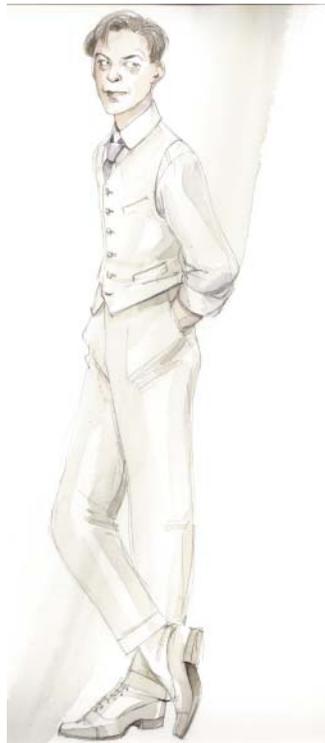


STUDY GUIDE
2004

CONTAINS ONTARIO CURRICULUM SUPPORT MATERIAL

Ah, Wilderness!

by
Eugene O'Neill



Education Partner

Great-West Life
THE ASSURANCE COMPANY



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PRESENTS

Ah, Wilderness!
by
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This study guide for *Ah Wilderness* contains background information for the play, suggested themes and topics for discussion, and curriculum-based lessons that are designed by educators and theatre professionals.

The lessons and themes for discussion are organized in modules that can be used independently or interdependently according to your class’s level and time availability.

The general information is on white paper and the lessons are on green.

THIS GUIDE WAS WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY REBECCA BRAGG, DENIS JOHNSTON, DEBRA MCLAUCHLAN, AND BARBARA WORTHY. ADDITIONAL MATERIALS WERE PROVIDED BY JOSEPH ZIEGLER, CHRISTINA PODDUBIUK AND JOHN TUTE.

AH, WILDERNESS!

Previews May 13

Opens May 29

Closes October 8

For a calendar of performances check:

www.shawfest.com

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The Players

Tommy Zachary Thomson/Christopher Wovk
 Mildred Tamara Kit
 Arthur Jeff Irving
 Essie Miller Wendy Thatcher
 Lily Miller Mary Haney
 Nat Miller Norman Browning
 Sid Davis William Vickers
 Richard Jared Brown
 David McComber George Dawson
 Norah Jessica Lowry
 Wint Selby Martin Happer
 Belle Lisa Norton
 Bartender Graeme Somerville
 Salesman Michael Ball
 Muriel McComber Maggie Blake

Directed by Joseph Ziegler
 Designed by Christina Poddubiuk
 Lighting designed by Alan Brodie
 Musical direction and original music composed by John Tute

Running Time

APPROX. 2HRS. 55 MINS INCLUDING TWO INTERMISSIONS

Production History

Ab Wilderness opened on Broadway on October 2, 1933, in a production by the Theatre Guild that featured George M. Cohan as Nat Miller and Elisha Cook Jr as Richard. It ran in New York for almost 300 performances, and later toured to Toronto’s Royal Alexandra Theatre in February 1935. A film version appeared in 1935, and the play later inspired a movie musical called *Summer Holiday* (1948) and a stage musical, *Take Me Along* (1959). A casting curiosity is that Mickey Rooney appeared in both movies: in *Ab Wilderness* as little Tommy and in *Summer Holiday* as the teenager Richard.

The first made-in-Canada production of *Ab Wilderness* came in December 1946, presented by Toronto’s New Play Society and directed by Andrew Allan, with Donald Harron as Richard.

Our 2004 production represents Eugene O’Neill’s first appearance at the Shaw Festival.



Costume sketches by Christina Poddubiuk

The Author

EUGENE O'NEILL

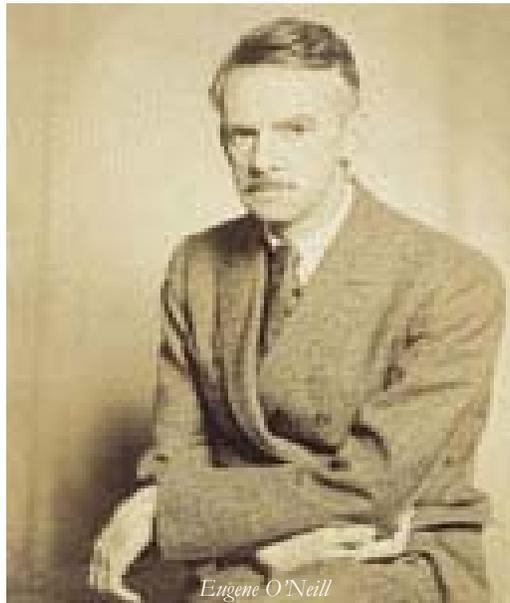
1888-1953

Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) is generally acknowledged as America's first great playwright. He was literally born into the theatre: his father James O'Neill was one of the great touring stars of 19th-century American theatre, forever associated with the title character of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Born in a hotel in New York, where his father was appearing, Eugene O'Neill was the youngest of three sons, one of whom died in infancy. He spent his first seven years on the road with his parents, and thereafter he was educated in boarding schools. The only real home life he experienced was in the family's summer home in New London, Connecticut, likely the inspiration for the "large small-town" in which *Ab Wilderness* is set.

