

Marlena Hetman

Department of English
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
marlena.hetman@gmail.com

Eugene O'Neill and His Ghosts of the Past, Present and Future

Abstract. “The past is the present, isn’t it? It is the future too. We all try to lie out of that but life won’t let us” (1989:75) remarks Mary Tyrone, the heroine of *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*. In the play, considered to be O’Neill’s *opus magnum*, the writer directly confronts the ghosts that have kept the cycle of his family trauma intact for generations. Tyrone’s / O’Neill’s family home continuously haunts its inhabitants, which results in their increasing alienation and inability to emotionally grow or connect. O’Neill translates this deeply personal process of breaking illusions, healing and forgiving against all odds into a cruelly authentic, literary portrayal of the human condition. In this article, I will argue that personal struggle is a significant notion not only in O’Neill’s drama but also generally in contemporary literature. The notion of *trauma* has been extensively interpreted by scholars in the social, anthropological and historical context. I will investigate, with O’Neill’s life and work as primary references, the personal / universal aspect of trauma, my primary research question being: to what extent can the ghosts of trauma be restrained by means of literature?

Keywords: ghosts; past; time and space; trauma; biography.

The (Contemporary) American Playwright

Eugene O’Neill received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1936. At that time, his most critically acclaimed plays, *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), *Long*

Day's Journey Into Night (1941) and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1943) were yet to be delivered. So far, he is the only American playwright to win this most prestigious literary award. O'Neill has also been celebrated as the first writer in history awarded with four Pulitzer Prizes¹ and has been invariably referred to as the father of modern American drama, as the United States' greatest dramatic talent, as a revolutionary who quickly became a classic (Churchwell 2012). His successors to this day acknowledge a substantial artistic debt to "the American Playwright," thus far, the undisputed Master of American Drama². Not a single literary critic managed to convincingly challenge O'Neill's position, although some, with more or less success, insisted on determining areas for improvement in his work—he has been accused of too grim a tone and sentimentality.

The upsurge of interest in O'Neill's plays can be traced back to 1956 with *Long Day's Journey Into Night* receiving the Tony Award for best play, along with two very successful theatre adaptations: the play's world premiere in Sweden, directed by Bengt Ekerot, and José Quintero's Broadway production (both staged in 1956). From that point on, O'Neill has not ceased to attract some of the most renowned theatre (José Quintero, Robert Falls) and film directors (John Frankenheimer, Sidney Lumet) and actors (Coleen Dewhurst, Katharine Hepburn, Jason Robards, Lee Marvin) in America and abroad³. Competent handling of O'Neill's *œuvre* demands not only considerable technical skills⁴ but also a great deal of experience, both professional and personal, resulting in a certain degree of maturity, unceasing devotion to the arts and an uncompromising dedication to the ethics of work⁵. The legendary film director Sidney Lumet in his 1995 book *Making Movies* provides a list of key summary topics for his most important films. He argues that defining that one main theme before the actual filming process starts greatly contributes to the film's later success. He fails to provide the leading theme for *Long Day's Journey Into Night* which he explains with the following words:

¹ Only Robert Frost and Robert E. Sherwood managed to hold an equally impressive record.

² See: 2006 "Eugene O'Neill: A Documentary" in which contemporary American writers such as Tony Kushner and John Guare voice their gratitude to O'Neill.

³ Primarily in Sweden.

⁴ O'Neill spent his childhood and adult years in theatre, understanding most of its working mechanisms by the time he was thirty years old.

⁵ James O'Neill (Eugene's father), who is referred to as "one of America's last great actors" (Alexander 1962: 65), followed one motto throughout his life: "Work, work, WORK!" (Alexander 1962: 38).

I must stop here. I don't know what the theme is, other than whatever idea is inherent in the title. Sometimes a subject comes along and, as in this case, is expressed in such great writing, is so enormous, so all-encompassing, that no single theme can define it. Trying to pin it down limits something that should have no limits. I am very lucky to have had a text of that magnitude in my career. (Lumet 1996: 56)

The film, made in 1962, has not met its cinematic match so far. It remains the classic example of a faithful yet bold, all-embracing screen adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's work.

