

Eugene o'Neill: LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

This work is interesting enough for its history. Completed in 1940, *Long Day's Journey Into the Night* is an autobiographical play Eugene O'Neill wrote that--because of the highly personal writing about his family--was not to be released until 25 years after his death, which occurred in 1953. But since O'Neill's immediate family had died in the early 1920s, his wife allowed publication of the play in 1956. Besides the history alone, the play is fascinating in its own right. It tells of the "Tyrones"--a fictional name for what is clearly the O'Neills. Theirs is not a happy tale: The youngest son (Edmond) is sent to a sanitarium to recover from tuberculosis; he despises his father for sending him; his mother is wrecked by narcotics; and his older brother by drink. In real-life these factors conspired to turn O'Neill into who he was--a tormented individual and a brilliant playwright.

This was the environment, respectably middle class on the surface, obsessed and tortured inside, out of which our most gigantic writer of tragedy emerged.

One sees seemingly strong James, ashamed of himself for selling out his acting abilities for financial security. Mary, lonely from James' years of touring, has turned to an opium addiction that she can not seem to confront. Jamie, from hate of his father's stinginess and his own self-blame, loses himself in alcohol and whores. And sweet, artistic, tubulcular Edmund (O'Neill's alter ego) plays witness in the deterioration of his family's web of pain, denial and lies. All they want is for morning to come, another day to let the fog come in around them so they can forget again.

Play and players lure you into the hellish lives of Eugene O'Neill's family and lock you in their warfare for one long day. A fog horn bleats mournfully dawn to dusk, enclosing Mother, Father, and two sons in suffocating and terrifying battle, separately and together. It is nearly unbearable to watch. *Long Day's Journey Into Night* unleashes O'Neill's rage against his family, each of them filled with undisguised self-hatred, pain and desperate need for one another. They have arrived at the moment when they can no longer talk of fixing the garden, or taking an afternoon drive, or getting on with the mechanical business of living, or talk at all. Any word spoken precipitates an emotional collision, for they have reached the end of endurance. Roiling passions break through superficial civilities, punctuated by the father's hearty alcoholism, the eldest son's plunge into self destructiveness, the mother's drug addiction, the younger son's "consumption" from within and imminent death.

O'Neill distilled his own tormented experience for this, his last play, and refined a mode of tragic realism he earlier had introduced on the American stage. While the mode usually involves representing, if not disclosing, otherwise hidden feelings, here they feel nearly literal and untransformed. Mary Tyrone closely resembles O'Neill's fragile and lost mother Ella; James Tyrone, his successful actor-father James, the simplest of these four characters; James Jr., the sensual lover of wine, women and song, with a wild, Irish flair for grand poetry; and young Edmund, physically slight, published for the first time in a local newspaper when he learns of his fatal illness. The two brothers share Eugene's traits: Edmund, his introversion, Jamie his romantic excess.

The play highlights Tyrone's stinginess, giving him a comic outline--in fact the men stage more comedy than comes off the page. The father with his tenth grade education regularly undercuts his more verbal and volatile sons with eccentric opinions, like his belief that Shakespeare was an Irish Catholic. In Act 3, his objections to lighting the electric lights during his card game with Jamie generates one of the most theatrical moments of the play,

when the dark symbolically encroaches on them all. But not so humorously, the scornful Jamie needs to bully Tyrone out of his plan to send the sick Edmund to a state sanatorium 'on the cheap.'

In general, the men play off each other well. Dennehy, a slow moving bear of a man, always suggests reserves of power in check, whereas the energetic Hoffman lets it all out, and Edmund clutches himself in despair. In a sense, he is O'Neill's Hamlet--acutely sensitive, deeply attached to a mother who disappoints him. She perceives neither his gifts nor the streak of morbidity expressed in his poems. Still, stage father and sons too often go at each other full tilt: their wrangling rises quickly to highest pitch and remains there on one note. In Act 3 (4 and 5 of the original text), which is all revelation, angry punch and counter punch make the day long indeed.