After being suspended from his first year at Princeton University, O'Neill led an unsettled and dissipated life. In 1909 he married but left his wife to go prospecting for gold in Honduras, and never lived with her after his return. The next year a son was born, but a month later O'Neill left New York as a seaman on a Norwegian merchant ship. In 1911 he returned to New York on a tramp steamer, and lived for a time at Jimmy-the-Priest's, a waterfront dive. After a suicide attempt he was reunited with his family and toured with his father's *Monte Cristo* company.

In the winter of 1912-13, after a short stint as a newspaper reporter, O'Neill spent six months in a sanatorium being treated for tuberculosis. As one commentator put it: "He entered the sanatorium a dabbler in poetry; he left resolved to be a serious writer." He wrote his first plays the following year, and in 1914-15 took George Pierce Baker's famous playwriting course at Harvard. In 1916 he began a productive relationship with the Provincetown Players, first in Cape Cod

and then in New York, which produced 15 of his plays over the next six years. His most enduring plays of this period are probably his one-act "sea plays" such as *Bound East for Cardiff* and *The Long Voyage Home*, based on his experiences as a merchant seaman. A breakthrough of sorts came with his boldly experimental play *The Emperor Jones* (1920), which transferred to Broadway and ran for over 200 performances.



In 1928 O'Neill began a relationship with another producing company, the Theatre Guild, which had respectable New York runs with *Marzo Millions* (1928), the trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), and *Ab Wilderness* (1933). *Strange Interlude* (1928), the longest-running play in O'Neill's lifetime, ran for more than 400 performances - a surprise hit considering its enormous length (about five hours) and its experimental presentation of spoken subtext.

After *Ab Wilderness*, O'Neill moved to California with his third wife Carlotta, and embarked on a mammoth cycle of plays that was never finally written. (Only one of them survives in complete form, *A Touch of the Poet*, which was produced posthumously.) In 1939 he put the cycle aside and, though in progressively failing health due to a degenerative motor disease, began writing the three realistic dramas that have cemented his place in the pantheon of theatre history: *The Iceman Cometh*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, and the harrowing autobiographical masterpiece *Long Day's Journey into Night*. O'Neill received Pulitzer prizes for four of his plays - *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), *Anna Christie* (1922), *Strange Interlude* and (posthumously) *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and in 1936 he became the only American playwright ever to be honoured with the Nobel prize for literature.

Director's Notes

by Joseph Ziegler

In her introduction to the published play, Christine Dymkowski observes that *Ab Wilderness* “is often seen as a bright reverse image of *Long Day's Journey into Night*.” Written in 1940, and not performed until after the author's death, *Long Day's Journey* is O'Neill's dark masterpiece. It's a tragic and deeply felt story of the Tyrone family, a stand-in for his own. It takes place in the summer of 1912, when O'Neill was 23.

Ab Wilderness, written in 1932, was for O'Neill “the way I would have liked my childhood to have been.” It begins on a sunny Fourth of July, Independence Day 1906, when O'Neill was 17. It's about a middle-class family, the Millers, and in particular it's the story of Richard who is “going on seventeen, just out of high-school,” and looking for his own independence.

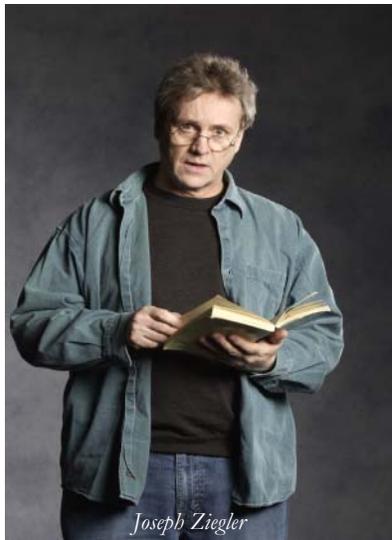
The two plays have, as their probable setting, New London, Connecticut, the “large small-town” of O'Neill's stage directions. The sitting-rooms in which half of *Ab Wilderness* and all of *Long Day's Journey* take place are virtually one and the same. They are based on the O'Neills' summer home which came to be called Monte Cristo Cottage, named for the play in which the playwright's father James O'Neill made his fortune as an actor. The house still stands today, preserved as an American National Landmark.

For the young O'Neill, this was the closest thing he would have to a home. His family spent summers there for many

years, when his father was not touring America and when he and his brother were not away at boarding school or living in rented rooms in New York. The character of Edmund, based on O'Neill himself, says in *Long Day's Journey*: “It was a great mistake, my being born a man, I would have been much more successful as a sea gull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death!”