In the context of all the above achievements and O'Neill's wide-ranging critical recognition I would like to raise the following question: what is O'Neill's position in the contemporary context? He has transformed American theatre in the first decades of the twentieth century; what does he have to offer to contemporary literature scholars who reach out to younger generations? This question was originally prompted by the lecture of Dr Gary Vena, one of the leading O'Neill scholars, a co-founder of New York's New School of Drama, entitled: "The Hunted and The Haunted: Reflections on Eugene O'Neill." In the lecture, Vena describes an educational experiment he undertakes each year with his undergraduate students examining the level of their familiarity with modern American dramatists. He says: Arthur Miller, several students raise their hand, Tennessee Williams, all students raise their hand, and finally Eugene O'Neill—not a single hand is up. Tennessee Williams stated once: "O'Neill gave birth to the American Theatre and died for it" (Wilkins 1997). Vena's experiment indicates that Williams' praise has turned a grim prophecy. Has Eugene O'Neill already become the ghost of the past, a literary spectre strolling along Shelton Hotel corridors, an old revolutionary with no sufficient means of pushing postmodern theatre out of self-referentiality? In the past decade, O'Neill has been considerably rarely adapted for the stage and screen⁶. The list of films based on his writing is comparatively short with only few internationally recognized productions, such as 1962 *Long Day's Journey Into Night* adaptation discussed above. However, it is my strong conviction, built upon an extensive research and analysis, that O'Neill's work has gained considerable relevance. Some

⁶ In Poland, in the years 2000-2016 his plays were only staged four times in total, *The Iceman Cometh*, his second most acclaimed play has only been staged once in 1976 in the Dramatic Theatre in Warsaw. Ulana Faryna in the article "The Dynamics of the Reception of the Dramas of Eugene in Poland" states: "Since 2000 the heritage of O'Neill has been completely ignored by Polish critics" (2009: 159).

of his favourite themes, such as the state of a permanent imbalance, cultural, political and existential fragmentation and condemnation for some leading modernist objectives⁷, strongly resemble postmodern traits. Eugene O'Neill's unique style was shaped, to a significant degree, out of rebellion towards the doctrine of the classics such as Dumas, Hugo or Hume⁸ his father was so deeply affected by. When Edmund quotes poetry, from Dowson or Baudelaire, Tyrone Senior attacks him: "You have a poet in you, but a morbid one! Devil take your pessimism. . . Why can't you remember your Shakespeare and forget the third-raters? You'll find what you're trying to say in him—as you will find everything else worth saying" (1989: 114). Eugene O'Neill revived American drama by drawing, then yet unexplored, ideas from European avant-garde writers and thinkers such as Strindberg, Ibsen, Zola or Nietzsche. They greatly appealed to his uncompromising nature. In the process of mastering the technique, O'Neill became a more critical but also a more mature thinker; his voice emerged as truly modern and highly universal at the same time.

The O'Neills and the Tyrones

The Iceman Cometh, A Moon for the Misbegotten, Long Day's Journey Into Night would not have come into existence if it had not been for O'Neill's tragic and complicated past. His literary journey led him, gradually, to face his own upbringing. The trilogy marks the evolution of O'Neill's most intimate personal relationships: these with his mother, his father and his brother Jamie. Thus, the famous title of his most popular play *Long Day's Journey Into Night* serves as an apt metaphor for both his life and his work. Lloys Richards, a Canadian-American theatre director, in the 2006 documentary *Eugene O'Neill* shares a following observation:

There is something that people need to ponder about Eugene O'Neill, which actually opens them up to the whole art of writing: what does it cost to be an artist? What did it cost to be Eugene O'Neill? What cost Eugene O'Neill to be Eugene O'Neill was a mother, cost him a father, cost him a happy marriage, it cost him children, it cost him the many wives that he tried to have, because

⁷ Such as: ability to judge objectively and overcoming crisis with the means of reason or belief in an existence of a coherent *self*.

