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Identity Insecurity as Observed in Eugene O'Neill:
Examining America's Most Tragic Playwright in the Sociological Lens

Audrey Langston-Wiebe

College Writing 114 13: Writing Identity

December 15, 2023

One day in the wintry months of 1921, the late playwright Eugene O’Neill (1888-1953)¹ learned of some ill-natured remarks that had been made regarding one of his plays. One critic in particular, Ernest Boyd, had described O’Neill’s work as being “depressing, unpleasant, and vulgar.”² O’Neill, acting in defense of his creative merits, responded rather peculiarly in a follow-up letter sent to Boyd.³ That letter and other “original documents covering over a hundred years of Eugene O’Neill’s artistic work and life,”⁴ are all featured in the *Harley Hammerman Collection on Eugene O’Neill*.⁵ The display presents a curated and comprehensive model of the Irish-American playwright and incorporates not just the relics of O’Neill’s creative career, but also biographical elements, plus O’Neill’s unpublished personal works and written communications with critics. The collection follows a succession of works where “The story of O’Neill’s life yielded the stories (or plays) of O’Neill, which yielded the story of O’Neill’s life...which then yielded the story of the story of O’Neill, in biography, which then yielded the story of the story of the story of O’Neill in critical discussion of his

¹ Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, "Eugene O’Neill," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 23, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eugene-ONeill>.

² Harley Hammerman, “Typed Letter Signed, 2 pages Tuesday, December 06, 1921, Provincetown, To Ernest Boyd,” <https://eoneill.com/letters/21910.htm>.

³ Eugene O’Neill to Ernest Boyd, December 6, 1921, <https://eoneill.com/letters/21910.htm>.

⁴ Katie N. Johnson, “Scholarly Generosity,” in *The Assembled Playwright: Harley Hammerman’s Eugene O’Neill Collection Catalog*, John M. Olin Library (Level 1, Thomas Gallery): Washington University Libraries Julian Edison Department of Special Collections, 2023. <https://wustl.app.box.com/s/un42kjreugffrs1stjyzxas6pm8pqk0r>.

⁵ The *Harley Hammerman Collection on Eugene O’Neill* is housed in the Washington University Library’s Special Collections Department. The collection was cultivated by Washington University alumnus and longtime O’Neill-enthusiast, Dr. Harley Hammerman, MD. It is comprised of 284 books, 237 documents/manuscripts, and an estimated 700 other related items, for more see *The Assembled Playwright: Harley Hammerman’s Eugene O’Neill Collection*, Curated by Joel Minor. John M. Olin Library (Level 1, Thomas Gallery): Washington University Libraries Julian Edison Department of Special Collections, 2023, <https://wustl.app.box.com/s/un42kjreugffrs1stjyzxas6pm8pqk0r>. and Joel Minor’s “Introducing the Harley Hammerman Collection on Eugene O’Neill at Washington University,” in the *Eugene O’Neill Review*, Volume 41, no. 1 (November 1, 2020), 31-51, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/754182/pdf>.

life/plays/autobiography/biography.”⁶ This cumulative story outlined in “Hammerman’s O’Neill”⁷ details the successes and failures of O’Neill’s work and presents a more vulnerable tale of Eugene O’Neill, that being one of a misunderstood individual who sought cohesion between how he presented himself and how others perceived him.

O’Neill’s works have been highly lauded. He is, to date, “America’s only Nobel Prize-winning playwright”⁸ and has four Pulitzer Prizes⁹ under his belt. But as much as O’Neill’s works have been praised, they have been equally shrouded in controversy and criticism. O’Neill grappled with a troubled existence that spanned “everything from charlatanism to extreme morbidity and immorality,”¹⁰ as described in the first chapter of *A Poet’s Quest*,¹¹ written by Richard D. Skinner in 1935.¹² The book explores the relationship between O’Neill’s personal experiences and his plays, supposing that “[O’Neill] may be the summation of all virtues in his private life and yet experience in his poetic imagination the nadir of moral degradation”¹³ and that the “material [of O’Neill’s plays] obviously results from the impact of personal experience.”¹⁴ O’Neill struggled with alcoholism, flunked out of Princeton University for “general hell-raising,”¹⁵ and attempted to commit suicide; all before the age of twenty-two. By his fortieth birthday, O’Neill had lost both of his parents and his brother, all of whom had

⁶ William Davies King, “Hammerman’s O’Neill,” ed. by Harley Hammerman, *ZYZZYVA*, Volume 3 (2008), 18. <https://eoneill.com/library/laconics/3/3h.htm>.

