

MYTH AND REALISM IN THE PLAY A LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT OF EUGENE O'NEILL

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ABSTRACT: Eugene O' Neill was an American playwright and Nobel Laureate in Literature. His poetically titled plays were among the first to introduce into U.S. drama techniques of Realism. O'Neill's plays were among the first to include speeches in American English vernacular and involve characters on the fringes of society. They struggle to maintain their hopes and aspirations, but ultimately slide into disillusionment and despair. He has written many popular plays. The most important ones are Beyond the Horizon, 1918 - Pulitzer Prize, 1920, The Straw, 1919, The Emperor Jones, 1920, The Firstman, 1922, The Hairy Ape, 1922, The Fountain, 1922, and many others. Most of them are tragedies dealing with the modern man and American people. But his famous play A Long day's Journey into Night 1941 is popular play dealing with myth and realism of a family called Tyrons.

KEY WORDS; Eugene O'Neill, A Long day's Journey into Night, Tyrons, Myth, Realism, American, dream, fate tragedy, modernism, postmodernism.....

INTRODUCTION: Among great plays of Eugene O' Neill A LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT is his best play to depict myth and reality. This can be studied in many ways- myth and realism; modernism and post modernism; fate and man, tragedy of the modern man in general and particularly the tragedy of an American. To know myth and realism in it, it is better to know its plot first. This is set in the summer home of the Tyrone family, August 1912. The action begins in the morning, just after breakfast. We learn as the first act unravels that Mary has returned to her family recently after receiving treatment in a sanatorium for morphine addiction. Edmund, meanwhile, has in recent weeks begun to cough very violently, and we learn later on in the play that, as Tyrone and Jamie suspect, he has tuberculosis. Then the plot progresses in different angles.

Throughout the course of the play, we slowly find out that Mary is still addicted to morphine, much to the disappointment of her family members. The gradual revelation of these two medical disasters makes up most of the play's plot. In between these discoveries, however, the family constantly revisits old fights and opens old wounds left by the past, which the family members are never unable to forget. Tyrone, for example, is constantly blamed for his own stinginess, which may have led to Mary's morphine addiction when he refused to pay for a good doctor to treat the pain caused by childbirth.

Mary, on the other hand, is never able to let go of the past or admit to the painful truth of the present, the truth that she is addicted to morphine and her youngest son has tuberculosis. They all argue over Jamie and Edmund's failure to become successes as their father had always hoped they would become. As the day wears on, the men drink more and more, until they are on the verge of passing out in Act IV. Most of the plot of the play is repetitious, just as the cycle of an alcoholic is repetitious.

The above arguments occur numerous times throughout the four acts and five scenes. All acts are set in the living room, and all scenes but the last occur either just before or just after a meal. Act II, Scene i is set before lunch; scene ii after lunch; and Act III before dinner. Each act focuses on interplay between two specific characters: Act I features Mary and Tyrone; Act II Tyrone and Jamie, and Edmund and Mary; Act III Mary and Jamie; Act IV Tyrone and Edmund, and Edmund and Jamie.

The repetitious plot also helps develop the notion that this day is not remarkable in many ways. Instead, it is one in a long string of similar days for the Tyrones, filled with bitterness, fighting, and an underlying love.

It is a long evening -- four acts, beginning at 7:30 p.m., with two intermissions and a curtain call just after 11. *Long Day's Journey into Night* did not drag for a moment, a fact that surprised me, for I had read the lengthy play ahead of time. O'Neill maintains the unity, presses the action forward, and gives each of these actors speeches full of unexpected turns, with myth and reality. For example: on the written page the fourth act, which takes place after midnight, had seemed to be a meandering, maudlin session over a whiskey bottle and cards. Director Lucien Douglas and the cast pace the action with a see-saw, gradually gathering upward tension, making the most of the series of duo scenes. Father and younger son play cards and slowly reach beyond confrontation; as the elder son stumbles up the walk, drunk, the father leaves the two brothers alone. Their conversation, fueled by whiskey, is angry, then affectionate, wandering and scandalously anecdotal, then deeply desperate.

The elder brother's collapse onto the sofa brings the father in from back porch. Shortly afterward, the mother comes downstairs with the distracted, otherworldly demeanor of a sleep walker and a seer. Her final speeches are an aria of love and regret, paying no attention to interruptions and little attention to those whom she loves. She rises, almost visibly, toward the mystic obliteration of her drug. O'Neill was intelligent and honest enough to see beyond his father's pinch-penny, sententious exterior, however much the man may have marred him. Ev Lunning, Jr., is a fine actor who as James Tyrone, Sr., plays a harassed, upset and bewildered former actor. His rasp and gruffness give us with great subtlety the dilemma of every parent disappointed in himself, in his wife, and even more in his offspring -- a good man past his effectiveness but still vigorous and uncertain where to turn. Patricia Percy as Mary Tyrone is a creature of translucent yearnings, factual about disappointment but nevertheless in deep denial. Her vulnerability is haunting.

Nigel O'Hearn as Edmund the consumptive plays the afflicted O'Neill with more energy than one might expect from a patient about to get a sentence to a sanatorium, and he is surprisingly resistant to the quantities of whiskey sloshing about. O'Hearn bears a gratifying resemblance to the author, a detail more appreciated in hindsight as

one comes to understand the alert, disappointed watchfulness of this character. Rachel Dendy plays the pertly cunning, garrulous second servant Cathleen. In her brash simplicity, in Act II she serves as a telling foil to her employer Mary Tyrone, who is slipping into neurasthenia and addiction.

