

Adriana Bulz

University of Bucharest

**“A LITTLE IN LOVE WITH DEATH”:
STAGING THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE MODERN SELF IN LONG
DAY’S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT**

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Abstract: *Using the frame of reception theory, the paper deals with the questioning of individual certainties and the challenge of authenticity in Eugene O’Neill’s Long Day’s Journey into Night. A nearly post-modern text, woven out of conflicting self-narratives and literary quotations, Long Day’s Journey into Night negotiates the definition of humanity between the poetic visions of Shakespeare and Baudelaire, as revealed in the father–son debate over literary tastes. The expectations of the audience, both aesthetic and ethical, are continuously challenged by witnessing the moral and physical disintegration of the Tyrones, while literature-in-the-text is subversively used to point out the decadence of society as a whole. Amidst the problematic selves of the Tyrone family, the character Edmund poses a radical challenge to American materialism by imagining the dissolution of the individual self and the sense of community, while also questioning such venerable notions as love, time and language. In exchange, we are offered the bitter consolation of truth and the possibility of endurance through mutual understanding and genuine feeling.*

The present paper deals with the literary challenge posed by Eugene O’Neill’s auto-biographical family play to critics, viewers and readers along the history of its reception. It dwells on the frequently interconnected aesthetic and ethical challenges posed by a text unanimously appreciated as O’Neill’s masterpiece. The ultimate aim of the paper is to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of this family drama for the present age of conflict over the sense of America and the world, by stressing the moral that mutual love and forgiveness may represent the counterpoise to the engulfing turmoil and darkness of our existence.

According to reception theory, literature brings about an “imaginary correction of deficient realities” (Freund 146) by confronting the reader with real-life elements disposed in an original combination. The literary text is understood as a reaction to contemporary situations, as a result of an interaction between its author’s views and the socio-historical norms of the environment. The theoretical basis for our investigation is represented by Hans Robert Jauss’ aesthetics of reception. A hermeneutical method of doing literary history, it explains how an innovative text thrives by engaging its readers in a dialogue made of questions and answers that vary in time and space, by positing various aesthetic and ethical challenges that attempt to modify the horizon of the public’s expectations. On the other hand, Wolfgang Iser’s phenomenological approach to reading focuses upon the more specific repertoire of strategies that a text employs in order to captivate its readers, laying emphasis on the creative role of individual understanding and stressing the reader’s personal contribution in filling the constitutive narrative gaps. By denying the expected answers and postponing revelations, the text invites its readers on a quest for its secret – whose trace is signified by blanks or negations prompting us towards the final understanding of the work. In my analysis, I dwell on the “response-inviting” structures of O’Neill’s family play, focusing mainly on the strategic use of literature-in-the text, while keeping in mind that “meaning is no longer an object to be defined but an effect to be experienced” (Iser in Freund 143) – a notion particularly fruitful for the understanding of drama.

Since its initial staging in 1956, the appeal of *Long Day's Journey into Night* has been both that of a dramatic masterpiece and of a personal memoir - the ultimate confession of a playwright obsessively writing about his own problems, deflecting them into dramatic literature. O'Neill dedicates the play to his wife, Carlota Monterey, and the fact that it was written –as he tells us – “in tears and blood”, foregrounds the delicate work of converting memory into theater, resulting in the exorcism and transcendence of his personal turmoil through the power of love:

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 (qtd. in Brustein 349).

Dealing with the stuff of emotional and psychological history – the shared past of the Tyrone/O'Neill family - the play also constituted an event in dramatic literary history at the time of its world premiere. The Quintero staging in New York practically reinstated O'Neill in his rightful place as America's national playwright – a position formerly contested by the failure of his last production, in 1946, of *The Iceman Cometh*, as well as by approximately two decades of artistic silence since the reception of the Nobel Prize in 1936¹. In writing this family drama, O'Neill's challenge had been twofold – one of achieving excruciating, almost complete sincerity, the other of attaining universal artistic relevance by carefully shaping the personal material.

