

THE FOUR HAUNTED TYRONES:  
EUGENE O'NEILL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FAMILY PORTRAITS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of  
Southwest Texas State University  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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San Marcos, Texas

August 1975

## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

I wish to express my most sincere appreciation to the following persons, without whose combined efforts this paper would never have reached completion:

To Dr. Vernon Lynch, whose unlimited patience and gentle guidance lifted me up when I was down. No better chairman ever was.

To Dr. Robert Walts, whose corrections, suggestions, and friendship proved to be invaluable.

To Dr. James Garland, who most generously agreed to serve when no one else seemed interested.

To Dr. Hal Blythe, - an educated educator whose presence during my oral examinations will not be forgotten.

To Dr. George Constant, a physician whose healing powers are second only to his personal wisdom.

To my parents, for having faith.

To Kathy, Brian, and Buddy, who were kind enough to tough it out to the end.

C. J. B.

August 1975

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

During the early summer of 1939, Eugene O'Neill began what was eventually to become his longest journey. At fifty, his hands were seriously affected by palsy. He was suffering from the first stages of the rare, obscure, unnamed disease which would eventually destroy his motor system. Despite his deteriorating condition, he began work on what he later described in the dedication to Long Day's Journey Into Night as

. . . this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood. . . . 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.<sup>1</sup>

For over two anguishing years, O'Neill relived his past. The four main characters, "the four haunted Tyrones," are O'Neill and his immediate family. The "old sorrow" he felt and the "tears and blood" he shed in his vivid re-creation of the inner relationships and dark

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 7.

secrets of the O'Neill family are painfully visible in the Tyrones, Eugene O'Neill's most definitive and personal family portrait.

Dissection and analysis of his family and of himself was not a novelty for O'Neill. Since the beginning of his apprenticeship days he had been systematically drawing on personal and family experiences for topics to be used in his plays, and symbolically heightened or thinly disguised portraits of O'Neill and his family dominate the bulk of the playwright's work. Yet in 1939, he seemed to be compelled to approach the entire family again for one last family portrait. From his letters, notes, and conversations during the play's conception and formulation, there is little doubt that O'Neill's mental anguish far outdistanced the physical pain he was experiencing.

Although he states that he wrote the play with pity, understanding, and forgiveness, " . . . he saw himself to the end as a victim of the father, the mother, the brother he loved. Never was he really able to lift himself out of that 'old sorrow'."<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, the

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<sup>1</sup>Doris Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1962), pp. 289-90.

painfully personal elements found in the play are part of the complex reasons why O'Neill did not want the play produced until twenty-five years after his death. He only reluctantly allowed long-time friends Saxe Commins and Bennett Cerf to read the play upon its completion in 1941. In compliance with O'Neill's wishes, they then placed the manuscript in Cerf's vault at Random House with the following notation: "Not to be opened until twenty-five years after the author's death."<sup>2</sup>

Understandably, O'Neill's desire to isolate the outside world from any and all autobiographical aspects of the play was respected. He would only grudgingly admit that he had completed an unpublished play. It therefore became somewhat of a curiosity among theatre buffs and critics. As late as 1946, columnist Earl Wilson, who was known for his way of prying into the most private subjects, made an unsuccessful attempt to question the aging playwright about the still-unpublished work. O'Neill would only state that "It's a real story, laid in 1912. There's

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<sup>2</sup>Croswell Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959), p. 273.

still one person in it who's alive . . . . I won't say a word about it."<sup>1</sup>

The one person still alive was the author himself. His darkest journey into his family's past would first be produced in 1956, three years after his death. The play received immediate critical acclaim throughout the world, and Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was subsequently awarded posthumously his fourth Pulitzer Prize. The play sparked a new and vital interest in the man as well as his works, and soon an O'Neill cult began to develop. Today, over a dozen biographical works which deal with O'Neill are available, and more are now in progress. It is almost impossible to open any book pertaining to twentieth century drama or its major dramatists without finding at least a mention of either O'Neill or his works. The only American dramatist to win a Nobel Prize, he seems to have won the undisputed title of America's most distinguished and beloved playwright.

We find that today O'Neill's most personal conflicts have become public knowledge, due to the many dedicated researchers who have combined their efforts to leave

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<sup>1</sup>Elig Tornqvist, A Drama of Souls (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 36.

practically no corner of the playwright's life untouched. O'Neill scholars and biographers began to delve into the dramatist's personal life. The sources of his plays, his plots, his characters, his themes--all began to emerge as veiled extensions of O'Neill's bizarre personal and public life: "Everything in his life became significant because everything affected his plays."<sup>1</sup>

As a result of the research which dug deeply and perceptively into the playwright's past, O'Neill has emerged as an extremely complex individual. It seems that the deeper the critics and scholars dig into the playwright's past, the more they are able to discover. Their discoveries have produced many and varied opinions about both the man and his works. Out of this vast sea of ideas and interpretations, definite patterns begin to emerge.

One of the dominant theories among the O'Neill cult is the theory that O'Neill was a victim of his own dark past experiences, and that many of these experiences found their way into the pages of his plays. The publication of Long Day's Journey Into Night and the subsequent

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), p. xix.



revival of interest in O'Neill and his plays served to open the door, and the quest then began in earnest. During the last ten years, opinions and interpretations concerning the autobiographical aspects of O'Neill's works have emerged with some regularity, and this field remains fertile ground. Unfortunately, some of the interpretations are confusing and conflicting, and some, when compared with the generally accepted biographical facts, are based largely on speculation.

Long Day's Journey Into Night is understandably a work which receives considerable dissection by O'Neill scholars because of its obvious autobiographical clarity. More study is now being directed toward the more complex plays, such as Desire Under the Elms and the Mourning Becomes Electra trilogy, since most scholars who become involved with O'Neill are realizing the extent of the autobiographical elements within the plays, thanks to the findings of the biographers. Many of the earlier plays, especially the one-acters and unproduced works, have been overlooked probably because of their lack of popularity as well as the obvious lack of literary merit to which O'Neill himself readily attested. In order, however, to substantiate a theory of definite autobiographical patterns,

and to obtain any sort of actual, accurate picture of the amount of influence O'Neill's family exerted on his works, either consciously or unconsciously, all of the plays must be examined and compared with the vast amount of biographical data and critical analyses.

O'Neill began and ended his career as an autobiographical dramatist. As he grew progressively stronger in his craft, the amount of autobiographical influence also grew. When all individual members of O'Neill's immediate family--James, Ella, and Jamie--are traced from their first appearance as characters in the plays, their importance as major influences on O'Neill's works becomes evident.

O'Neill used his plays to analyze and dissect his relationship with his family. By using O'Neill's own method of dissection--by dissecting and analyzing each play which contains a character that can be linked through biographical data to either James, Ella, Eugene, or Jamie--it is possible to establish the fact that O'Neill's past, his relationship with his family, and reaction to it all provided him with a major source of his plays' characters, character development, and plots.

## C H A P T E R    I

### THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO:    JAMES O'NEILL, SR.

Of the three members of Eugene O'Neill's immediate family, none had a more pronounced influence upon his life than did his father, James O'Neill, Sr. While Eugene loved his father deeply at times, he hated him violently at other times. This constant vacillation between love and hatred, between idealization and condemnation, found its way into many of O'Neill's plays. Often James is elaborately disguised, as in the case of Ephraim Cabot, the miserly father in Desire Under the Elms. At other times he is thinly disguised, as in the character of "Nigger Jim" Harris in All God's Chillun Got Wings. O'Neill began his career as a playwright by patterning his first father-figure after James, beginning with the earliest one-act plays. He continued to use his father as an intermittent model, and finalized his dissection of their relationship in Long Day's Journey Into Night. In order to gain an accurate understanding of the actual amount of influence the father exerted upon the son, and to understand how this influence carried over into the plays, the proper place to begin is

with the first play in which James O'Neill's influence is evident.

During the winter of 1913-14, the playwright was recuperating from a bout with tuberculosis, residing with his parents at their New London, Connecticut, summer home. The house was known as Monte Cristo Cottage because of James O'Neill's extensive portrayals of the role of The Count of Monte Cristo, the hero of Dumas' work by the same name. The twenty-five year old O'Neill had just returned from Gaylord Farm, the private sanitarium which would later become a point of conflict in the father-son relationship in Long Day's Journey Into Night. The onset of winter meant that James O'Neill and his wife would resume a life of touring, with James beginning another season as "The Count," the stage role which provided the O'Neill family with the bulk of their income.

It was decided that Eugene was to remain behind, to be boarded with the Rippen family, people the O'Neill's had known since their first summer in New London. O'Neill's weakened condition called for plenty of rest, and it was thought that the sea air and New London's climate would be good for his lungs. It was during this time that he began to write in earnest, completing at least six

one-act plays and one full-length play.<sup>1</sup> Because of their obvious lack of literary merit when compared with the more mature plays, the author would have preferred for the entire group to have been forgotten. Unfortunately, New Fathoms Press seized upon O'Neill's negligence in allowing their copyrights to expire, and in 1950, a bootleg edition of The "Lost" Plays of Eugene O'Neill appeared, much to the displeasure of their author. O'Neill had neither lost nor misplaced the plays; he had merely hoped that they were buried and forgotten. His comment upon their discovery best sums up his reaction to their publication: "They are pretty bad and the less remembered about them, the better."<sup>2</sup>

Eleven years following O'Neill's death, these same plays were made available in an authorized edition. This 1964 Random House publication was presented through the combined efforts of O'Neill's widow, Carlotta, and one of the playwright's oldest and closest friends, Bennett Cerf, a Random House senior editor. In the book's Foreword, Cerf sarcastically dealt with the pirates, presenting a statement which undoubtedly echoed his old friend's feelings about the plays:

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

Here are . . . the very earliest exercises Eugene O'Neill undertook in his self-disciplined apprenticeship to become a playwright. As his mastery of dramatic technique became surer . . . he looked back on these early works without sentimentality. Later in life, he had no desire for them to be preserved at all. But by that time they were out of his hands and they have been published in various editions. . . .