⁸ The full list of the classics approved by James Tyrone / O'Neill Senior can be found on the very first page of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1989: 9)

he didn't know how, he had never learnt that . . . This happens to a lot of people, it does, but not everybody can write about it, not everybody is really willing to look deep within themselves to see what's going on, "What am I doing?" And he was capable of that. And that is hard. It is hard to take a pencil and say: "This is me in the deepest part of my gut." (Burns 2006: 02:12)

Richards' claim is that O'Neill's highly personal experience was not so much an inspiration for his work, as a currency with which the artist paid for his scrupulous honesty throughout his literary career. Richards tackles an important issue of the essential role of literature, of its life transforming capacity so pertinent to O'Neill's writing.

Eugene O'Neill made no secret of the fact that *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is an autobiographical piece. Tyrone is a county in Ireland where James O'Neill was born, James Tyrone—a popular actor, Mary (Ella O'Neill)—his beautiful brown-eyed wife who used to dream of becoming a nun, the older brother Jamie—an alcohol addicted womanizer, and finally, Edmund the poet, a character based on the author himself⁹. The question I would like to ask in reference to the play's autobiographism is as follows: do readers need to be familiar with the original story of the O'Neill family in order to interpret the play thoroughly? Biographism can indeed pose a serious threat of over-interpretation with meanings over-dependent on an author's biography¹⁰. Methodology, however, should be adopted concordantly with the writer's style, his/her theme selection. I would argue that with majority of O'Neill's plays, biographical research significantly enhances literary analysis of his work. The highly complex past of the O'Neill family, with its sudden twists and turns and relationships rich in nuances and crises, continuously refines the interpretative palette of the playwright's work. It is my strong conviction that the correlation between the ghosts of O'Neill's family past and the ghosts haunting the Tyrones in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* should not be overlooked by researchers. The profound impact of this interrelation was correctly assessed by Eugene O'Neill himself. In 1941, upon the completion of his landmark piece, on his 12th wedding anniversary, Eugene presented the following letter of dedication to his wife Carlotta:

⁹ O'Neill reverses names—Edmund was his late brother who died of measles, in the play the dead infant is referred to as Eugene.

¹⁰ For example: Samuel Beckett's character of Godot interpreted as the anticipation of Irish independence.

Dearest: I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood. A sadly inappropriate gift, it would seem, for a day celebrating happiness. But you will understand. 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. These twelve years, Beloved One, have been a Journey into Light—into love (King 2017)

In the letter, O’Neill demonstrates his troubled yet deep and on-going commitment to Tyrone / O’Neill family members. Could such an intense bond have ever been developed with fictional characters? Carlotta admitted that *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* “almost killed” O’Neill, “it was terrifying to watch his suffering . . . , it was an agony for him to re-live his painful past” she said (Adato 1986).

This play, the final product of considerable personal and professional struggle, presents its readers with a serious challenge. Arguably, Mary Tyrone’s most striking characteristic is detachment; the reader’s attitude can only be the opposite. O’Neill presents us with the complicated anagrams of human relationships. Hence, our reading depends on the location of certain facts from the characters’ past. On its own, a given decision might be interpreted in terms of a selfish wrong-doing but in the company of additional motives and circumstances it gains new shades of meaning. There is affection and repulsion, frustration and desire, deficiency and vulnerability. It is the reader’s job to examine the structure of this complicated web closely, with concern and genuine curiosity. O’Neill’s aversion towards the *definite* plays the key role here. The play’s complexity and universalism allow Tyrone’s story to be effectively translated into readers’ own experience. I will take this argument even further: those who embrace O’Neill thoroughly, to their full emotional and intellectual potential, are offered a clearer view of their own family’s inadequacies. It has, at the very least, the potential of setting some very firm ground for it. This brings us back to Lloyd Richard’s initial observation that “not everybody can write about it [things that happen deep within ourselves], sometimes not even think about it.” O’Neill’s work functions as a transitional tool here. His characters guide us through this difficult process of unveiling the unwanted, painful truths we almost wished to have no contact with. Jealousy and spite, love on the verge of hate, blame and regret, hope and illusion—O’Neill handles these with unprecedented precision. He not only exposes but directly confronts his ghosts.