O'Neill referred to *Ab Wilderness* as “a sort of wishing out loud.” Maybe what he was wishing for was a real home like the Millers', and the security of belonging that is such a huge part of this family. In the Miller house, everyone belongs, everyone is accepted. People lose their tempers, people feel heart-ache and disappointment - but underneath it all, everyone in the family has a place, and knows that whatever happens, there will be tolerance, forgiveness and love.

In a 1933 letter to his editor, Saxe Commins, O'Neill wrote: “For me it has the sweet charm of a dream of lost youth, a wistfulness of regret, a poignantly melancholy memory of dead things and people - but a smiling memory as of those who live still being not sadly dead. If you know what I mean . . . And, of course, there is the intention in the play to portray the startling difference between what we Americans felt about life, love, honour, morals, etc, and what we are conscious of feeling today.”



Norman Browning as Nat Miller, Jared Brown as Richard Miller and Wendy Thatcher as Essie Miller in *Ab, Wilderness!*
Photo by Andree Lanthier



Maggie Blake as Muriel McComber and Jared Brown as Richard Miller in *Ab, Wilderness!*

Designer's Notes

by Christina Poddubiuk

Ab Wilderness was first performed on a large proscenium stage where, through the mechanics of sliding truck units or revolving platforms, the sitting-room set might be moved off as the dining-room set is moved on. But how could we ever fit all this scenery onto the Court House stage? And where could we store a rowboat!

The Court House space is celebrated for its intimate dynamic between actor and audience, and most of the important moments in this play are intimate in scale - scenes involving just two or three characters. These would be well served by paring the scenic elements down to bare essentials. A minimalist set also invites the audience to use their imaginations to fill in the rest of the room, and an abstract visual approach seemed the best one for the nostalgic mood of the play.

For the overall atmosphere, we created a backdrop based on a photograph entitled *The Pond - Moonrise* by Edward Steichen (1879-1973), one of the most important figures in the history of photography. This idyllic image has several connections to the world of *Ab Wilderness*. Steichen was 25 years old in the summer of 1904 when he made this photograph in Mamaronek, a village in New York near the Connecticut border, not far from New Haven and New London. Throughout his long career, Steichen always said that he wanted to create "painterly photographs" (this one is a platinum print that Steichen tinted by hand), so I think he would have approved of this wonderful reproduction - painted by Gwyneth Stark, head of The Shaw's scenic art department.



Costume sketch for Belle by Christina Poddubiuk



Costume sketch for Muriel by Christina Poddubiuk

Composer's Notes

by John Tute

In fleshing out the world of *Ah Wilderness*, Eugene O'Neill shows meticulous attention to musical detail. In addition to a scene in which Arthur sings three popular parlour songs while the rest of his family quietly listens (a reflective moment which seems luxuriously risky by the dictates of our modern short attention spans), O'Neill also specifies the titles of songs to be sung or whistled as characters enter or exit. These are the songs that Joe Ziegler and I decided should be used as incidental music throughout the play. They proved to be not just quaint period songs, but also fertile material for musical invention and transformation.

The inclusion of the sitar in an otherwise standard musical ensemble hopefully parallels the sense of fleeting, transient beauty that touched the lives of these characters through *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Indeed, it is a beauty that suffuses this entire play.

The music was recorded by Karen Graves and Kathryn Sugden (violins), Alex Grant (cello), Doug Miller (flute), Nancy Nelson (oboe), Paul Sportelli (piano) and Irshad Khan (sitar).



Wendy Thatcher as Essie Miller and Norman Browning as Nat Miller in *Ah, Wilderness!*

The Title of the Play

The play's title comes from the quatrain Richard deems "the best":

*A book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread – and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness --"*

Though O'Neill does not provide us with the fourth line of the quatrain, knowing it makes the meaning of the play's title even more explicit:

"Oh, Wilderness is Paradise enow."



Mary Haney as Lily Miller and Jared Brown as Richard Miller in *Ah, Wilderness!*

Canadian Trivia

The first made-in-Canada production of *Ah Wilderness* came in December 1946 and was presented by Toronto's New Play Society. The cast included a few Canadian luminaries, and was directed by Andrew Allan, the legendary CBC Radio producer. Andrew Allan later became the Artistic Director of the Shaw Festival for the years 1963 to 1965.

Nat Miller	Budd Knapp
Essie	Claire Murray
Arthur	Mel Breen
Richard	Don Harron
Mildred	Isa Dale
Tommy	Elliott Collins
Sid Davis	Tommy Tweed
Lily Miller	Arden Key
David McComber	Perce Quin
Muriel McComber	Sandra Scott
Wint Selby	Lloyd Bochner
Belle	Beth Caddy
Nora	Jean Cruchet
Bartender	Glenn Burns
Salesman	Peter Mews

The Play

The Setting: The year is 1906 and the action takes place over two days in “a large small-town in Connecticut”. The Miller family is celebrating the Fourth of July - for Americans, the most important secular holiday of the year, to commemorate the day in 1776 when the U.S. was released from British sovereignty. The family members have planned a variety of activities, individually and with others, all of which could be described as good, clean fun – picnics, a family dinner, a drive in the Buick, watching the town’s fireworks display.