⁷ Davies King, W., “Hammerman’s O’Neill.”

⁸ Minor, J., *The Assembled Playwright*.

⁹ The prizes were won for his plays *Beyond the Horizon* in 1920, *Anna Christie* in 1922, *Strange Interlude* in 1928 and *Long Day’s Journey into Night* in 1957. For more see Mike Pride, “Eugene O’Neill: The playwright who won over Pulitzer jurors four times,” *The Pulitzer Prizes*, <https://www.pulitzer.org/article/eugene-oneill-playwright-who-won-over-pulitzer-jurors-four-times>.

¹⁰ Richard D. Skinner, *Eugene O’Neill: A Poet’s Quest* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1935), 2.

¹¹ Skinner, R., *Eugene O’Neill: A Poet’s Quest*.

¹² Skinner’s book was written with O’Neill’s permission. It was not, however, endorsed by O’Neill as he chose to leave Skinner the liberty of presenting a fully unbiased assessment (without any guidance or oversight from O’Neill, that is.) for more see Skinner, R., *Eugene O’Neill: A Poet’s Quest*, vii-xvii.

¹³ Skinner, R., “O’Neill— The Poet of the Individual,” in *Eugene O’Neill: A Poet’s Quest*, 3.

¹⁴ Skinner, R., “O’Neill— The Poet of the Individual,” in *Eugene O’Neill: A Poet’s Quest*, 3.

¹⁵ Minor, J., *The Assembled Playwright*.

suffered from addiction (his mother to morphine; his father and brother to alcohol).¹⁶ Following their deaths, O’Neill had once again succumbed to suicidal alcoholism¹⁷ as a way to cope with his grief. Furthermore, O’Neill struggled through three unsuccessful marriages and lost his two sons, both to suicide.¹⁸ O’Neill faced a tragic existence and thus created tragic masterpieces.

There is a profound anguish ingrained throughout O’Neill’s work. O’Neill’s earlier writings focused more intimately on his struggles with mental illness. The earliest manuscript known to exist from O’Neill is an unpublished autobiographical poem titled “The Bridegroom Weeps!,”¹⁹ which vulnerably details one of O’Neill’s extreme depressive episodes.²⁰ In the poem, O’Neill accounts for the “many tears in [his] eyes,” the “many ashes in [his] mouth,” and the “many corpses of [his] decomposing dreams.”²¹ Another one of O’Neill’s early works, published in 1912, is his poem entitled “Free.”²² Within the poem, O’Neill accounts for how he is “weary of the tumult” and “sick of the staring crowd.”²³ O’Neill had been troubled from his adolescence, and mantras of philosophical torment were never absolved from O’Neill’s work. As his career progressed, the phenomenological identity crisis O’Neill continually grappled with was only amplified as the majority of his characters followed dark trajectories marred by societal dejection.

¹⁶ Felicia Hardison Londré, Review of *Eugene O’Neill: A Life in Four Acts*, by Robert M. Dowling, and: *Eugene O’Neill: The Contemporary Reviews* ed. by Jackson R. Bryer and Robert M. Dowling, *Theatre History Studies* 35 (2016): 351-353. <https://doi.org/10.1353/th.2016.0027>.

¹⁷ Davies King, W., “Hammerman’s O’Neill,” 5.

¹⁸ Gelb, A. et al, "Eugene O’Neill," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*

¹⁹ Eugene O’Neill, *The Bridgeroom Weeps!*, <https://eoneill.com/manuscripts/19000.htm>.

²⁰ The poem was never published, so the context behind the piece isn’t certain, but it is assumed that O’Neill wrote the piece while lamenting during what had been a low point in his life, around 1910-1911, around the time of his suicide attempt. See Minor, J., *The Assembled Playwright*.

²¹ O’Neill, “The Bridgeroom Weeps!”

²² Eugene O’Neill, “Free,” in *Pliedes Club Yearbook*, 1912.

²³ O’Neill, “Free,” in *Pliedes Club Yearbook*.

One of O'Neill's more popular works, the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Strange Interlude*,²⁴ delves into the messy lives of its characters, all of whom confront divisive temptation, face numerous rejections, and must cope with the mundane misfortunes of life. The play premiered in 1928 and propelled O'Neill's career forward. Differing from "The Bridegroom Weeps!"²⁵ and "Free,"²⁶ *Strange Interlude*²⁷ was not an autobiographical piece, but definitive parallels can be drawn between one of the play's main characters, Charlie, and O'Neill himself. Charlie seems to be O'Neill's channeling of himself as a troubled writer onto the stage. Like O'Neill, Charlie engages in deep introspection and is portrayed as being misunderstood from the beginning of the play with another character, Nina, lamenting that Charlie is always overly "morbid"²⁸ and belittling his input in situations saying that one day she and the play's other characters would inevitably read of their relations with Charlie in some twisted unrecognizable work of his.²⁹ Both O'Neill and Charlie are misunderstood and tortured creators. *Strange Interlude*,³⁰ in its production, can be inferred as an attempt of O'Neill's to prevent being misunderstood as he made executive decisions that ensured his creative vision was held as the priority in all productions of his work.