Those who saw Sir Laurence Olivier's James Tyrone in London, or Frederick March's in the original New York production, felt certain the play centered around him. With this production it's easy to imagine O'Neill wrote the piece for Vanessa Redgrave, who makes Mary Tyrone not only credible, but a fascinating holy terror. It took O'Neill all his life to exorcise this demonic mother, and the cost obviously was exorbitant. He loved her and hated her, and the play spares Mary Tyrone no humiliation. Allowing her no cover for her lies, O'Neill unveils the huge selfishness with which she blames husband and son for her plight, while at the same time remaining deeply in denial of her addiction. With all the tyranny of the weak and the deviousness of the invalid, Mary several times screams defiance at them, physically stopping Edmund's mouth with her hands, for instance, when she guesses he has been condemned to death by tuberculosis. She explodes in a fury at the mere idea, while he desperately hopes for her comfort. She cannot risk getting close to that much real life, nor allowing that much attention to stray from herself, so she retreats even farther into a hallucinatory past. By nightfall she lives entirely in her own impenetrable haze.

Vanessa Redgrave's luminous performance captures every nuance in the mother's subtle mixture of horror and pathos. Initially she is all nervous vulnerability, fearful of exposure, fluttering at the edge of panic as her need for a morphine dose approaches; by afternoon she has gained the confidence of the drug, though her erratic self control shows in small bursts of violence. Every move of Redgrave's expressive face and body reveal Mary Tyrone's strategies for screening out the world with needling, or self-pitying talk, or compulsive playing on an imaginary piano whenever reality threatens. In a psychologically precise moment, when Edmund tries in vain to reach her about his illness, she distractedly tries to "explain," she says, that it is worry over him which has disturbed her peace of mind. The audience gasps at her callousness; he collapses in distress, to which she is blind. She goes on: she lost a soul she no longer called her own, she says with something like self discovery, and needs to find it again. It's the line that motivates her last scene, when she wanders around the room carrying her wedding dress, looking for an unknown something that would make everything right.

It doesn't matter that neither Mary Tyrone nor the play, for that matter, is quite credible as "real" nor as pure fiction. Nor is she the great tragic heroine of American drama, as some critics claim. This is a holy terror bred on foolish babble about the Virgin Mary while living in a convent school, her time of happy girlhood, before she married the glamorous actor James Tyrone and "fell" into the world. There's no doubt that Mary sees herself as fallen; far from having shed her Catholicism, it remains the chief source of her fantasies. Her bathetic history of traveling with James on his tours, "filthy" hotels, "bad food," lonely and friendless among theater folk, the summer house (in New London where the play is set) that will never be a home--all are the self aggrandizing deprivations driving her back to fond memories of music lessons and the nuns. And all are morphia induced, repeated over and over again in a litany of the unsayable. "I don't blame anybody," she protests coyly, as she lays out sins of neglect by husband, sons, the doctor who started her on morphine, all responsible for her life, as she

plainly is not. Mary is pitiable, but O'Neill offers her no trait of character or mind that might redeem her or create tragic affect. It is remarkable that he carried a vision of this mother, true or not, all his writing life.

Perhaps Mary Tyrone provided a silhouette for the virago Amanda Wingfield, at least to the extent that playwrights know plays. Arthur Gelb's biography of O'Neill is a lot kinder to the historical Ella than her son was with this play. If it is to be trusted about the O'Neill men, they, rather than Mary, may have needed to deal more directly with their legacies of Irish Catholicism: Jamie with his skewed good girl, bad girl ideas about women whom the father calls "sluts," Edmund with his secret marriage and child, Tyrone with his flirtatious preening and dependency on a submissive but distant female audience. Then there is O'Neill himself, who cast the Virgin Mary in the role of wife with *Iceman Cometh* before turning back to her in *Long Day*. It's a rich topic that deserves an essay of its own.

