

O'Neill's Authorial Voice: The Prismatic Autobiography of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

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Since its premiere in Stockholm in the winter of 1956, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* has been the holy grail of dramaturges around the world. It is the quintessential psychological thriller—entirely autobiographical yet universal in its depiction of stubbornly faithful and hateful familial ties. Suffering in the public domain for the duration of his life and career, playwright Eugene O'Neill finally put pen to paper and exorcised his life's demons in the conceptualization of this preeminent work. Heretofore, most analyses of the play have been of its character, Edmund, as representative of O'Neill himself. This work attempts to delve into the deeper waters of the play, connecting layers of each character's psyche to that of the playwright at various junctures throughout his life as they are made clear via O'Neill's prismatic authorial voice. Through text analysis, connections are formed between lines in the context of the play itself and their underlying meanings in the context of the author's human experience. In this way, this article finds *Long Day's Journey Into Night* as a character alone in its entirety, an all-encompassing self portrait of the poet. This article aims to articulate the capabilities of dramaturgy as more than text analysis, but as a means to finding deeper artistic significance within the fabric of known and unknown plays alike.

Introduction

Eugene O'Neill's final trilogy is regarded by many as some of the greatest works within American realism. *Long Day's Journey Into Night*⁴, the middle play, addresses the history of substance abuse and mental illness which plagued his family for three generations—it is known as near-perfect autobiographical work. The play documents the final summer O'Neill spent with his parents and brother in their New England home. Ella Q. O'Neill (represented in the play by the character Mary Tyrone) surrendered to her morphine addiction and O'Neill himself (Edmund Tyrone, in the play), enjoyed his first publications in the *New London Telegraph* while battling an onset of tuberculosis. The character of Edmund has been analyzed by critics as a clear dramatic representation of the author as he was in the year the play is set. This article, in contrast, explores O'Neill's achievement of a prismatic autobiography—one simultaneously distorted and clarified through its representation by all characters of the Tyrone family portrait.

Theatre critics, dramaturgs, and audiences oftentimes find it difficult to study the works of Eugene O'Neill without connecting them to his own life tragedies. Each play seems to paint a period of his own journey, and for the coherence of the following reflection, interlaced accounts of the playwright's timeline are essential. Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born on October 16, 1888 in a New York City Hotel on 43rd Street and Broadway¹. He was son to James O'Neill (named "James Tyrone" in *Long Day's Journey*), an Irish-born actor, who sold out to success in the Count of Monte Cristo, but who could have become a great Shakespearean actor. Eugene O'Neill unabashedly depicted this same man in *Long Day's Journey*:

TYRONE: I could have been a great Shakespearean actor if I'd kept on, I know that! In 1874 when Edwin Booth came to the theatre in Chicago where I was leading man, I played Cassius to his Brutus one night, Brutus to his Cassius the next, Othello to his

Iago and so on. The first night I played Othello, he said to our manager, 'That young man is playing Othello better than I ever did!'

O'Neill the elder achieved great financial success and security for his day, as would his son with his plays. After developing a case of tuberculosis, Eugene was admitted to Gaylord Farm Sanatorium, where he would live for five months. In *Long Day's Journey*, Edmund has fallen victim to tuberculosis, but has yet to experience time in a sanatorium. In fact, his brother Jamie fights vehemently against his being sent off to one. Ironically, the very place the young men of the play fear the most is where Eugene O'Neil, at age 24, chose his vocation—it was at Gaylord Farm Sanatorium that he decided to become a dramatist. He dedicated himself to the study of Strindberg, who he said in his 1936 Nobel Prize for Literature acceptance speech gave him "the vision for what modern drama could be."² Upon his release in 1913, O'Neill wrote eleven one-act plays in the home of a private New London family. James O'Neill financed the publication of six by the Gorham Press in Boston, and in 1914 Eugene enrolled, at his father's persistence, in George Pierce Baker's playwriting course at Harvard. As seen in *Long Day's Journey*, James Tyrone bitterly takes on the responsibility of having employed Jamie, time and time again, regardless of his supposed disobedience and neglect:

TYRONE: If you weren't my son, there isn't a manager in the business who would give you a part, your reputation stinks so. As it is, I have to humble my pride and beg for you, saying you've turned over a new leaf, although I know it's a lie!

JAMIE: I never wanted to be an actor. You forced me on the stage.

TYRONE: That's a lie! You made no effort to find anything else to do. You left it to me to get you a job and I have no influence except in the theater...

