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*Power in the Theatre: O'Neill's Long Day's Journey Into Night.*

The experiencing of a play in the theatre is a subjective involvement for an audience, and audiences are often simply unable to articulate their response to a particular performance. On the other hand, the external or objective reaction to a play is easily measured. By the time *Long Day's Journey Into Night* received its first American production in 1956, the playwright's critical reputation was secure. O'Neill had received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936, and he had lit up the Broadway stage with such Pulitzer Prize winning plays as *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), *Anna Christie* (1922), and *Strange Interlude* (1928).<sup>1</sup> The popular assumption was that O'Neill's last and long awaited posthumously produced play, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, would be another critical success. It was, garnishing another Pulitzer Prize and being generally proclaimed by knowledgeable experts as the greatest play written on the American side of the Atlantic.<sup>2</sup> Audiences, the true harbingers of theatrical success, flocked to see the play, and the numerous subsequent productions speak to the enormous popularity of the piece. Those who have seen the play claimed the drama powerful, the acting superb, the experience most moving. Very few, however, have been able to articulate why the drama created such a powerful and long lasting impression.

Just as there are many interpretations of a given work of art, there are many ways one might examine a play. One may analyze *Long Day's Journey Into Night* from an external point of view, comparing the play, not the experience of the play, but the written script with an arbitrary set of standards. Aristotle's *Poetics*, one of the first discourses on the nature of drama, comes to mind.<sup>3</sup> The plot, the arrangement of incidents, is a simple one. In a single locale the Tyrones drink and talk throughout the

<sup>1</sup> Production information derived from Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> John Gassner, "The Nature of O'Neill's Achievement: A Summary and Appraisal" in *O'Neill, A collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), pg. 165-169.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gianakaris, *Foundations of Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), pg. 194-196.

course of a single day. The characters are well drawn. The Tyrones have understandable motives, their aspirations generally self centered. The language of the play is realistic, not poetic, and is suitable as dialogue to be spoken with facility by actors and heard with comprehension by audiences. For spectacle the play has a realistic setting with suggestions of fog outside. Under the category of theme, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* contains such ideas as it is not such a good idea to penny pinch, one should treat one's family with consideration and respect, and acting is a profession one should avoid or at least be extremely wary of entering.

John Henry Raleigh, in an article titled "O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and New England Irish-Catholicism,"<sup>4</sup> takes a different tack. Raleigh looks at the play as a cultural document whose effectiveness is derived from O'Neill's autobiographical sources. He states that New England Irish-Catholicism "is this that provides the folkways and morals, the character types, the interrelationships, the whole attitude toward life that gives *Long Day's Journey Into Night* its meaning."<sup>5</sup> Raleigh claims the Tyrones display traits common to Irish Catholics living in America, including such characteristics as a tendency for loquacity, an obsession with the fear of betrayal, being simultaneously both religious and blasphemous, sentimental and ironic about love, being clannish, noncommunal, turbulent, and hot tempered. And, of course, the Irish love of hard drink is included as well. Raleigh, in his analysis, provides numerous examples from the play to justify his thesis, and he concludes with the statement, "The characteristics that I, and others, have ascribed to the Irish are the result of a passionate people being imprisoned by an endless stasis: historically, politically, religiously, culturally, sexually, and personally."<sup>6</sup>

To examine and interpret the written script of a play, in either Aristotelian terms or as an example of the validity of a sociological study, does not in any way come to terms with the acknowledged power of such a play as *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in theatrical performance. What then is this power? And how is this power created and sustained?

To begin to answer these questions we must turn to playwright process. What Eugene O'Neill did was something rather elementary and common to most playwrights. He found an objective theatrical image for his subjective emotional state. As the playwright who lead American drama into its own in the 1920s O'Neill had experimented with a variety of theatrical forms; expressionism, epic theatre,

<sup>4</sup> John Henry Raleigh, "O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and New England Irish-Catholicism" in *Parisian Review*, XXVI, No. 4, Fall 1959, pp. 573-592.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.573.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.592.

symbolism, Greek type tragedy, and others. Sometime around 1933 O'Neill moved away from experimenting in form to coming to grips with content, that is dealing with something that was in his heart and not in his head. No one knows for certain what his actual playwrighting process was nor can we adequately put into terms what he was trying to say. What we can recognize, however, is the extraordinary white hot power and honesty of O'Neill's conception as experienced by an audience in theatrical performance.

