Eugene O’Neill’s
Long Day’s Journey into Night

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Long Day’s Journey into Night is Eugene O’Neill’s Pulitzer Prize–winning masterpiece, a work of autobiographical content that seethed within him all his life. It is the story of the Tyrone family, James Sr. (here referred to as “Tyrone,” as the play indicates), an actor; Mary, his wife, suffering from a morphine addiction ever since the birth of their youngest son, Edmund; and James Jr., called Jamie, the eldest. A second child, Eugene, died as a baby. Beginning in the clear morning after a night of fog and foghorns and proceeding through the day as the fog returns, the play pits each character against the others in their struggle against fate and their own humanity.

O’Neill began Long Day’s Journey after a relative dry spell while endeavoring to write his multiplay cycle, “A Tale of Possessors, Self-Dispossessed,” a monumental opus that was to be based on autobiography and American history. While that cycle was never finished, excepting two plays within the cycle, he did complete Journey in 1941. After one of the most productive ten-year periods (the 1920s) that any writer has experienced—which earned him three Pulitzer Prizes followed by a Nobel Prize—O’Neill finally found both the “interest” and the “nerve” he needed to confront his past and write a play about it. That it is highly autobiographical is beyond dispute, but whether in writing it he was serving factual details or artistic interests is not clear. O’Neill’s father was an actor, made famous by his role of the Count of Monte Cristo; his mother did develop a drug habit after his birth; and he did have an older brother, Edmund, who died as a baby. At the time the play is set (1912), however, O’Neill had been married and divorced to Kathleen Jenkins, a point that he left out of the play (though she is noticeably present via the servant, Cathleen). And he began to suffer from tuberculosis in the fall, not in the summer time setting of Journey.

O’Neill’s play is full of autobiographical bits, elements of his painful life at home and abroad. There are points in Journey where one can feel O’Neill crying out, as when Edmund tells his mother, “Please, Mama! I’m trying to help. Because it’s bad for you to forget. The right way is to remember.” O’Neill struggled all his life with his past, forcing himself to remember what he desperately must have wanted to forget, because it was the only way to achieve peace. As he noted at the front of this play, in a dedication to his wife, Carlotta: “I mean it as a tribute to
your love and tenderness which gave me the
faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at
last and write this play—write it with deep pity
and understanding and forgiveness for all the
four haunted Tyrones."

This sentiment of Jean Chothia’s is echoed by
many critics:

With hindsight, the whole career can be read as a
clearing of the ground, a sifting of events, a honing
of language and structure in preparation for the
extraordinary dramatic control and self-
exploration of the final three plays. . . . As Michael
Manheim has put it, “O’Neill has been writing
versions of Long Day’s Journey into Night
throughout his entire career.”

In Journey, O’Neill finally was able to strip
away all the artifice that went into earlier plays
to let realism ring true. He needed only his ac-
tors for this play, along with a few chairs, a table,
whiskey, and glasses. By simplifying the
structure of the play, one scene from morning to
night, he reserved a unity that allowed more
room for the ramifications of his characters’
lives. He is at his most Aristotelian, confining
himself to a twenty-four-hour period the Greek
philosopher mandated for tragedy in his Poetics.

Everything he learned from previous experi-
mentation was the ladder he climbed to get here,
and he got to the play just in time. Only two
years after its completion, Parkinson’s disease
made his hands shake too violently to write
anymore. But he had said everything he needed
to say. Whatever O’Neill’s decisions were
regarding fact and fiction, the play stands as a
great achievement in theater on its own artistic
merits, and that is what concerns us here.

ACT 1

The play opens in the living room of James
Tyrone’s summer home. There is a barrage of
stage directions, and the first thing the audience
sees is a bookcase filled with the likes of “Balzac,
Zola, Stendhal, . . . Schopenhauer, Nietzsche,
Marx, Engels, Kropotkin, Max Stirner, . . . Ibsen,
Shaw, Strindberg, . . . Swinburne, Rossetti,
Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Kipling.” Above these is
a portrait of Shakespeare. Note, however, that
these authors are known from reading
the play. It would be extremely difficult for an audience
to tell just which books are on the shelves; only
the portrait of Shakespeare would be clearly vis-
ible. Is this, then, a play to be read rather than
seen? For O’Neill, it was necessary for these
details to be recorded for the atmospheric purposes of his writing. Because he could control what readers of the play see, there was at least one possibility of getting the full scope of the drama across.

Then come lengthy descriptions of Mary and James Tyrone as they enter from the dining room. Mary, it is told, will strike us by her “extreme nervousness.” She is said to have “pure white hair,” which seems even more striking for a woman who is only middle-aged and has a healthful figure. She looks as if she has suffered a horrible shock, and indeed she has. Tyrone is robust, looking ten years younger than his age, and has “never been really sick a day in his life.” O’Neill has a novelist’s sensibility for description. His directions (which are copious) propel the emotional content of the scenes as much as the dialogue: Mary comes in “excited and self-conscious... glanc[ing] everywhere except at any of their faces.” O’Neill has seen this all happen in front of him and has to make certain it goes right. Before the play has even started, he is shaping our way of looking at it, leaving little for a director’s or an actor’s interpretation.

