

# Long Day's Journey into Night: an Autobiographical Work

## Long Day's Journey into Night: uma obra autobiográfica

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### Resumo

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Este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar a muito aclamada peça teatral de Eugene O'Neill *Long Day's Journey into Night* como uma obra autobiográfica considerando as muitas semelhanças entre a própria vida de O'Neill e a obra ficcional.

**Palavras-chaves:** família, relacionamentos, alienação.

### Abstract

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This essay aims at presenting Eugene O'Neill's much acclaimed play *Long Day's Journey into Night* as an autobiographical work considering the many similarities between O'Neill's own life and the fictional work.

**Key words:** family, relationships, alienation.

Throughout literary history many famous writers around the globe such as St. Augustine, Wordsworth, Joyce, Proust and others have written self-reflexive works using different kinds of genre. Some of these works were fictional, others were not. And yet, it may be said that, perhaps, the drive behind these men's intentions must have had a similar source- a way to understand how each one of them stood in relation to his personal history. According to Aurélio Loureiro<sup>1</sup> (1993:30), in "El Espíritu Biográfico", "confronting one's history surely does not mean that the past is

equivalent to irrefutable truth." Juan Juristo (1993:34), in "La Fábula del Fabulador", states that the best and the most naïve lies are told in self-writing works. The lies, he says, "are not due to acting in bad faith or the product of an acquiescing deliberation, but that it has to do with the mystery intrinsic in this genre". He adds that "perhaps the reason for the lies is due to the genre having never reached the degree of internal coherence of fiction, or, perhaps, because the genre's main character is man himself and the truth inherent in man is always inscrutable" (id.).

For Proust as well as for Joyce, self-writing was seen as the death of the past since the past is given a place to be buried at the very moment

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<sup>1</sup>All the quotes referring to Loureiro and Juristo are of my own translation.

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that it gains new life in a fictional form. However, in order for this death to occur through the fictional text, the writer has to make it implicit that fictionalizing it implies his forgetting of the past.

Moreover, in the area of psychoanalysis, an autobiographical writing is also seen as a means of facing, and subsequently, analyzing one's history. For Freud, it was considered the most self-analytical of all kinds of work. He claimed that the act of self-writing involves a process called "talking cure". The past, in this process, is discursive as well as symbolic, and the writer's cure depends less upon the reproduction of key events as they really occurred than on the individual's capacity to work with "memories which are products of the imagination intended to serve as some kind of symbolic representation" (JAY, 1984, p. 25).

In the United States, Eugene O'Neill, who is regarded as America's greatest playwright, also wrote a self-reflexive fictional play- *Long Day's Journey into Night*. To Arthur and Barbara Gelb (1965:47), who wrote the biography entitled *O'Neill*, the play may be considered as a "balefully heightened picture of what the O'Neill family was at its worst". O'Neill himself once stated that he wrote this play with "deep pity and understanding and forgiveness" (apud BIGSBY, 1982, p. 90). In addition, in a note to his wife, he spoke of "the faith in love that enabled me to face my death at last" (apud WILLIAMS, 1968, p. 49).

O'Neill is said to have gone through spiritual, mental, and physical torture during the two years that it took him to write *Long Day's Journey into Night*. In the process of writing it, he experienced the agony of reliving his painful past as well as the guilt of disclosing that past. Harold Clurman (apud CARGILL, 1961, p. 214) claims that O'Neill tried "not only to understand but to forgive - to free himself from resentment."

The play has been praised, by all critics alike, as O'Neill's best tragedy, or perhaps, even the finest play ever written in the United States. Adjectives such as powerful, ruthless, and clear have been used to describe it. And yet, critics also agree that the play's strength lies on the family depicted- the Tyrones or the O'Neills.

According to the Gelbs (1965:20), O'Neill

was described as a "restless, distrustful, rebellious and self-pitying renegade" by people who knew him. He was born in a Broadway hotel room in New York City in 1888. His father, James O'Neill, was an actor who held onto the leading role of a single play for all his life since it assured the financial stability he sought. Having come from a poor immigrant Irish family, James was a man obsessed with pursuing financial security. O'Neill's mother, Ella, was an emotionally frail woman who did not adapt well to the hectic life of traveling from city to city with her husband's theater company. She started taking morphine in order to alleviate physical pain contracted at Eugene O'Neill's birth. Unfortunately, she became addicted to it, and it served the purpose of keeping her from facing familial responsibilities as well. O'Neill's brother, James Junior, was an alcoholic who spent his days drinking, womanizing and holding on and off to jobs secured by his father.