Because of the general truthfulness to facts, the differences between reality and dramatic fiction deserve particular attention - significant changes such as the names of the mother and younger son or the difference in the attitudes towards life implied by the playwright and expressed by his fictionalized self. These differences are part of the unconventional reshuffling of the composition of reality, meant to generate the transformative experience of original art. The mother's character is called Mary instead of Ella, which is more relevant in the context of her former “dedication to the Blessed Virgin”, and also useful as a shocking contrast with her “degeneration” through the use of drugs and with her feeling of doom through loss of faith. O'Neill's dramatic counterpart is given the name of Ella's dead baby, Edmund, while the dead baby is called Eugene. As the Gelbs have noted in their biography of O'Neill, this may indicate a profound death wish on the part of the playwright, contributing to the general elegiac tone of the play (188). In terms of play structure, the design is even more obvious: the progressive accumulation of tension leads to an emotionally overcharged fourth act in which the most dramatic revelations occur, while the condensation of the whole dramatic material in the classical unities of space and time – one day, in the family's summer house – points towards the ambition of achieving a dramatic tour de force.

Critics seem to agree that the last plays O'Neill wrote are much better than his former plays – and that among these plays, *Long Day's Journey into Night* is O'Neill's masterpiece: “he is in astonishing control of his material – the work is a masterpiece” (Brustein 350); “O'Neill's most perfect play” (Carpenter 79), “a model for family plays of the later twentieth century and the epitome of tragedy in our time” (Manheim 216) etc. What seems to win the critics' admiration is the enlightened balance of the play's mood: “*Long Day's Journey into Night* dramatizes the fundamental fact of human evil but never denounces it...the final result is neither sentimental pity nor moral condemnation but perfect understanding” (Carpenter 78-79).

As Carpenter notes, the playwright refrains from identifying with the characters in this play - as he used to do in his former creations – and it is quite obvious that even Edmund is hardly a mouthpiece for O'Neill, although he is a truthful image of O'Neill's youthful self. While Edmund Tyrone views reality as a stifling nightmare and declares his inadequacy for it (“It was a great mistake my being born a man, I would have been much more successful as a seagull or a fish” Norton 1365), Eugene O'Neill's dramatic vision transcends this doomed romanticism and finds the power to confront and accept the

¹ During this time, O'Neill worked on a massive historical cycle – *A Tale of Possessors Self-dispossessed*, and his so-called “late” plays, that were staged after his death – with the exception of *Iceman*.

mixed reality of suffering and love – emphasizing togetherness as a trope for endurance, despite contradictory and conflicted stances.

We can very clearly read *Journey* in relation to O'Neill's preoccupation with the two diseases of American modernity – materialism and solitude – and search the text for “cures” envisaged by the playwright. For almost a decade before writing *Journey*, O'Neill had been working on an American historical family cycle entitled *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*, whose main theme was the Biblical question: “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul?” In a sense, we can regard the Tyrones as self-dispossessed possessors of their own lives, each wreaking havoc on themselves, by denying their god-given gifts: Tyrone chooses easy financial success over his great artistic talent, Mary chooses romantic love over her dedication to the Virgin, Jamie wastes away his youth and talents, while Edmund becomes an existential rebel seeking escape from the ugly reality through nihilistic attitudes. It is not so much the mistakes the characters make but the exemplary character of these mistaken choices that O'Neill wishes to underline, as relevant for the disease of materialism plaguing American society. The characters modeled on his family illustrate general human failings and struggles, and their role, in the moral economy of the play, is to warn us against such issues and to teach us to deal with the consequences of our actions.