Illusion and Entrapment

Space for O'Neill serves as a canvas for the workings of illusion, a topic that transfixed him throughout his career. Illusion perpetually haunts his characters for it knows no time barriers, it infects reality almost imperceptibly. For Lavinia and Orin in *Mourning Becomes Electra* it is the delusional love each feels for the opposite sex parent. They are imprisoned, eternally, behind the grand, white columns—prison bars of their mansion which, not accidentally, bear resemblance to a giant skull. Orin's and Lavinia's ultimate destination is that of Orestes and Electra from *Oresteia* by Aeschylus. The Mannon dynasty is forever doomed. It is the ghost of the past, in the guise of Captain Adam Brant that forever immobilizes its present and future. Orin feels betrayed upon learning that his mother falls in love with Brant, Lavinia becomes revenge-ridden once her beloved father is deceived, and eventually eliminated, by her mother Christina. Consequently, the two siblings plot to murder Brant. This act is of a highly symbolic value. Brant—an illegitimate child of David Mannon, Ezra's Mannon's uncle—seeks revenge on the family that previously rejected him and his mother. A sordid family past continually haunts the Mannon descendants. The whole dynasty is brought to the end—Orin commits suicide, Lavinia locks herself in an empty mansion, a place where the family tragedy was originally initiated, with the intention of staying there eternally.

The claustrophobic house pulls its inhabitants in, paralysing them emotionally, making them eternally fettered. The Mannon mansion transfigures into the Kingdom of Illusion, a metaphor explored in several works by O'Neill such as: *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Beyond the Horizon*. This powerful metaphor has inspired generations of playwrights. Edward Albee—evidently in awe of O'Neill's portrayal of alcoholism, with alcohol performing a role of an illusion potion—entitles his final act of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?", in which Martha is forced to finally abandon an illusion of being a mother, "Exorcism"¹¹. Challenging and brutally dispelling illusions is precisely what Eugene O'Neill is executing in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. The play starts in the morning with the husband James affectionately embracing his wife Mary, their sons Edmund and Jamie laughing in the dining room. But as daylight begins gradually to fade, so do their illusions. The family

¹¹ "Exorcism" is also the title of O'Neill's 1919 play.

spends a brief time outdoors but Mary's reluctance to go¹² and her obsessive demands to be left alone in her room during the day, strongly suggest that her estrangement is building up. She shows sure signs of resentment towards the outside world—she has no friends in town, no one to turn to. But the place in which she tries to hide is no less hostile. In the second part of the first act she confides in Jamie:

they [towns people] have decent, presentable homes they don't have to be ashamed of . . . They are not cut from everyone. . . . Not that I want anything to do with them. I've always hated this town and everyone in it. I never wanted to live here in the first place. But your father liked it and insisted on buying this house. . . . I have never felt it was my home. It was wrong from the start. (1989: 38)

Interestingly, in this largely autobiographical play, Eugene O'Neill fictionalizes this particular story of the summer house. Mary complains: "Your father would never spend the money to make it right. It's just as well we haven't any friends here. I would be ashamed to have them step in the door. But he's never wanted family friends" (1989: 38). Doris Alexander, O'Neill's scholar and biographer, writes in *The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill*:

James had the house built of the finest materials. (Years later, when a back wing of the house was torn down, the contractor offered to do the job for nothing if he could keep the beautiful wood.) The doorways, woodwork, the staircases were all of fine walnut, the floors parquet, and the fireplaces of imported tile. The report in the *Boston Times* that the house had cost \$40,000—a fortune in 1883—could not have been far off. (1962: 12)

Alexander notes that "the house was full of guests" (1962: 14), a testimony which clearly contradicts Mary's Tyrone story. It may indicate that for O'Neill the condition of the environment his characters found themselves in consistently reflects their inner state. The shabby house with no solid fundamentals clearly represents Mary who fails to protect her children and sustain joy in their lives. She struggles greatly in the role of a mother-figure, for she evidently lacks the basics of stability and emotional security so vital for the ones under her care.

