

The autobiographical truth in long day's journey into night



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Aspiring writers are often told, "Write what you know." Writers are thus encouraged to draw on their personal experiences to craft their narratives. Experienced authors often choose to create semi-autobiographical works, which contain a blend of some elements of their real lives and some of their own fictional creation. Irish-American playwright Eugene O'Neill is one such author who drew largely from personal experience to create his plays. *Long Day's Journey into Night* is widely considered to be his finest literary achievement and also his most personal play. This drama has many autobiographical elements but with some important fictional characteristics. An understanding of how O'Neill draws on personal elements in the creation of this text can deepen our appreciation of this powerful work.

Long Day's Journey into Night is a truly unique play in the way that it differs from most semi-autobiographical works. Many works in this genre are initially based on life events, but then the author chooses to veer the work in another direction. O'Neill, however, remains largely true to the events of his life. As O'Neill scholar Michael Hinden explains, O'Neill had "no need to fabricate family incidents for his plot" and actually "pruned additional family troubles from the finished play" (94). In fact, compressing the events into a twenty-four hour period is arguably the most fictional part of the production. As Hinden writes, "The play fixes a moment of time shared equally by its protagonists, reaches into the past to illuminate that moment, and presents it without editorial comment" (93). We can pin down some facts about the O'Neills' lives in the moment, but we as the audience are left to speculate about the remainder of the characters' lives. When examining the O'Neills' lives, we must remember that several events and details were intentionally

left out of the production. With an acknowledgment of the unusual nature of O'Neill's writing, we can begin to examine the autobiographical elements in the play.

The four central characters in the play are based on O'Neill's immediate family. First, James Tyrone is based on Eugene's father, James O'Neill (1846-1920). Like his character in the play, James was an actor best known for the role of Edmond Dantes in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Despite this being his most successful role, it also became the "fatal turning point in his career" (Hinden 104). He was typecast and could not find another role after it. The O'Neills spent much of their life traveling and living out of hotels due to James's acting career. Eugene believed that this led to his mother's morphine addiction (104). While Eugene's portrayal of his father's career appears accurate, James's personal traits in the production may have been biased, particularly in regards to James's handling of money. Hinden argues: "Friends who remembered James O'Neill protested that his presentation as a miser in the play was inaccurate. They recalled the actor as an open and generous man who always was happy to provide a handout" (101). Eugene portrays his family from his own personal lens, which is subject to bias. His characters thus closely resemble but do not completely reflect the members of his family.

Mary Tyrone is based on Eugene's mother, Mary Ellen ("Ella") Quinlan O'Neill (1857-1922). Like her character in the play, Ella met her future husband backstage at one of his New York performances. The two were married on June 14, 1887, and their first son James Jr. (Jamie) was born a year later. Five years later their son Edmund was born. He quickly died, <https://assignbuster.com/the-autobiographical-truth-in-long-days-journey-into-night/>

however, after contracting measles from his older brother. Ella lived in conflict between blaming herself and blaming Jamie for the baby's death (Hinden 98). Eugene chose to exchange his name in the play with his brother's. His character is named Edmund Tyrone in the play, and the dead brother is referred to as Eugene. Some scholars speculate that Eugene made this choice to emphasize how he felt living in the shadow of a "ghost child" (101). Some believe that the play suggests Eugene's birth indirectly led to his mother's drug addiction (98). A doctor prescribed her morphine after a painful and traumatic childbirth. However, "whether the doctor who introduced her to morphine was a cheap hotel quack, as Mary charges in the play, or a respectable practitioner, cannot be ascertained" (99). Her drug addiction spanned many years and deeply troubled the O'Neill family. Her addiction is central to the plot of the play. Her unusual behavior in the play, such as wearing her wedding dress, is also true. However, what is left out of the play is Ella's surprising recovery. In 1914 she retired to a convent and found the strength to give up morphine (99). In the play Eugene chose to focus on her earlier life which was still ravaged by addiction.

Jamie Tyrone in the play is based on Eugene's older brother James O'Neill, Jr. (1878-1923). Scholars claim that Jamie's character is the most lifelike in the production (Hinden 100). As Hinden writes, "The measles episode, school expulsions, bitterness, drinking, whoring, and the train ride are the legacy of James O'Neill, Jr." (100). In real life, Jamie was a troubled soul who could not find a healthy way to cope with his problems. He cared deeply for his younger brother, but he was always afraid his troubles would bring his brother down (101). In the play and in life, he was addicted to alcohol for

almost all his life. In fact, after his mother's death in 1922, he " never had another sober day" (99). His drinking eventually became so terrible that Eugene had to distance himself from his brother in real life (101). Jamie actually tells his brother to keep his distance in the play. His character warns, " At the first good chance I get, I'll stab you in the back" (O'Neill 821). As is predicted in the play, Jamie slowly drank himself to death and died at age forty-five.

Edmund Tyrone is O'Neill's self-portrait, and as Hinden describes is " somewhat disingenuous" (104). O'Neill looks back on his younger self from a place of experience. Many details of his own life are intentionally left out. Hinden argues, " Edmund's inexperience in the play is crucial: through his passivity the family's aggression comes sharply into focus" (105). Edmund in the play is a sensitive person but with a dark edge, friends of the true O'Neill seem to agree that he had a sensitive but dark personality (105). What is left out of the play is his failed marriage to Kathleen Jenkins and his strained relationship with his son Eugene O'Neill, Jr. His character would have already experienced his marriage and the birth of his son by the time the play took place. As was his character, O'Neill was diagnosed with tuberculosis and was sent to a sanatorium in 1912. It appears as though his character may die in the play, but the real O'Neill did recover within a year. His time dealing with illness actually inspired him to pursue a career in writing (Clark 24). Though he received success as a writer, he lived to see a grim life. He could not escape the influence of his older brother and became a chronic alcoholic. O'Neill experienced multiple failed marriages, the suicide of his eldest son, and a Parkinson's-like tremor which kept him sick for many years. He died of

pneumonia in 1953, and his last words were, " Born in a hotel room- and God damn it- died in a hotel room" (qtd in Hinden 106). His character Edmund is a version of O'Neill isolated in time, written by an experienced O'Neill looking backward. He intentionally removes his character from the tarnish of his own experience.

Long Day's Journey into Night was birthed out of O'Neill's experience in a broken family that was ravaged by pain and addiction. His portrait of his family is grim, but the O'Neill family did not experience only darkness.

Hinden explains:

Each of the four O'Neills lived to see a wish fulfilled. James watched his son develop into the fine artist he might have been, Ella conquered her addiction, and for a few years Jamie finally had his mother all to himself. As for O'Neill, his third marriage was a fulfilling one despite its stormy quarrels. (107)

It is important to acknowledge that, despite what the play suggests, not every moment of the O'Neills' lives was depressing. They experienced their own moments of love and of triumph. O'Neill's semi-autobiographical work may be a criticism of his family and the pain they inflicted upon him, but it is also his way of remembering his family and paying tribute to them. A better understanding of O'Neill's life helps us see the way the work actually honors his family. The characters in the production as well as the members of O'Neill's family are broken and beautiful, and because of the success of O'Neill's work, they will always be remembered.

Works Cited

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