The initial success of O'Neill was in part due

to the aid of a father respected in the theatre, and this perhaps festered in a guilty subconscious. Did O'Neill feel forced into the world of the theatre? If he did, he certainly attempted to escape it during his years at sea, which will be discussed later. For now, we are examining O'Neill, the young budding playwright. The amount of groundbreaking doctrine Eugene was exposed to in Baker's course at Harvard is speculated to have been limited, but it was under Baker's tutelage that O'Neill learned the essential components of a substantial dramatic work. Gaining from the course what he found to be enough, O'Neill, as was his custom, left after one year and shuffled on to Manhattan, to live and work amongst the Greenwich Villagers. This team of artists, radicals, and characters included Susan Glaspell, who would settle on Cape Cod in the summer of 1915 and establish the Provincetown Players, an amateur theatre group in need of material. O'Neill would be the one to supply it¹.

From this point onward, O'Neill's professional life appears an upward spiral of success. One of his very first full-length plays, *Beyond the Horizon*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1918 and ran on Broadway for roughly five months. Not long after, he would win another Pulitzer in 1922 with *Anna Christie*, and yet again in 1928 for *Strange Interlude*. At a time in which there were virtually no American dramatists, O'Neill became the first, and was internationally hailed as the greatest. With this recognition came financial prosperity, similar to the kind his father enjoyed throughout his own career. Act IV of *Long Day's Journey* provides not only insight into James Tyrone's own conflict with monetary prosperity, but Eugene's as well. O'Neill the younger villainized materialism in American society in a series of plays, "The Cycle", also entitled *A Tale of Possessors Dispossessed*, but these plays were mostly thrown out. Perhaps his vehemence against the nation's consumerist culture did not agree with the fragile and broken state in which the Great Depression had left it; and perhaps he himself, having not been financially injured by the economic crash, felt insecure

about brashly addressing such a sensitive matter. In relation to the subject of money in *Long Day's Journey*, Tyrone seems to vocalize O'Neill's exploration of his own complex feelings towards security:

TYRONE: I've never been able to believe my luck since. I've always feared it would change and everything would be taken away. But still, the more property you own, the safer you think you are.

O'Neill's three marriages each demanded monetary stability. His third marriage needed to survive the Depression; therefore, it is only natural that O'Neill would have found a solace in the ownership of land, just as his father had. It was crucial to O'Neill that his source of wealth be founded in true art, and not reaped from commercial success; this underlying insecurity and paranoia regarding his work was undoubtedly on account of his father. James Tyrone had sold his soul to the touring success, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and he confesses:

TYRONE: That God-damned play I bought for a song and made such a great success in—a great money success—it ruined me with its promise of an easy fortune. I didn't want to do anything else, and by the time I woke up to the fact I'd become a slave to the damned thing and did try other plays, it was too late.

As previously stated, Eugene was dedicated to the poetry of drama, and it was that poetry which motivated each of his dramatic endeavors. This romantic inspiration was shared with his father and textualized by Tyrone, but also laced with the poetic devotion of Eugene. "I loved Shakespeare. I would have acted in his plays for nothing, for the joy of being alive in his poetry" (page 150). Eugene's struggle with his wealth could be summarized in Tyrone's line, "a few years later my good bad luck made me find the big money-maker." O'Neill's wealth was just that—"good bad luck," and as defended by Tyrone, "...a great temptation" (page 150). James Tyrone invested

money in real estate, and his son similarly invested his luck in land. Tyrone says bitterly, "What the hell was it I wanted to buy, I wonder, that was worth—well, no matter. It's a late day for regrets" (page 150). What Eugene O'Neill wanted was to buy a home.

O'Neill experienced an unideal and unstable upbringing. Within his very first years, he traveled from one hotel to the other, living life on tour with his parents and older brother. His mother, Ella, never approved of actors or a life in the theatre and would forever regard it as a sleazy profession. Mary's lament in Act I verbalizes this animosity but also foreshadows the following analysis of Eugene's complex desire for belonging:

MARY: Oh, I'm so sick and tired of your pretending this is a home! You don't know how to act in a home! You don't really want one! You never have wanted one—never since the day we were married! You should have remained a bachelor and lived in second-rate hotels and entertained your friends in barrooms!

