

Ephiphanies in "long day's journey into night"



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While the word "epiphany" suggests positive enlightenment, it is only negative in Eugene O'Neill's disturbing "Long Day's Journey into Night." Each family member undergoes a bitter revelation within the course of only twenty-four hours. Through self-examination, the four family members all finally grasp the causes of their sorry lives. James Sr.'s epiphany occurs in the form of a personal confession to his son, when he admits he would have enjoyed his life if he had continued pursuing acting rather than letting money rule his decisions. James reluctantly acknowledges that his childhood poverty led him to be a miser: "A dollar was worth so much then. And once you've learned a lesson, it's hard to unlearn it (148)." His fear of the poorhouse ultimately causes James to realize that "Maybe life overdid the lesson for me, and made a dollar worth too much, and... that mistake ruined my career as a fine actor (149)." Abandoning his passion as a Shakespearean actor ultimately desecrated his life. He tells Edmund, "I've never admitted this to anyone before, lad, but tonight I'm so heartsick I feel at the end of everything, and what's the use of fake pride and pretense. That God-damned play I bought for a song and made such a great success in- a great money success- it ruined me with its promise of easy fortune (149)." At this moment, when James is honest with himself, he finally realizes that money has shattered his potential and caused him a despondent life. Jamie, one of James' sons, lives in a world much unlike his father's, but like James recognizes that his life holds no real substance. Jamie abhors the worthless person he has become. He claims he "hates life" and "has been dead for so long (165)." His lifestyle of bars and brothels causes him nothing but self-pity, depression, and jealousy. Jamie admits to his brother, Edmund, that he never wanted his brother to succeed and "make [him] look worse by

comparison (165)." He even goes so far as to say that he hates Edmund for his mother's addiction. He quickly revokes this statement, claiming, " I love you more than I hate you. My saying what I'm telling you now proves it. I run this risk you'll hate me-and you're all I've got left (166)." By confessing what he has hidden behind for thirty-four years, Jamie plummets toward rock bottom. At this point in his hollow life, it becomes evident he cannot overcome his doubts and failures. When the optimism he places in his mother's sobriety falters, he says " I'd begun to hope if she'd beaten the game, then I could too (165)." This discouraging confession confirms the desperate future ahead for Jamie. Mary also uncovers much about her self-destructive nature. The mask behind which she hides disappears momentarily during a morphine relapse. Like her husband, Mary regrets the choices in her youth that led her to drug addiction. If she had followed her dream and joined the convent, morphine would play no part in her life. Toward the end of the play, Mary longs for the faith she has lost: " I remember when I had it I was never lonely nor afraid. I can't have lost it forever, I would die if I thought that. Because then there would be no hope (173)." During her soliloquy, Mary muses, " If only I could find the faith I lost, so I could pray again! (107)" These lines suggest that Mary's prediction has come true: by losing her faith, she lost all hope. Without this hope, Mary struggles with her substance dependency and feels shameful and weak. As Mary begins to pray, she stops and proclaims, " You expect the Blessed Virgin to be fooled by a lying dope fiend reciting words! You can't hide from her!...I must go upstairs. I haven't taken enough. When you start again, you never know how much you need (107). This confession is the only time Mary verbally admits she can not overcome her addiction, and it signifies her

surrender. In Mary's last line, she revisits her long-ago decision to leave the "Blessed Virgin" for James Tyrone. Her constant retreat into her past confirms her revelation that by not following her dream, she created a life of sorrow. Edmund arrives upon his epiphany in the same manner as his mother, by reflecting on his past. He discloses his realization to his father over the drunken card game: "It was a great mistake, my being born a man, I would have been much more successful as a seagull or a fish. 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! (153)." Edmund always feels tremendous guilt for his mother's condition, which was caused by his birth. His statements suggest an inability to cope with the difficulties in his life, therefore inspiring the feelings of rejection and not belonging. In an earlier scene, when Edmund returns from a foggy walk, he tells his father, "That's what I wanted, to be alone with myself in another world where truth is untrue and life can hide from itself (131)." Edmund faces many pressures in his life that he cannot control. The guilt he endures eventually breaks him down and ruins his potential. While talking to his father, Edmund realizes he will never become a commendable man. Throughout "Long Day's Journey into Night," Eugene O'Neill provides insight into the dismal worlds in which each character barely lives. James Sr. sacrifices his passion of acting for his obsession with money, only to find the money was not worth his dream. Jamie admits he drove his life straight into the ground and struggled to take Edmund with him. Mary realizes that by losing her faith, she lost her joy and self-control as well. Edmund acknowledges that the sea is the only place he ever feels welcome. When each character finally breaks through the barriers of denial and fallacy in

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their everyday lives, their revelations are anything but the “ positive” enlightenment we normally associate with epiphany.