The early plays of Eugene O’Neill make for a compelling study in hermeneutics. By early plays, I mean those composed before O’Neill went to Provincetown, now anthologized in the tellingly titled Ten “Lost” Plays, which includes A Wife for a Life, Thirst, Warnings, Fog, Recklessness, Abortion, The Movie Man, Servitude, The Sniper, and most important here, The Web (1913). Defining them as “lost” concedes, rather appropriately, O’Neill’s dissatisfaction with these plays. But this definition likewise endorses two troubling conclusions that inform O’Neill criticism: first, that the early plays are so burdened by melodrama that they do not merit consideration, and second, that O’Neill gained nothing and had nothing to gain from American theater of the Progressive Era. Demonstrating the problems that follow from such conclusions are the observations by Arthur and Barbara Gelb in O’Neill: Life with Monte Cristo. In The Web, they contend, “it is possible to discern Eugene’s first shaky steps toward exposing social injustice and hypocrisy” about the misbegotten from New York City slums.¹ Yet O’Neill’s ambition is compromised by the equivalent of boasting, his “showing off his familiarity with New York’s seamy street life.”² The Gelbs are correct in stressing this contradiction in The Web, which intends an indictment of class-based injustice but frequently indulges in cross-class sensationalism. They are right, too, in arguing that this contradiction comes from O’Neill’s experiences, likely from
time spent with Jack Reed and Terry Carlin, social and political radicals that O’Neill befriended while drinking in Lower Manhattan in 1912. But the Gelbs are wrong in how they interpret this contradiction—that while plays like *The Web* may “foreshadow the noble themes” of later works like *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, they were only “frail beginner’s efforts” that reflect O’Neill’s immaturity as a dramatist.\(^3\)

Common enough in O’Neill criticism, this conclusion proves unsatisfactory for several reasons, but none more so than this: the contradiction was not his alone. In the years leading up to O’Neill’s beginnings, American theater was wrestling with the contradiction between revealing social injustice and indulging in sensationalism regarding the slums. The 1908–9 season saw an approval of the former with the emergence of sociological plays, such as Owen Kildare’s and Walter Hackett’s *The Regeneration* (1908), Cleveland Moffett’s *The Battle* (1908), Edward Sheldon’s *Salvation Nell* (1908), and Eugene Walter’s *The Easiest Way* (1909). Bringing together such plays were decidedly progressive attitudes about poverty, drunkenness, and prostitution that defined the misbegotten as victims of environmental and material circumstances rather than of pathological or inherent failings, as they had been defined in the Victorian Era. In “The Slum Invades the Theatre” (1909), Hartley Davis described this proliferation as unsurprising: “Everybody knows that of late years the slum has been made the subject of careful study” and that “whatever is dominant in the thoughts of people finds its way to the stage.”\(^4\) Behind the initial point are the founding of social sciences at Columbia University\(^5\) and the establishment of the United Charities Building at 105 East Twenty-Second Street, two powerful forces that advanced progressive arguments about reform and philanthropy. Behind the second is a point that adds to Brenda Murphy’s work in *American Drama and American Realism, 1880–1940*. She argues that the aforementioned dramatists “were crucial for the establishment of realistic principles in American drama,”\(^6\) especially in *Salvation Nell*’s conception of setting, through which Sheldon helped “create the forceful sense of character-determining milieu” by developing the conflicts for the eponymous character through a contrast of environments.\(^7\) Driving this concern was a progressive understanding of the dialectical relationship of character and environment; and the plays, in turn, endeavored to advance this dialectical understanding for middle-class audiences.

Highly popular for the most part, these plays were, nevertheless, met with apprehension from theater critics, including Davis, who regrets this invasion of the slums “with all its hideous reality.”\(^8\) Importantly,