These engaging, problematic characters have fictional doubles and exhibit self-contradictions. On the one hand, they are seeking to forget the present, to escape the accusations, to avoid looking into the mirror and seeing themselves as they are. While Edmund's revelations connected to the fog and the sea bespeak his desire for self-evasion, the same function is performed by Mary's return under the influence of drugs to the happiness and innocence of her girlhood, or James' denials, and Jamie's drinking himself into oblivion. Such attitudes are meant to illustrate extreme cases of existential failure and the instinctive individual responses to life-crises.

On the other hand, the characters are obsessively seeking to understand and explain their actions, to confess and seek forgiveness from one another – such impressive instances are James Tyrone's story of the hard-times in his youth (meant to impress Edmund and motivate his tight-fisted policy) or Jamie's warning his younger brother against himself (by revealing how he had deliberately tried to make Edmund ruin his life by drinking and womanizing). These heart-felt, eye-to-eye dialogues are exemplary cases of selflessness and family feeling. The confessional tone of the work has also been linked by some critics to O'Neill's subjacent Catholicism. In my opinion, the confessional tone is generated by the human need for togetherness and compassion – offered as cures for solitude and misfortune. The same idea is illustrated by other plays written in the last part of O'Neill's life, such as *The Iceman Cometh* or *Moon for the Misbegotten*, in which forgiveness becomes the supreme value.

Because of the wrong life choices the characters have made, they each have to bear the consequences of “what the past had done” to them: Mary's solitude and loss of faith, James' avarice, Jamie's alcoholism, Edmund's consumption. Moreover, during the first three acts, the characters continually form and dissolve alliances, attacking each other or defending themselves against attacks from the others. With such terminal diseases plaguing the characters, the text is decisively situated under the sign of decadence, symbolically represented by the poetry of Baudelaire, as quoted by Edmund. An existential tragedy, *Long Day's Journey* thematically denies the present. In real and emotional time, the journey is downwards and retrospective – as Mary laments, “The past is the present. It's the future, too.”

From the initial stage directions, the aesthetic and ethical challenges of the dramatic text are intertwined. O'Neill uses literature-in-the text to illustrate the various diseases of modernity, using family conflict as a metaphor of the capacity for mutual aggression and destruction of the human race. The text's thematic negativity, however, shouldn't be read as an absolute sign of despair on the part of the author. It is rather a form of protest and a device for challenging the audience by the temporary deconstruction of such time-honored notions as family, love, the integrity of the self. As pointed above, such notions are ultimately reconstructed by the characters' ability to remain united and share the dramatic present, facing its ugly truths and seeking solutions, despite the bleak prospects. Written at a time of personal and world turmoil – O'Neill was a sick, depressed man, and the Second World War had already started in Europe -

the play seeks to counteract the anxiety of loss by offering a paradigm for understanding and forgiving the past.

What would seem an irrelevant burden of data – the list of the authors whose works are present in the two libraries of James, Sr. and Edmund² – is in fact an item of precious information meant for the readers of the play, including the director and the actors. The two “reading” lists of father and son are more than “an example of O’Neill’s novelistic approach to theatrical detail” (Norton 1303) – they represent “a telling indicator of the tone and texture of O’Neill’s dramatic imagination” as well as “essential features of an authentic recreation of the past” (Chothia 196). The indication that the volumes in the father’s library “have the look of having been read and reread” (Norton 1303) is meant to earn our intellectual respect for the defender of Shakespeare and the traditional view on art in the play’s debate over literary tastes of the fourth act. In fact, the towering presence of Shakespeare over “the readings” of the son is iconic and ironic at the same time. Edmund, as his father notes, “knows his Shakespeare” and “has the makings of a poet” himself – a fact which renders Edmund’s (and implicitly O’Neill’s) relation to Shakespeare particularly problematic. Both admiring and defensive towards his father’s favorite poet, Edmund seeks to define his own kind of poetical affiliation by opposition – a thing that intrigues his father, who reproaches him:

Where you get your taste in authors – That damned library of yours! [*He indicates small library at rear.*]
Voltaire, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Ibsen! Atheists, fools, and madmen! And your poets!
This Dowson, and this Baudelaire, and Swinburne, and Oscar Wilde, and Whitman and Poe! Whore
mongers and degenerates! Pah! When I’ve three good sets of Shakespeare there [*He nods at the large
bookcase*] you could read (Norton 1356).