¹² She refuses to go on a trip to town although James bought her a car specifically for this purpose.

The Ghost of Trauma

One day with the Tyrones and we uncover decades of sorrow, mutual blame, escape from responsibility and reality, guilt and regret. The ghosts of the past, present and future all wear the same face, the same mask¹³, O'Neill would have said, and it is the one of *trauma*. The playwright gives a startling insight into its mechanisms. Mary Tyrone is possibly the most exemplary victim of trauma, its main source being the tragic loss of her infant son. Mary's case meets most of the PTSD criteria (<https://www.ptsd.va.gov>): she was directly exposed to the event, she learnt that her relative died as a result of a traumatic event, she has several intrusive thoughts, suffers great emotional distress after exposure to traumatic reminders, she experiences physical reactivity after traumatic exposure (drug addiction, problems with hands) along with overbearing blame towards herself and others (especially towards Jamie, whom she accuses of passing the sickness on his younger brother out of jealousy). Mary's interest in activities is highly decreased, she feels isolated, has heightened startle reactions and experiences hypervigilance, she has difficulty sleeping and concentrating and displays highly risky and destructive behavior (drug abuse). In addition, her behavior shows strong signs of trauma-related stimuli such as depersonalization and derealization¹⁴. Family trauma, which embraces all the tragedies, disappointments and resentment of the Tyrones, operates as a destructive vicious circle¹⁵. Individuals had been affected and generations, also generations to come¹⁶. Eugene O'Neill died with the full realization of his family curse, devoid of a place he could call *home*, his last words allegedly being: "Born in a goddamn hotel room and dying in a hotel room" (King 2016: preview). Trauma—the ghost¹⁷ "freezes" time, its victims—the

¹³ Eugene O'Neill was greatly interested in the concept, the evidence of which can be found in several of his plays, especially in *The Great God Brown* (1926)

¹⁴ *Depersonalization* is an experience of being an outside observer of or detached from oneself (e.g., feeling as if "this is not happening to me"). *Derealization*—an experience of unreality, distance, or distortion (e.g., "things are not real") (<https://www.ptsd.va.gov>).

¹⁵ National Center for PTSD lists the following PTSD criteria linked to the notion of repetition: flashbacks, trauma-related thoughts or feelings, trauma-related reminders, blaming others, intrusive negative thoughts about the world and oneself (www.ptsd.va.gov).

¹⁶ Eugene O'Neill's two sons committed suicide, his two-month-old grandson died of neglect.

¹⁷ There is a strong link between the three concepts: *ghost*, *trauma*, and *haunting* in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. *Ghost* is disembodied spirit, the soul of a dead person (<http://www.dictionary.com>) and can be associated in the play with Tyrons' dead baby. *To*

four Tyrones from *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, the Mannon family from *Mourning Becomes Electra* (trilogy composed of *Homecoming*, *The Hunted*, *The Haunted*), Anna Christy and several others are infinitely haunted by its workings, unable to forget and forgive, to move forward, to evolve. What stops O'Neill's ghost of trauma from being exorcized is an illusion, an inability to put a stop to false realities so willingly produced by the Tyrone family.

The Iceman Cometh, a play preceding *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, puts the notion of illusion at its centre. The play is set in a pub turned motel, owned by Harry Hope, second name not accidental. Harry's long term clients, all heavily dependent on dreams and alcohol, have been confined within the premises since time immemorial. They dwell on the past, have no present, and can only fool themselves about the future. And here comes Hickey, the Iceman, the Master of Ceremony, for whom the only key to the gate of future happiness and freedom is one of disillusion. He leads his friends, one by one, to the *land of the truth*, voluntarily rids them of all the pipe dreams that kept them glued to this hopeless place— Harry Hope's motel (originally called the Golden Swan, it was also known by the more suitable name—the Hell Hole). Hicky unsurprisingly fails, for lies and dreams are what in fact holds Harry's clients aloft, keeping them sane and, above all, alive.