The play was one of O'Neill's more experimental pieces, as he chose to mask his actors in both a strategic and dynamic manner. In the play's Broadway productions, actors were instructed to hold their masks up exclusively when engaging in dialogue with each other.³¹ When

²⁴ Eugene O'Neill, *Strange Interlude*, 1928.

²⁵ O'Neill, "The Bridgeroom Weeps!"

²⁶ O'Neill, "Free," in *Pliedes Club Yearbook*..

²⁷ O'Neill, *Strange Interlude*, 1928.

²⁸ O'Neill, *Strange Interlude*, Hudson Theatre, March 11, 1963,

<https://eoneill.com/artifacts/flash/si2/si2.htm>.

²⁹O'Neill, *Strange Interlude*.

³⁰ O'Neill, *Strange Interlude*.

³¹ For More insight and analysis regarding O'Neill's opinions on and strategic use of masks in his plays, see my essay "Masks in Theatrics, Suppressive or Liberating?: Exploring the Applications of Masks in the works of Eugene O'Neill and Judith Butler,"

the actor (or more accurately, the character) spoke without holding up the mask it was meant to be indicative of the character's inner monologue. By employing this mechanism, O'Neill enabled himself to more effectively communicate with his audience about the nuances of the introspective mind. Specifically by exposing the juxtaposition between the character's inner and outer monologues, O'Neill was able to directly propel his intended ideology to his audience. Doris Falk, author of *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension*,³² comments on the unique dynamic O'Neill presented by masking his actors in *Strange Interlude*³³ stating that "Each spectator must maintain a double system of values: [their] own as [they] watch the character on stage and that of the character as [they] view the situation."³⁴ The intimacy provided in knowing a character's rawest thoughts enabled O'Neill's audiences to consider how discrepancies between an individual's intended presentation of themselves and others' actual perceptions of them might affect one's security of identity.

To further assess how the *Hammerman Collection's*³⁵ portrayal of Eugene O'Neill may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of an individual's existential value, there must be a discernment of what is specifically being addressed when discussing identity through the lens of O'Neill. There are countless facets of identity; far too many to effectively apply within the binds of this paper. Thus, for this examination, identity will be attributed under the premises

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jXfsumMsMAEyQ_zbRvQUYpNdoMFiwSnTDCz-EhudsIA/edit?usp=sharing.

³² Falk, V. D., *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension*.

³³ O'Neill, *Strange Interlude*.

³⁴ Falk, V. D., "Theme," in *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension*, 11.

³⁵ *Harley Hammerman Collection on Eugene O'Neill*, Washington University Libraries, Department of Special Collections.

of two sociological theories: “Social Verification Theory”³⁶ and “Identity Discrepancy Theory.”³⁷ Social Verification Theory (SVT) describes the observation that “people want others’ perceptions of their self to converge with their own perceptions.”³⁸ It exemplifies an individual’s innate instinct to seek subjective social stability through the verification of others. Identity Discrepancy Theory (IDT) is, in tandem, the observation that “discrepancies between how individuals want [to be perceived] and...how others view them...will be associated with depressive symptoms.”³⁹ In short, individuals share a universal need for social belonging, that when unmet, leads to distress and social dissonance.

Given his renown, O’Neill was naturally bound to a life in the public eye and was thus inevitably bound to an onslaught of public judgment. O’Neill was known to grow frustrated when the messages he intended to communicate with his audiences didn’t land. This is to be expected; as Skinner had described, the “super-life which the poet leads...the hunger and pain and doubt of great masses of people may of course seem very personal.”⁴⁰ Eugene O’Neill’s creative portfolio, established as dealing chiefly with interpersonal conflicts and troubles of the mind, is an obvious exemplar of both SVT and IDT. Curious, however, is that characteristics of these theories may also be identified within O’Neill’s personal endeavors. O’Neill had a habit of sending typed-letter responses to those who commented on his work. These correspondences with critics may be the most complimentary evidence of O’Neill’s troubled persona being in

³⁶James G. Hillman, Devin I. Fowlie, and Tara K. MacDonald, "Social Verification Theory: A New Way to Conceptualize Validation, Dissonance, and Belonging," in *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 27, no. 2023: 309-331, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/10888683221138384>.

