

* The Nobel laureate Eugene O'Neill had never been proud of the authorship of his first vaudeville-like one-act "A Wife for a Life". Can you explain why?

Be ready to discuss the following issues in brief:

1. Conflict and plot.
2. Characters.
3. Structure and language.
4. Themes and context.

Eugene O'Neill
A Wife for a Life (1913)

<http://www.eoneill.com/texts/wfl/contents.htm>

SCENE—*The edge of the Arizona desert; a plain dotted in the foreground with clumps of sagebrush. On the horizon a lonely butte is outlined, black and sinister against the lighter darkness of a sky with stars. The time is in the early hours of the night. In the foreground stands a ragged tent the flap of which is open. Leaning against it are some shovels and a pick or two. Two saddles are on the ground nearby. Before the tent is a smouldering camp fire at which an elderly man of about fifty is seated. He is dressed in miner's costume; flannel shirt, khaki trousers, high boots etc.—all patched and showing evidences of long wear and tear. His wide-brimmed Stetson hat lies on the ground beside him. His hair is turning gray and his face is the face of one who has wandered far, lived hard, seen life in the rough, and is a little weary of it all. Withal his air and speech are those of an educated man whose native refinement has clung to him in spite of many hard knocks.*

On one side of the tent stands a rough stool and a gold-miner's panning tub—a square box half filled with water.

THE OLDER MAN—*(stirring the fire in a futile attempt to start it into flame)* I wonder what can be keeping him so long? *(hears noise of someone approaching)* Hello Jack, I was just beginning to think you were lost.

(Old Pete enters. He is an old man dressed in rough miner's costume but he wears spurs and carries a quirt in his hand. He is covered with dust and has evidently been riding hard.)

OLD PETE—It aint Jack. It's me.

THE OLDER MAN—*(disappointed)* Hello Pete. What brings you around at this time of the night?

OLD PETE—*(taking telegram from his pocket)* I was just leaving Lawson when the operator stopped me and give me this for Jack. I seen your camp fire burning and reckoned I'd bring it right over.

THE OLDER MAN—*(taking telegram)* Many thanks Pete. Won't you sit down and rest a bit?

OLD PETE—Much obliged but I reckon I'll travel along. I ain't slept none to speak of in the past few nights and I got to be up at sunrise. *(grinning sheepishly)* That fool town of Lawson sure does keep you up nights. *(He starts to go, then stops.)* Claim panning out as good as ever?

THE OLDER MAN—Better every day. This morning we took a sample from the upper end which we haven't touched so far. It looks good but we haven't panned it yet.

OLD PETE—You-alls ought to get rich. You know how to keep money. Now me and money never could get on noway. *(pulls out pockets ruefully)* They cleaned me out in Lawson this time

and I reckon they'll clean me again the next time. (*shaking his head*) Cities is sure hell that-a-way. Adios. (*exits*)

THE OLDER MAN—Good night. Poor Pete. Same old story. Been bucking the faro bank again I suppose. (*looks at telegram*) Hmm. Wonder what this is? Jack has had no correspondence in the five years I've been with him. May be something important in connection with the mine. I guess I'd better open it. He won't mind anyway. (*He opens the telegram and reads aloud*) "I am waiting. Come." No name signed. It comes from New York too. Well it's too many for me. I give it up. (*puts telegram in pocket*) Must be that fool operator got mixed up in his names. I wouldn't like to see Jack obey any summons like that. He's about all I've got now and I'd hate to see him leave just when we've struck it rich. (*dismissing the subject*) I guess this wire is all a mistake anyway. (*He looks around yawning and his eye lights on the panning tub.*) Now if only the upper part of the claim is as rich as that we've been working— (*The noise of someone approaching is heard.*) Here he comes now. Welcome wanderer! Where have you been all this time?

(*Jack enters. He is dressed about the same as the Older Man but is much younger—in the early thirties.*)

JACK—One of the horses slipt his hobbles and I had quite a hunt for him. I finally found him down by the spring wallowing around as if water were the commonest thing in this section of Arizona. Fool beast!

THE OLDER MAN— (*forgetting all about the telegram*) It's a strange thing we should run into water out here where the maps say there isn't any. It's the one blessing we've found in this land God forgot. We're fools for luck for once.