Edmund feels that Shakespearean poetry cannot express his own view of life – a thing so terrible he compares it to the three Gorgons whose sight turns men into stones, or to Pan – “You see him and you die – that is, inside you – and have to go on living as a ghost.” (Norton 1354). To his father’s quote, “We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep,” he replies ironically: “Fine! That’s beautiful. But I wasn’t trying to say that. We are such stuff as manure is made on, so let’s drink up and forget it. That’s more my idea.” (Norton 1354) Such profound disgust and discontent with humanity generates Edmund’s desire to lose himself in the fog, which parallels Mary’s desire to hide away from people. Fog, with its blurring of boundaries and progressive obstruction of vision, generates the self-effacement both mother and son crave for, albeit for different reasons. As the denial of truth, of time, of reality, the fog also represents an assault on materialistic certainty – it simulates the disappearance of the world and of the all-important self:

The fog was where I wanted to be...I didn’t meet a soul. Everything looked and sounded unreal³.
Nothing was what it is. That’s what I wanted. To be alone with myself in another world where truth is
untrue and life can hide from itself. It was like walking at 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 damned
peaceful to be nothing but a ghost within a ghost (Norton 1354).

The fog is Edmund’s spiritual matrix, as suggested by the image of being contained in the fog, as in a motherly womb. O’Neill’s artistic language itself is therefore naturally linked to this primordial

² Edmund’s “small bookcase, with a picture of Shakespeare above it” contains “novels by Balzac, Zola, Stendhal, philosophical and sociological works by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Engels, Kropotkin, Max Sterner, plays by Ibsen, Shaw, Strindberg, poetry by Swinburne, Rossetti, Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Kipling etc., while James Tyrone’s is a “large, glassed-in bookcase with sets of Dumas, Victor Hugo, Charles Lever, three sets of Shakespeare, The World’s Best Literature in fifty large volumes, Hume’s History of England, Thiers’ History of the Consulate and Empire, Smollett’s History of England, Gibbon’s Roman Empire and miscellaneous volumes of old plays, poetry and several histories of Ireland.” (Norton 1303)

³ O’Neill’s text seems to echo at this point T.S. Eliot’s *Wasteland*, with all its implications of the aftermath of catastrophe.

element – his “faithful realism” being nothing more than “stammering” (by contrast to the beauty and eloquence of Shakespearean poetry): “Stammering is the native eloquence of us, fog people” (*Norton* 1364). This statement represents the formal aesthetic challenge at the heart of the text, revealing the intimate connection between expression and being, and underlining the need for a new dramatic realism, capable of voicing the problems of the contemporary world.

Besides the aesthetic upheaval, Edmund’s poetic effusion poses a radical challenge to the modern self, imagining its dissolution. His discourse initially stages the disappearance of the self in the medium of fog, then advocates the evasion of self through inebriation. The state of drunkenness is exalted as an escape from time by Edmund’s quote from Baudelaire: “Be drunken if you would not be martyred slaves of time; be drunken continually! With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will.” (*Norton* 1355) After uttering these lines, Edmund “grins at his father provocatively” – since the mention of virtue is an allusion to Tyrone’s moralizing discourse.