An unnamed Swedish critic quoted in the February 20, 1956 International edition of *Newsweek* magazine said of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* that the play was "one of the most powerful realistic dramas of the century. It's Ibsen's dramatic technique but without his symbolic over-emphasis."<sup>7</sup> Actually, the dramatic technique is realism at its best because it is realism at its simplest. What occurs on stage is easily identifiable. The characters behave and speak and are enclosed in an environment that approximates reality as we, the audience, know or believe such a reality to be, and attention is not brought to this reality by contrivance. We are an audience that has been nurtured on the theatrical form of realism, if not so much in the theatre of late then certainly by the all pervasive television and movies which are rarely symbolic and practically always realistic in form. What does realism mean to an audience? It means that the world of the play is grounded on a recognizable framework that contains no special symbols or unusual conventions that have to be explained to an audience, a world that is easily identifiable and sympathetically accepted by the audience. The use of environmental detail, the settings, costumes, speech and realistic behavior of the characters will, generally speaking, most always generate sympathy in an audience - provided that the behavior of the characters is an honest approximation of the way an audience believes such people would behave in real life.

Plays may be considered as containing elements of both the universal and the individual. Gestalt psychology tells us that human beings have difficulty in focusing on an ambiguous image. People perceive images as having a ground and a foreground with one being dominant and the other subordinate, and in the theatre this phenomena is often expressed in terms of the individual and the universal. Human beings are curious by nature, seeking the new, the different. What is unique and unusual about *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, those individual elements in the play which a curious audience instinctively finds interest in, is the Irish Catholic environment, the particular story elements such as the mother's addiction and the father's theatrical and miserly background, the setting, and the placing of the play in a time past, the world of 1912. What is universal in the play and what one might consider as the connecting element

<sup>7</sup> *Newsweek*, International Edition, February 20, 1956, p. 34.

of play to audience is the notion of the family. The representation of the family is the element of common humanity to which the seeking audience responds.

America is a pluralistic, multicultural society. Many different nationalities and cultures, each with varying beliefs and attitudes, languages, and ways of perceiving the world, all living in a time charged with change, make up the contemporary American experience. But the one thing that all Americans have in common is the family. In a society of diversity fraught with the traumatic shocks of change all Americans share the common experience of the family.

This is not the family the American viewing public sees on television at night. The television lies to us. The happy families who resolve their problems in a half an hour in time for the next commercial are no where near the idea of the family that is our own. When the American audience witnesses the Tyrones they know that what they are seeing is an honest picture of the family dramatized with an unremitting and painful accuracy. The Tyrones are not necessarily honest people, but the picture of them is, and what happens is, as Raleigh says, that we are "face to face with guilty-innocent humanity on the purely personal level - all the terrible things that members of a family will do to one another, often in innocence, and always without reference to outside people or events are presented in a relentless and yet compassionate honesty."<sup>8</sup>

*Long Day's Journey Into Night*, however, is a play that goes beyond just the truthful recognition of family. The Tyrones are the grand archetypal American family, possessed of more adversity, more sorrow, more trial and tribulation than most American families. The Tyrones have, what Robert Brustein calls, "a strain of blank misfortune,"<sup>9</sup> and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* shows the family as tragic hero with each of the protagonists responsible for his or her own destruction and partly as a victim of family fate. They live in a harsh, irrational world, pushed by the unseen forces of heredity and environment, sharing a common heritage as Irish Catholic immigrants to an alien land and in the conditions of life which the father's theatrical profession imposed on them all. The Tyrones are beset by problems as all families are, only the Tyrones are beset by problems in an extreme, and it is that experiencing of the extreme that moves them to grandeur in an audience's eyes.

And what is the result? The audience knows as a consequence of feeling, partially through their own family experience and partially through viewing the Tyrones, that one cannot block out one's past and one's family present. The mother's addiction, the brother's sickness, the father's narrow attitudes won't disappear, and what is more there

are no pat answers as to why these very human conditions won't disappear. No philosophic, religious, social, economic answers or solutions apply. There are no answers or solutions, there is only the silence implicit in the statement of the mystery of human existence.

A terrible sadness is inherent in the honest recognition of life and there is also a joy in the potentialities of that recognition. The Tyrones live it and the audience knows it. The Tyrones walk their long day's journey into night and by sympathetic analogy the audience walks that journey with them.

<sup>8</sup> Raleigh, op.cit., p.591.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt* (Boston: Little Brown, 1964), p. 355.