It is a cheerful enough beginning. The fog has lifted, and Tyrone and Mary are bantering back and forth after breakfast, discussing her weight and the conspiratorial laugh at the old man’s expense of their boys, who are still in the kitchen. The two enter together, his arm around her waist, in a picture of domestic concord. She counters his kidding about her weight affectionately with “I’ve gotten too fat, you mean, dear. I really ought to reduce.” He will have none of that nonsense, and she says that she could not possibly eat as much as he would like. “I hope I’m not as big a glutton as that sounds.” Tyrone is still in a playful mood here, but the word “glutton” is signaling the exposure of subtext.

As in any well-wrought play, O’Neill is laying down the battle lines. Tyrone is hoping that he does not seem a glutton—and he is a glutton in the way that he consumes whiskey, bad real estate, and his need for his family’s obeisance. At the same time, he is not a glutton—a money hoarder, he reluctantly spends a dime for anything. Mary is trying to fend off the spying. She hates to be watched—not because of her weight, but because of her past. They are laughing, but even in the midst of their initial conversation, O’Neill shows the fault lines in his stage directions. He marks the pair’s dialogue with tags such as “Jokingly but with an undercurrent of resentment” or “A trifle acidly.” The mood shifts when they hear their boys laughing in the kitchen. The shift is reflected in the directions. The dialogue tags evolve from “with hearty satisfaction” to “Huffily” to “Forcing a smile.”

The subject of their conversation moves to Tyrone’s faulty real estate ventures and Edmund’s health. Edmund is suffering from consumption, or, as it is called today, tuberculosis. Mary insists here and throughout that it is just a cold, and until the third act it is only the tone of voice in the male characters that tells the audience this is not so. The same is true of Mary’s illness, which plays out slowly throughout the play as she unravels. Mary is constantly fretting with her hands, which become the outward sign of trouble, and touches her white hair.

Very early O’Neill gives us our first clue as to the dramatic subject of the play, with a return to the play’s first discussion—Mary’s weight:

**MARY:** . . . What makes you think I’m upset?

**TYRONE:** Why, nothing, except you’ve seemed a bit high-strung the past few days.

**MARY,** **Forcing a smile:** I have? Nonsense, dear. It’s your imagination. **With sudden tenseness.** You really must not watch me all the time, James. I mean, it makes me self-conscious.

**TYRONE,** **Putting a hand over one of her nervously playing ones:** Now, now, Mary. That’s your imagination. If I’ve watched you it was to admire how fat and beautiful you looked. **His voice is suddenly moved by deep feeling.** I can’t tell you the deep happiness it gives me, darling,
to see you as you’ve been since you came back to us, your dear old self again. He leans over and kisses her cheek impulsively—then turning back adds with a constrained air. So keep up the good work, Mary.

It is now apparent that something is wrong with Mary. Something is causing this extreme nervousness. But Tyrone’s pat words “So keep up the good work, Mary” are so dismissive that it is no wonder she cannot abide him. Mary tries to lighten the conversation by joking about his snoring, but he refuses to pull out of his grumpiness.

As the stage directions indicate, the dialogue of the characters constantly swerves back and forth from adoration to abhorrence. They cannot say one bad thing without qualifying it with a good thing. The den of mixed messages in which they live keeps everyone on edge. There is no relaxing, no comfort from a family member when you cannot be certain what vitriolic thing will spew forth in the next sentence. This will happen throughout the play, as with Jamie’s double back: “Stung into sneering jealousy. [Edmund]’s always come home broke finally, hasn’t he? And what did his going away get him? Look at him now! He is suddenly shamefaced. Christ! That’s a lousy thing to say. I don’t mean that.” There’s doubling even without premeditation: in reply to a smart comment of Edmund’s, Tyrone speaks “with appreciation, before he thinks.” After his answer, “he growls.” He is appreciative of his son’s ideas, but only before he “thinks.” And then he catches himself and growls, in order to prepare a tongue-lashing for his son.

When the boys finally enter the scene, it is another round of placating Mama. She is the engine they all work around, trying desperately not to do anything to cause a breakdown. She is constantly nervous, ready to fall to pieces. Mary’s hands are always busy, usually with her hair, but it is also her glasses she cannot find. She is continually searching for them. It seems that if she just had her glasses, she could see. But vision does no one any good in this play. The men do nothing but stare at her and can do nothing to stop her from turning back toward her addiction.

Edmund is introduced in his role of storyteller. He tells of Shaughnessy’s pigs, which have caught pneumonia by wallowing in the neighboring ice pond belonging to Harker, the Standard Oil millionaire. Harker has accused Shaughnessy of breaking the fence so that his pigs could get through, but Shaughnessy counters, accusing Harker of breaking the fence so that the pigs would get sick and die. This story serves a good effect in the play. It performs the work of a dumb show, a traditional theatrical device that mimes the play’s plot, which is about to be told at length. Harker and Shaughnessy are the two sides of Tyrone, rich like Harker but behaving as if he were poor like Shaughnessy. And Edmund, Mary, and Jamie are the pigs caught breaking free and catching their death for it. Without witnesses, no one will know whether Harker or Shaughnessy is in the right, and the debate could go on forever. Though the audience is witness to this play, the family’s dilemma is that there is no single person to blame for everything, and so a solution cannot be rendered.