The decor of the home’s large sitting room, though cheerful, reflects the “scrupulous medium-priced tastelessness of the period,” with bookcases filled with “cheap sets,” children’s books and best-selling novels, “books the family really have read.” The dining-room furniture, complete with chandelier, is a little too grand and pretentious for the available space.

The Plot: Richard, sensitive, impressionable, and in the throes of first love, is crushed after receiving a rejection letter from his girlfriend Muriel after her father discovers excerpts from “foul” love poems in Richard’s handwriting. A distraught Richard allows himself to be lured by Wint Selby, a friend of his brother Arthur, into a date with a prostitute. He finds himself at a dingy bar, the Pleasant Beach House. Hoping to appear a man of the world, Richard immediately becomes sloppily drunk and gets cold feet after bleached-blond Belle urges him to take her to a room upstairs. Remembering Muriel, he claims to have “taken an oath to be faithful” and begins reciting poetry. Since he has already given Belle the five dollars she wanted for sex, she finds no further use for him and arranges for the bartender to throw him out, saying he is underage. When the boy finally arrives home, disheveled, humiliated and still too drunk to be punished by his horrified parents, his sympathetic Uncle Sid helps him to bed. Meanwhile, Mildred delivers a note asking him to sneak out to meet her that night on the beach near the harbour. She tells him that her father dictated and forced her to write the first letter and he should have known better than to believe she no longer loved him. He confesses (with a few alterations to make him look less foolish) the story of his adventure of the night before with Belle. They forgive each other, kiss, pledge eternal love, and Richard begins imagining a honeymoon on Kipling’s road to Mandalay, “on the trail that is always new,” watching “the dawn come up like thunder out of China!”

Themes: As usual in romantic comedies, love conquers all and audiences go home with faces wreathed in smiles. But one way or another, O’Neill’s pen is always dipped in his own blood and *Ab Wilderness* is no exception. In part, it was an experiment for the dramatist. Famous for the bleakness of his vision, O’Neill wanted to demonstrate that he was also able to write with a light touch and said that *Ab Wilderness* was his fantasy of what he would have liked his own troubled youth and family life to have been.

Considering the year the play was first staged (1933), the subject of alcohol was a timely topic. The pros and cons of drinking, and the devastation alcoholism could and often did wreak in people’s lives, were themes explored constantly in newspaper articles as well as in conversations over every American dinner table. This was a subject on which O’Neill, who himself fought a lifelong battle with the bottle, had more personal expertise than he could have wanted, no matter how profitably he was able to mine it in his writing. O’Neill himself had been tossed out of Princeton for drinking and his older brother, Jamie, died of alcoholism in middle age. So as light as his touch in portraying Uncle Sid’s boozing and Richard’s humiliating first experience with the Demon Drink may be, there is an underlying parallel theme of personal tragedy embedded in *Ab Wilderness*. And once upon a time, before alcoholism robbed them of their future together, Sid and Lily had been as young and innocent as Richard and Muriel.

Historical Context: *Ab Wilderness* made its first appearance on Broadway in 1933, a year when theatre-lovers who could still afford the price of a ticket were desperately in need of a few laughs. It was the height of the Great Depression, when more than a quarter of the work force in the U.S. was unemployed and hunger stalked the land. Though Prohibition would be repealed that year by the newly-inaugurated Democratic President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 14 years of a national ban on alcohol had fostered the growth of a criminal underworld whose tentacles were strangling the quality of life in the country’s major cities, creating widespread nostalgia for smaller towns. For gloom and doom, people had only to glance at their daily newspapers - but with *Ab Wilderness*, O’Neill offered them the proverbial spoonful of sugar and the play became one of his greatest successes with audiences.

The Characters

Mrs. Miller (Essie): 50ish, short, plump, and the devoted, mother of six children, four of whom still live at home. As the play opens, she is fussing over her youngest, Tommy, 11, and correcting his grammar (though her own may be less than perfect). Unlike the other adults, Essie seems never to have read any “serious” literature and bases her views on the merits of books on whether they (or the behaviour of their authors) encourage the drinking of alcohol, “indecency,” or challenge the country’s social and political order. Time and again, she describes the family’s maid Norah as “thick” and unable to follow even the simplest instructions, suggesting that Essie might be transferring doubts about her own adequacy onto the sharp, witty Irish girl.