JACK— (*nodding*) Yes. (*then rather exultantly*) But we have small cause to kick about this lonely hole after all. Any place is God's country to a man *if* there's gold in it and he finds it. There's gold here and (*taking a small bag from his pocket and shaking it*) we've found it. So long live the desert say I.

THE OLDER MAN—Those are my sentiments. (*He rolls a cigarette paper and setting it afire in the flame lights his pipe.*) It sure looks as if our ship had come in at last here on the rim of the world. The luck was due to change. We've had our share of the bad variety; just missing a strike in every jumping-off place from South Africa to Alaska. We've taken our hard knocks with the imitation of a laugh at any rate and (*stretching out his hand to the younger man who grasps it heartily*) we've been good pals ever since that day in the Transvaal five years ago when you hauled me out of the river, saved my life, and our friendship began. (*as the younger man starts to speak*) No you needn't try to stop me expressing my gratitude. I haven't forgotten that day and I never will.

JACK— (*to change the subject*) I'm going to see what that prospect we took at the other end of the claim looks like. (*He goes into the tent and returns with a gold pan heaped with dirt under his arm and sitting down in front of the panning tub proceeds to test the prospect. He washes the heap of dirt down until there is but a handful of gravel left. The Older Man comes over and stands behind him looking over his shoulder. Finally after one quick flip of the pan Jack points to the sediment left in the bottom in which a small heap of bright yellow particles can be seen.*) What do you think of that?

THE OLDER MAN— (*reaching over and feeling them with his fingers*) O'course gold; just as I expected. The upper end of the claim is just as rich as it is down here.

JACK— (*with growing excitement*) There's over a quarter of an ounce here at least. That's five dollars a pan—better than we've ever panned down here at any time since we made the strike four months ago. (*lays the pan aside*) I tell you this claim is too much for us to handle alone. One of us ought to go East and organize a company.

THE OLDER MAN—Then it will have to be you. I'm too old. (*Jack smiles and makes a deprecating gesture.*) Anyway I never could get along with civilization and (*laughing*) civilization never cared overmuch for me. (*goes over and sits down by the fire*) — (*after a pause*) You've seemed to be hankering after the East quite a lot in the last month or so. (*smiling*) Getting tired of the company here eh?

JACK—(*quickly*) No you know that isn't so after all the years we've been pals and all we've been through together.

THE OLDER MAN—(*jokingly*) Then what is the attraction the effete East has to offer? (*mockingly*) It's a woman I suppose?

JACK— (*with dignity*) An angel rather.

THE OLDER MAN— (*cynically*) They're all angels—at first. The only trouble is their angelic attributes lack staying qualities. (*then half bitterly*) At any rate you'd find them hard to prove by my experiences.

JACK— (*shrugging his shoulders a little impatiently*) You're a disgusting cynic and I refuse to argue. You know we've never been able to agree on that subject. I'm going to hunt out that bottle we've carried about so long and we'll drink to the mine and future prosperity. (*He goes into tent.*) Here it is. (*He returns with a quart of whiskey, opens it with a knife and pours out two drinks in the tin cups.*)(*laughing*) I think this is a proper occasion for celebration—the two Prodigals welcome the fatted calf. Let's make it a christening also. Here's to the Yvette mine!

THE OLDER MAN—(*who has been laughing turns suddenly grim. His hand trembles as he clinks cups and he almost spills some of the whiskey. He speaks in harsh jerky tones.*) Why the Yvette?

JACK—(*not noticing his agitation*) I know it sounds like rather a frivolous name for a mine but I have a hunch. There's a romance back of it—my romance. That was her name. One rarely speaks of such things. I've never told you but I will now if you care to hear it. It was over a year before I met you. I had just been out of mining school a short time and was prospecting around in the mountains of Peru hoping to hit a bonanza there. At the time I speak of I had returned to reoutfit at a small mining camp near the frontier of Ecuador. It was there I met her. She was the wife of a broken-down mining engineer from the States, over twenty years her senior. (*The Older Man who has been listening intently is poking the fire nervously and his face becomes harsher and harsher.*) According to all accounts he was a drunken brute who left her alone most of the time and only lived from one drunk to another. Personally I never saw him. It was probably better that I did not. You see I fell in love with her on the spot and the thought of how he treated her made my blood boil.