The news of Edmund’s sickness comes out after he leaves. The stage directions have told us that he does not look well, but Mary brings it into the conversation, swearing that it is just a summer cold. The other two know better. The family argument over the nature of Edmund’s illness typifies the family dynamics. Instead of doing anything about it, they argue over what it could be instead of what to do. When they discuss doctors, Mary becomes extremely irritated: “I know what doctors are. They’re all alike. Anything, they don’t care what, to keep you coming to them. . . . What is it? What are you looking at? Is it my hair—?” she continues. That’s exactly what they are looking at, her white hair—gone white after her terrible bout with morphine. Still, she does not understand what it is about her hair that is so offensive to
them. Just a short time later she starts describing her hair as it was:

It was a rare shade of reddish brown and so long it came down below my knees. You ought to remember it, too, Jamie. It wasn't until after Edmund was born that I had a single grey hair. Then it began to turn white. The girlishness fades from her face.

Another piece of the puzzle is handed to us—Edmund’s entrance into the world set off Mary’s decline.

The two family illnesses are used as a means for them to attack one another. Tyrone and Jamie tear at each other over who is more responsible for Edmund’s sickness—Tyrone for failing to spend the money for a worthy doctor or Jamie for encouraging Edmund to live wildly with his weak constitution and his mother’s nerves. In his defense of starting Edmund down the path to hell, Jamie says, “All right. I did put Edmund wise to things, but not until I saw he’d started to raise hell, and knew he’d laugh at me if I tried the good advice, older brother stuff.” He gives his father the motto that he passed on to Edmund: “If you can’t be good you can at least be careful.” He chastises his father: “That’s a rotten accusation, Papa. You know how much the Kid means to me.” His father replies, “Impressed—mollifyingly. I know you may have thought it was for the best, Jamie. I didn’t say you did it deliberately to harm him.” Tyrone backpedals to save face and the situation, but Jamie refuses to take the respite offered. “Besides it’s damned rot! I’d like to see anyone influence Edmund more than he wants to be.” Jamie is not content to be blamed for unconscious things; he wants to unshoulder completely the burden of blame. Of course, this is one of the rare moments when responsibility is rightly located. Edmund is responsible for his own choices.

There are other illnesses in the play besides the obvious ones: Jamie’s (and Tyrone’s) alcoholism and Tyrone’s miserliness. Not much is made of the drinking, except when Tyrone and Jamie contrastingly tell Edmund not to drink because of his health and to drink because of it. Yet their drinking helps spur on their attitudes toward each other. Tyrone and Jamie drown themselves in drink, and both refuse and allow Edmund to do the same. The men are like Mary; they, too, have an addiction problem. And Mary’s constant back and forth over Edmund’s health—saying, on the one hand, that he should take care of himself and, on the other, that really it is just a cold and he is being a baby—is much like the men’s alternately offering and refusing him a drink.

A conversation between Edmund and Mary ends the first act, and her paranoia starts to blossom. She suspects everyone of spying on her, and rightly so. They argue until the spite comes out of her: “It would serve all of you right if it was true!” It is Edmund’s suspicion that pushes her over the line. She is hurt that it should come from him of all people—Edmund whose birth began it all, Edmund who is sick, too. It is true that Mary needs to be watched, but the watching alienates her further, thus pushing her toward the morphine. She has not gone to it yet, and there is still the possibility that this day could be like any other. In early drafts, O’Neill had considered having Mary use drugs on the previous night, but he pulled back from the idea because there would have been nowhere for the play to go, and the audience would have no sense of the “normalcy” of the family. It is a tenuous normalcy at best, but it is the border the Tyrones live on every day.

ACT 2

Already in the second act there is no sun coming into the room through the windows; it is sultry out. O’Neill complements the mood with a bottle of whiskey. At the end of the act Mary’s drug habit is revealed, so the element of surprise is not an issue for the remainder of the play. The viewer might hope that Edmund does not have consumption, but there is no reason for such
hope. By now, it is a foregone conclusion, like Mary’s return to her addiction. The rest of the play is a stripping away of emotional layers. Each character slowly confronts his or her rage toward the others for their horrible lives and, even more slowly, faces his or her own fault in the issue. Edmund blames his and his mother’s conditions on Tyrone’s miserliness; he knows that Tyrone will not send him to anything but a state sanatorium and hates him for that. Mary blames Tyrone for the quack doctor who gave her the drugs and her son for being born. Jamie hates Edmund for having the talent that he himself never had. The problems seem less to do with the dark hand of fate than with mundane human issues.

Cathleen makes her first appearance in the first scene. For such an intensely localized family drama, O’Neill’s choice to have an unrelated servant appear is strange. Is her character necessary? The whiskey could have been on stage at the opening of the curtain. Moreover, Mary already has spent time talking to herself, so Cathleen is not absolutely necessary as a means for Mary to reveal things she would not say to her family. Cathleen, then, provides the play with an antithesis to the four main characters. The girl speaks her mind “garrulously”; she is free with her opinions, negative or otherwise, but is not cruel with them. The Tyrones have a difficult time with their feelings for one another, which is not to say that they do not admit their feelings. They spit their anger out at one another, in ill-thought-out bursts of rage that are chased by regret for having kept it veiled for too long. And Cathleen bears the stamp of the old country on her face. (Note, too, that her name, “Cathleen,” is the name often given to Mother Ireland.) She is Irish; the Tyrones are American, and they suffer an American tragedy.