Nat Miller: Essie’s husband, late 50s, owns the local newspaper the *Evening Globe* and looks the part of the moderately prosperous, middle-class, middle-aged American citizen. In contrast to his wife, Nat is tall, lean, and round-shouldered, but his eyes, described as “fine, shrewd, humorous,” project a depth of character his overall bland appearance masks. While he dresses to convey an “awkward attempt at sober respectability,” he is not nearly as hidebound by the social conventions of the day as Essie. Though he does not shy away from confrontation, he is forgiving of human weakness if there has been no intention to do harm. When his brother-in-law Sid comes home drunk from a picnic, Nat insists that the family ignore his condition, and when his son Richard is accused of impropriety by his girlfriend’s father, Nat, who detests all forms of hypocrisy, dishonesty and malice, angrily calls the man a liar.

Sid Davis: Essie’s brother, 45, is short, fat and bald, “with the Puckish face of a Peck’s Bad Boy who has never grown up.” Once seen as charmingly colourful, Sid has become as outmoded as the “shapeless and faded nondescript” suit he wears. Over the years, his drinking has cost Sid dearly. Fired from his latest job, he hopes Nat, as usual, will hire him back as a reporter. Sixteen years earlier, Sid and Lily, Nat’s sister, were engaged to be married, but she broke it off because of his drinking and “taking up with bad women.” Sid still hopes that she will change her mind. Ironically, although his alco-

holism has driven away the love of his life, it also brings him reluctant approval, because when Sid is drunk, he is the life of the party – and not even Lily, to her dismay, can help herself from laughing at his antics.

Lily Miller: At first glance, Lily, 42, might appear to be the stereotypical “old-maid school teacher,” but behind her glasses, her gray eyes are gentle and her manner exudes “shy kindness.” At her own insistence, she pays room and board to live in the home of her brother and sister-in-law, but nonetheless feels that she is “just sponging” and not really paying her own way. When she takes her place in the sitting-room, Lily takes a straight-backed chair, “leaving the comfortable chairs to the others.” Despite her self-effacing shyness, however, still waters run deep in Lily’s poetical soul. When her nephew Richard praises the *Rubaiyat* – quatrains written by the eleventh-century Persian poet Omar Khayyam, Lily astonishes everyone by saying that she likes them too, quoting the one that encapsulates her fear that her own life has passed her by:

*“The Moving Finger writes, and having writ,
Moves on: nor all your Piety and Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.”*

Richard Miller: Richard is almost 17 and just out of high school; soon he will be joining his older brother Arthur at Yale. O’Neill describes Richard as being at the same time similar to both his parents and “definitely different” from them. “In manner, he is alternately a plain, simple boy and a posey actor solemnly playing a role.” Physically, Richard is a man but emotionally he is still very much a child, choosing his reading material as much for its potential to shock his parents (especially his mother) as to help him along the road to intellectual maturity. Despite his “extreme sensitiveness,” he still sees life only in black and white. Calling the Fourth of July “a stupid farce,” Richard denounces “all this lying talk about liberty – when there is no liberty!” Richard, who seemingly believes that he himself has discovered the authors whose work he admires, is surprised to learn that his father has also read Carlyle’s *French Revolution* and that his Aunt Lily can quote from the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.



Jared Brown as Richard Miller in *Ah, Wilderness!*

Classroom Applications

*The following pages suggest questions and activities students might explore
before attending the play*

Theme 1 Into the Wilderness

The title of the play *Ah Wilderness* evokes a number of images and potential themes.

ACTIVITY AND DISCUSSION

- 
- In groups of 3-4, brainstorm ideas about the word “wilderness”.
 - If your group were in the wilderness, what would you be doing?
 - Create a tableau to depict your idea of “wilderness”.
 - After viewing the class tableaux, discuss both their common and distinct features.
 - As a class, generate ideas about the play based only on its title.

Theme 2

Celebrating Our Nation's Birthday

Ah Wilderness is set in a town in Connecticut, USA, during the Fourth of July celebrations of 1906.



DISCUSSION

- How does your town celebrate Canada Day or the Fourth of July? Do you participate in any activities?
- How do you think people celebrated Canada Day a century ago? What do you think children would be doing? Teenagers? Young adults? People your parents' age?



ACTIVITY



This exercise will be done with the entire class standing in a circle.

- One by one, each person in the circle mimes an activity that someone might do to celebrate Canada Day. After each person performs the activity, the rest of the class repeats it. The goal is to generate as many activities as there are class members.
- One by one, each person in the circle now says a line depicting the thoughts of the person he or she portrayed while performing the above activity.

Theme 3

Black Sheep of the Family

When sheep are born in the spring, every so often one lamb has black fleece while the majority of sheep are white. The term *black sheep* has come to describe a family member whose beliefs or actions deviate from the mainstream standards of society. In *Ah Wilderness* we witness the actions of a *black sheep* over two days of a holiday time.