THE OLDER MAN—(*in stifled tones*) What was the name of the mining town you mention? I've been in that country myself—many years ago.

JACK—San Sebastien. Do you know it?

(At the words "San Sebastien" the Older Man seems to crumple up. Nothing seems alive about him but his eyes, staring horribly, and his right hand which nervously fingers the gun in the belt around his waist.)

THE OLDER MAN—*(in a hoarse whisper)* Yes. I know it. Go on.

JACK—*(dreamily, absorbed in his own thoughts)* I loved her. In the corrupt environment of a mining camp she seemed like a lily growing in a field of rank weeds. I longed to take her away from all that atmosphere of sordid sin and suffering; away from her beast of a husband who was steadily ruining that beautiful young life and driving her to desperation. I overstayed my time. I should have been back in the mountains. I went to see her often. He was always away it seemed. Finally people began to talk. Then I realized that the time had come and I told her that I loved her. I shall never forget her face. She looked at me with great calm eyes but her lips trembled as she said: "I know you love me and I—I love you; but you must go away and we must never see each other again. I am his wife and I must keep my pledge."

THE OLDER MAN—*(starting to his feet and half drawing the pistol from the holster)* You lie!

JACK—*(rudely awakened from his dream also springs to his feet, his face angry and perplexed)* Why what do you mean? 'What is it?

THE OLDER MAN—*(controlling his rage with a mighty effort and sitting down again)* Nothing. Nerves I guess. It's my sore spot—the virtue of women. I've seen but little of it in my mining camp experiences and your heroine seems to me too impossible. *(Wonderingly Jack sits down beside him again.)*

JACK—*(eagerly)* You wouldn't think so if you could have seen her. *(The Older Man covers his face in his hands and groans.)* Here's a picture of her she sent me a year ago. *(takes small photo out of pocket of his shirt)* Look at it. *(handing him the photo)* Do you think a woman with a face like that could be the regular mining camp kind? *(feels in pocket again and goes into tent as if searching for something)*

THE OLDER MAN—*(looks at the photo with haggard eyes for a moment, then whispers in a half sob)* My wife! *(Then staring into vacancy he speaks to himself unconsciously aloud.)* She has not changed.

JACK—*(who has come back from the tent with a soiled envelope in his hand in time to hear the last sentence)* *(astonished)* Changed? Who? Do you know her?

THE OLDER MAN—*(quickly mastering his emotion and lying bravely)* No. Of course not. But she reminds me of a girl I knew here in the States a long time ago. But the girl I speak of must be an old woman by this time. I forget my grey hairs.

JACK—Yvette is only twenty-five. Her parents were poor French people. In a fit of mistaken zeal for her welfare they forced her to marry this man when she was too young to know her own mind. They thought they were making an excellent match. Immediately after the marriage he dragged her off to San Sebastien where he was half owner of a small mine. It seems the devil broke out in him before they were hardly settled there. *(after a pause)* I'd like to be fair to him. Maybe he realized that she could never love him and was trying to drown the memory of the mistake he had made. He certainly loved her—in his fashion.

THE OLDER MAN—*(in a pathetic whisper)* Yes. He must have loved her—in his fashion.

JACK—*(looking at the letter in his hand which he had forgotten)* Ah, I forgot. I have proof positive of her innocence and noble-mindedness. Here is a letter which she wrote and sent to me the morning I was leaving. It's only a few words. Read it Mr. Doubting Thomas. *(hands letter to the Older Man)*

THE OLDER MAN—*(His hands tremble.) (aside)* Her writing. *(reading aloud)* "I must keep my oath. He needs me and I must stay. To be true to myself I must be true to him. *(aside "My God I was wrong after all")* Sometime I may send for you. Good-bye" signed Yvette. *(He folds the letter up slowly, puts it back in the envelope and hands it to Jack. Suddenly he turns to him with quick suspicion.)* What does she mean by that last sentence?

JACK—When I left I gave her my address in the States and she promised to let me know if she changed her mind or if conditions changed.