Mary has doped up while “resting” upstairs. She comes down bright-eyed and chipper but detached. She begins to make remarks that seem out of place: “Yes, the only way is to make yourself not care,” she says with respect to Jamie’s worrying over being seen working by the front hedge. And yet one knows that she is talking about removing herself from the trouble of her son’s illness and her lack of a home life. Just shortly thereafter, Mary utters one of the most telling bits of dialogue in the play, after attacking Jamie for sneering at his father and being unappreciative:

Mary, Bitterly: Because he’s always sneering at someone else, always looking for the worst weakness in everyone. Then with a strange, abrupt change to a detached, impersonal tone. But I suppose life has made him like that, and he can’t help it. None of us can help the things life has done to us. They’re done before you realize it, and once they’re done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you’d like to be, and you’ve lost your true self forever.

Mary’s comment about Jamie seeking out everyone’s “worst weakness” is apt, because he does seek them out, feeling more shorn of good qualities than everyone else. But the philosophy espoused afterward is a kind of fatalism that traps the family. Of course, Mary cannot help but succumb to her addiction; and, of course, Jamie cannot help being a jerk; and, of course, Tyrone cannot help being a miser because he grew up poor. The family has no sense of the possibility of change.

Tyrone finds out about Mary when he comes in from the yard and sees her. He knows immediately, when she attacks him straightaway for living in second-rate hotels and never having a proper home, saying that he should have stayed on his own so that “nothing would ever have happened.” One of the points of contention—this one between Tyrone and Mary—is the “home” that they live in. Mary has never felt at home in their summer place or on the road during touring season. But Tyrone early on says, “It’s been heaven to me,” referring to having Mary well and back at home from rehab. “This home has been a home again.” She answers this later to Edmund: “I’ve never felt it was my
LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

home. It was wrong from the start.” She feels “cut off from everyone.”

The idea gets built upon in the next scene of the act, after lunch. With the cat out of the bag, all that is left is to uncover pieces of the past. Mary continues her conversation with herself on their lack of a “proper home” and says, “In a real home one is never lonely. You forget I know from experience what a home is like. I gave up one to marry you—my father’s home.” This is the first intimation of what lies behind Mary’s sickness, though it will not be picked up again until much later in the play. It is easy to understand Mary’s addiction through this lens. She is the character who has been pulled from her roots. Tyrone has lived as an actor for his adult life and, as a child, lived in whatever tenement his family could afford. The boys grew up in this situation. Mary is afloat in an unknown sea—she is the only woman in the family. Her religious temperament has not been satisfied or replaced with anything. The drugs, ironically, divide her from her faith by presenting her with the pleasant memory of her youth in the nunery in which to wallow.

After lunch Mary retreats upstairs, and Jamie puts it bluntly: “Another shot in the arm!” This is exactly what Mary is going to do, but whether the other characters think it or not, everyone is taking another shot in the arm. Edmund and Jamie’s quarrel over philosophy leads Tyrone to chastise them both for straying from the Catholic Church:

EDMUND: That’s the bunk, Papa!
JAMIE: We don’t pretend, at any rate. Caustically. I don’t notice you’ve worn any holes in the knees of your pants going to Mass.
TYRONE: It’s true I’m a bad Catholic in the observance, God forgive me. But I believe! Angrily. And you’re a liar! I may not go to church but every night and morning of my life I get on my knees and pray!

Here again is a character who changes attitude midstride. Tyrone is confessional, asking for forgiveness, and then quickly turns to anger and calls Jamie a liar, throwing onto Jamie the negative feelings for which he was asking forgiveness and removing blame from himself:

EDMUND, Bitingly: Did you pray for Mama?
TYRONE: I did. I’ve prayed to God these many years for her.
EDMUND: Then Nietzsche must be right. He quotes from Thus Spake Zarathustra. “God is dead: of His pity for man hath God died.”
TYRONE, Ignores this: If your mother had prayed, too— She hasn’t denied her faith, but she’s forgotten it, until now there’s no strength of the spirit left in her to fight against the curse.

Edmund declares that he will still hold out hope for his mother, while the other two say that they will not. When Edmund calls Jamie a liar for insinuating that his mother has returned to the needle, he is holding out hope to the last that she has not. He is like his mother—both want to deny the other’s illness to the point of ridiculousness, Mary more so. But Edmund at least wants his mother to see his illness for what it is, even if he will not do the same for her, regardless of whether she wants him to. Edmund is the last to hang on to his hope; his own illness and his guilt at causing, however inadvertently, his mother’s addiction are at the root of this hope.

The question of Mary’s faith is left hanging here, but it is at the crux of the play. Her faith is what she gave up for James Tyrone, and it has caused her suffering ever since. She wanted a home, a permanent home at the convent in the House of God, and instead she took Tyrone as her husband and never had any home at all, just cheap hotels and a poorly kept summer cottage on what might have been their own tiny island. Mary connects her loss of faith with the development of her habit. She says to her husband, when he is contemplating what Dr. Hardy, the family physician, has had to say about Edmund’s illness, “I wouldn’t believe him [Dr. Hardy] if he swore on a stack of Bibles.” Here she expresses
both her lack of faith in the medical profession and her former religion’s powerlessness to impart trust in the family’s would-be caretaker.