Ella's difficulties in bearing Eugene "on the road" are what supposedly resulted in her drug addiction, which Eugene would resent and bear the guilt of his entire life. He was born ten years after his brother James, from whom Edmund, the middle boy, caught the measles and died at little over one year old. Edmund's birthday was a painful day for Ella and instigated her first drug episode. In 1903, at the age of fifteen, Eugene was informed by his father and brother of Ella's addiction. Around this time, Ella had attempted to drown herself in the river near to the family's New London summer home. The event naturally ruined any chance of the temporary home as a haven for the playwright to look back fondly on. The O'Neill men were luckily present to save her, but the episode made it impossible to hide Ella's demons from the young Eugene any longer. This same year marks O'Neill's introduction to hard drinking—he would battle alcoholism until 1926, when he forced himself to make the choice between alcohol and his

work. When he was only 8 years old, Eugene was sent away to St. Aloysius, a Catholic boarding school, which he resented greatly (page 392¹). A complicated relationship with the church, rooted in its seeming rejection of his suffering mother's devotion and the cold and disciplinary staff, made for comfortless and homeless formative years. From the boarding school, he was sent to a military school, then to Betts Academy in Stamford, CT. After graduating in 1906, he attended Princeton University for nine months, after which he was expelled for "poor scholastic standing." He had been previously suspended for drunken misconduct—legend has it he threw a rock through the window of then-university president, Woodrow Wilson. It seems that Eugene grew to instinctively reject any possibility of a home being made at Princeton, or at any of his other schools; in each place, no family was present. However, despite these rejections throughout his youth, O'Neill never ceased pining for home; As Mary states, "He doesn't understand a home. He doesn't feel at home in it. And yet, he wants a home." (page 61).

On his own accord, O'Neill first attempted to establish his own home at sea. The ocean plays a significant role in the life and work of O'Neill—a photograph reveals the playwright, age seven, with a sketchbook in hand gazing intensely out to sea. The family's summer home, unambiguously named "Monte Cristo Cottage," sat right at the waterfront, and he would return there every summer while at school. After his expulsion, it seems only fitting that he would pursue the life of a seaman. His voyages at sea would remain perhaps his most precious memories, and this sentiment is reflected in a series of works—from *Anna Christie*, *The Hairy Ape*, and *The Iceman Cometh*—but is perhaps most eloquently glorified through Edmund at the conclusion of *Long Day's Journey*:

EDMUND: When I was on the square head square rigger, bound for Bueno Aires. Full moon in the trades, the old hooker driving 14 knots. I lay on the bowsprit, facing astern,

with the water foaming into spume under me. Every mast with sail white in the moonlight towering high above me. I became drunk with the beauty and singing rhythm of it—and for a second I lost myself, actually lost my life. I was set free! I dissolved into the sea, became white sails and flying spray—became beauty and rhythm, became moonlight and the ship and the high dim-starred sky. I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of man, to Life itself!

As it is poetic, *Long Day's Journey* is accurate—in 1910, O'Neill shipped out on a Norwegian square-rigger bound for Buenos Aires. At the end of the two-month voyage, he worked and failed at a series of odd jobs, and proceeded to live the life of a waterfront vagabond. Later in life he inscribed in a volume of his plays for an Argentinian library, "I doubt that there was a single park bench in Buenos Aires that had not served me as a bed..." (page 30²). His next voyage, to South Africa, would ultimately return him to America in 1911, whereupon he took up residence in a waterfront saloon in New York City, known about town as "Johnny the Priest's." O'Neill would later immortalize the institution by designating it as the interior setting of *Anna Christie*. After his stint in the waterfront slumming, O'Neill set out to sea again, this time to Southampton, England, on an American liner. After returning home from the voyage, two of his seamen companions committed suicide, and not soon after O'Neill himself attempted the same at Johnny the Priest's. O'Neill briefly refers to the attempt in *Long Day's Journey*, only switching the name of the priest from "Johnny" to "Jimmie":

EDMUND: Dully sarcastic: Yes, particularly the time I tried to commit suicide at Jimmie the Priest's, and almost did.

TYRONE: You weren't in your right mind. No son of mine would ever—you were drunk.

EDMUND: I was stone cold sober.

As chilling as it may be, Edmund's frank and unattached memory of the action serves as an exorcism or confession for O'Neill himself. Simultaneously, Tyrone's denial of the incident embodies the paternal sadness O'Neill later grew to understand as father to a son, Shane O'Neill, who battled with drug and alcohol addiction. Shane himself attempted suicide multiple times throughout Eugene's lifetime. After Eugene O'Neill's suicide attempt, he returned with his family to their New London home in the spring of 1912—the very time and setting of *Long Day's Journey*.

