

The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

Ohio State Engineer

- Title:** The Engineer's Bookshelf
- Creators:** Dumble, Wilson R.
- Issue Date:** Mar-1934
- Publisher:** Ohio State University, College of Engineering
- Citation:** Ohio State Engineer, vol. 17, no. 5 (March, 1934), 7-8.
- URI:** <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/35123>
- Appears in Collections:** [Ohio State Engineer: Volume 17, no. 5 \(March, 1934\)](#)

The Engineer's Bookshelf

By Wilson R. Dumble

TOBACCO ROAD—*Erskine Caldwell*—Grosset & Dunlap (\$1.00).

DAYS WITHOUT END—*Eugene O'Neill*—Random House (\$2.50).

Tobacco Road

Good novels, as a rule, it seems, cannot be converted into good plays. Please do not ask me why; I do not know, nor do I understand why it cannot be done. I merely know from watching the theatre during the last twenty years that such is not the case. The most outstanding exception, however, was "Rain," made over from the short story, "Sadie Thompson," by W. Somerset Maugham. "Rain" had a splendid run in New York City with the late Jeanne Eagles as Sadie, and then, for several years to follow, it was played throughout this hinterland by various stock companies. It was even put in the movies, Gloria Swanson doing it for the silent films several years ago, and Joan Crawford for the talkies. But on the other hand, one remembers such wide-selling novels as "Elmer Gantry" and "Main Street," both by Sinclair Lewis, lasting only a few weeks after they were transcribed from the novel to the stage.

But at long last Broadway is seeing a play made from a book which is a huge success, despite the first night critics who said that it could not live more than the first week or so. I refer to "Tobacco Road" by Erskine Caldwell, which opened on Broadway during the height of the Christmas theatrical season and which is one of the outstanding attractions. No doubt its success is due to the splendid acting of Henry Hull who takes the chief role of Jeeter Lester. All critics, naturally, praised the fine work of Mr. Hull, but in the same breath claimed that the theme of the piece was too revolting to guarantee its existence on the stage.

When I read the criticisms in the New York newspapers I was interested to read the novel, published in 1932. Somehow I had missed it. Anyway, after securing a copy, and reading it I discovered that all the critics said about it were quite true. It is strong meat, and a good many people are properly licensed to be shocked by the candor of the author. "Tobacco Road" is the story of the disintegration of the Lester family, a family of poor white trash in the God-forsaken backwoods of Georgia; one has only to read it to grasp its full meaning. There is humor, there is pathos and there is tragedy; and I suppose it does touch the universal when old man Jeeter tearfully leaves the soil from which he has wrenched a miserable existence to go to work in a factory in neighboring Augusta. But the sordid side far offsets these points. The sight of old Jeeter, lazy,

slow-witted, dishonest, waiting on his back porch for his decrepit old mother to bring in branches for the fire; the glimpse of Jeeter's wife, shabby and terrible, whose one ambition is to have a stylish dress to be buried in; or the presence of the hairlipped daughter, gabbling while she scratches in the earth to find roots to feed on; these are the coals which feed the terrible plot.

And throughout the novel this joyless picture does not change. Old Jeeter gives his youngest and fair-haired daughter to a neighbor as a wife for the sum of seven dollars; Grandma Lester dies in the woods but no member of the family goes to find her—although they mean to do it some day; the worthless son marries a traveling woman preacher, twice his age, on her promise to buy him a new Ford car, the same car which runs over and kills his mother. That is about all that happens; and yet, as a novel it is interesting to read. However, does that explain why it is a current attraction on Broadway? Is it the sordid side of life, a life that is so off-key from what one generally believes American life to be, that draws the crowd? I do not know; I only know that since reading the book I do not wish to see the play.

Days Without End

Speaking of the theater, Eugene O'Neill has another new play running on Broadway and which at the same time has been published in book form. This one he calls "Days Without End," and as in the case of his other productions is a challenge to criticism. This latest one presents struggle in a simple and accepted form and—of all things—it is given a happy ending. It is a record of a man's battle against the evil in his own nature, a battle against his personal demon. John Loving, so the story goes, casts off divine love when, as a boy, he renounced his religion because of the deaths of his parents. At last, however, he loves, marries and would have lived happily except for the demon of denial who carries on the fight, dividing his personality. When, later on, John is face to face with the loss of his wife, he conquers his bad self by confession at the foot of the cross.

That, briefly, is the story. Of course it has brought a storm of criticism. People either like it or they do not like it. Personally I cannot make a decision, and chiefly, I imagine, because it is so different from the O'Neill I already know. I do not believe that while I read it, it made the spirit triumph in me. From a reading of "Days Without End," I believe I prefer the earlier O'Neill; I might change my mind if I saw the stage production.

Esquire

So much comment is being made nowadays about the

new men's magazine, *Esquire*, that it no doubt deserves a line or two in any column. *Esquire* appeared last October as a quarterly, and the reception was so favorable that its publishers decided to make it a monthly publication. To date four issues have been placed on news stands and the sale in all parts of the country has been very large.

It is printed on splendid paper, is a convenient size and contains a list of contributors that reads like Who's Who. In the January issue, for instance, there were articles by Ernest Hemingway, Emil Ludwig, John Dos Passos and Louis Golding among others; short stories by Thomas Burke, Andre Maurois and John D. Swain; sports articles by Westbrook Pegler, Jack Dempsey and Bobby Jones; a splendid page of book reviews by Burton Rascoe; some poetry by Johnny V. A. Weaver; numerous humor sketches by George Ade, Irvin S. Cobb and Robert Buckner, and the most splendid collection of advertising that has been seen in any magazine.

That *Esquire* is worth reading is plain to see. It appears to be a splendid combination of *Stage*, *New Yorker*, *Ballyhoo* and a few others. One is able to spend a most diverting evening between its pages.

Repeal Night

And speaking of magazines I am tempted to comment about a short story by Katherine Brush which appeared in the March *Cosmopolitan*. Miss Brush calls it "Repeal Night," and I claim it is worth reading. It concerns a group of young married people who inhabit Westchester County, who devote all their time to the worship of Bacchus, and who, on that memorable night in November when Utah was about to ratify, set out to get their first legal drink. What happens to the group can be seen in the story; naturally, it stands to reason that they are unable to wait for the ratification by that famous western state, and finally end up in their favorite speakeasy in the Forties. It is not the story that counts so much, as it is in the manner in which the story is presented. Nobody, I wager, but Miss Brush could write such a story; nor could anyone have written it without first having been associated with such a group. It is sheer delight, a reading of "Repeal Night," for in it you will see all of the Country Club set back home, understand their futile strivings for a so-called good time, and realize that there are many hundreds of thousands of people in this country today, who have consumed quantities of intoxicants, and yet, never until last November, took a legal drink.

Miss Brush is an interesting person. Now living in Manhattan, she is a native of East Liverpool, Ohio, where I am told she was accustomed to spend her summer afternoons under a shady tree in the yard of her home, pounding, pounding, pounding at her typewriter. Her first story, "Glitter," won a prize from College Humor, and later she published a novel, a good one, too, called "Young Man of Manhattan." Her short story, "Night Club," won fame a couple of years ago and has worked its way into several notable college anthologies. I would not be surprised if "Repeal Night" did the same thing.