There seems to be a chance of escape toward the end of the second act, when Tyrone pleads with Mary, “Won’t you stop now?” O’Neill says that Mary “stammers in guilty confusion for a second,” and says, “I—James! Please! . . . We’ve loved each other! We always will! Let’s remember only that, and not try to understand what we cannot understand, or help things that cannot be helped—the things life has done to us we cannot excuse or explain.” Mary just as quickly loses this moment of clarity and changes the subject to the afternoon drive Tyrone wants her to take, alone. One gets the feeling that this kind of thinking is what got the Tyrones into this mess, the remembering “only that” and not confronting the issues that are poisoning their existence. Here is where Mary first mentions the convent, complaining that when she was there she had so many friends. . . . But, naturally, after I married an actor . . . a lot of them gave me the cold shoulder. And then, right after we were married, there was the scandal of that woman who had been your mistress, suing you. From then on, all my old friends either pitied me or cut me dead. I hated the ones who cut me much less than the pitiers.

Tyrone’s response here is not to “dig up what’s long forgotten.” This is his chance to save his wife, but his own shame keeps him from dealing with the issue.

What follows is a string of revelations that lay the groundwork for the second half of the play: Mary was healthy before Edmund was born. She had had another child before him, Eugene, who had died after contracting measles, which Jamie was sick with at the time. She blames Jamie for spreading the disease to Eugene on purpose, even though he was only seven. Edmund spends his last saving of hope and asks his mother to stop taking the drugs, telling her that she has only just begun. Hope is exhausted when she tells him that she is going to town to visit the drugstore. O’Neill has written his reply as “Brokenly. Mama! Don’t!” This is the turning point in the middle of the play. There is no going back. The curtain falls with Mary, again, alone on stage.

MARY: It’s so lonely here. Then her face hardens into bitter self-contempt. You’re lying to yourself again. You wanted to get rid of them. Their contempt and disgust aren’t pleasant company. You’re glad they’re gone. She gives a little despairing laugh. Then Mother of God, why do I feel so lonely?

ACT 3

As O’Neill opens act 3 with a round of novelistic detail in his stage directions, readers learn that Mary’s eyes “shine with unnatural brilliance.” He goes on to say that she “has hidden deeper within herself and found refuge and release in a dream where present reality is but an appearance to be accepted and dismissed unfeelingly—even with a hard cynicism—or entirely ignored.” These are not stage directions; they are an omniscient narrator’s exploration of a character’s psyche and a son’s explanation for his mother’s behavior. The fog has descended again, despite Tyrone’s predictions; the foghorn, too, has returned, sounding like “a mournful whale in labor,” reminiscent of Mary’s birth pains with Edmund.

In conversation with Cathleen, Mary tells her about her dream, her two dreams, to be either a nun, “the more beautiful” dream, or a concert pianist. She forgot these dreams when she met Tyrone and promptly only dreamt about being his wife. In an odd moment, Mary snaps out of her stupor and chastises herself for her romanticism over James Tyrone. Throughout the conversation she has seemed to be talking to herself regardless of Cathleen’s presence in the room.
Now that she is alone, it is so much starker when she says: “You were much happier before you knew he existed, in the Convent when you used to pray to the Blessed Virgin.” Mary tries to utter a Hail Mary but cuts herself off: “You expect the Blessed Virgin to be fooled by a lying dope fiend reciting words! You can’t hide from her!” So she goes upstairs to take another dose of morphine, because, she says to herself in an oddly rational moment, “when you start again you never know exactly how much you need.” This is the creepiest moment of the play. Mary is in complete control of herself; she knows that she is taking the drugs, and she is trying to calculate the right amount for her escape. She sounds as if she is trying to remember her mother’s recipe for chocolate chip cookies. Later she remarks, “I hope, sometime, without meaning it, I will take an overdose.” This is a clarity that comes to her only when she is alone. Mary is fully aware of her problem but cannot apply the clarity to solving the issue nor remain clear when her family is around. She retreats into her fog of pretense when they are onstage. Mary does not make it upstairs before Edmund and Tyrone come back.

They see how far she has gone right away; she bears the stamp of it on her. It is her wedding dress she has hidden and of how her father spoiled her that now becomes clear. She quotes her own mother, “You’ve spoiled that girl so, I pity her husband if she ever marries. She’ll expect him to give her the moon. She’ll never make a good wife.” Edmund comments. They go on:

TYRONE: To hell with your figures! The proof is in the bills I have to pay!
EDMUND: . . . Yes, facts don’t mean a thing, do they? What you want to believe, that’s the only truth! Derisively. Shakespeare was an Irish Catholic, for example.
TYRONE, Stubbornly: So he was. The proof is in his plays.
EDMUND: Well he wasn’t, and there’s no proof of it in his plays, except to you! Jeeringly. The Duke of Wellington, there was another good Irish Catholic!
TYRONE: I never said he was a good one. He was a renegade but a Catholic just the same.

One cannot help but feel that there is a little of Tyrone in his own opinion of Wellington, a renegade but a Catholic just the same. Tyrone is not a good Catholic, but he has not departed from it as the backdrop to his life. Their argument over money sets off the ensuing discussion and revelation about Tyrone’s childhood, and the Irishness he clings to is the cause of his problems. Despite the torturous upbringing, he is proud of his heritage and would not have it any other way. His boys do not understand this, hence the gap in their communication.
Each of the Tyrones has a dream unfulfilled, a dream they all try to hide from one another but cannot seem to do it. Mary wanted to be a nun or a pianist, Tyrone wanted to be the great actor he had promised to be, and Edmund yearned to be a poet. The characters’ failed dreams are symptoms of a psychological disease spreading through the play, a disease that is a counterpoint to Mary’s addiction and Edmund’s consumption. These players are disaffected in their own ways, and that contributes to the drowning of the family. Now it is the men’s turn to face their dreams. Edmund and Tyrone engage in the most heartfelt dialogue of the play, each in turn revealing to the other what has mattered most to him in his life. Edmund speaks of taking a walk in the fog:

That’s what I wanted—to be alone with myself in another world where truth is untrue and life can hide from itself. Out beyond the harbor, where the road runs along the beach, I even lost the feeling of being on land. The fog and the sea seemed part of each other. It was like walking on the bottom of the sea. As if I had drowned long ago. As if I was a ghost belonging to the fog, and the fog was the ghost of the sea. It felt damn peaceful to be nothing more than a ghost within a ghost.