The above evidence leads to the conclusion that O'Neill associates pain with home. This association perhaps contributed to his "misunderstanding" of home; Mary accuses Tyrone of the same misunderstanding. The curse of a past and a future, O'Neill observes, is the tether of the living, for Edmund relishes in his moment at sea "...without past or future" (page 153). O'Neill concludes that freedom and belonging are fully achieved in death, where there is no past nor future. Being at sea was the closest O'Neill would ever feel to that sense of belonging or home. He had idealized the conceptual home as a place free of pain. Idealistically, homes were then the opposite of his temporary "places of inhabitation," where drugs, alcohol, illness and suicide haunted him. By the time he had written *Long Day's Journey*, his brother Jamie finally succumbed to his alcoholism. In accordance with the family curse, both of O'Neill's sons suffered at the hands of drug addiction and ultimately committed suicide. Shane after, but Edmund Jr. just months before, the playwright's death. His home in Provincetown had been washed into the sea in a storm, his second home sold, and his third, in Bermuda, given to his second wife in their divorce. All past inhabitations were rendered nonexistent, and even in the more stately mansions he would build, he never rediscovered that sensation at sea. His third wife, Carlotta, loved luxury, and so their first residence of two years was a forty-five-room chateau at Saint Antoine du Rocher, where he felt uneasy. After their sojourn in France, the couple returned to New York, where they began

plans for an extravagant mansion on Sea Island Beach, Georgia. "Casa Genotta" as they called it, had romantic intentions—they desired for it to be haven for their new marriage as well as Eugene's work, equipping it with an elaborate study facing the sea—but it proved to be stiflingly hot, and produced only his never-completed "Cycle" series. However, with the cash benefit awarded to him from the Nobel Prize, O'Neill sought to create a new home in which he could find peace (page 129³).

Long Day's Journey Into Night was written around 1940–41 at "Tao House" in Danville, California. "Tao" translates as "the right way of life", and the home embodied Taoist ideals which had appealed to Eugene as young man for their rejection of materialism and American consumerism. The study built in this home was purely functional—a small, grey wood-paneled room—and encouraged a humility and inwardness which birthed the objectivity of *Long Day's Journey* (page 58²). He resided here for six years—longer than he had in any home—and this brief peace is echoed in Act I:

TYRONE: It's been heaven to me. This home has been a home again. [his son looks at him, for the first time with an understanding sympathy. It is as if suddenly a deep bond of common feeling existed between them]

Yet, even in the apparent haven that was Tao House, O'Neill's voice, through Mary, moans: "I've never felt it was my home. It was wrong from the start." (page 44) and again through Edmund: "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..." (page 154).

O'Neill spent his last days in Boston; he had chosen the city for its reputation as the medical capital of the country, but no one yet knew how to treat his unrecognizable illness—what we know today to be Parkinson's disease. He and Carlotta took up residence in a hotel where doctors could make calls whenever needed, and it was there that he died in November of 1953. His prophecy to Baker in 1914 had been fulfilled—when he was no longer an artist, he

was nothing. A day before his death, sitting himself up and wildly looking around the room, O'Neill cried out, "I knew it, I knew it! Born in a goddamn hotel room and dying in a hotel room" (page 505¹). In those words, the conscious voice of James Tyrone, the disapproving and stranded soul of Mary, are heard. Forever grieving the absence of an inherited or adopted home, America's greatest dramatist lived in tragic ignorance of the fact that in his art and his work, he always had a home. Perhaps to the young boy behind the artistic legend, that would never be enough.

In retrospect, all facets of O'Neill's emotional memory inhabit the space between the lines of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Within each character's perception of each other lies his own varied points of view—he looks on each person with several contradictory layers of understanding. Because Edmund, Jamie, Mary, and James all physicalize and vocalize multiple periods of O'Neill's life, his prismatic authorial voice creates one of the most humanistic and psychologically articulate plays ever written for the stage.

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Further Reading:

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Madelyn Dempsey Dundon is a recent graduate (degree in dance and minors in theatre and art history) of the College of Creative Arts and it's Class of 2020 Outstanding Senior! She is a performing artist and aspiring dramaturg and historian. She made her award-winning screen debut as the title character in the SONY Pictures feature film *Getting Grace*. Madelyn studied classical voice at Moravian College and at the Manhattan School of Music. Prior to WVU, she received her dance training at the Pennsylvania Youth Ballet and at the Rock School in Philadelphia. Dundon's recent creative works includes a one-woman play *Encountering Shakespeare: How Two Americans Saved the Bard*, presented at the Folger Shakespeare Library, where she is a certified reader and alumna of the selective Public Programs Internship. In collaboration with WVU Art History faculty, Dundon wrote and produced a one woman play on the life and work of WVU alumna and renown abstract artist Blanche Lazzell, which she performed at local elementary schools. Most recently, Dundon developed a dramaturgical casebook on *Esplanade*, the iconic masterwork by American choreographer Paul Taylor, which she performed in WVU's 2020 Dance Now! concert, earning her an internship with the Paul Taylor Dance Company in New York City. Since graduating, Madelyn starred in her next feature film, *Lucky Louie*, anticipated for release this summer. She recently joined the team of Donegal Square Celtic Imports in Bethlehem, PA, where she is pursuing her passion for her heritage and Ireland's history as a writer and researcher for the business's online platforms.

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