In order to better understand *Long Day's Journey into Night*, one needs to take a close look at O'Neill's own personal beliefs in relation to life. As a follower of Nietzsche's and Strindberg's ideas, O'Neill believed that human beings are born isolated and on their own from the moment they are born; therefore, throughout their whole lives they struggle against life- a domineering entity. This struggle consists of drives for destruction and self-destruction. It is possible to say that the process of living involves a constant struggle between death and the attainment of satisfaction. However, acquiring satisfaction depends on the defeat of another, so it is temporary, whereas the desire for death, even though less apparent, when achieved is permanent.

For O'Neill, the family unit was regarded as a destructive entity as it consists of man's first and closest possible intermixing of relationships. Raymond Williams (1966:108), when referring to the family as a private tragedy, claims that "men and women seek to destroy each other in the act of loving and of creating new life, and the new life is, itself, always guilty, not so much by inheritance as by relationships it is inevitably born into" For Strindberg (apud BIGSBY, 1982), the wish for destruction among human beings is not so intense compared to the relation between love and destruction. Consequently,

when examining *Long Day's Journey into Night*, one comes across O'Neill's vivid portrayal of a family, confronting each other, propelled by each member's egotistical ideas and illusions, amidst much love and hatred. The play is said to be O'Neill's tentative rendering of a single day his family spends together as the title so aptly suggests. The dysfunctional family depicted consists of four members: Mary Tyrone, a morphine-addicted mother, James Tyrone, a greedy father and two problematic sons- Jamie, and alcoholic, and Edmund, a physically-sick young man.

The notion of private tragedy, as described by Raymond Williams (1996), is well-exemplified by the Tyrones. The inevitable desintegration of the Tyrone family occurs when each member comes in direct confrontation with his/her accuser: weaknesses and guilts are exposed, and no one is free to get away. For, perhaps, in order to do so, it would involve letting go of his/her means of escapism. According to Bigsby (1982:64), "O'Neill's characters seem to live at emotional extremes, switching from one mood to its opposite with the mechanical suddenness. Hate changes to love, reproach to apology, self-contempt to pride".

Thus, when analyzing the mother's relationship with the father, it is clear that she blames the fact that they do not have a permanent home on his stinginess and on his profession as well. She goes as far as saying that for her husband<sup>2</sup>, "money spent on a home is money wasted... He doesn't understand a home. He doesn't feel at home in it..." (p. 749). In addition, she accuses him of being responsible for her loneliness, for she laments, "but he's never wanted family or friends. He hates calling on people, or receiving them..." (p. 752). Mary also reproaches him from keeping her away from their children, especially during their second child's sickness and subsequent death. And, yet, when asked by her husband if she would forgive him, she answers, "No, dear I forgive I always forgive you. So don't look so guilty. I'm sorry I remembered out loud. I don't want to be sad, or to make you sad. I want to remember only the happy part of the past" (p. 784).

As for Mr. Tyrone, he is a man torn between

love and hurt in regards to his wife. Her impotence in quitting her morphine addiction is a means of torture for him. Throughout the play, he speaks affectionately to her and complements her on her good looks. However, upon finding out that she had started taking morphine again, he cannot help but feel bitter and miserable. And yet, instead of reproaching her, he blames it on the drug, "Now, now lad. It's not her. It's the damned poison." (p. 801). Thus, their relationship oscillates from love to anger, and finally to forgiveness.

James Tyrone's animosity towards his older son Jamie is a feeling mutually shared. This is clearly evident since they keep on accusing each other throughout the play. Whenever the father has a chance, he reminds his son of his being financially dependent. He says, "Yes, forget! Forget everything and face nothing. It's a convenient philosophy if you've no ambition in life except to..." (p. 724). Consequently, Jamie's womanizing and drunkness is a constant source of friction between them. In addition, Jamie is also made responsible for Edmund's consumption, "the less you say about Edmund's sickness, the better for your conscience! You're more responsible than anyone!" (p. 732), accuses the father. The hostility they feel towards each other is out in the open, since Jamie cannot forgive his father for being miserly and having hired a cheap doctor to attend upon Mary when she gave birth to Edmund. The doctor prescribed morphine to Mary what eventually led to her addiction. When James Tyrone tells his son nobody is to be blamed for Mary's addiction, James reacts furiously, "The bastard of a doctor he was! From what Mama's said, he was another cheap quack like Hardy! You wouldn't pay for a first-rate" (p. 735).