His admiration of it is eerily like that of his mother’s words in act 3. Recall that earlier Mary speaks of the fog: “It hides you from the world and the world from you. You feel that everything has changed, and nothing is what it seemed to be. No one can find or touch you any more.” Also, Tyrone calls Mary a “mad ghost.” Mary and her youngest son are linked by more than just illness. Even Edmund says it outright during the brouhaha that erupts between him and his father during their game of casino: “I’m like Mama, I can’t help liking you, in spite of everything.”

Edmund’s speech provokes actual admiration from his father; he says Edmund has a poet in him, albeit a “damned morbid one.” Their different tastes in literature, as reflected as the play opened with their bookcases, comes into play. For Tyrone, it is Shakespeare or nothing—the good Irish Catholic Shakespeare, who is not one of these atheist moderns that his son likes. “When you deny God, you deny hope,” he advises his son, who held on to hope longer than Tyrone did. Their argument is about money. Tyrone has always cried “poorhouse” so doctors would never recommend the best and most expensive treatments, for Mary or for Edmund. Edmund outright blames his father during this debate for his mother’s addiction. Then Edmund turns to his own situation:

God, Papa, ever since I went to sea and was on my own, and found out what hard work for little pay was, and what it felt like to be broke, and starve, and camp on park benches because I had no place to sleep, I’ve tried to be fair to you because I knew what you’d been up against as a kid. I’ve tried to make allowances. Christ, you have to make allowances in this damned family or go nuts! . . . But to think when it’s a question of your own son having consumption, you can show yourself up before the whole town as such a stinking old tightwad! Don’t you know Hardy [the doctor] will talk and the whole damned town will know! Jesus, Papa, haven’t you any pride or shame?

Edmund ends his speech with a fit of coughing. This speech finally shakes Tyrone. He gives in: “You can go anywhere you like. I don’t give a damn what it costs.” He gives his son a “bracer” shot of whiskey to control the coughing.

Tyrone grows angry and counters his son: “You said you realized what I’d been up against as a boy. The hell you do! . . . Oh, I know you had a fling of hard work. . . . But it was a game or romance and adventure to you.” They continue:

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.
They certainly are together in whatever repository of lost dreams exists. Tyrone had the paper to cling to once, as if it were his ticket back to artistic greatness. But now it is gone. “I’d be willing to have no home but the poorhouse in my old age if I could look back now on having been the fine artist I might have been.” Imagine how the family’s lives would have been different if he had been able to—Edmund must be imagining it there at the table. He might have managed his dream, too, which he is moved to relate after his father’s tale of woe:

EDMUND: . . . on the American Line, when I was lookout on the crow’s nest in the dawn watch. A calm sea, that time. Only a lazy ground swell and a slow drowsy roll of the ship. The passengers asleep and none of the crew in sight. No sound of man. Black smoke pouring from the funnels behind and beneath me. Dreaming, not keeping lookout, feeling alone, and above, and apart, watching the dawn creep like a painted dream over the sky and sea which slept together. Then the moment of ecstatic freedom came. . . . [I] became the sun, the hot sand, green seaweed anchored to a rock, swaying in the tide. Like a saint’s vision of beatitude. Like the veil of things as they seem drawn back by an unseen hand. . . . For a second there is meaning!

Edmund adds to this beautiful passage: “It was a great mistake, my being born a man. I would have been much more successful as a sea gull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home.”

TYRONE, Stares at him—impressed: Yes, there’s the makings of a poet in you all right.

EDMUND, Sardonically: The makings of a poet. No, I’m afraid I’m like the guy who is always panhandling for a smoke. He hasn’t even got the makings. He’s got only the habit. I couldn’t touch what I tried to tell you just now. I just stammered. . . . Stammering is the native eloquence of us fog people.

This is a double revelation, for as Edmund is confessing to his father his feelings of failure and
doubt, so O'Neill is telling us about his own failure to get it right, to try to tell us the nature of his life as a fog person, then and now. Edmund's dream is left hanging in the balance. He is not positive about his ability, but the play does not indicate that he absolutely will fail at becoming a writer. He is the only one of the Tyrones who has the possibility of achieving his dream and following through, unlike his brother, who will admit his own failings when he comes home from drinking. His entrance prompts Tyrone to go on the porch to avoid his adder tongue. He announces that he is drunk. "Thanks for telling me your great secret," Edmund replies. What is Jamie's great secret? We have seen Edmund's and Tyrone's, and a little of Mary's. Tyrone's thoughts on this are simple: "If he's ever had a loftier dream than whores and whiskey, he's never shown it."