. . . in this standard official edition . . . they are presented as the "curiosities" they are: not intrinsic contributions to American drama. . . .<sup>1</sup>

If approached from a critical, literary standpoint, Cerf is not without justification in calling the collection "curiosities." When approached from an autobiographical standpoint, however, these plays, regardless of their literary worth, have provided invaluable information for the creation of the concept of O'Neill as an autobiographical dramatist. One of the plays, entitled Abortion, is the first play in which O'Neill dealt with his relationship with his father.

O'Neill describes the setting of the play as "a large eastern university of the United States." Because of the number of easily identifiable surroundings, the university which O'Neill used as his model is undoubtedly Princeton, O'Neill's alma mater.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bennett Cerf, Foreword to Ten "Lost" Plays, by Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 116.

The plot of Aborton revolves around Jack Townsend, a collegiate baseball hero whose outstanding abilities have just led his team to a championship victory. The play opens in Townsend's dormitory room, where he is joined by his parents, sister, and fiancée in celebrating the afternoon's victory. After warmly congratulating their hero, the women are excused to enjoy the excitement generated by the day's victory, and Jack is left to discuss more pressing matters with his father. It is soon revealed that John Townsend has recently provided his son with money necessary to finance an abortion for a local working-class girl, Nellie Murray. After a free and easy discussion of the matter, father and son, in high spirits, prepare to join their women outside. John exits, but Jack is delayed by the entrance of Nellie's unsavory brother, Joe, who informs him that Nellie has died as a result of the abortion. Joe begins by threatening Jack with blackmail, and ends by drawing a pistol, fully intending to murder Jack. In a short struggle, Jack easily gains possession of Joe's pistol. Totally defeated, Joe rushes out of the room, promising as he departs to take the entire matter to the police and expose Jack's actions to everyone. Left alone and in a state of severe depression, Jack commits suicide with

Joe's pistol as a large crowd gathered outside calls for their hero to join them in celebrating his day of victory.

When he created the father-son relationship between Jack and John Townsend, O'Neill had himself and his father in mind. The situation between Jack Townsend and Nellie Murray closely resembles O'Neill's own situation in 1909. In October of that year, he secretly married Kathleen Jenkins, a young woman of whom his father came to disapprove:

James, always highly suspicious that any girl interested in his son was actually after Monte Cristo gold . . . told Eugene that Kathleen must be a gold-digger; even worse, she was not a Catholic. James would take matters into his own hands and get Eugene out of the country for a while.<sup>1</sup>

Hoping to prevent a marriage (which had already occurred), James O'Neill made arrangements for Eugene to accompany a mining engineer to Honduras. Since James was a heavy investor in the mining venture, he encountered little difficulty in securing a position for his son. It was only after Eugene was safely in Honduras that the newlywed mustered up enough of his courage to tell James of the marriage. Ironically, neither the son nor the father

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 133.



suspected that Eugene had left behind a pregnant wife. O'Neill first learned of the birth of Eugene O'Neill, Jr., upon entering a favorite New York bar the day of his return to the United States, on May 6, 1910. "He was greeted jocularly by the bartender and informed that drinks were on the house."<sup>1</sup> O'Neill had chosen to inform his wife of his return at a later date, or possibly, according to some biographers, he had chosen not to inform her at all. The results were tragic.

O'Neill quickly set out to find his father, visibly upset. He had become the subject of New York gossip columns; and James, angered at the Jenkins' treatment of the matter, again came to his son's rescue. Following a series of catty, scandalous newspaper articles, aimed mostly at James by Kathleen's vindictive mother, Eugene was spirited away as a stage manager for one of his father's extended road tours. James was successful in keeping the couple apart, for Eugene and Kathleen were never reunited. They were divorced in 1912.

The most important revelation of Abortion is the characterization of John Townsend. In Townsend, O'Neill created a father to whom a young man could turn when in

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

trouble without fear of ostracism. He is a reminiscence of an apparently close alignment between the father and the son, quite different from any other portrait which O'Neill would create for his father. There is clearly an autobiographical pattern in the play, one which is related to O'Neill's experiences with James during the Jenkins affair. Like James O'Neill, John Townsend was unable to accept his son's "mistake" in choosing his women:

. . . What I cannot understand is how you happened to get in with this young woman in the first place. You'll pardon me, Jack, but it seems to me to show a lack of judgement on your part and--er--good taste. . . . This young woman is hardly of the class you have been accustomed to associate with. . . .<sup>1</sup>

In the play, despite his lack of understanding, John Townsend provides the means for his son's escape from an undesirable woman, just as James O'Neill provided his son with an escape from Kathleen--first to Honduras, then on tour with him. O'Neill is quick to point out that Townsend, like his own father, did not desert his son:

Townsend: . . . I want to thank you for the confidence you placed in your father by making a

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Abortion in Ten "Lost Plays", p. 155.

frank appeal to me when you got in this trouble. It shows you regard me not only as a father but also as a friend; and that is the way I would have it.

Jack: You have always urged me to come to you and be frank about everything; and I always have and always will. I had to have the money and I thought I owed it to you to be open and above board and not start deceiving you at this late date. I couldn't get it any other way. . . .<sup>1</sup>

As Jack points out, the abortion, and thus his "escape," could not have been accomplished without his father's financial assistance. At the time of O'Neill's involvement with Kathleen Jenkins, he was, like young Townsend, unemployed and totally dependent upon James for financial sustenance. The fact that John Townsend is portrayed as an understanding and benevolent father, when taking into account James O'Neill's actions in the Jenkins affair, is not then to be taken lightly. John Townsend, judging from the play, was actually loved and respected by his son. Whether O'Neill loved James at this or any other time is a matter for speculation, but it is doubtful that he did not at least feel some sort of gratitude toward the man who made it possible for him to escape from a situation which to him seemed impossible:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 156-57.

. . . he was suicidally terrified at the thought of marrying her. He realized that he didn't love her. The honorable, code-bound Eugene rose in him and scorched him for betraying innocence, but he shrank from the thought of a life bound hopelessly to a woman he didn't love.<sup>1</sup>

Following Abortion, O'Neill shelved his dissection of his relationship with his father; a figure that even remotely resembled James O'Neill did not appear again in an O'Neill play until 1932, three years after James' death. The play was All God's Chillun Got Wings, and the character of "Nigger Jim" Harris is unmistakably a double for James. From a superficial viewpoint, the tragedy seems to be only a study of miscegenation, a dramatization of Jim Harris' failure to find his place in society, bound to a woman who needs and yet despises him. Probing beyond the superficiality, it is also the story of another tragedy, the tragedy of James and Ella O'Neill:

. . . He did not bother, in this play, to disguise the true names of his parents for two reasons. The first was they were both recently dead. The other was that Jim was a Negro and the play, on the surface, seemed to be a story of miscegenation, which no one could dream of relating to O'Neill's own family.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill, p. 131.

<sup>2</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 10.

The play opens with an examination of Jim and Ella Harris' relationship as children. "Nigger Jim" realizes that he is socially beneath the white Ella Downey; yet he still professes his love for her, as she does for him. As the years pass, Jim becomes determined to "make something" of himself. He graduates from high school and then plans to go on to law school. He pulls himself away from his old neighborhood-tough gang and soon prepares to enter a better society. As he is in the process of pulling himself up, Ella is in the process of being torn down, associating with thugs and pimps. She finally comes to the realization that only in Jim can she find the strength to survive, and in a mood of desperation, she agrees to marry him.

Shortly after their marriage, it becomes evident that Ella will not fit into Jim's society. She becomes jealous of his success, and she cannot adjust to either Negro or white society. She comes to consider herself Jim's superior both by birth and background; and because of his blind love for her, Jim concedes her superiority. Ella is not able to cope with the possibility of Jim's becoming an attorney, and she secretly prays that he will fail his bar exams. She constantly taunts him, calling

him "Nigger!" Yet during her periods of infantile, regressive insanity, she clings to him desperately, calling him "the whitest of the whites."<sup>1</sup> As the play rushes toward its tragic conclusion, Ella is reduced to a regressive state of childlike insanity in which she loses all contact with reality. Resigned to a life of failure by this time, Jim realizes that he is destined to become his wife's nurse for the remainder of their lives.