ACTIVITY 1

- In groups of 3-4, identify specific reasons for labelling a family member a black sheep.
- Assign adult family roles to members of your group. Do not assign anyone the role of black sheep.
- Decide on a reason for the family to be gathering in celebration. Where will the celebration take place?
- Imagine that the family members are planning the celebration by telephone, and concerned about the potential impact of the black sheep.
- Enact the telephone conversations that might occur among family members as they plan the celebration. Try to involve each member of the group in approximately the same number of telephone calls as each other member. (For example, Character A calls Character B; Character B calls Character C; Character C calls Character A, etc).
- The series of telephone conversations will end once the characters have made firm decisions about handling the black sheep.

Theme 3, continued

DISCUSSION

- Why are black sheep often interesting and engaging?
- Is the term *black sheep* politically incorrect in today's society? Can you think of a more acceptable term?

ACTIVITY 2



Ah Wilderness is dedicated to George Jean Nathan, “who also, once upon a time, in peg-top trousers went the pace that kills along the road to ruin”. George Jean Nathan is not a character in the play, and is not mentioned by any of the characters in it.

- The task in this activity is to create circumstances of George Jean Nathan's life as a teenager if he lived in today's society.
- Assign each member of the class a role of either George's friend, family member, teacher, neighbour, or classmate. Selecting a role out of a hat is a good idea here.
- Imagine that George is in trouble with the police. Decide as a class what that trouble is.
- Have the class meet in groups: George's friends in one group, family members in another, and so on.
- In their groups, students will decide on incidents that have occurred between themselves and George.
- In role as a social worker, the teacher calls the class together, and thanks them for attending a meeting to determine what should be done to help George.
- The teacher as social worker asks the class, in role, for information about George's character and behaviour.
- The class may also ask the teacher questions about his or her opinion of George.
- After the questioning period is completed, each group works together to develop a one-page written statement about their knowledge of George.
- The teacher as social worker calls the class back together and reads the statements aloud.
- As a group, the class decides on the best course of action for helping George.

Theme 4

Protest Through Poetry

The main character in *Ah Wilderness* is a teenager who disagrees with the politics and prudishness of American society. He expresses his discontent through the words of poets and playwrights considered controversial in the early 20th century.

DISCUSSION

- Where do most teenagers find protest material today?
- Why is it a natural occurrence for teenagers to doubt the beliefs of their parents?
- Can teenage protest ever change things for the better?
- Has any person or group in your school protested about an issue or rule? If so, what was the outcome?
- After watching the play, identify issues that create conflict between teenagers and authority figures.

ACTIVITY

- 
- In groups of 5, select lyrics from a modern song that expresses teenage protest today.
 - Your task is to present the song as a poem to the class, using both words and movement to communicate its message.
 - First, divide up the lyrics of the song, so that all members of your group are involved in speaking the lines. You may use choral speaking, solos, or paired speech as appropriate for different parts of the lyrics.
 - Practise the verbal part of the presentation until it is memorized.
 - Now think of actions or frozen images that will help communicate the message of your song. It is usually effective to begin and end in a tableau.
 - Incorporate the frozen images and actions into the lyrics.
 - Practise the words and actions together until the entire piece is memorized.
 - Present to the class.

Theme 5

Social Pressures

Richard Miller, the main character in *Ah Wilderness*, responds to various incidents of social pressure throughout the play. Many of his experiences are similar to those faced by teenagers today.



ACTIVITY 1

Peer Pressure

This activity is performed in pairs, **A** and **B**. **A** is a 17-year-old who has just received a break-up letter from his/her girlfriend/boyfriend. **B** is a friend of **A**'s older brother. **B** invites **A** to a sleazy club for the purpose of drinking and attracting dates of dubious morals. If **A** accepts the offer, he or she will have to gain admittance to a licensed club and lie to his/her parents. **A** has never had this kind of experience before, and is unsure about whether to go or not.

- In your pair, decide on answers to these questions: Why does **B** want **A** to go? How does **A** feel about the invitation? How does **B** tempt **A** to go?
- Improvise the scene in which **B** makes the invitation and tries to persuade **A** to go to the club.
- Does your scene end with **A** deciding to go or not go?

ACTIVITY 2

Saving Face

This activity is also performed in pairs, **A** and **B**. **A** is a 17-year-old who is at a club where everyone is drinking heavily. **B** is someone who appears sophisticated and is attractive to **A**. **B** takes an interest in **A** because **A** pretends to be familiar with the club scene. **B** wants **A** to buy more drinks for both of them, and drink as heavily as **B** is drinking. **A** wants to impress **B**, but doesn't have a lot of money and doesn't really like drinking.

- In your pair, decide on answers to these questions: How do **A** and **B** meet at the club? What do they talk about? Why does **B** think that **A** frequents clubs? How does **B** try to convince **A** to buy drinks?
- Improvise the scene between **A** and **B** in the club.
- How does the scene end?

ACTIVITY 3

Paying the Price

In this activity, **A** and **B** are the parents of a 17-year-old. It is Friday night, more than an hour past curfew, and the teenager is not home yet. This is the first time the teenager has been late for curfew.