Jamie reveals his true self to Edmund in the last significant dialogue of the play. They are the closest of any pair in the play, having to help each other out with money and support. It is Jamie who has taught Edmund about the world, for better or worse. Jamie even claims to have put him on to being a writer, saying he wanted to be a writer once, too. He even calls Edmund his "Frankenstein." It is fitting that this encounter is the last between two characters. Edmund has looked up to his brother, and what Jamie has to say to him destroys whatever illusions of his family remained. The emotional charge of the play reaches its climax here. Edmund hits Jamie for calling their mother a "hophead." It is only a glancing blow, but it sobers Jamie up:

**JAMIE:** Want to warn you—against me. Mama and Papa are right. I've been rotten bad influence. And worst of it is, I did it on purpose.

**EDMUND,** Uneasily: Shut up! I don't want to hear—

**JAMIE:** Nix, Kid! You listen! Did it on purpose to make a bum of you. Or part of me did. A big part. The part that's been dead so long. That hates life. My putting you wise so you'd learn from my mistakes. . . . Made my mistakes look good. Made getting drunk romantic. Made whores fascinating vampires instead of poor, stupid, diseased slobs they really are. Made fun of work as sucker's game. Never wanted you to succeed and make me look even worse by comparison. Wanted you to fail. Always jealous of you. Mama's baby, Papa's pet! He-stars at Edmund with increasing enmity. And it was your being born that started Mama on dope. I know that's not your fault, but all the same, God damn you, I can't help hating your guts—!

**EDMUND,** Almost frightenedly: Jamie! Cut it out! You're crazy!

**JAMIE:** But don't get the wrong idea, Kid. I love you more than I hate you. My saying what I'm telling you now proves it. I run the risk you'll hate me—and you're all I've got left.

Jamie's failed dream is that he really never had one. He borrowed others' dreams and tried them on, but he never felt at home. He is mostly the big dead part of himself now, the one that wants Edmund to stay sick, and he is glad that his mother is back on dope, so that he will not "be the only corpse around the house!"

The play ends as it must. Throughout the last act, the men have heard Mary rumbling about upstairs. As Tyrone and Jamie are drunkenly falling asleep, she comes down, sets the house ablaze with light and begins playing badly, like a child, a Chopin waltz. They wake, and she enters, carrying her wedding gown. When Mary speaks, she is back in her childhood. The sisters of the convent are in the present, and she claims to need to see Sister Martha about her swollen knuckles. "She has things in her medicine chest that'll cure anything." One wonders if Sister Martha did, or if Mary is superimposing her morphine cure for rheumatism on top of this. She has come down to find something, but she cannot remember what. During the whole play she has been looking for her glasses, the vision to see through the fog that has kept her from her faith. When Tyrone takes the gown from Mary, she says, "I found it in the attic hidden in a trunk. But I don't know what I wanted it for."
This is just like Tyrone speaking of trading his talent for money, “What the hell was it I wanted to buy, I wonder.”

Mary takes us to the curtain with the story of what led her to marry Tyrone when all she wanted was to be a nun. “I had a talk with Mother Elizabeth,” she says, who advises Mary to leave the convent after graduation to live as other girls live for a time, to make sure.

I never dreamed Holy Mother would give me such advice! I was really shocked. I said, of course, I would do anything she suggested, but I knew it was simply a waste of time. After I left her, I felt all mixed up, so I went to the shrine and prayed to the Blessed Virgin and found peace again because I knew she heard my prayer and would always love me and see no harm ever came to me so long as I never lost my faith in her.

Mary has lost it. There would be a temptation to blame Mother Elizabeth for this. If she had said, “Yes, join us,” maybe none of this would have happened. But Mary finishes: “That was in the winter of senior year. Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time.” Mary met James Tyrone before she even left the convent.

“She stares before her in a sad dream. Tyrone stirs in his chair. Edmund and Jamie remain motionless.” Tyrone stirs; he knows this, but the boys are in shock, the graphic nature of their mother’s history has never before been so up-front to them. They cannot move as Tyrone does; they are frozen by her revelation. What she could not remember was that she fell in love with Tyrone and thereby put an end to her dreams of sisterhood and of playing the piano. The Tyrones are victims of negotiating with their dreams. The tragedy is that what they gave up they gave up for what they thought was a good thing. Mary was in love with Tyrone; it was natural that she should want to marry him. Tyrone wanted a stable life for himself and his family; it was natural for him to seek out a steady monetary income. Jamie gave in to the overbear-

ing shadow of his father and never tried to excel in the theater. Edmund is the last holdout. O’Neill became a talented writer, but will Edmund do the same? His last words on the subject would not lead us to believe so, but the answer is beyond the scope of the play. The family is done for. All that’s left to them is their various ways of narcotizing life until it ends. Ironically, it is Edmund’s need to go to the sanatorium that seems to be his only way out. By getting away from his family, he might break free of the weight of his past.

This is O’Neill’s American tragedy. It is not Greek or Shakespearean. As in the story of Oedipus, tragedy ensues from one man’s birth, but unlike the tale of Oedipus, the tragedy is not Edmund’s fault. Oedipus had control over his actions, or at least they were his actions, whether or not he could choose them. But Edmund’s birth was not his action, and the morphine was administered by the doctor. If it is anyone’s tragedy, it is Mary’s; she fails to overcome her addiction, and the fallout affects her family. This fallout, however, is only one in a series, as each haunted Tyrone’s confession in the play makes clear. O’Neill’s idea is to expose the several faults so that the tragedy belongs to the entire family. In the land where anyone can lift himself up by the bootstraps (as Tyrone does as a young man), one can fall from that dream or never achieve it. One can never even have a dream but live like a vampire in the glow of other’s dreams. Tyrone’s and his sons’ failure, or possible failure, to succeed is the corruption of the American dream—that Mary should have been stricken with morphine addiction while they were touring in Tyrone’s great American success story—financial success anyway—is the ironic center of the family’s destruction.