Despite his pathetic failures, Jim Harris is an exalted figure. If nothing else, O'Neill's examination of his parents' marriage leaves the impression that Ella Harris is correct when she calls her husband "the whitest of the whites." Regardless of O'Neill's later portraits of his father, during the time when he was creating All God's Chillun Got Wings he was apparently moved by the devotion which James O'Neill had shown toward Ella. This devotion carried over into the play, and is exemplified as Jim Harris' sister suggests that he leave his insane white wife. Jim, weary and worn, replies:

You're like the doctor. Everything's so simple . . . Life isn't simple like that--not

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, All God's Chillun Got Wings in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill (New York: The Modern Library, 1941), p. 120.

in this case, anyway . . . I can't leave her. She can't leave me . . . For her sake--if it'd do her good--I'd leave--I'd do anything--because I love her. I'd kill myself even . . . I'm all she's got in the world! Yes, that isn't bragging or fooling myself. I know that for a fact! . . .<sup>1</sup>

Jim Harris was hopelessly bound to a wife with emotional and mental problems which he chose to handle himself rather than turn her over to strangers. No doubt there were times when James O'Neill felt as helpless as Jim Harris; yet he, too, chose to cope with his own problems rather than leave his wife in the hands of strangers. Ella O'Neill's narcotics addiction, like Ella Harris' insanity, often caused much grief for her husband:

James, between his sons' drinking and his wife's morphine stupors, was at the end of his rope. Afraid to leave Ella alone in their hotel room, he often brought her to the theatre with him, where she sat in his dressing room during the performance. She ignored her sons and seemed oblivious to her surroundings--except in one instance. Obeying a strange impulse, she would sometimes leave the dressing room and stand in the wings during the ballroom scene. . . .<sup>2</sup>

At this critical point in James' portrayal of "The Count," Ella, if not detained by an actor or stagehand, would begin

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 122-23.

<sup>2</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, pp. 183-84.

to move toward the stage, totally oblivious of her surroundings. James lived with the constant fear that she might actually reach the stage during a performance, but someone in the wings always managed to stop her before she came into the audience's view.<sup>1</sup> Young O'Neill was often present at such moments; and the tender loving care with which his father dealt with his mother during such moments is recreated in Jim Harris' dealings with his wife.

Like Jim Harris, James O'Neill made every attempt to protect his wife from the prying eyes of the world. He managed to keep her narcotics addiction well hidden; the publication of Long Day's Journey Into Night found Ella's relatives faced with defending a situation which they had not even guessed existed.<sup>2</sup> O'Neill's attachment to his mother was a close one, and he undoubtedly appreciated the way in which his father always stood beside her. Although he would later attack James as the direct cause for Ella's addiction, at this time in his progressive examination of his family, he lauded his father for the care which he had given his wife. "Nigger Jim" Harris, alias James O'Neill,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 93.



is portrayed as "the whitest of the whites" in what is perhaps the most defensive portrait of the father O'Neill both worshiped and despised.

In 1924, O'Neill followed All God's Chillun Got Wings with the highly controversial, highly successful Desire Under the Elms. Although highly and elaborately disguised, the relationship between Ephraim Cabot and his son, Eben, is another autobiographical examination of O'Neill's relationship with James. O'Neill's two previous portraits of his father were written from a highly idealized viewpoint, but an abrupt reversal of that pattern is found in this play. The playwright disregards his former pattern of idealization in this instance, and releases with equal passion a derogatory portrait of James O'Neill which is surpassed only by the final portrait of James in Long Day's Journey Into Night.

Desire Under the Elms received mixed reactions from a variety of sources; the New York circle applauded it vigorously, while "The Los Angeles Company was hauled off to jail on charges of lewdness and immorality."<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>Allan Lewis, American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 21.

plot revolves around the basic conflicts of Eben Cabot, the youngest son of a New England farmer, Ephraim Cabot, a man as hard as the rocky ground which he farmed. Young Eben's primary purpose at the beginning of the play is eventually to gain the complete possession of his late mother's farm, which is now in Ephraim's control. Eben is successful in ridding himself of two unsavory stepbrothers, Simeon and Peter, and is satisfied with the knowledge that he will be Ephraim's only heir with the disappearance of his stepbrothers. However, he has not planned on the appearance of Abbie Putnam, a beautiful and seductive young woman whom old Ephraim has suddenly taken for his bride. Abbie immediately becomes a threat to Eben, for she represents a direct threat to his inheritance. Despite the hopes of both Eben and Abbie, Ephraim has no intention of letting his farm go until he dies; and judging from his physical and mental strength, he may live forever. Abbie finally secures his promise that, should they have a son, the farm would go to her and the child. In this manner, she defeats Eben.

Despite their initial hatred for each other, Abbie and Eben become ill-fated lovers, with unfortunate results. They produce a son, who is passed off as

Ephraim's child, although everyone in the neighborhood but the old man has guessed the truth. At this point, Ephraim reveals to Eben and all the neighbors that Abbie will inherit the farm, and a violent quarrel erupts between the father and the son. In a fit of rage, Eben, feeling betrayed, finds Abbie and tells her that he plans to follow his stepbrothers' path to the gold fields of California, but not before he informs his father of their entire affair. Eben also tells her he wishes that the baby had never been born, and Abbie interprets their child as the barrier between her and Eben, whom she has come to love truly. Thinking that the removal of the child will allow Eben to love her again, she kills her son.

The next morning finds Eben preparing to leave. When Abbie informs him that she has killed their child to prove her love, Eben is overcome with mixed emotions, and sets off wildly to find the local sheriff. Old Ephraim then confronts Abbie, who tells him of the entire course of events. During this confrontation, Eben returns with the sheriff and, in a fit of remorse, insists on sharing the blame for the murder which Abbie has committed. As Eben and Abbie are taken away to face the authorities, Ephraim stoically decides to burn all the farm's buildings, free the stock, and go to California himself to find peace.

Ephraim Cabot is presented as a hard man, one held responsible for the death of a woman whose son regarded her as almost a saint. While critics disagree as to whether O'Neill created Ephraim in the image of James consciously or unconsciously, the fact remains that O'Neill began the first of a series of attacks on his father in this play.

It is no longer a well-guarded secret that Ella O'Neill was a morphine addict, nor is it a secret that O'Neill blamed his father for her addiction. The story varies from biographer to biographer, but the basic facts remain: Ella apparently had difficulty bearing Eugene, and a doctor ordered morphine injections to ease her pain. O'Neill's accusations that his mother's addiction was the direct result of his father's miserliness are fully examined in Long Day's Journey Into Night as Edmund Tyrone, representing O'Neill, blames his father's preference for "cheap quacks" over competent physicians as the cause for the mother's addiction. Adopting the viewpoint that James was totally responsible for Ella's addiction, the playwright had little trouble in substituting a symbolic death for his mother's addiction.

O'Neill's attachment for his mother, often classified as fanatical by biographers and researchers, figures

largely in the reasons why the son so maliciously attacked the father in Desire Under the Elms. That O'Neill regarded his mother as an almost saintly figure is almost an understatement:

. . . She seemed to Eugene the most beautiful woman in the world. . . . Eugene was very proud of his mother. . . .

The happiness he experienced in his mother's love is shown by the way he depicted the mother in all of his mature plays. . . .

Again and again in his plays he depicted the profound love of a man for his mother, and he always made the mother a symbol of lost happiness . . . The love for the mother is actually sublimated into a cosmogony. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Such statements are voluminous. Eben, representing O'Neill, establishes early in the play that he will avenge his mother's death and get even with Ephraim, her murderer:

Peter: He's our paw.

Eben: (violently) Not mine! . . .

Peter: (reminiscently) She was good t' Sim 'n' me.

A good Step-maw's scurse.

Simeon: She was good t' everyone . . .

Peter: (. . . judicially) She was good even t' him.

Eben: (fiercely) An'fer thanks he killed her! . . .

Didn't he slave Maw t'death? . . . (vengefully) Waal--I hold him t' jedgement! . . .<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill, pp. 19-20.

<sup>2</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Desire Under the Elms in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill (New York: The Modern Library, 1941), p. 141.

O'Neill took great pains to establish the fact that a good woman was murdered by her husband, and would be avenged by her loving son. The play is representative of O'Neill's vacillation between love and hatred for his father. In this case, O'Neill, through Eben Cabot, uses his play as a vehicle for gaining revenge for the symbolic death of his mother. Whether O'Neill created the play as a conscious or unconscious effort is a matter of speculation, but at one point he did admit to his actor-friend Walter Huston, among others, that he had "dreamed the whole play one night."<sup>1</sup> This aspect has been further analyzed by Dr. Philip Weissman, a noted specialist in the psychiatric aspects of the creative process. Dr. Weissman, in a study of O'Neill's works, concluded that Desire Under the Elms is an "unconscious autobiography" and "could have been written only by someone who was recently in the midst of the most intense personal mourning for his mother."<sup>2</sup> The Gelbs' biography, one of the few works on O'Neill which even mention the Weissman article, points out that Ella O'Neill had been dead over two years when her son began

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 539.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 538.

formulating the play. The Gelbs continue, maintaining that the factor which turned O'Neill's thoughts toward his mother's death was another death, that of Jamie O'Neill, the brother of the playwright and his last link with his family:

. . . Jamie's death, just before he began the actual writing, had revived O'Neill's sense of loss for his mother and turned his thoughts with renewed intensity to what he considered Ella's outrageous suffering. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Eben places the blame for his mother's death directly upon his father, just as O'Neill often placed the blame for Ella's morphine addiction on James. Filled with bitterness and hatred, Eben coldly awaits the day when he can avenge his mother's death:

. . . (with vengeful passion) An' sooner'r later, I'll meddle! I'll say the thin's I didn't say then t' him! I'll yell 'em at the top o' my lungs! I'll see t' it my Maw gits some rest an' sleep in her grave! . . .<sup>2</sup>

Eben's victory occurs when he cuckolds his father, thus gaining a twisted sort of revenge. The morning

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 538-39.

<sup>2</sup>O'Neill, Desire Under the Elms in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, p. 143.

following Abbie and Eben's mutual seduction, Eben's mood borders on delirium, and he greets his father as the unsuspecting butt of an excellent joke:

Cabot: (grimly sarcastic) Ye're feelin' right chipper, hain't ye? Whar'd ye steal the likker?