- In your pair, decide on answers to these questions: Is the teenager female or male? What are the attitudes of both parents toward the lateness of their son or daughter? Where do they think their son or daughter might be? Are they going to wait for their child's return or make an effort to find him/her?
- Improvise the scene between **A** and **B** as they await their child's return.
- What will happen at the end of the scene if the teenager arrives home drunk?

After attending Ah Wilderness the class should be able to examine theatrical techniques and ideas introduced by the play.

Theme 6
A Comedy of Recollection

Ah Wilderness was written in 1932 by Eugene O’Neill, who described the play as a “comedy of recollection” of the kind of family life he never had, but wished he had. In contrast to *Ah Wilderness*, most of O’Neill’s work reflects a dark and tragic look at family life.



- What character in the play do you think O’Neill imagined as himself?
- In what ways are the characters in *Ah Wilderness* stereotypes of an idealized family in the early 20th century? In what ways does the play suggest but not explore the potential for major family discord?
- Family life was a common theme in early sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s. Discuss images of family life you have watched on reruns of early television series. Are any of the characters similar to characters in *Ah Wilderness*? Is family life still a major theme of television shows? If not, what factors do you think have caused a change in focus?



Norman Rockwell Paintings

Like Eugene O’Neill, the painter Norman Rockwell worked in the 1930s and 1940s, creating images of small town New England life. Unlike most of O’Neill’s work, Rockwell’s paintings most frequently depict happy images of commonly lived experiences.

The task in this activity is to create Rockwell-like images of moments from *Ah Wilderness*.

- In groups of varying numbers, decide on a moment in the play to capture as a Norman Rockwell painting.
- Assign roles to each person in the group.
- Determine the location of each character in the painting in order to reveal information about character relationships.
- Determine the activity of each character in the painting in order to reveal information about plot.
- Create an aesthetic quality for the painting by including a variety of levels, grouping characters in a balanced fashion, and maintaining a focal point that draws the eye of the audience.

Theme 6, continued

ACTIVITY 2

Memories as Stories

Households often have family stories that are told many times on various different occasions. These stories help define family identity. In *Ah Wilderness*, Mr Miller retells a story that his family has already heard several times before. In it, Mr. Miller remembers an episode from his youth when he saved a friend from drowning.

- Your group task is to create and tell a story about an imaginary event that happened to your group members. Potential story topics include: the time we got lost in the woods, the time the car ran out of gas, the time we spent all of our money and had to get home from Toronto, and so on.
- In telling the story, try to divide it up so that everyone has an equal chance to participate. At the same time, try to make the telling of the story sound spontaneous and unrehearsed. Practise having people cut each other off, interrupt each other, or contradict each other so that the story sounds natural. Include a couple of disagreements among group members about details of the story. Maybe one group member exaggerates and another one forgets important facts.
- Sit in a circle around an imaginary campfire, with flashlights for illumination, and tell your class stories.

Theme 7

Two Sides of the Coin

DISCUSSION

Ah Wilderness depicts different pairs of characters who act as contrasts, or foils, for each other. In the adult generation, these pairs include Mr Miller and Sid, Mr Miller and Mr McComber, Mrs Miller and Lilly. What contrasting pairs are found in the teenage generation of the play?

ACTIVITIES

- 
- This activity requires groups of four. Each group selects one pair of contrasting characters (for example, Mr Miller and Mr McComber) as their topic.
 - Roles for the four group members include: first contrasting character (for example, Mr. Miller), second contrasting character (for example, Mr McComber), gossiping neighbour talking about the first contrasting character, gossiping neighbour talking about the second contrasting character.
 - In your group, brainstorm both positive and negative qualities of the two contrasting characters. Also identify important moments for each of the characters in the play.
 - Determine five or six sentences that represent thoughts of each contrasting character about his or her experiences in the play. For example, one of Mr McComber's sentences might be: "I know what's best for my daughter, even if she hates me for it."
 - Determine five or six sentences that represent conversation snippets for each gossiping neighbour. For example, a neighbour gossiping about Mr Miller might say: "That poor man, burdened with his spinster sister and his wife's drunken brother all these years."
 - Determine the best order for all of the sentences to be presented.
 - Determine the best stage positioning for your group members. Do not include movement in the activity after the initial stage positioning has been set.
 - Practise the delivery of the sentences.
 - Make sure the sentences reveal a complete picture of the character's situation. You may need to edit or change one or two of your sentences here.
 - Memorize the scene.
 - Present to the class.
 - Discuss how effectively the groups communicated the contrasts and similarities among the characters.

Theme 8

Enabling Behaviour

Sid Davis is a talented and kind man whose life has been controlled by alcohol. Alcoholism has caused Sid to lose both a promising career and marriage to the woman he loves. Although family members disapprove of Sid's drunkenness, their interactions with him do not discourage his behaviour. In current psychological terms, Sid's family enables him to continue drinking, in spite of their hopes that he will stop.