PRODUCTION HISTORY AND INFLUENCE

The story of Long Day’s Journey into Night’s initial production is long and sordid, involving
even the era’s secretary-general of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld. O'Neill had placed a twenty-five-year moratorium on publishing and producing the play before he died, and yet the play was made before the end of the decade in which he died. The play’s first production occurred in Stockholm, which may seem strange at first, but O'Neill very much admired the Royal Dramatic Theater’s productions of his earlier plays and was grateful for his award of the Nobel Prize in 1936. Random House had the play locked in its vault and would not publish it, according to O'Neill’s wishes. Carlotta O’Neill gave them permission to do so, but rather than break their word, they relinquished the rights, which subsequently were sold to Yale University Press, the royalties going to fund the Eugene O’Neill Collection at Yale and scholarships for students in the school of drama. After much haggling, the play landed in the hands of José Quintero, whose earlier revival of *The Iceman Cometh*, a play whose initial production flopped, was a much-heralded success. Quintero cast Fredric March and Florence Eldredge as the elder Tyrones and Jason Robards Jr., then starring in *The Iceman Cometh* and who would play Tyrone Sr. thirty years later, as Jamie. Carlotta had approval of the part of Edmund—which went to Bradford Dillman. Quintero brought him to see her, and in an interview (quoted by Brenda Murphy) she said of the meeting, “I said something to amuse him [Dillman], so that he smiled, and his smile was like Gene’s. I made him angry for a moment and his scowl was like my husband’s.”

The play opened in Boston on October 15, 1956, at the Wilbur Theater and then premiered in New York on November 7 at the Helen Hayes Theater. In a vivid review of the first American performance of the play, Walter Kerr wrote:

*Long Day’s Journey into Night* is not a play. It is a lacerating round-robin of recrimination, self-dramatization, lies that deceive no one, confessions that never expiate the crime. Around the whiskey bottles and the tattered leather chairs and the dangling light-cords that infest the decaying summer home of the Tyrones (read O’Neills), a family of ghosts sit in a perpetual game of four-handed solitaire.

*Long Day’s Journey into Night* was a great success; it ran for 390 performances and earned Eugene O’Neill a posthumous Pulitzer Prize, his fourth. The play has gone into production many times all over the world and has been made into several cinematic adaptations as well.

O’Neill has come to sit atop the American theatrical Parnassus. Curiously enough, as Harold Bloom points out in his introduction to the newest edition of *Journey*, he seemed to have no American influences, relying instead on the Swedish dramatist August Strindberg and the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. O’Neill, however, has been the influence of many American dramatists who followed him, among them, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, and, more contemporarily, David Mamet and Sam Shepard. Miller wrote of seeing *Journey* in 1956,

I can hardly end this ramble without mentioning the most enthraling dramatic experience I have had since I first read Ibsen. It is Eugene O’Neill’s recently published play, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. I think it is his most moving work. It is as true as an oak board, a remorselessly just play, a drama from which all his other plays seem to have sprung.

The desolation of the American family in *Journey* is an image that filtered through into future dramas, like Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Shepard’s *Buried Child*.

This is not to say that O’Neill is without his critics. There are two main criticisms of O’Neill. The first is that his use of language is mediocre. The other is that his plays, up until his last, great ones, were not all that good, despite having netted him three Pulitzer Prizes in a decade. (The response to this is, of course, that he had little competition among contemporary American playwrights at the time.) If O’Neill’s language is
not superior, what, then, is to be made of him? Is he great? After all, plays, like poems and novels, are made up of words. Except that they do not entirely consist of words. O'Neill's genius was in his vision. What he lacked in linguistic capability he made up in dramatic structure and strength of character. In this play O'Neill often has everything at the surface; there is not much covering the subtext. For instance, Mary says quite frankly to Tyrone in act 3,

I'm sorry if I sounded bitter, James. I'm not. It's all so far away. But I did feel a little hurt when you wished you hadn't come home. I was so relieved and happy when you came, and grateful to you. It's very dreary and sad to be here alone in the fog with night falling.

Things are spelled out quite clearly, but the fact is that there is so much to uncover, so much buried wreckage, that there is no time for hiding in this play. In this case, Mary's speech is not the subtext; there is still more beneath.

O'Neill sometimes is faulted as a melodramatist. Considering that the two main revelations of *Journey*—Mary's addiction and Edmund's illness—are revealed in the second and third acts, there is not much melodrama at all, however, beyond the flamboyance of the characters themselves. Remember that two of these characters are actors, and another is a poet. As Mary says to Edmund, "You're so like your father, dear. You love to make a scene out of nothing so you can be dramatic and tragic."

Whether one thinks that O'Neill's language is strong, the stories in his plays are powerful. The scope of human emotion held within them has resonated since they first echoed through the halls of the world's theaters. While O'Neill may have laid to rest his personal demons, the demons of the twentieth-century American family life that haunted the Tyrones have not died quietly and continue to haunt the theater of today.

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