Eben: (good-naturedly) 'Taint likker. Jest life. (Suddenly holding out his hand--soberly) Yew 'n' me is quits. Let's shake hands.

Cabot: (suspiciously) What's come over ye?

Eben: Then don't. Mebbe it's jest as well. . . What's come over me? Didn't ye feel her passin'-- goin' back t' her grave?

Cabot: (dully) Who?

Eben: Maw. She kin rest now an' sleep content. She's quits with ye. . . Ha-ha-ha! I'm the prize rooster o' this roost. Ha-ha-ha!<sup>1</sup>

Although the apparent enthusiasm over victory is short-lived, by cuckolding Ephraim Eben is able to deal his father a sharp blow. O'Neill, using the play as his vehicle, was also able to gain a symbolic revenge-of-sorts for Ella's morphine "death." Eben loses out in the end, for he and Abbie are hauled off to meet their punishment. However, he experiences his moments of joy, regardless of his reaction at the final outcome. It is difficult to determine whether O'Neill found any joy in his symbolic victory over James.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 181-82.



Setting aside the question of joy and victory, another important issue deserves consideration. In this play, was O'Neill preparing the groundwork for another re-examination of James' responsibility for his wife's addiction? No one can answer that question but O'Neill. However, another examination of the question of James' part in Ella O'Neill's addiction is found in Long Day's Journey Into Night. The primary and most important difference between it and Desire Under the Elms lies in the fact that in Long Day's Journey all symbolism is done away with-- James O'Neill is openly accused of what is symbolically hidden in Desire Under the Elms. If O'Neill felt that he had failed to make his point in the first attempt to accuse and condemn his father for his part in Ella's addiction, a sense of rectification must have characterized the final attempt in Long Day's Journey.

Desire Under the Elms was published in 1924. Five years and five plays later, O'Neill again resumed his systematic dissection of his relationship with his family in Mourning Becomes Electra, a trilogy based on the Greek tragedy of Electra and her brother, Orestes. O'Neill planned this play more carefully than any of his previous works; he worked on it longer, and he wrote and rewrote it

more painstakingly, having begun it in 1926.<sup>1</sup> The play marks a return to the first pattern for James, a father-figure pattern of idealization which surpasses any of O'Neill's previous efforts.

From an autobiographical standpoint, Mourning Becomes Electra is perhaps the most confusing of O'Neill's works. Many biographers and scholars have disagreed about sources the author used for each of the play's characters, but the generally accepted opinion is that the four Mannons of the play are symbolic representations of the O'Neill family. Often the autobiographical aspects are overlooked, or perhaps wisely ignored, by researchers because Eugene O'Neill is represented by Lavinia Mannon, the vengeful, spiteful young daughter who is obviously sexually attracted to her father, General Ezra Mannon, a hero of the American Civil War. The parallels between General Mannon and James O'Neill are numerous enough to point to the fact that O'Neill had his father in mind when he created Mannon.

In the play, General Mannon returns shortly after Lee's surrender to his home, a small New England town in which he is already well established as a former judge and

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<sup>1</sup>Frederic I. Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 128.

important businessman. From various conversations between local citizens, it is established that he is one of the town's most respected citizens. James O'Neill commanded much the same respect in New London, a small New England town quite similar to the town which Mannon returns to after his separation from the army:

. . . James himself was widely liked and esteemed. . . .

At a time when the Irish were generally looked down upon as hard-drinking riraff, James was among the first of his countrymen invited to join the Thames Club, the all-male sanctum of the town's most leading citizens. . . .<sup>1</sup>

As Ezra Mannon spent his time distinguishing himself in various military campaigns and political offices, James O'Neill spent his time in distinguishing himself on various stages across the United States as one of the most distinguished actors of his day. Although their battlefields were different, their homecomings were always warmly awaited by local citizenry, and both were pillars of their respective communities.

There are enough obvious parallels between "The General" and "The Count" to substantiate the theory that

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<sup>1</sup>Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), pp. 57-58.

O'Neill had his father in mind when he created Ezra Mannon, yet the remainder of O'Neill's family portrait is somewhat disfigured. While Mannon's wife cuckolds him because she utterly despises him, even to the point of poisoning him in order to marry another man, there is no existing biographical evidence which even hints that Ella O'Neill was anything but a faithful wife who loved her husband. Why O'Neill chose to portray his mother as an adulteress and his father as a cuckold is autobiographically unexplainable; it could be that O'Neill merely chose here to follow the Greek originals.

Perhaps the only autobiographically accurate relationship within the play is the relationship between the eldest son and the father, for the parallels between Orin and Ezra Mannon and Jamie and James O'Neill are very close. Early in the play, it is revealed that Orin was forced into the war by his father, forced to follow in the footsteps of a man whose shoes he could not possibly fill. As a result, he resented the profession and the man who put him into it, his father. Orin's resentment is evidenced in one of his speeches to Lavinia shortly after he has returned home:

. . . I thought what a joke it would be on the  
stupid Generals like Father if everyone on both  
sides suddenly saw the joke war was on them and

laughed and shook hands! So I began to laugh and walked toward their lines with my hand out. Of course, the joke was on me and I got this wound in the head for my pains. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Orin Mannon's cynical outlook on his father's profession directly parallels Jamie O'Neill's outlook on acting:

Jamie had no real love for the profession, as his father had. He was vociferously contemptuous of the theatre in general and of his father's talents in particular. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Like Orin, Jamie chose to make a joke of following in the footsteps of his father. He was constantly appearing on stage in a drunken state, and made little effort to conceal his contempt for the acting profession. It appears from all biographical evidence that he, like Orin Mannon, saw his involvement in his father's profession as the means of carrying off a good joke on The Old Man. Orin admits to Lavinia that General Mannon came to his rescue, overlooked his stupidity on the battlefield, and brought him out of the battle as a hero. This also parallels James' relationship to Jamie, for despite the amount

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Mourning Becomes Electra in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill (New York: The Modern Library, 1941), p. 781.

<sup>2</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 100.

of embarrassment Jamie caused him, James was always there to pick up his son when he fell on his face. However, at times even James' excellent reputation as an actor could not protect his son, as evidenced by a review in the Florida Times-Union during the 1910 tour of Monte Cristo:

. . . "When the heart of the father ceases to cloud the judgement of the actor and artist, James O'Neill, Sr., will drop James O'Neill, Jr., from his company; and the plays will be the better therefore."<sup>1</sup>

James always came to Jamie's rescue, just as General Mannon managed to rescue Orin. Eugene and Jamie were exceptionally close, and perhaps the symbolic recreation of the relationship between Jamie and James in the play was O'Neill's way of thanking his father for not deserting the son and older brother that they both loved.

Although the character of Ezra Mannon is physically murdered in the first play of the trilogy, he spiritually dominates the remainder of the play. The overpowering influence of the father's spirit on Lavinia is the basis for the revenge-tragedy which follows, and this revenge is eventually to destroy the Mannon family until

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill, p. 110.

Lavinia (like the playwright at the time he began the play) is the last member of the family remaining alive. Although the play is not based primarily around James O'Neill but is more of an examination of the emotional fabric of the Mannon family as a whole, James O'Neill's influence, as symbolically represented by General Ezra Mannon, dominates enough of the character motivation to be classified as one of O'Neill's more thorough examinations of his father.

In the fall of 1932, O'Neill finished his only full-length comedy, Ah, Wilderness! Although the autobiographical elements to be found there are evident, and although there was much speculation in 1932 as to how "autobiographical" the events and characters actually were, the playwright publically denied it all:

. . . Ah, Wilderness!, said O'Neill, was a nostalgic dream of what he would have liked his adolescence to have been. "The truth is, I had no youth," he added.<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill's reaction to public speculation was the standard O'Neill reaction when anyone came too close to the truth--that he was an autobiographical playwright--to deny, to lie, to throw up any sort of screening possible to

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 81.

conceal the truth. O'Neill planned in the play to idealize his family and himself, re-creating the life of the O'Neill family in New London as it should have been. He based the fictional Miller family largely on the John McGinley family, long-time O'Neill family friends. Everything O'Neill had wished his own father had been was personified in John McGinley, and perhaps that is why he was chosen in part to represent James in the play. James himself even admired John McGinley:

O'Neill was self-pityingly given to contrasting his own boyhood summers in New London with the summers spent by his New London contemporaries, whose parents devoted themselves uncomplicatedly to each other and their children. The McGinley family was the one he particularly admired and envied. . . . Not only Eugene, but his father as well, regarded the McGinleys' cheerful domesticity with a kind of awe. . . .<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill follows the pattern of McGinley's life rather closely. Nat Miller, for example, is a successful newspaper publisher, a well-respected citizen, and is the pride of his cheerful, healthy family. Like McGinley, Nat Miller and his family are the type rarely found outside the proverbial American dream-drama. Undoubtedly, James O'Neill would regard such a family with awe, considering

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.



the fact that in his own home-situation he was confronted with a wife who was a morphine addict, an eldest son who was a ne'er-do-well alcoholic, and a youngest son who was quickly following in his older brother's footsteps. It is not difficult to understand why O'Neill needed a family other than his own for his model if he was to create a successfully idealized portrait of his family and himself.

Richard Miller, the play's young hero and the boy O'Neill states he wishes he had been, causes his father only a minimum of anxiety. When compared with O'Neill's actual boyhood activities, young Miller's antics are those of a choir boy. In the play, O'Neill wanted to return to the days of his youth, and in order to do so he chose to relive only the milder of his actual family experiences. Even the majority of these are modified to fit into the idealized family and the idealized father-son relationship O'Neill strove to create.