THE OLDER MAN—*(with grim irony)* You mean if the drunken husband died.

JACK—*(his face growing hard)* Yes. That's what I mean.

THE OLDER MAN—Well how do you know he hasn't? Have you ever heard from her since?

JACK—Only the one time when she sent the picture I showed you. I received the letter from her in Cape Town a year ago. It had been forwarded from the States. She said her husband had disappeared soon after I left. No one knew where he had gone but the rumor was that he had set out on my trail for vengeance, refusing to believe in her innocence. *(grimly patting his gun)* I'm sorry he didn't find me.

THE OLDER MAN—*(He has by this time regained control of himself and speaks quite calmly.)* Where is she now?

JACK—Living with her parents in New York. She wrote to say that she would wait a year longer. If he did not return to her by then she would become legally free of him and would send for me. The year is up today but *(hopelessly)* I have received no word. *(walks back and looks into the darkness as if hoping to see someone coming)*

THE OLDER MAN—*(suddenly remembers the telegram he has. He takes it from his pocket as if to give it to Jack; then hesitates and says in agony)* My God I cannot! *(as he realizes the full significance of what the telegram says. Mastered by a contrary impulse he goes to burn it in the camp fire but again hesitates. Finally as Jack returns slowly to the camp fire he turns quickly and hands the telegram to him.)* Cheer up! Here's a surprise for you. Read this. Old Pete brought it from Lawson before you returned and I forgot all about it. I opened it by mistake thinking it might have something to do with the mine. *(He turns quickly away as if unable to bear the sight of Jack's elation.)*

(Jack feverishly opens the yellow envelope. His face lights up and he gives an exclamation of joy and rushes to the Older Man.)

JACK—It's too good to be true. Tell me I am not dreaming.

THE OLDER MAN—(*He looks at Jack steadily for a moment, then tries hard to smile and mutters*) Congratulations. (*He is suffering horribly.*)

JACK— (*misunderstanding the cause of his emotion*) Never mind Old Pal I won't be gone long and when I come back I'll bring her with me.

THE OLDER MAN—(*hastily*) No. I'll manage all right. Better stay East for a while. We'll need someone there when the work really starts.

JACK—When can I get a train?

THE OLDER MAN—If you ride hard and start right away you can get to Lawson in time for the Limited at three in the morning.

JACK— (*rushing off with saddle under arm*) My horse is hobbled at the mouth of the canyon.

THE OLDER MAN—(*stands in front of tent*) So I have found him after all these years and I cannot even hate him. What tricks Fate plays with us. When he told me his name that first day I noticed that it was the same as the man's I was looking for. But he seemed such a boy to me and my heart went out to him so strongly that I never for an instant harbored the idea that he could be the John Sloan I was after. Of course he never knew my right name. I wonder what he would say if he knew. I've half a mind to tell him. But no, what's the use? Why should I mar his happiness? In this affair I alone am to blame and I must pay. As I listened to his story this evening until no doubt remained that he was the John Sloan I had sworn to kill, my hand reached for my gun and all the old hate flared up in my heart. And then I remembered his face as he looked that day in the Transvaal when he bent over me after saving my life at the risk of his own. I could almost hear his words as he spoke that day when death was so near: "All right, old pal, you're all right." Then my hand left my gun and the old hatred died out forever. I could not do it. (*He pauses and a bitter smile comes over his face as at some new thought.*) O what a fool I have been. She was true to me in spite of what I was. God bless him for telling me so. God grant they may both be happy—the only two beings I have ever loved. And I—must keep wandering on. I cannot be the ghost at their feast.

JACK—(*entering hurriedly, putting on spurs, hat, etc.*) Good-bye Old Pal. I'm sorry to leave you this way but I have waited so long for this. You understand don't you?

THE OLDER MAN—(*slowly*) Yes. (*grasping his hand and looking deep into his eyes*) Good-bye and God bless you both.

JACK—(*feelingly*) Good-bye. (*exits*)

THE OLDER MAN—(*sits down by the camp fire and buries face in his hands. Finally he rouses himself with an effort, stirs the camp fire and smiling with a whimsical sadness softly quotes:*) Greater love hath no man than this that he giveth his wife for his friend.

(*The Curtain Falls*)