O'Neill puts several recitations into this piece. Edmund quotes a translation of Baudelaire; he and Jamie quote lines from 19th century English poets Ernest Christopher Dowson, Oscar Wilde, Kipling, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and, to underline the climax of the final scene, Algernon Swinburn's "Leave Taking" ("Let us go hence, my songs; she will not hear.") To relatively less literary 21st century ears, these passages seem less apposite than they might have been at the play's date of 1911 or when O'Neill wrote it in 1941. The Dowson verses, in particular, seem to have survived principally in lyrics in mid-century popular songs ("the days of wine and roses" and ". . . I have always been faithful to thee . . . in my fashion.

In contrast, many of the monologues for his characters are gripping. Again, examples from the fourth act: stung by Edmund's reproach for his miserliness, Lunning as James Tyrone in his drink recounts his origins and his acting career with a frankness and eloquence that belies the alcohol. Edmund responds with "high spots" from his memories of the sea. O'Hearn's delivery of these is curiously detached, perhaps intentionally, since Edmund responds derisively to his father's comment,

David Gallagher in the role of the debauched elder brother Jamie is fire and bitterness. One understands that he is not primarily an alcoholic; rather, caught between his anger at his well-meaning father and his contempt for himself, he is addicted to self-destruction. Gallagher is in precise control of a character who otherwise could easily slip into maudlin self-pity. He gives Jamie a snarling frankness, touched intermittently with ineffectual attempts at expressing affection for his younger brother. These deeply conflicted attitudes rise to a climax in their duo scene in Act IV. Jamie, swilling whiskey in an effort to shut himself down, fiercely warns Edmund, "I'd like to see you become the greatest success in the world. But you'd better be on your guard. Because I'll do my damndest to make you fail. Can't help it. I hate myself. Got to take revenge. On everyone else. Especially you." That's a scene written 30 years later by a deeply unhappy, enormously gifted dramatist. A man in failing health who had been writing all his life to escape that ugly house in New London and the torment of memory.

In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, O'Neill fuses the present and the past and the influence of the past on the present pervades the work from the beginning to the end. If O'Neill was able to transform classical myth into modern secular tragedy with *Desire Under the Elms*, he was to achieve even more success with *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Through tools like the fog in *Long Day's Journey*, which represents inner states of mind, he was able to substitute some of the mythical "otherness" of "fate" found in classical tragedy. This fog has uncanny similarities to the rain that falls persistently through the action of Shepard's *Buried Child*, cutting off another American family from the outside world. Another way of expressing the "otherness" of fate is expressed through verbal repetition. The usage of mind-altering substances also permeates *Long Day's Journey* as alcohol and morphine cause the characters to lose control of themselves and perhaps speak too much. O'Neill conceived "classic fate" as "family fate." In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, time becomes a crucial theme. The title itself is

the first indication of the importance of time in the play as it traces an inexorable descent into darkness. In this sense, O'Neill's play is clearly part of the continuum of the theme of lost American innocence. Their dilemma and that of the culture at large stems from being in time and longing for an ideal which is not. In *Long Day's Journey to Night*, he decided to repeat the same theme on a more intimate level by focusing on the individual within a smaller unit and a single generation, and this, of 199 main differences regarding how this drama differs from that written by modern dramatists. There are few (if any) referents to hold onto. Gone are the sureties of time, place and identity of the older dramatists.

There appears to be little past and the future portends little more. Tragicomedy seems to have robbed dramatic realism of individuality in opposition to social constraints, which, as mentioned before, were discernable by the spectator. Formerly, the spectator used to be able to grasp the exact notion of the moral dilemma. Even in O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*, it is clear that everyone desires something whether what is desired is attainable or not. Fate is still very present in these plays as well. If fate of one sort or another hovers over all of tragedy, then tragicomedy is no different. There is still an external force, an external "something" that determines human action, but it has no public face, no visible manifestation. This might also point to one of the main differences between Modernism and Postmodernism. Modernism has grounding, in this case the father as an authoritative figure.. To my mind, O'Neill will be remembered for his late plays in which he was able to recreate the private and the personal while portraying the ravages of hereditary guilt. In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the Tyrone family past has been broken up into fragments but these fragments make up a whole that the viewer or reader is able to grasp. Life is no longer knowable and character dissolves into a type of psychic battlefield and insoluble puzzle. *Long Day's Journey into Night* fits into this pattern quite easily and comfortably. It is a play where character is a psychic battlefield, beliefs in the past are discovered to be sham, human existence cannot be transformed, being a hero is nigh on impossible and borders on the absurd, life is unknowable, becoming more a series of sensations, albeit blunted by mind-altering drugs, than anything linear.

CONCLUSION: Perhaps one of the better ways to begin to divulge modernist techniques at work in *Long Day's Journey into Night* is to consider the notion of time. In many ways, it can be considered a play about the sense of loss produced by the ravages of time. Throughout the play there is an amalgam of myth and realism. This production of *Long Day's Journey into Night* is a remarkable gift to anyone who loves serious drama. If you fall into that category, you have only four opportunities left to see it. It is an effort to find myth and realism in the play I would have told you earlier, but this production just knocked me over. It took a while to digest it so that I could recommend it appropriately to talk more about myth and realism

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

² Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973),

³ John Henry Raleigh, *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965

⁴ Jean Chothia, *Forging a Language: A Study of the Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 166.

⁵ Frederic Carpenter, *Eugene O'Neill* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979)

⁶ Robert F. Whitman, "O'Neill's Search for a 'Language of the Theatre,'" in *O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964).

⁷ James Tyrone frequently refers to morphine as "poison": "It's the damned poison" (p. 174); "Up to take more of that God-damned poison, is that it?" .

⁸ Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956),