The most obviously distorted portion of the actual relationship between the father and the son revolves around Richard Miller's socialistic viewpoints. Young Miller, like young O'Neill, became strongly attracted to the viewpoints of such leading socialists as Emma Goldman and George Bernard Shaw. Richard is quick to denounce the Fourth of July as a purely capitalist celebration:

I don't believe in this silly celebrating the Fourth of July--all this lying talk about liberty--when there is no liberty! . . .

The land of the free and the home of the brave! Home of the slaves is what they ought to call it--the wage slaves ground under the heel of the capitalist class, starving, crying for bread for his children, and all he gets is a stone! The Fourth of July is a stupid farce!<sup>1</sup>

Instead of flying into a rage, Nat Miller's response to his son's revolutionary feelings is one of pure amusement:

(putting a hand to his mouth to conceal a grin)  
Them are pretty strong words. You'd better not repeat such sentiments outside the family or they'll have you in jail. . . .

Son, if I didn't know it was you talking, I'd think we had Emma Goldman with us.<sup>2</sup>

In Nat Miller, O'Neill created a father who could overlook his son's adolescent politics and dismiss them as harmlessly amusing. Biographical evidence, however, points to the fact that James O'Neill did not share his symbolic counterpart's sentiments:

For all the exaggeration and broad humor in the portrait there is a distinct parallel between young Miller and O'Neill at the same age. . . Like his

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Ah, Wilderness! in Sixteen Famous American Plays, edited by Bennett Cerf and Van H. Cartmell (New York: Random House, Inc., 1941), p. 285.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

fictional counterpart, Eugene was full of ill-digested revolutionary theory and critical of his elders, but here the resemblance ends; unlike Richard, Eugene inspired little mirth in his parents, particularly in his father, who had to bear the brunt of his rebellion.<sup>1</sup>

Constantly surrounded by family crisis after crisis, James O'Neill had little time for Eugene's revolutionary political theories, and consequently the father and son exchanged heated words on the subject. In the play, however, O'Neill goes so far as to have Nat Miller take up for his son when he is attacked as a radical by a young woman's irate father when he has discovered the socialistic poetry which young Richard has written to her. Miller himself becomes irate as the girl's father attacks Richard as a degenerate who is attempting to corrupt an innocent young girl with his socialistic philosophies. Miller's response is to throw the man out of his home, totally disregarding the fact that he is one of Miller's major newspaper advertisers. He then turns to Mrs. Miller and jovially dismisses the matter as trivial:

. . . I've got to do something about the young anarchist or he'll be getting me, and himself, in a peck

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 107.

of trouble. (then pathetically helpless) But what can I do? Putting the curb bit on would make him worse. Then he'd have a harsh tyrant to defy. He'd love that, darn him!<sup>1</sup>

Miller confronts Richard with the affair when he returns home, expressing confidence that he will not lie to him, as has always been the case in their father-son discussions. Richard freely admits that he wrote the poems in question, and the confrontation ends on a cheerful note, with both the father and the son basking in Richard's innocence of any wrongdoing. The fact that Miller expresses concern over his son's opinion of him, combined with the manner in which he gently handles their relationship throughout the remainder of the play, leaves the reader with no choice but to admire Miller as an excellent father, one who justly deserves his son's love and respect. All biographical evidence points to the fact that while James O'Neill loved his sons, he was not above severely tongue-lashing them when he felt that they had committed a wrong. Unlike Nat Miller, James O'Neill was not remembered as a father who had always dealt gently with his sons.

Embodied within the play are other trivial family incidents and reminiscences concerning James, such as the

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Ah, Wilderness! in Sixteen Famous American Plays, p. 292.

incident of the bluefish. Nat Miller superstitiously held that bluefish contained an oil which was poisonous. Mrs. Miller had been serving it to him for years under the guise of weakfish, and he had never known the difference.

Another peculiarity of Miller's was the constant repetition of his boyhood experiences, especially the story of how he had once saved a swimming companion from drowning. All are definitely incidents which O'Neill drew from memories of his father:

. . . James' conviction that "a certain peculiar oil" in bluefish had a poisonous effect on his digestion; it was a family joke that Ella served him bluefish under the guise of weakfish. . . . James' tendency to repeat stories of his boyhood and young manhood . . . [is] illustrated in Ah, Wilderness!. . . concerning the way he had once rescued a friend from drowning.<sup>1</sup>

Another highly inflated incident in the play occurs when Miller and his wife discuss Richard's punishment for returning home drunk. In the O'Neill household drunkenness was not a novelty, since the entire family, including Ella, was not above occasionally overindulging. Nat Miller tells his wife that he plans to inform Richard that to teach him a lesson his conduct has eliminated the

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, pp. 82-83.

boy's college plans, but at the same time Miller expounds his faith in the boy's future:

. . . I said I'd tell him that now--bluff--then later on I'll change my mind . . . you mark my words, that boy's going to turn out to be a great lawyer, or a great doctor, or a great writer. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Miller, James accepted his sons' drinking, and often was seen accompanying them to various bars. Perhaps the most inflated portion of this particular passage, however, revolves around Miller's prophecy that his son might turn out to be a respected figure. James only grudgingly permitted his youngest son to enter Princeton, and once Eugene failed miserably as a college freshman, James never again considered the fact that his son would ever adopt a worthwhile profession. Even as late as 1914, when O'Neill was obviously adrift, not seeking any sort of permanent employment, his father was still reluctant to finance any type of training program. O'Neill expressed an interest in attending George Pierce Baker's famous English 47 class at Harvard, a class whose professor accepted only the most promising young writers and playwrights. O'Neill

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Ah, Wilderness! in Sixteen Famous American Plays, p. 350.

was accepted, but James was somewhat unwilling to finance his son's expenses. Finally Clayton Hamilton, an admirer of Eugene's talents and an old family friend, persuaded James to finance the apprentice playwright's stay at Harvard. Hamilton was later to reveal the fact that James was not overcome with glee at the prospect of financing Eugene's stay at Harvard:

" . . . Mr. O'Neill was finally persuaded to send Eugene to Harvard, although he still maintained that the boy would never amount to anything. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

James maintained that his youngest son was destined for failure until the overwhelming success of Beyond the Horizon forced the recognition of Eugene's talents. The success of the play and the praise of many well-respected critics forced James to accept the measure of his son's talents. Once he accustomed himself to the fact that Eugene, despite his flaws, was destined to become successful, the two half-heartedly reconciled their differences and began to enjoy a sort of friendly relationship.

While Nat Miller always held that his son was destined to become a success in life, James O'Neill

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 264.

generally held an opposing point of view, that his son was destined to become one of life's failures. On the surface, Ah, Wilderness! is a comedy. However, when the autobiographical elements are examined, the play's humor is lessened, and the play is revealed as a nostalgic attempt to create what never existed in O'Neill's life. O'Neill wished for a past to be re-created but because he had little experience which would fit into an idealized pattern, he was forced to create one. As a result, Nat Miller vaguely resembles James O'Neill, but basically Nat is all the things which James was not. If he wished to create an idealized father, O'Neill apparently realized he would really have to stretch his imagination. Nat Miller is the result.

. . . (With contemptuous hatred) What a bastard to have for a father! Christ, if you put him in a book, no one would believe it!<sup>1</sup>

The father in question is James Tyrone, Sr., as characterized by his eldest son, James Tyrone, Jr., in the last act of Long Day's Journey Into Night. To the haphazard reader who might happen to stumble blindly into the play, James Tyrone could well appear to be the accident of

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night, p. 157.



Nature which he is believed to be by his son. However, if the same reader, in the same haphazard manner, picks up and glances through any reputable biography of the O'Neill family, he will understand that the four Tyrones of the play are an unvarnished portrait of Eugene O'Neill and his family. The reader may then wonder if O'Neill dealt justly with each of the characters in the play, and whether O'Neill's family was really as he depicted them. Indeed, there are many questions which deserve answers concerning the autobiographical authenticity of this play. For example, why after years of disguising his family as characters in his many plays did O'Neill feel compelled to write such a personal exposé? Why did he suddenly, in the last years of his life, feel that he must expose his father as a miser, his mother as a morphine addict, and his brother as a cynical, destructive alcoholic? Perhaps O'Neill's wife, Carlotta Monterrey O'Neill, his constant companion and nurse during the creation of the play, best explained O'Neill's motives:

" . . . He explained to me that he had to write this play. He had to write it because it was a thing that haunted him and he had to forgive whatever caused this in them . . . and in himself . . . O'Neill would come out of his study gaunt and sometimes weeping. . . . I think he felt freer when he got it out of his system.

It was his way of making peace with his family, and himself."<sup>1</sup>

For obvious reasons, O'Neill did not want the play produced until twenty-five years after his death. He knew that he had created an ugly picture, perhaps the most grotesque autobiographical portrait of an American family ever created by an American dramatist. He was also aware that since most of it so closely paralleled well-known facts about his family, it could easily be discovered that the play was autobiographical. Being a private person by nature, the aging playwright wanted to answer no questions about his most private examination of the inner relationships of his family. After he had lived such a life, after being haunted by it, after spending over two years painfully reconstructing it, he wanted to bury it, or at least to answer no questions.

