

# The Eugene O'Neill Foundation, Tao House

## 2023 Play/Book Club

### Bonus Discussion Questions for “*Anna Christie*”

Katie N. Johnson, Dramaturg

- In which other plays does O'Neill set the action of the play back in time? What years does he typically choose? Why those dates?
- In what other O'Neill plays can we find fog as an important motif—and how does it compare to “*Anna Christie*”?
- In *Chris Christopherson* (an earlier version of the play, written in 1919), neither Marthy nor Anna appear as characters in the first scene. Indeed, rather than being a prostitute, Anna is a typist (office worker). Is “*Anna Christie*” a better play by changing the type of work that Anna performs (sex work)? And do you think “*Anna Christie*” is a better or weaker drama by including two “fallen women” in a saloon, a scandalous place for women? Notice that this is a rare moment between two women alone onstage (and, importantly, one of the very first of such scenes between two prostitutes/fallen women). What does this add to the play?
- In the early 1900s there were so many “brothel dramas” (as Katie Johnson as coined the term) with consumptive prostitutes that critics bemoaned their prevalence on stages. Compare Anna to other portrayals of prostitutes by O'Neill; think of Rose from *The Web*, the Woman in *Welded*, Cora and Pearl in *The Iceman Cometh*, the New Guinean woman referenced at the beginning of *Bound East for Cardiff*, the prostitute that Ned visits to secure his divorce in *Exorcism*, and “Fat Violet” referenced in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*).
- The sea was an important motif for O'Neill, appearing in numerous plays. What is the significance of sailors (and the sea) to “*Anna Christie*”? What *kind* of sailors are portrayed by O'Neill? Unlike the Glencairn Plays, which take place on ships, some of the action in “*Anna Christie*” take place on Chris's coal barge. In *Chris Christopherson* two men in the bar—absent characters in “*Anna Christie*”—derisively call Chris's work “an old woman's job,” and label Chris “a coal puncher,” and “a barge rat” (*Complete Plays*, 810-811). In “*Anna Christie*” this is softened somewhat when Johnny-the-Priest and the Postman laugh that Chris is “Captain of a coal barge” (*CP*, 960). What is the significance of this kind of life at sea?