For Edmund, the human self, with its conflicting illusions – pain and happiness – is a transitory state of being in which we should at least renounce the hypocrisy of thinking ourselves better than the others. As an illustration of the vanity of our condition, in which the only true wisdom is madness as an acknowledgement of doom, Edmund quotes from Dowson:

“They are not long, the weeping and the laughter, / Love and desire and hate:/ I think they have no portion in us after/ We pass the gate./ They are not long, the days of wine and roses:/ Out of a misty dream/ Our path emerges for a while, then closes/ Within a dream” (1354).⁴

Finally, recalling his experiences at sea, Edmund-Eugene speaks about the momentary, exhilarating loss of self through contemplation of the elements: “I became drunk with the beauty and singing rhythm of it, and for a moment I lost myself – actually lost my life – I was set free!” (*Norton* 1364). For someone like Edmund, who sees life as a burden, the dissolution of the self in elemental nature represents a “moment of ecstatic freedom”: “The peace, the end of the quest, the last harbor, the joy of belonging to a fulfillment beyond men’s lousy, pitiful, greedy fears, and hopes and dreams!” (*Norton* 1365). This unique experience, “like a saint’s vision of beatitude,” reveals to the human spirit its ultimate truth – the unity of all being within the Force of Life or God:

For a second you see – and seeing the secret, are the secret. For a second there is meaning! Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone, lost in the fog again, and you stumble on toward nowhere, for no good reason (1365).

Apparently nihilistic, Edmund does not deny the world in its primordial beauty and harmony and feels his belonging to the “fog people” to be an inescapable misfortune. A wild spirit trapped in the flesh, he can only dream about evading the self and cultivates his artistic morbidity as an act of absolute sincerity: “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, who must always be a little in love with death!” (1365).

Tyrone’s disgusted rejection of Edmund’s “morbid craziness” is typical for the kind of criticism to O’Neill’s drama that addresses the face value of the text, without allowing itself to acknowledge its deeper meanings. Critics such as Bigsby or Brustein construct O’Neill as an excessively pessimistic artist, an existential rebel that denies all value to humanity. To Brustein, O’Neill’s “dark brooding and longings after death” generate “a vision of human decay” where the “anti-hero” is “disadvantaged, humiliated, perverse, and thoroughly incapable of significant action” (29). According to Bigsby, O’Neill’s characters are “living corpses” driven by a narrative compulsion – “speaking as not to die” – who end as “victims of

⁴ If his adaptation of the Shakespearean quotation is meant to find a more adequate expression for the crisis of humanity, his quote from Dowson is remarkably close to the Shakespearean lines. This signifies that, although the means of expression of the faithful realism Edmund advocates are radically modern, the poetic feeling behind his words is the classical one.

story”, self-entrapped in the roles they consciously perform (26-27) and whose only consolation “lies in habit or the stasis of boredom” (26). If these assertions about O’Neill’s drama were valid, how could the play at the same time generate moral revelations and emotional catharsis in the audience? Such criticism is generated by the conflicted juxtaposition of life and art in the play – we must remember that Edmund is just a character, whose coordinates are youth and idealism, and that O’Neill’s vision is more comprehensive than that of his dramatic counterpart.

In fact, *Long Day’s Journey* advocates giving up the concern for our own petty selves, breaking the barriers of self-preservation and silence. The answer to the family crisis and the key to O’Neill’s dramatic vision lies in understanding and coming to terms with Mary’s tragedy. In the end, when they are all united in their misfortune of “losing her” to the drug, the Tyrone men succeed, for a moment at least, in evading the confines of their tormented selves. And so does the audience – involved now as an extended family, watching, enduring and sympathizing with the characters, wondering what can be done. The one who has attempted to answer this final question is Mary herself and her solution is also O’Neill’s implied response to the sorrow of life. In its fatalism, it salvages the only force that can help one rise above suffering and time – the power of love – in the name of which Mary pleads with her husband:

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. (Norton 1334)

By privileging the work of love over the workings of reason, Mary’s plea echoes Edmund’s poetic intuitions. Their joined voices are staging the disappearance of the Modern Self in the audience’s sensibility, an artistic movement which represents O’Neill’s supreme claim to personal authenticity and dramatic originality. Three years after his death O’Neill seriously challenged American materialism, by offering the world a play which clearly supports an ideology opposed to that of the success story on which American democracy was built. His masterpiece is nevertheless quintessentially American through its individualistic, naysaying vision.

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