O'Neill's portrait of his father in the play is the most definitive; yet like the idealized portrait of Nat Miller in Ah, Wilderness!, this portrait of James O'Neill is also moulded to fit into what O'Neill would have liked for his father to have been. Without an accurate

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<sup>1</sup>Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten, p. 273.

understanding of what the real James O'Neill was like, it would be reasonable to believe that if James Tyrone accurately represents James O'Neill, then his son would not be without just cause when he calls his father a "bastard."

A study of James O'Neill's true character, however, reveals that even if O'Neill told the truth as he saw it, he distorted some facts and ignored others.

One of the play's major conflicts revolves around Edmund Tyrone's impending confinement in a tubercular sanatorium because of his steadily weakening condition. It appears at the first of the play that James Tyrone plans to send his youngest son to a "county home" instead of one of the better private sanatoriums which could easily have been afforded. Both Edmund and his brother Jamie are appalled at this possibility. They are convinced that their father's miserliness is the underlying cause of the selection of a public institution instead of a private one. Once it is established that Edmund must be confined to some sort of facility because of his tubercular condition, the confrontation between the father and the son begins:

Edmund: You think I'm going to die.

Tyrone: That's a lie! You're crazy!

Edmund: (More bitterly) So why waste the money. That's why you're sending me to a state farm--

Tyrone: (In guilty confusion) What state farm? It's the Hilltown Sanatorium, that's all I know, and both doctors said it was the best place for you.

Edmund: (Scathingly) For the money! That is, for nothing, or for practically nothing. Don't lie, Papa! You know damned well Hilltown Sanatorium is a state institution! Jamie suspected you'd cry poorhouse to Hardy and he wormed the truth out of him!<sup>1</sup>

Tyrone makes a feeble attempt to defend himself, explaining that as a taxpayer it is his right to take advantage of state-supported facilities. Edmund counterattacks by reminding his father that the property he pays taxes on is valued at a quarter of a million dollars, and adds that just that day James has bought more property. The attempt to shame the father is partially successful:

Edmund: . . . It makes me want to puke! . . . to think when it's a question of your son having consumption, you can show yourself up before the whole town as a stinking old tightwad! Don't you know Hardy will talk and the whole damned town will know! Jesus, Papa, haven't you any pride or shame? And don't think I'll let you get away with it! I won't go to any damned state farm just to save you a few lousy dollars to buy more bum property with. You damned stinking old miser! . . .

Tyrone: . . . Be quiet! Don't say that to me! You're drunk! I won't mind you! . . . You've got yourself worked up over nothing. Who said you

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night, pp. 143-44.

had to go to this Hilltown place? You can go anywhere you like. I don't give a damn what it costs. All I care about is to have you get well. Don't call me a stinking miser, just because I don't want doctors to think I'm a millionaire they can swindle. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Just as the Tyrones bitterly debated the subject of county homes and private sanitoriums, the O'Neill family were also torn by a similar situation. In the play, James and Edmund end their discussion of Edmund's confinement by creating the impression that Edmund will not be sent to a county home, but will be placed in the private institution of his choice. O'Neill and his father were also faced with the problem of choosing a sanatorium. Most early biographers state that O'Neill was confined for tuberculosis at Gaylord Farm, in Wallingford, Connecticut, one of the most progressive institutions of its type at the time O'Neill faced confinement. This fact would, of course, point to the fact that O'Neill did not deal justly with James, due to the fact that Gaylord Farm was both a private institution and a progressive one. However, more recent biographers such as Louis Sheaffer and Arthur and Barbara Gelb have proved that while O'Neill eventually

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 145-46.

spent his convalescence period at Gaylord Farm, he was also a patient at Fairfield County State Tuberculosis Sanatorium, a shabby, state-supported institution, for a short time:

James made his decision to send Eugene to Fairfield County State Tuberculosis Sanitarium in Shelton, Connecticut, a few miles west of New Haven. The institution charged \$4 a week for those who could pay; those who could not were supported by the state.<sup>1</sup>

James accompanied his son on the trip to Fairfield; the place to which Eugene was admitted consisted only of two dismal shacks and a farmhouse converted into an infirmary. James was scheduled to begin his New York season, and immediately after seeing that Eugene was admitted, he left. Dr. Edward J. Lynch, Fairfield's superintendent, wisely realized that his new patient was utterly miserable, and that his mental condition would not favor his physical recovery. He advised O'Neill to apply for admission to Gaylord Farm:

"I told him he'd meet a much better class of people at Gaylord," Dr. Lynch recalled, "and that, since Gaylord took only minimal cases, his chances for recovery there would be much better."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 224.

On December 9, 1912, O'Neill left Fairfield to join his father in New York. Although James had been informed by Dr. Lynch that Eugene would have a better chance for recovery at Gaylord, he was not warmly greeted by his father on arriving in New York:

Eugene arrived in New York on December 11. After some bitter wrangling, he persuaded his father to send him to a man regarded by many as the country's leading chest surgeon and a pioneer in the treatment of tuberculosis--Dr. James Alexander Miller. Eugene gained Dr. Miller's interest in his case, and on December 17th, the surgeon wrote to the director of Gaylord. . . .<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill entered Gaylord Farm on Christmas Eve, 1912. This is the private sanitorium which James Tyrone mentions as an alternative to the Hilltown Sanitorium in the last act of the play. Like the sanitorium mentioned by Tyrone, it was also privately endowed and charged seven dollars per week. O'Neill was happy at Gaylord Farm, and he always recalled his stay there with the fondest of memories. Many of the experiences and characterizations found in his early plays are re-creations of acquaintances and experiences which he encountered during his convalescence there.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 224-25.

Like James and Jamie Tyrone, James O'Neill and his son quarrelled over confinement in a state-supported institution. The primary difference between the two fathers lies in the fact that the fictional father eventually agreed that a public institution was not the correct place for his son's confinement, while the real father made the opposite decision. While it is true that James O'Neill eventually provided his son with a leading specialist and entered him in one of the country's leading tubercular institutions, it is also true that he was first entered as a patient in a shabby state institution which dealt primarily with paupers and terminal cases. Edmund Tyrone's bitterness in the play is very real; for while the fictional son might have been convinced of his father's good intentions, the real son had experienced the final outcome of the father's decision, and was able to know better.

O'Neill's condemnation of his father's miserliness in the play was not confined to James Tyrone's dealings with his son, but also included Tyrone's treatment of his wife. The play clearly reveals that Mary Tyrone, like Ella O'Neill, was addicted to morphine. All of the members of the family clearly blamed the mother's addiction on the father's miserliness. In the same final act in which Edmund so



violently attacks James' miserliness as the cause for selecting a "county home" instead of a private institution, he also attacks his father's miserly nature as the cause of Mary Tyrone's addiction:

Edmund: . . . It never should have gotten a hold on her! I know damned well she's not to blame! And I know who is! You are! Your damned stinginess! If you'd spent money for a decent doctor when she was so sick after I was born, she'd never have known morphine existed! Instead you put her in the hands of a hotel quack who wouldn't admit his ignorance and took the easiest way out, not giving a damn what happened to her afterwards! All because his fee was cheap! Another one of your bargains!

Tyrone: (Stung--angrily): Be quiet! How dare you talk of something you know nothing about! . . .

Edmund: . . . After you found out she'd been made a morphine addict, why didn't you send her to a cure, at the start, while she still had a chance? No, that would have meant spending some money! . . .

Tyrone: . . . how was I to know then? What did I know of morphine? It was years before I discovered what was wrong. I thought she'd never gotten over her sickness, that's all. Why didn't I send her to a cure, you say? (Bitterly) Haven't I? I've spent thousands in cures! A waste. What good have they done her? She's always started again. . . .<sup>1</sup>

If Edmund Tyrone's accusations in this passage represent the truth as O'Neill realistically believed it,

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night, pp. 140-41.

then James Tyrone's accusations that his son knows nothing about the subject of his mother's addiction applies not only to Edmund, but also to the play's author as well. One of the first facts which the major reputable biographers point out when dealing with Ella O'Neill's addiction is the fact that O'Neill distorted his father's involvement in the matter. The Gelbs' biography, which is perhaps the most complex and accurate work dealing with the O'Neill family unit, points out that Ella's addiction was her means of escaping from the realities of her life:

There is questionable validity in the contention, as advanced in Long Day's Journey Into Night, that a "quack doctor" started Ella on a vicious habit that trapped her against her will. It is true that a doctor introduced her to the drug, but she herself seized on its effects as a means of escape. Morphine offered her a never-never land in which she could hide. It was months before she realized that she could no longer do without the drug.<sup>1</sup>

The Gelbs also learned from an O'Neill cousin, prone to eavesdropping on conversations between his elders, that James O'Neill found out only after Ella was completely addicted to the drug that she was even using a narcotic. He made his discovery when he blindly entered a drugstore

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 59.

to pick up Ella's "medicine," totally unaware of what it contained, and was advised by a well-meaning druggist of the dangers of morphine. This cousin was understandably one of the few O'Neill relatives who was not surprised by the revelation of Ella's narcotics addiction with the publication of Long Day's Journey Into Night.<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill needed a reason for his mother's addiction, and James was a handy target. O'Neill's attachment to his mother explains why he would not, or could not, accept the fact that she became a morphine addict by choice, not by chance:

By picturing his mother as a captive princess, he could attribute all the uncertainty he felt in her love to the "ogre," his father, and he was finally able to accept even his mother's addiction to drugs by making his father the culprit. By imagining that his father, out of sheer miserliness, had called in cheap doctors who accustomed her to morphine, he was able to exonerate his mother and soothe himself. He still held this belief years later, and offered it as the cause of his mother's addiction in his autobiographical play, Long Day's Journey Into Night.<sup>2</sup>

O'Neill blamed James for Ella's condition, yet he also strangely allows him to defend himself in the play.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill, pp. 98-99.