O'Neill's protagonists can be characterized as, to use Edmund's (a character modeled on O'Neill) expression, "fog people"; it is the fog, the illusion that blinds them but also binds them together. It is the fog that protects them:

The fog was where I wanted to be. Halfway down the path you can't see this house. You'd never know it was here . . . 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. I was like walking on the bottom of the sea. As 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 more than a ghost within a ghost . . . Who wants to see life as it is, if they can help it? (1989: 113)

ghost may also mean to leave suddenly without saying goodbye (www.dictionary.com), Mary's son died suddenly while she was away. *To haunt* means to visit habitually or appear to frequently as a spirit or ghost, to recur persistently to the consciousness of, to disturb or distress; cause to have anxiety; trouble; worry (www.dictionary.com), all of which resemble the PTSD criteria mentioned above (www.ptsd.va.gov).

Mary Tyrone's desperate fight with her drug addiction is lost repeatedly, which profoundly hurts those close to her. To constantly restore faith in their wife and mother seems unworkable in such hard conditions. It is Mary's foggy gaze that gives her away. With her condition worsening she becomes more and more detached, absent and lost within herself. Her movements become awkward, as if she was constantly walking through the fog. "Who wants to see life as it is, if they can help it?"—Mary certainly does not. She cannot. The single person in the play showing some signs of strength in handling the reality is Edmund. The parents are unable to overcome old regrets, cynical Jamie turned his back on the world a long time ago.

To see clearly is to be hurt, but only those who see have the "makings of a poet" in them. Edmund, a promising artist, speaks of his deeply personal experience during which he, for once, belonged, felt part of the world, and not its outcast:

When I was on the Squarehead square rigger, bound for Buenos Aires. Full moon in the Trades. The Old Hooker driving fourteen knots. I lay on the bowsprit, facing astern, with the water foaming into spume under me, the masts with every sail white in the moonlight, towering high above me. 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! I dissolved in the sea, became white sails and flying spray, became beauty and rhythm, became moonlight and the ship and the high dim starred-sky! I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself! To God, if you want to put it that way. (1989:134)

As opposed to the fog in which the rest of the family finds itself trapped in and the claustrophobic interior of the summer house, Edmund speaks of "every sail white in the moonlight," of "becoming moonlight," of being out in the open with "towering high" above him. He "became drunk" not with stimulants or illusions but with "beauty" and "sky." His example vividly illuminates that the ghosts of trauma can be successfully defeated in an act of embracing the world against all the odds. Capturing this experience within an artistic act was a part of a healing process which Edmund/Eugene both underwent. It has never cease to affect the readers likewise.

In this article, I have posed a fundamental question of the essential role literature plays in our lives. I have argued that, as in the case of Eugene O'Neill, literature possesses life transforming, and above all, life sustaining capacities. The two characters in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* who have

not surrendered to substance abuse and addiction are Edmund Tyrone and James Tyrone Senior, both artists and avid readers. Edmund Tyrone represents young Eugene O'Neill—a striving poet who finds solace in nature and words. His shining talent symbolizes hope for the Tyrone family, a family haunted by ghosts of the past, the present and the future. These haunting spirits come in the form of trauma and illusion, the themes which are reflected in the environment O'Neill designs for his characters. The playwright closely investigates the haunting quality of time and space, but is remarkably reluctant to openly dispel illusions which, in a large part, contribute to the problem. Allowing the ghosts to openly speak is, for O'Neill, an important part of the exorcism. As painful as the process may be, O'Neill's fog people are guided by compassion and understanding. These two are the most valuable lessons literature can teach us.

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