DISCUSSION

- Identify specific ways in which different characters in the play enable Sid to continue drinking.
- Can anyone ever change the behaviour of an alcoholic?
- What makes someone become an alcoholic?



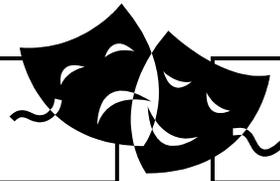
Forum Theatre

- Forum theatre is a type of dramatization in which real-life problems are acted out with various different solutions. These solutions are suggested by members of the group.
- In groups, your task will be to improvise a new version of the July 4th dinner scene from the play, when Sid arrives drunk after promising to stay sober and take Lily to the fireworks display.
- In groups, imagine yourselves as popular television psychologists (Dr Phil, for example). What advice would you give to each member of the family about dealing with Sid at the dinner table when he arrived home drunk?
- Assign yourselves roles from the dinner scene.
- Play out the dinner scene, following the advice you have suggested.
- How does your scene end?

ACTIVITIES

Further Ideas for Discussion

- After viewing the play, discuss the choice of its title.
- *Ah Wilderness* depicts the life of a single family in a specific time and place in American history. To what extent are events of the play relevant to today's audiences?
- O'Neill began work on a sequel to the play, to be set after World War I. If you wrote the sequel, what would have happened to the characters in the years between 1906 and 1919? Research O'Neill's idea for the sequel on the Internet, and compare them with your own.



BLOCKING: The actor's movement on stage is known as "blocking". The Stage Manager writes the blocking notation into the Prompt Script.

COSTUME: Anything that an actor wears on stage is referred to as a costume. The Wardrobe department (the department responsible for creating costumes) provides clothes, shoes, hats, and any personal accessories such as umbrellas, purses and eyeglasses.

DROP: A drop is a large piece of painted canvas that is "flown in" by the flyman (see FLYMAN).

GREEN ROOM: The green room, usually near the entrance to the stage, is where the actors and crew sit while waiting for their turn to go on stage. One possible explanation of how the green room got its name is that actors used to wait for their entrances at the back of the theatre in an area where the scenery was stored. Perhaps the scenery was green, or the name "scene room" evolved into "green room".

ORCHESTRA PIT: The orchestra pit is the place where the musicians perform during a musical. Usually the orchestra pit is between the front row of the audience and the stage.

PROPS: A property or "prop" is anything that the audience sees that is not worn by an actor and is not a structural part of the set. Some examples are: tables, chairs, couches, carpets, pictures, lamps, weapons, food eaten during a play, dishes, cutlery, briefcases, books, newspapers, pens, telephones, curtains and anything else you can imagine.

PROSCENIUM: A term describing the physical characteristics of a theatre. A proscenium theatre is one in which the audience and the actors are separated by a picture-frame opening that the audience looks through to see the actors. Surrounding this opening is the PROSCENIUM ARCH. If there is an acting area on the audience side of the proscenium arch, it is referred to as the APRON or FORESTAGE.

SCRIM: A scrim is a piece of gauze that is painted and used as part of the scenery. When a scrim is lit from in front it is opaque, you cannot see through it. When a scrim is lit from behind it is transparent, you can see through it. This allows for many different visual effects to be created by the lighting and set designers.

THRUST STAGE: A thrust stage is a stage that is surrounded on three sides by the audience.

DIRECTOR: The person who guides the actors during the rehearsal period. The director decides what the important messages of the play are and how they will be conveyed to the audience.

DESIGNERS: The people who work with the director to decide what the production will look like. Designers must choose the colour, shape and texture of everything you see on the stage. There are several areas that need to have designers: costumes, set, lighting and sometimes sound. The designers work very closely with the director to create the environment in which the play will take place.

DYER: The person who dyes fabrics for the Wardrobe department.

FLYMAN: The person responsible for the manipulation of the scenery which is in the fly gallery (the space above the stage). The scenery is manipulated by ropes attached to a counterweight system.

MILLINER: The person who makes the hats which the actors wear on stage.

PROPS BUYER: The person who buys items that will be used or adapted to become props. Props buyers also purchase the raw material used to build props.

SCENIC ARTISTS: The people who are responsible for painting and decorating the surfaces of the set. Some of the techniques they use include: wood graining, stenciling, marbling and brickwork. They also paint the drops and scrims that are flown in.

STAGE CARPENTER: The person who ensures that everything runs smoothly on stage during a performance. The stage carpenter and stage crew are responsible for changing the sets between scenes and acts.

STAGE MANAGER: The person who makes sure that all rehearsals and performances run smoothly. During a performance the stage manager also makes sure that all of the technical elements (e.g. lights, sound, curtains flying in and out) happen at exactly the right time.

TECHNICAL DIRECTOR: The person who is responsible for coordinating all of the technical elements of a production. Technical directors work with the people who build the sets, props, costumes, wigs and special effects to make sure that everything runs smoothly.