James Tyrone's defense against his son's accusations is far more accurate biographically than the charges which Edmund brings against him, a fact which only confuses the issue. O'Neill set out to create a portrait of a miser, one whose tight-fisted ways would send a son to a "county farm" instead of a private institution and would employ a "cheap quack" to attend a wife during childbirth. Whether consciously or unconsciously, when the playwright allowed James Tyrone to defend himself in the manner evidenced within the play, he totally destroyed the portrait of James O'Neill as a miser, at least in the case of Ella's narcotics addiction.

O'Neill's mother's drug problem was finally arrested during the spring of 1914. James withdrew from a highly successful role in the play Joseph and His Brethren to be with her, to keep the family's darkest and most intimate secret from the press, and to pay the bills.<sup>1</sup> Like James Tyrone, he had spent "thousands" searching for a cure for his wife, and had repeatedly watched her failures:

When Ella O'Neill told her husband that she wanted to make a final attempt to overcome her

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 281.

"curse," he was against it; there had been too many times she had returned from a sanatorium resolved to keep a grip on herself, inspired hope in the family that perhaps this time she was permanently cured, only to backslide and plunge them all, herself particularly, into new depths of despair. . . .<sup>1</sup>

James O'Neill's sacrifices, his mental anguish, and his undying love and loyalty to his wife are all evident. All biographical evidence points to the fact that James Tyrone was correct when he accused Edmund of treading on shaky ground when he began their discussion of Mary Tyrone's addiction. O'Neill knew the facts of his mother's addiction, knew that James had done all that one man could possibly do to help his wife overcome her problem; yet O'Neill stubbornly maintained the false belief that his father was the family ogre. It was by far easier to invent a cause and a villain than accept the harsh reality of the true facts--exactly what O'Neill chose to do in this case. Perhaps when he allowed James Tyrone to state the facts accurately in the play, O'Neill was in some way facing the truth at last, not as he wanted it to be, but as he knew deep within himself that it was.

James Tyrone's relationship with his other son, Jamie, is also an important aspect of the play. While

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 280.

O'Neill distorted parts of his relationship with his father, he accurately portrayed the relationship between his older brother and their father. The real Jamie O'Neill and the fictional Jamie Tyrone were both utter failures, and both were totally dependent upon their father for financial support. Both Jamies went onto the stage, following their actor-fathers, because acting was their easiest method of avoiding any type of responsibility. Both could have been leading actors if alcohol and the life of a Broadway sport had not seemed more appealing than working to become successful. When James Tyrone begins his steady denunciation of his son early in the play, the playwright is doing nothing more than re-creating with accuracy scenes he must have witnessed between his father and brother on numerous occasions:

Tyrone: . . . I've lost all hope that you will ever change . . . You've never known the value of a dollar and you never will! You've never saved a dollar in your life! At the end of each season you're penniless! You've thrown your salary away every week on whores and whiskey!

Jamie: My salary! Christ!

Tyrone: It's more than you're worth, and you couldn't get that if it wasn't for me! If you weren't my son, there isn't a manager in the business who would give you a part, your reputation stinks so. As it is, I have to humble my pride and beg for you, saying you've turned over a new leaf, although I know it's a lie!

Jamie: I never wanted to be an actor. You forced me onto the stage.

Tyrone: That's a lie! You made no effort to find anything else to do! You left it to me to get you a job and I have no influence except in the theater. Forced you! You never wanted to do anything except loaf in barrooms! You'd have been contented to sit back like a lazy lunk and sponge on me for the rest of your life! After all the money I'd wasted on your education . . . The only thanks is to have you sneer at me for a dirty miser, sneer at my profession, sneer at every damned thing in the world--except yourself. . . .<sup>1</sup>

All biographical evidence points out that Jamie Tyrone is not an exaggeration, but a crystal-clear portrait of Jamie O'Neill:

. . . The Florida Times-Union bluntly announced, "When the heart of the father ceases to cloud the judgement of the actor and the artist, James O'Neill, Sr., will drop James O'Neill, Jr., from his company; and the plays will be the better therefore." James O'Neill had turned on Jamie, trying to drive him to work harder. But Jamie retorted flippantly, and they quarreled. To his father's bitter declaration that he'd never be an actor the way he was going, Jamie sneered, "What of it?" and flung out to spend the night drinking and chasing women. . . .<sup>2</sup>

This particular passage is only one of many such accounts of the many and frequent conflicts between James O'Neill

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night, pp. 31-32.

<sup>2</sup>Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill, p. 110.

and his eldest son. Jamie's cynicism, his drunkenness, his whoring, his pathetic failures both on and off the stage were never-ending sources of embarrassment to his poor father. James knew that Jamie was a ne'er-do-well who would never become anything considered worthwhile; yet, like James Tyrone, the elder O'Neill would continue to provide his son with chance after chance to redeem himself. The intense quarrels between James and Jamie Tyrone which are found in the play, as bitter as they are, represent in reality nothing more than the playwright's recollections of many similar scenes between his father and his brother. O'Neill stated in the play's dedication that he wrote the play ". . . with deep pity and understanding. . . ." Whether any pity was felt for either his father or his brother as O'Neill created their doubles for the play is highly speculative. However, the clarity with which he recreated the stormy relationship between James and Jamie leaves little room for speculation when it comes to the question of O'Neill's understanding of the daily conflicts of their relationship.

While Jamie and Edmund Tyrone seem to see only the worst in their father, their mother's viewpoint is more perceptive. Mary Tyrone's feelings for her husband



vacillate between harsh condemnation and defensive attachment. While she violently attacks her husband in more than one instance during the course of the play, she will not allow her sons the same privilege. When Jamie seizes an opportune moment to sneeringly mock his father while James is safely out of earshot, it is Mary who strongly rebukes her son:

. . . It's you who should have more respect! Stop sneering at your father! I won't have it! You ought to be proud you're his son! He may have his faults. Who hasn't? But he's worked hard all of his life. He made his way up from ignorance and poverty to the top of his profession! Everyone else admires him and you should be the last one to sneer--you, who, thanks to him, have never had to work hard in your life!<sup>1</sup>

More than her sons, Mary Tyrone seems to have some sort of an understanding of the cause of her husband's miserliness, attributing it to his rise from poverty of the lowest order. However, her understanding of James' miserliness crumbles when she begins to delve into the subject of her narcotics addiction; for, like her sons, she blames her addiction on James' miserliness. During the heated family quarrel centered upon Edmund's upcoming

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night, p. 60.

confinement to a sanitorium, she sides with her two sons in their condemnation of James' miserliness in selecting physicians for his family:

. . . Oh, we all realize why you like him, James! Because he's cheap! But please don't try to tell me! I know all about Doc Hardy! . . . it was exactly the same type of cheap quack who gave you the medicine--and you never knew what it was until too late!<sup>1</sup>

It is evident from this instance and others found in the play that Mary Tyrone blamed her addiction directly on her husband's miserliness. Ella O'Neill may have blamed her husband for her addiction to morphine within the privacy of their home, as does her fictional counterpart, but the matter has been and always will be a matter of speculation, simply because there is no known biographical evidence either to substantiate or repudiate the matter. All accounts of Ella O'Neill point out that she was a very shy and private person, and if she ever discussed her addiction with anyone outside the family, there is no record of it today. The only record of Ella's feelings about her husband and his part in her addiction is found in the play itself, and when the playwright's strong

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

feelings of attachment for his mother and his vacillating feelings for his father are considered, Mary Tyrone's statements within the play cannot be classified as the definitive statement of Ella O'Neill's feelings. In this particular instance, the true facts will never be separated from the author's fantasy.

Mary Tyrone's vision of her husband as a miser is not limited to only the matter of her narcotics addiction, but includes a variety of instances of what she considers miserliness on James' part. It is these instances, when compared with the accepted biographical facts, which tend to cast shadows of doubt on the validity of the author's attempts to create a portrait of his father as a miser. One not familiar with the family's history might overlook seemingly insignificant details found within the play. However, when some of these seemingly trivial matters are recognized as part of O'Neill's attempt to create situations which simply did not exist, then the trivial is suddenly of the utmost importance.

One of the most glaring injustices centers around the O'Neill family's summer residence, the now-fabled Monte Cristo Cottage, located in New London, Connecticut. O'Neill chose to re-create the cottage in the

play, just as he chose New London for its setting. O'Neill begins his stage description by attempting to create the impression that the home is an abhorrence, and Mary Tyrone's comments later in the play are intended to further substantiate this impression:

. . . I've never wanted to live here in the first place, but your father liked it and insisted on building this house, and I've had to come here every summer . . . I've never felt it was my home. It was wrong from the start. Everything was done in the cheapest way. Your father would never spend the money to make it right. It's just as well we haven't any friends here. I'd be ashamed to have them step in the door. . . .<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill was stretching the truth here, for all biographers who have researched the home agree that Monte Cristo Cottage was anything but "done in the cheapest way:"

James had the house built of the finest materials. (Years later when a 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, and staircases were all of fine walnut, the floor parquet, and the fireplaces of imported tile. The report in the Boston Times that the house cost over \$40,000--a fortune in 1883--could not have been far off.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>2</sup>Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill, p. 12.

