

# Tyronian tragedy

Literature



In Eugene O'Neill's agonizingly autobiographical play *Long Day's Journey into Night*, readers are introduced a dismal family situation. Drugs, death, illness and failure lace each conversation, and regret flows almost as unreservedly as the alcohol. In such a tragedy, one would expect to have a clear idea of with whom the blame lies. In this piece of drama, however, there is a distinct inability to do so. Eugene O'Neill persistently manipulates the emotional responses of the reader. This manipulation keeps partiality off balance and uncertain.

O'Neill accomplishes this by allowing readers to sympathize with one family member. Once sympathy is established for one particular character, that character promptly says, or does, something that loses the reader's alliance, along with the alliance of whichever character he or she is berating at that particular moment. This results in the reader's inability to discern who, precisely, is culpable for the Tyrone family's situation. The idea of assigning culpability in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is almost humorous.

Even if one wanted to, it would be difficult to sort through years of built up anger, layer upon layer of repression, and huge amounts of guilt in each character; for each character is at fault for one thing or another, and, in addition, each character blames someone else for his or her problem. For example, Mary blames her husband and his tightfistedness for her addiction to morphine. Due to their mother being an addict, Jamie is unable to bring girls home, thus he visits prostitutes. Such behavior has influenced his younger brother Edmund, "making him old before his time" (35).

Consequently, Jamie is at fault for Edmund's poor health. In turn, his mother, for causing the addiction by being brought into the world, as well as worsening it with his own illness, blames Edmund. And so, the vicious circle continues. However, if one does not wish to inflict upon one's distinguished teaching assistant a painfully long dissertation of each member's contributions to the tragedy and the results thereof, one ought to maintain, for argument's sake, that the majority of the culpability lies with James Tyrone, for his behaviour in regards to money, alcohol, and his own status as a failed actor.

James's father had left the family when James was only ten years of age. This left James as the man of the family, working twelve hours each day to help provide for his mother and three sisters. As James explains, "It was in those days I learned to be a miser"(151). He feels proud of his savings, and announces to his family in regards to buying something: "I got them dead cheap"(15). His own early recognition of the importance of money explains his continual contempt for his own children's lack of concern when it comes to working:

"What do you know of the value of a dollar? (150). He accuses Jamie of being lazy and having no ambition. Not only does James Tyrone wish his sons understood the value of money, but since they do not, he is forced to be miserly enough for the whole family. Consequently, the family resents his overly economic ways. There are many attacks throughout the play on James Tyrone for this, the first one being Jamie accusing him of not sending Edmund to a real doctor for his illness when he first got sick. Jamie says, "

Hardy only charges a dollar. That's what makes you think he's a fine doctor!  
"(31).

Later, another dialogue gives an even worse view of the situation; Tyrone sending Edmund to a cheap sanatorium, but spending money on real estate:  
JAMIE: Well, for God's sake, pick out a good place and not some cheap dump!  
TYRONE: (Stung) I'll send him wherever Hardy thinks best! JAMIE: Well, don't give Hardy your old over-the-hills-to-the-poorhouse song about taxes and mortgages. TYRONE: I'm no millionaire who can throw money away!

Why shouldn't I tell Hardy the truth? JAMIE: Because he'll think you want him to pick a cheap dump, and because he'll now it isn't the truth i?? especially if he hears afterwards you've seen McGuire and let that flannel-mouth, gold-brick merchant sting you with another piece of bum property! (82) Later realizing the anger this statement comes from, James Tyrone offers Edmund " any place you like! Never mind what it costs! Any place I can afford. Any place you like". Sadly, there follows the stipulation Tyrone cannot seem to shake off: " Within reason. "(151). Cheap medical care seems to be Tyrone's weakness.

As Mary Tyrone makes clear, his tightfisted ways result, though inadvertently, in her downfall as well, due to a doctor giving her morphine as an easy fix. " But bearing Edmund was the last straw. I was so sick afterwards, and that ignorant quack of a cheap hotel doctor-All he knew was I was in pain. It was easy for him to stop the pain. "(90) Tyrone is also to blame for his wife's general unhappiness, not just her addiction to morphine. Mary says to Edmund that she has never been happy in the house, because "

Everything was done in the cheapest way. Your father would never spend the money to make it right. (45). The subsequent scene has Mary come downstairs (60), in a detached sort of manner.

She complains bitterly to Edmund about Tyrone's inability to make a real home. He is too stingy to build a real home, with good servants, and so she has suffered all her life. When Tyrone himself comes in, she says in continuation of her previous statements " I'm sick and tired of pretending this is a home! You won't help me! "(69). She goes on to say that had he remained a bachelor " Then nothing would have happened. " This indicates strongly that she blames him too.

Tyrone condemns Mary for her addiction, yet feels no guilt or responsibility for it, taking away any amount of forgiveness readers may have parted with in Tyrone's favour. The amusing part of this however, is while he condemns his wife for substance abuse, the same thing is his own major vice. Mary tells her husband: " I would never have married you if I'd known you drank so much" (115). She also launches into a story about their honeymoon, when Tyrone was dragged home intoxicated. It appears that in a fashion similar to that of their father, Jamie and Edmund seem quite partial to alcohol.

In fact, the entire family seems unable to confront reality without chemical assistance. Mary's words indicate that drinking all day is a common Tyrone family activity: " I know what to expect. You will be drunk tonight. Well, it won't be the first time, will it i?? or the thousandth? " (72). The Tyrone men validate their drinking habits with folk wisdom about whiskey's alleged health benefits: " It's before a meal and I've always found that good whiskey,

taken in moderation as an appetizer, is the best of tonics" (68). Alcohol has contributed to Jamie's failures.

It has hurt Edmund's health. And it becomes a source of conflict between Jamie and Tyrone, as Jamie consistently steals his father's whiskey, replacing the amount taken with water, so his father won't take notice. Regrettably, the alcohol solves no problems, and problems get more intricate as the tongues loosen from the booze. The three men share a drink, but none of the social magic of alcohol seems to work. Tyrone, Edmund and Jamie remain as miserable as ever. The last, most driving element of James Tyrone's guilt is his status as a failed actor.

In act four of the play, James Tyrone relates something to his youngest son that he has never told anyone before. He explains that since his father left the family when he was ten, he grew up to be miserly. Thus he was quick to give up artistic fulfillment in exchange for financial security, ruining his career as "one of the three or four young actors with the greatest artistic promise in America"(153). James Tyrone now muses that he doesn't even know what it was he had wanted to buy. It appears that James has never forgiven himself for this, and therefore inflicts it on his family and neighbours.

Mary says in regards to the neighbours: " they bowed to your father and he bowed back as if he were taking a curtain call"(44). Jamie relates that Tyrone puts on an act for everybody (57). Tyrone begins to quote a play almost as tragic as his own family life, but his son, obviously well versed in his father's repertoire of chastisements from King Lear, finishes the sentence before his

father can continue, with " 'to have a thankless child'. I know"(92). His sons also immediately think in terms of tragedy when referring to their father, quoting Othello in reference to James's snoring: " 'The Moor, I know his trumpet'"(21).

It appears that Tyrone turns his own life into a tragedy, like the ones he once portrayed so well upon the stage, switching affections and emotions like he would have to between scenes, although his family isn't as accepting of this as Edwin Booth and the critics obviously were. But why bother to deal with the question of fault? After all, the characters themselves claim not to care about it, such as in act two, scene two, when James Tyrone tries to blame Edmund's consumptive state on Mary's side of the family. Jamie cries out against blame: " Who gives a damn about that part of it! "