Moreover, Jamie's relationship to his mother is also antagonistic. He knows that she was never able to forgive him for her second boy's death. Mary Tyrone claims

I've always believed Jamie did it on purpose. He was jealous of the baby. He hated him. Oh, I know Jamie was only seven, but he was never stupid. He'd been warned't might kill the baby. He knew. I've never been able to forgive him for that (p. 765).

So, Jamie's emotions in relation to his

<sup>2</sup>All the quotes referring to *Long Day's Journey into Night* are from Eugene O'Neill, *Complete Plays-1932-1943*, New York, The Library of America, 1988.

mother shift once again from love to hatred. And yet, even though he is thirty years old, he still lives with his parents and does not make any efforts to change his life. Towards his brother, Jamie feels resentful since he believes Edmund is his parents' favorite, and this idea anguishes him as he feels the constant need to fight for their attention. He tells Edmund, "*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!*" (p. 820). But, at the same time, he feels protective of his brother, and when talking to his father about Edmund, he says, "*you know how much the kid means to me, how close we've always been- not like the usual brothers! I'd do anything for him*" (p. 732).

Edmund cannot help feeling hostile in relation to his parents due to their distancing themselves from their children and because of Mary's addiction. Bitterly, he tells his mother, "*It's pretty hard to take at times, have a dope fiend for a mother!*" (p. 788). Besides, he reproaches her by saying: "*I've been away a lot and I've never noticed it broke your heart.*" And once again, the idea of not being able to cut the embryonic cord is present. Just like Jamie, Edmund cannot distance himself from his family either. Even though he has gone to sea and lived away for sometime, he always comes home.

Mary's position in the family is the most anguishing. She lives with the constant fear that her husband and sons are suspicious of her in relation to her morphine addiction. Nervously she says, "*It makes it so much harder, living in this atmosphere of constant suspicion, knowing everyone is spying on me, and none of you believe in me, or trust me*" (p.740). This feeling of distrust makes her feel guilty and hateful, so, in order to defend herself, she is spiteful and reminds them constantly of their own faults. She blames Edmund for her rheumatism, for being born and for her addiction. Jamie, as it has already been said, is incriminated for his baby brother's death as well as for introducing Edmund to liquor. Lastly, her husband is condemned for isolating her from family and friends. Clearly, it is extremely difficult for Mary to live with her family, and this is discernable when Edmund, bitterly, speaks about his mother's building a wall around herself, "*You know something in her does it deliberately -to get beyond*

*our reach, to get rid of us, to forget we are alive! It's as if in spite of loving us, she hates us !"* (p. 801). As a result, Mary holds dearly to her past memories and, in so doing, does not have to face reality.

According to Sherrill Grace (1989: p.88), O'Neill made use of his characters "*to convey a few fundamental themes that troubled him all his life*". His own perceptions concerning life's determinism and the alienated man's struggle against it may be detected through Mary when she claims,

none of us can help the things life done to us. They're before you realize it, and once they are 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 self forever. (p.749).

Also, when referring to Jamie's attitude towards life, she states "*he can't help being what the past has made of him*" (p. 751) Or when Edmund cynically says- "*Everything is in this bag! It's all a frame-up! We're all fall guys and suckers and we can't beat the game!*" (p.758). Once again, life is to be condemned for what happens to each individual, and he/she cannot be judged for his/her actions and attitudes.

O'Neill also used the fog as a symbol of the Tyrones' alienation and inability to communicate with each other. Since the setting of the play is a house by the beach, the fog is a constant presence for the Tyrones. For Edmund, it is the place where he wishes to be at in order not to see his house, "*That's what I wanted- to be alone with myself in another world where truth is untrue and life can hide from itself.*" (p.796). In addition, Mary takes refuge in the solace of foggy evenings, under the influence of morphine, to ruminate over the past and what she might have made out of her life had she not married James Tyrone. When referring to the fog, Mary says, "*it hides you from the world and the world from you. You feel that everything has changed, and nothing is that is what it seemed to be. No one can find or touch you any more*" (p. 773).

Consequently, when juxtaposing O'Neill's biography with *Long Day's Journey into Night*, many similarities, which have already been mentioned such as the mother's morphine addiction, the brother's drinking,

the father's niggardness, and O'Neill's own frail health, are evidence of the claim that *Long Day's Journey into Night* is an autobiographical play. And yet, if O'Neill told lies or not, it is not crucial to the play's seriousness considering that he succeeded not only in writing a masterpiece, as it has been claimed by all critics alike, but also in exorcising his demons.

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