Short Summary

The entire play takes place in the family room of the Tyrones' summer home. The year is 1912, the time is one August morning, and Mary and James enter after breakfast. We soon learn that Mary has recently returned from treatment at a sanatorium for her morphine addiction. In Act One's opening, we also learn that Edmund has been away traveling, and that recently his health has been deteriorating. He's developed a terrible cough. Jamie and Edmund enter, and James and Tyrone can't seem to resist fighting. A bit of teasing becomes bitter arguing, but Edmund and Mary intercede and calm them down. Edmund tries to tell a humorous story about one of their tenants, but Tyrone doesn't appreciate and Edmund's interpretation of events. Tyrone calls him a socialist and an anarchist, and Edmund, sick of being criticized, goes upstairs coughing. Mary is worried but refuses to hear talk that Edmund might be truly sick. She goes into the kitchen to supervise the help. With her gone, Jamie and Tyrone talk frankly about Edmund: he might have consumption. The two men fight bitterly, going through a series of arguments we will hear many times before the end of the play: Tyrone accuses Jamie of being without direction, and Jamie accuses Tyrone of being miserly. He blames Mary's morphine addiction on his father's bargain hunting and the consequent shoddy medical care. Mary returns, and the two men shut up. They go out to work on the lawn. Edmund comes down, and he tries to talk to Mary. She's concerned about his health, and he's concerned about hers. He tries to talk frankly about her problems with morphine, because he feels she should confront her past. She seems to prefer to avoid the topic. She complains about Tyrone's miserliness, and how because of it she has never had a real home. He goes out to the lawn to lie in the shade while the other two men work, and Mary is left alone.

Act Two, Scene One. Just before lunchtime. Edmund chats with Cathleen, the hired girl. Jamie comes in and sneaks a drink; Mary has been upstairs all morning, and Jamie fears that Mary is taking morphine. Edmund denies it, but when Mary comes downstairs her strange, detached manner confirms Jamie's suspicions. Later, Tyrone enters and sees soon what has happened. Finally, even Edmund can no longer deny that Mary has slipped back into use of the drug.

Act Two, Scene Two. Just after lunch. Mary criticizes Tyrone for being addicted to bad real estate investments. They receive a phone call from Dr. Hardy, and Tyrone takes it. From his

manner when he returns, we know that it is not good news. Mary goes upstairs to shoot up again, and the three men start to fight. Edmund goes upstairs to try to speak to her, and while he is gone Tyrone confirms with Jamie that Edmund does, in fact, have consumption. Jamie worries that Tyrone, miser that he is, will send Edmund to a cheap sanatorium. Jamie goes out, waiting for Edmund so that he can accompany him to town. Mary comes down, and the Tyrone parents talk. We learn about their past: she had Edmund in part for the death of an older son, whose name was Eugene. Edmund comes downstairs. He urges his mother to fight the morphine addiction, but she pretends to have no idea what he's talking about. Edmund leaves, and then Tyrone, leaving Mary alone. First she is relieved, and then she is achingly lonely.

Act Three. Half past six in the evening, same day. Mary sits in the family room, waited on by Cathleen; again and again, she treats Cathleen to whiskey. She muses about her youth, and her childhood dreams of being a nun or a concert pianist. Mary also remembers meeting Mr. Tyrone, and how in love she once was. Cathleen is trying to focus, but she is not terribly sharp and she has become a bit drunk. Edmund and Tyrone come home. Mary receives the men happily, but they see quickly that she is lost in the dope. Mary warns Edmund that Jamie wants to make him a failure, like he is. She thinks about their childhood, and worries that Tyrone's habits have started them on the path to alcoholism. Mary reminds Tyrone of the first night when they met. There is a brief, touching moment of tenderness. And then she returns to criticizing him. She then speaks nostalgically about her wedding dress, and how she fussed over it. She doesn't know where the dress is now; it must be in the attic somewhere. Tyrone goes down into the cellar to get more whiskey, and Edmund and Mary are alone. Edmund tries to tell Mary how sick he is, but she refuses to listen. They talk about her problems with morphine, but talking so directly about the past hurts Mary, so they stop. Edmund leaves. Tyrone returns and asks her to have dinner with him. She decides to go upstairs instead, presumably to shoot up yet again.

Act Four. Midnight, that night. Edmund comes home to find his father playing solitaire. The two have the normal quota of fights and drinking, but they also manage to have an intimate, tender conversation. Tyrone explains his stinginess, and he also reveals to Edmund that he ruined his career by staying in an acting job for money. After so many years playing the same part, he lost the talent he'd once had. Edmund understands his father now better than he ever has. He talks to his father about his days sailing, and talks indirectly about his hopes to be a great writer. They hear Jamie coming home drunk, and Tyrone leaves to avoid fighting. Jamie and Edmund have their own conversation, and Jamie confesses something: although he loves Edmund more than anyone else in the world, he wants Edmund to fail. And he'll try to make Edmund fail. Then Jamie passes out, dead drunk. When Tyrone returns, he wakes up, and then they start to fight again. Mary comes downstairs, by now so doped up she can barely recognize them. She is carrying her wedding gown, lost completely in her past. The men watch in horror. She does not even know they are there.

