfulness, purity, class privilege, and be oblivious to her position in society. She is supposed to be an ideal woman (as defined by the cult of domesticity) for the likes of privileged men, similar to a Paris Hilton type. Her similarity to Lucy exemplifies the homogeneity of women in the play.

DONALD (BULL HERRON)
As described by O’Neill: “He is a huge, swarthy six-footer with a bull neck and an omnipresent grin, slow to anger and to understanding but-- an All-American tackle. His immense frame is decked out in white flannels which makes him look gigantic” (O’Neill 204).

Now in 2020
This character should embody modern notions of hyper-masculine style, youthfulness, and class privilege like Jack. One could cast him as a modern day wealthy fraternity archetype as seen in most modern colleges. The notions of class and gender privilege would carry over seamlessly.

JOE MURRAY
As described by O’Neill: Murray is a member of a lower class family, introduced to the audience as “slouch[ing] to the middle of the room” and afflicted by TB, as he is “stopped by a fit of violent coughing which racks his thin body” (O’Neill 215). He also speaks with a working-class dialect. His given description exemplifies the differences between classes in Abortion.

Now in 2020
To take this modern variation of casting a step further, we would cast him as a student who is only able to attend college because of a financial scholarship, greatly contrasting his wealthy counterparts in the play. The way of dress should be tradesman oriented, still roughened up and swimming on him. In this case, he should be struggling from symptoms of COVID-19 to highlight classism and racism in relation to medical and financial privilege.

"We hope that our modern variation on setting and casting aids in acknowledging the universally applicable topics O’Neill presents in Abortion. Hopefully, our ideas inspire you to fully engage with Eric Fraisher Hayes and his talented cast’s interpretation of this play."
Director Eric Fraisher Hayes reveals his approach to staging O'Neill's plays:

“In general, I edit O'Neill’s scripts to find as much honesty as possible for a modern audience (or my ear.). That said, I do find that I can make lines work that, on the surface, seem not believable by playing with the punctuation and timing of their delivery. I learned long ago that an exclamation point is an indication of the intensity of thought or feeling, not necessarily the volume of its delivery. Also, O'Neill is constantly playing with characters’ internal dialogue as well as their dialogue with others. It is important to focus on intent and not get caught up in lingo. Seek to connect to the emotions in the play. Emotions don’t change much generation to generation. O'Neill writes big feelings that are dramatic. The actors have to own the size of the feelings. Coming from an acting background, I find that O'Neill often writes lines that could be communicated with actions. I cut lines that actors can communicate without words, if the words add nothing to the actions.”

Director Eric Fraisher Hayes explains casting choices:

“In casting our production of Abortion, I wasn’t really thinking about the year 1914. I was concentrating on showing that there was a class difference (or perceived class difference) between the Townsend family and Joe and Nellie Murray. How you choose to represent that difference can probably be handled in a lot of different ways. The important thing is that the Townsends think that they are on a certain strata of society while Nellie and her brother are on a lower level. It is important for the sense of tragedy that Jack be trapped by his situation. He is lauded as a hero and he knows he is not. What makes this play work is showing that he is 3 dimensional. He may think he is better than others, but he also knows he is not the hero everyone seems to think he is. He has a conscience and it is pursuing him, [which is] similar to Greek tragedy. The tension between who he feels he is and what others think of him needs to feel unbearable by the end of the play. One of the strongest aspects of this play is the way O'Neill uses music (the sound of a party) in the background to continually remind Jack of the difference between the outer world and his inner world.”

--email from Eric Fraisher Hayes (October 11, 2020)

We hope that our modern variation on setting and casting aids in acknowledging the universally applicable topics O'Neill presents in Abortion. Hopefully, our ideas inspire you to fully engage with Eric Fraisher Hayes and his talented cast’s interpretation of this play.
ABORTION DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

BY ASHLEY MURPHY

Eugene O’Neill’s play, Abortion (1914), was controversial in its time. Here are some discussion questions to further deepen your understanding and thoughts about the piece.

1. How does O’Neill portray women in Abortion? What does it say about how women were seen in context of the time period? Does a woman’s class status affect her treatment in the piece?

2. What is the significance of tackling such a controversial issue (abortion) that, at the time, was illegal, but practiced?

3. Considering that Margaret Sanger was an advocate for birth control and a founder of Planned Parenthood, what would modern-day Planned Parenthood have to say about this play? Does our society and our courts feel the same?

4. What impact does absenting Nellie from the action have on the play? Does it help or hurt Nellie’s case to have Murray act as her spokesperson?

5. Did Jack Townsend realize his wrong doing at the end of the play? Does class status play a role in the decision he made? Was he overwhelmed with guilt and remorse? Was he afraid of the adoring public discovering his secret? Something else?

6. Who is responsible for Nellie’s fate? Are there class or socioeconomic structures that allow for complicity in this situation? Who is at fault?

7. How would you have handled Jack’s situation? Nellie’s? What structures of support would support your decision? Were those structures available to Jack and Nellie?

8. Was Murray justified in his actions towards Jack at the end of the play?

9. Do you believe that O’Neill is making an argument for or against legalized abortions? Why?

10. Consider the ending of the play. How might the story have continued after the climactic conclusion?
One year ago, I was working in the luggage room at Tao House as the Travis Bogard Writer-in-Residence. The beauty of the San Ramon mountains surrounding O’Neill’s residence, where he wrote his final masterpieces, inspired me greatly. I wanted to share this with my students.

So when I began teaching a seminar on O’Neill, I wanted my students to connect with Tao House. Then Eric Frashier Hayes notified me he was producing virtual productions of “The Lost Plays,” and I wondered if my students could link their research projects with real audiences. With you.

What you see before you is the hard work of emerging scholars crafting dramaturgical projects for The Web (1913) and Abortion (1914)—two early plays by O’Neill. These dramaturgical packets highlight the contexts surrounding the historical moment in which O’Neill wrote these early plays—from Progressive Era abortion laws to the ontological question of what liveness means. In working intensely with O’Neill, they have come to know him, with all his faults and radical breakthroughs. They have researched, written, revised—and revised again—to bring you relevant contexts for understanding these works a century later.

I hope you enjoy their work. And who knows? You may one day drive up the hills to Tao House and see where O’Neill charted the future of American theatre.