³⁷ Kristen Marcussen and Mary Gallagher, “The Role of Aspirations and Obligations in Explaining the Relationship between Identity Discrepancies and Psychological Distress,” in *Sociological Perspectives* 60, no. 6, 2017: 1019-1038,. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/0731121417707754>.

³⁸ Hillman, J. G. et al, “Social Verification Theory: A New Way to Conceptualize Validation, Dissonance, and Belonging,” 310.

³⁹ Marcussen, K. et al, “The Role of Aspirations and Obligations in Explaining the Relationship between Identity Discrepancies and Psychological Distress,” 1019.

⁴⁰ Skinner, R., “O’Neill– The Poet of the Individual,” in *Eugene O’Neill: A Poet’s Quest*, 1964: 8.

alignment with both the aforementioned sociological theories. Perhaps then, by examining O'Neill's communications with critics, the effects of SVT and IDT may be contextualized as contributory factors to O'Neill's uniquely troubled psyche.

In a letter written to critic Norman Hapgood,⁴¹ O'Neill expressed his immense gratitude for the "fine letter of appreciation"⁴² that Hapgood had written about one of O'Neill's plays.⁴³ O'Neill further writes that "[Hapgood's letter] certainly hit [him] in the right spot, for so many people have misunderstood...the play"⁴⁴ and that "one does get discouraged every once in a while and then one can turn to letters like [Hapgood's] and begin to grin with assurance again."⁴⁵ Having explicitly stated how misunderstood he feels, only to be reassured by affirmations such as Hapgood's, it is made clear in the letter that O'Neill thrives when given reassurance. In another instance, O'Neill denies reporter Carol Bird of an interview reasoning that "the public [would] rightly ignore [him] as a repetitious bore and an irritating impertinence"⁴⁶ and further complains of the "stupid complaints against [his play]"⁴⁷ and the "attempt at suppression"⁴⁸ that was ensued after its publication. The stark contrast in O'Neill's tone when writing to Bird versus Hapgood shows how "identity-discrepant information is..inherently threatening"⁴⁹ to an individual. O'Neill's exhibited need for external validation aligns with SVT's suggestion that "true self-validation [is] difficult"⁵⁰ due to the non-performative nature of isolation and

⁴¹ Eugene O'Neill to Norman Hapgood, January 9, 1925, <https://eoneill.com/letters/25110.htm>.

⁴² Eugene O'Neill to Norman Hapgood.

⁴³ The letter was written specifically in regards to O'Neill's 1924 play *Desire Under the Elms*.

⁴⁴ Eugene O'Neill to Norman Hapgood.

⁴⁵ Eugene O'Neill to Norman Hapgood.

⁴⁶ Eugene O'Neill to Carol Bird, May 22, 1922, <https://eoneill.com/letters/22400.htm>.

⁴⁷ Eugene O'Neill to Carol Bird.

⁴⁸ Eugene O'Neill to Carol Bird.

⁴⁹ Hillman, J. G. et al, "Social Verification Theory: A New Way to Conceptualize Validation, Dissonance, and Belonging," 319.

⁵⁰ Hillman, J. G. et al, "Social Verification Theory: A New Way to Conceptualize Validation, Dissonance, and Belonging," 319.

anonymity⁵¹ and further supports the notion that external validation is crucial for an individual to gain security in self.⁵²

O'Neill was evidently sensitive to rejection, which according to IDT, manifests aversly in the troubled mind.⁵³ In its framework, SVT describes that when inconsistencies between the "ideal" and "actual" selves have been perceived, an individual will respond by engaging in "mitigation behaviors."⁵⁴ These mitigation behaviors are the attempts one might make to "reduce the perception of inconsistency."⁵⁵ Mitigation behaviors typically assume the form of seeking validation and altering oneself to fit the norm put out by society.⁵⁶ Mitigatory actions were detailed in both O'Neill's letters to Hapgood and Bird. O'Neill finds affirmation from Hapgood⁵⁷ and exhibits a desire to conform to societal expectations in his response to Bird.⁵⁸ The most compelling example of O'Neill's engagement in mitigatory behavior, however, is the letter he wrote to critic Ernest Boyd⁵⁹ in 1921. O'Neill had responded to Boyd's scathing critiques, that his works were "depressing, unpleasant, and vulgar,"⁶⁰ by shipping Boyd an unseen manuscript that further explained O'Neill's intended interpretations of his works for Boyd's private reading. O'Neill explained that felt he "owe[d] [Boyd] an explanation,"⁶¹ and reasoned for his extreme

⁵¹ Hillman, J. G. et al, "Social Verification Theory: A New Way to Conceptualize Validation, Dissonance, and Belonging," 319.