Character List

Edmund Tyrone: Son of Mary and James Tyrone. Brother of Jamie Tyrone. Edmund is Eugene O'Neill's double, a sensitive young man who has sailed around the world but now is

sick with consumption. Edmund, as a part, has no more stage time or lines than any of the other Tyrones. But he is nonetheless the center of the play: his forgiveness of his brother and father are the play's climax. He has aspirations of becoming a writer.

Mary Tyrone: Wife of James Tyrone. Mother of Edmund and Jamie Tyrone. Mary is a morphine addict, and throughout the course of the day we watch as she sinks farther and farther into a morphine-induced fog. Her hands are nervous, and they reveal her constantly agitated state. She is in deep denial about Edmund's illness. As the play progresses, she retreats farther and farther into the past.

James Tyrone: Husband of Mary Tyrone. Father of Edmund and Jamie Tyrone. James Tyrone is a Broadway actor and alcoholic. He is a religious Catholic, although he no longer attends Church. He is appallingly stingy, and his miserliness has led to many problems for the Tyrone family over the years.

Jamie Tyrone: Son of Mary and James Tyrone. Brother of Edmund and Jamie Tyrone. Jamie is a dissolute alcoholic whoremonger. He is ten years older than Edmund, but he has never amounted to anything. He spends his days in New York chasing whores and drinking.

Cathleen: One of the servants. She is largely oblivious to the troubles of the family for whom she works. She provides comic relief in Act Three by becoming drunk.

Main Themes

The Past, as refuge and burden: The Past, along with forgiveness, is one of two dominant themes in the play. At different parts, the Past plays different roles. On one hand the past is a burden. Mary speaks with a terrible fatalism, claiming that nothing they are can be helped: past sins and mistakes have fixed their present and future irrevocably. The past also takes the form of old hurts that have gone unforgiven. We hear the same arguments again and again in this play, as the Tyrone's dredge up the same old grievances. Letting go is impossible, and so the Tyrones are stuck.

The past also becomes a refuge, but not in a positive way. Mary uses an idealized recreation of her girlhood as escapist fantasy. As she sinks further and further into the fog of morphine, she relives her childhood at the Catholic girls' school. The past is used to escape dealing with the present.

Forgiveness: Forgiveness is the other pivotal theme of the play. Although old pains cannot be forgotten and the Tyrones are, in a way, a doomed family, Edmund is able to make peace with his past and move on to what we know will be a brilliant career. His ability to do so is based in part on his capacity for forgiveness and understanding. The four Tyrones are deeply, disturbingly human. They have their jealousies and hatreds; they also remain a family, with all the normal bonds of love, however troubled, that being a family entails. Unlike his brother, Edmund is able to forgive and understand all of the Tyrones, including himself.

Breakdown of communication: Breakdown of communication is a very apparent theme. We are forced to listen to the same arguments again and again because nothing ever gets resolved. The Tyrone's fight, but often hide the most important feelings. There is a deep tendency towards denial in the family. Edmund tries to deny that his mother has returned to morphine. Mary denies Edmund's consumption. Often, avoidance is the strategy for dealing with problems.

Religion: Although Tyrone professes to keep his faith, his two sons have long since abandoned the Catholic religion. Tyrone's religion spills over into his taste in art. He considers Edmund's favorite writers to be morbid and degenerate. Mary's loss of faith also recurs as an issue. Although she still believes, she thinks she has fallen so far from God that she no longer has the right to pray.

Drug and alcohol abuse: Mary's morphine addiction is balanced by the men's alcoholism. Although the morphine is perhaps a more destructive drug, alcohol does its fair share of damage to the Tyrone men. It is Tyrone's great vice, and it has contributed to Mary's unhappiness. Drunkenness has been Jamie's response to life, and it is part of why he has failed so miserably. And Edmund's alcohol use has probably contributed to ruining his health.

Isolation: Although the four Tyrone's live under the same roof this summer, there is a deep sense of isolation. Family meals, a central activity of family bonding, are absent from the play. Lunch happens between acts, and dinner falls apart as everyone in the family goes his separate way. Mary's isolation is particularly acute. She is isolated by her gender, as the only woman of the family, and by her morphine addiction, which pushes her farther and farther from reality.