⁵² Hillman, J. G. et al, "Social Verification Theory: A New Way to Conceptualize Validation, Dissonance, and Belonging," 322.

⁵³ Hillman, J. G. et al, "Social Verification Theory: A New Way to Conceptualize Validation, Dissonance, and Belonging," 318.

⁵⁴ Hillman, J. G. et al, "Social Verification Theory: A New Way to Conceptualize Validation, Dissonance, and Belonging," 318.

⁵⁵ Hillman, J. G. et al, "Social Verification Theory: A New Way to Conceptualize Validation, Dissonance, and Belonging," 318.

⁵⁶ Hillman, J. G. et al, "Social Verification Theory: A New Way to Conceptualize Validation, Dissonance, and Belonging," 311.

⁵⁷ Eugene O'Neill to Norman Hapgood.

⁵⁸ Eugene O'Neill to Carol Bird.

⁵⁹ Eugene O'Neill to Ernest Boyd.

⁶⁰ Eugene O'Neill to Ernest Boyd.

⁶¹ Eugene O'Neill to Ernest Boyd.

measures by stating that he had “a very great respect for [Boyd’s] critical judgment; and so the fact that [Boyd] reached a conclusion about [the play’s] last act quite contrary to [O’Neill’s] intention puzzles and troubles [him].”⁶² O’Neill was exceedingly concerned with Boyd’s perception of him, and in defending his work O’Neill wrote that “What did get under [his] skin in [Boyd’s] criticism [was] that [Boyd thought that O’Neill’s] ending was made to order for an audience,”⁶³ that “[he] swear[s] to [Boyd that] it was not,”⁶⁴ and that “[he would] have never done that sort of thing.”⁶⁵ There is a sense of desperation in O’Neill’s tone here, as he seems to plead for validation from Boyd. This desperate tone of O’Neill’s is not to be confused with submission. O’Neill is not submitting to Boyd, but rather he is asserting his case, or engaging in mitigating behavior.⁶⁶ It is the extent to which O’Neill worked to ensure that his critics didn’t actively possess misinformed opinions on his plays, that draws a parallel to SVT and IDT. O’Neill’s desperation to maintain the public’s understanding of his works shows how fraught O’Neill was when it came to sourcing stability in his self-view.

Eugene O’Neill sought alignment between his creative visions and their public interpretations. Themes of being misunderstood and socially isolated permeate O’Neill’s entire body of work. Social isolation, as it is described in Social Verification Theory⁶⁷ and Identity Discrepancy Theory⁶⁸ is felt when one detects a lapse between their intended way of being perceived and how they are perceived by others and can be a causative agent of insecurity.⁶⁹

⁶² Eugene O’Neill to Ernest Boyd.

⁶³ Eugene O’Neill to Ernest Boyd.

⁶⁴ Eugene O’Neill to Ernest Boyd.

⁶⁵ Eugene O’Neill to Ernest Boyd.

⁶⁶ Hillman, J. G. et al, “Social Verification Theory: A New Way to Conceptualize Validation, Dissonance, and Belonging,” 318.

⁶⁷ Hillman, J. G. et al, “Social Verification Theory: A New Way to Conceptualize Validation, Dissonance, and Belonging,” 309-331.

⁶⁸ Marcussen, K. et al, “The Role of Aspirations and Obligations in Explaining the Relationship between Identity Discrepancies and Psychological Distress,” 1019-1038.

⁶⁹ Marcussen, K. et al, “The Role of Aspirations and Obligations in Explaining the Relationship between Identity Discrepancies and Psychological Distress,” 1021.

O'Neill, having worked continuously in pursuit of validation, is an exemplary subject for performing a retrospective case study of SVT and IDT-related phenomena, and by examining various biographical contexts, creative works, and interpersonal communications of O'Neill, it can be concluded that O'Neill (perhaps more specifically the version of O'Neill presented by the *Hammerman Collection*,)⁷⁰ faced a truly tragic existence, and repeatedly yearned for true overlap between his internal and external self. Perhaps, then, it may be a worthwhile investment to further explore other literary figures and their works as exemplars of other sociological theories, to provide a more comprehensive academic conceptualization of the individual identity for both academics and the general public to reference.

⁷⁰ Harley Hammerman Collection on Eugene O'Neill, Washington University Libraries, Department of Special Collections.

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