Other sources have gathered reports of comments from various persons who had actually observed the cottage. Their reports also tend to show that the home and its contents were far from "cheap":

. . . "It is hard to go into any room in which there is not a cozy nook or a comfortable corner. Paintings of real value and real etchings adorn the walls, while any number of photographs of Mr. O'Neill's professional friends are scattered over tables and writing desks. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

In addition to creating the impression that James Tyrone is the type of husband who would subject his family to second-rate dwellings, Mary Tyrone also creates the impression that it was James who insisted on settling in New London, a town which she claims she has always loathed. Like the fantasy of the squalid cottage, this matter is another of the playwright's departures from reality, devised in order to create a more unfavorable portrait of his father. Like James Tyrone's father, James O'Neill's father had deserted his family, and had presumably returned to Ireland to die. At an early age, James was forced to shift for himself, as exemplified by Tyrone in the play. At the time James O'Neill purchased Monte Cristo Cottage,

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 84.

he had no family ties, since his family was scattered and his parents had both been dead for a number of years. Ella, however, had many relatives living in New London, as well as a number of long-time friends. New London was not a place which James selected at random, forcibly making his wife and family set up a home there. Ella had visited in New London during the summers since she was a girl, and her family was well known and well respected there:

. . . James and Ella went to New London to find a summer home, where, if James himself could not always spend the hot months, his wife and children could. Ella's mother had already taken up residence in New London to be near her sister. . . .<sup>1</sup>

It is true that James fell in love with New London, and New London fell in love with him. At one point, biographers point out that there was even some talk of running James for the office of town mayor. With his magnificent stage presence, James was readily accepted by the town's citizens, and was invited to join the leading men's social clubs and organizations. It is ironic that it was James, the "foreigner," who fit more appropriately into

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

New London society than did his wife, who had grown up in the midst of it all. It was Ella who first introduced James to the town, and yet it was James who was most readily accepted. From all reports, Ella was not socially active during the family's New London summers, as is the case of Mary Tyrone in the play. The reason is explained in the play, as Edmund Tyrone points out to his mother that the family is never able to entertain because she has never wanted company--she is a morphine addict.

Despite all her accusations, it is clear from her dialogue that Mary Tyrone loves her husband despite his faults. One particular passage seems to sum up best Mary Tyrone's true feelings for her husband:

. . . James! We've loved each other! We always will! Let's remember only that, and not try to understand what we cannot understand, or help things that cannot be helped--the things life has done to us we cannot excuse or explain.<sup>1</sup>

Considering all accounts of the relationship between James and Ella O'Neill, this particular paragraph is perhaps more autobiographically accurate than any other passage in the play. Their intense love and devotion for

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night, p. 85.

each other always seemed to overcome the catastrophic events which surrounded their lives. James O'Neill was devoted to his wife, and Ella, from all appearances, was similarly devoted to him. Their sons would cause them much grief and misery, but aside from Ella's addiction and the complications which arose from it, their life together was generally harmonious. In spite of all the tragic events which seemed to surround the family, they managed to survive it all together. O'Neill allowed a bit of this true relationship between his parents to seep into the play; and this fact alone (even if the play is taken at face value and all biographical evidence is discounted) is perhaps enough to convince the mature reader that James Tyrone, like James O'Neill, was not truly a "bastard" as he was pictured by his eldest son.

Eugene O'Neill used his father as a psychological double for at least seven characters in seven separate plays. With this in mind, there is little room for doubt that he was preoccupied with the man whom the sons jokingly referred to as "The Count." O'Neill's seven fictionalized representations are attempts to discover just exactly who or what James O'Neill represented. If consistency were to be considered the yardstick of accuracy, then O'Neill's



attempts to re-create characters who symbolically represented his father must be declared utter failures. As he dealt with his father, O'Neill vacillated drastically from one character-figure to the next, for he could never to his satisfaction re-create James O'Neill. O'Neill spent a large portion of his life trying to come to grips with what his father had really meant to him, fluctuating between favorable portraits such as that of Nat Miller and debasing ones such as that of James Tyrone.

Like his mother, O'Neill was a private person who never discussed family matters outside the family. He used his plays as sounding-boards for his soul, and it is in the plays that the secrets of his true feelings about himself and his family can be found. Perhaps one of the truest revelations about O'Neill's relationship with his father is found in a relatively obscure passage from one of the playwright's most profoundly probing psychological dramas, The Great God Brown. In this play, Dion Anthony (a psychological double for O'Neill) reveals his inner feelings about his father:

. . . What aliens we were to each other! When he lay dead, his face looked so familiar that I wondered where I had met the man before. Only at

the second of my conception. After that, we grew hostile with concealed shame. . . .<sup>1</sup>

In truth, O'Neill and his father were aliens. O'Neill never truly understood James, and as a result was forced (or perhaps more accurately, forced himself), through psychological father-doubles, to make various attempts to uncover the mystery of who or what James represented. Like Dion Anthony, O'Neill was unsuccessful, despite wavering attempts to find the truth. Hostility is evident in some of his creations, as is the concealment which resulted from his shame.

O'Neill's preoccupation, his vacillation, and his shame, however, can all be combined to substantiate the theory that James O'Neill played a large part in the formation of his son's dramas, regardless of whether or not the playwright was successful in discovering the mystery of who or what his father represented. Though he would probably not have admitted it, even to himself, O'Neill always loved James more than he hated him. If hatred had ruled supreme, O'Neill would never have created characters such as Nat Miller or John Townsend. Unknowingly, O'Neill had solved his own mystery long before he began to realize that a mystery existed.

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, The Great God Brown in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill (New York: The Modern Library, 1941), p. 333.

## C H A P T E R     I I

MAMA:    ELLA QUINLAN O'NEILL

Unlike the O'Neill men, Ella O'Neill wanted no part of the theater or the life associated with it. Her husband basked in the glory of being a matinee idol, her eldest son basked in the glory of being a Broadway sport, and her youngest son, willingly or unwillingly, was a product of both influences. Yet Ella was to play a larger part in the lives of her men than did any role they were either to create or portray. Her hold on her husband was strong enough to rekindle his faith time after time as he spent thousands of dollars in a search for a lasting cure for her morphine addiction. Her influence on her eldest son was strong enough to make him her devoted slave for as long as she lived. Her influence on her youngest son, the playwright, is clearly evidenced by the vast amount of time he spent in examining her relationship with them all. The notoriety which Ella O'Neill shrank from during her lifetime now begins to emerge as studies of the plays of her youngest son become more complex. It is within the plays that we find the true amount of influence which Ella O'Neill wielded within the family.

The first play in which O'Neill clearly patterned a character after his mother is All God's Chillun Got Wings. While it is commonly accepted among today's O'Neill biographers and scholars that the play was O'Neill's vehicle for examining the relationship between his father and mother, during the playwright's lifetime no one voiced suspicions that the play was anything other than an in-depth study of the problems of miscegenation. By recreating his father as a Negro doomed for failure and his mother as the insane white prostitute who became his wife, O'Neill was able to examine his parents' relationship without fear of being discovered. If any of O'Neill's friends or critics suspected that the Harris couple of the play in any way resembled the playwright's parents, there is no record of their suspicions, and no mention of the play's autobiographical elements was made until after the playwright's death. What would happen afterward is a quite different matter.

All God's Chillun was written during the fall of 1923. In many respects, the play's date is as significant as its contents. By 1923, both of O'Neill's parents were dead--James died in August of 1920, and Ella died in February of 1922. However, it is doubtful that O'Neill

would have created either Jim or Ella Harris had it not been for another death, that of James O'Neill, Jr., the playwright's last link with his family. When Jamie's alcoholism finally brought his life to a close in November of 1923, O'Neill was free to explore his family's past without fear of restraint or exposure. Jamie's death stirred his brother's memories, and these memories would serve as the basis for eight of the remaining plays which O'Neill would live to create. Had Jamie's life span paralleled Eugene's, the plays of Eugene O'Neill might have been quite different. However, once the playwright found himself without family restraints, he began his career as a dramatist of autobiographical scope in earnest. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Jim and Ella Harris were the first of O'Neill's mature attempts at unraveling the complex mystery of the whos, whats, and whys that haunted him whenever he thought of his family.

Ella Downey Harris is O'Neill's first clearly defined portrait of Ella Quinlan O'Neill, and possibly it is also one of his most confusing attempts at explaining the woman he called "Mama." To state that O'Neill deeply loved his mother is almost an understatement, considering the vast amount of material which establishes the playwright's deep devotion to his mother. It was this deep

devotion for Ella which forced him to twist the actual biographical facts as he created Ella Harris. O'Neill obviously had a great desire to deal with James and Ella's relationship, but at this point in his career he could not--or would not--face the realities on which their relationship had been based. O'Neill was haunted by Ella's addiction to morphine, but he was not yet prepared to deal openly with the facts of her addiction as he did in his later works. Still a partial victim of his inhibitions, he turned to his earliest recollections of "Mama's condition" for the basis of Ella Harris' characterization:

While Eugene was growing up, bewildered by his mother's recurrent strangeness, he was haunted by the fear that she was mentally unstable. What else could he think? Could he imagine that his mother, his gentle pious mother, was a dope fiend, the sort of person they wrote about in dime thrillers? His attempts to question his father and brother only reinforced his suspicions, for they always tried to cut off the conversation or replied that 'Mama' suffered from a kind of sickness. So far as the boy could see, everything pointed to mental illness as the answer. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Although O'Neill was not prepared at this point in his career to deal realistically with his mother's drug

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 80.

addiction, he was able to create obvious parallels between his mother and her psychological double. O'Neill's mother married his father, who was already well-established as a dashing matinee idol, without really understanding what life would be like as the wife of an actor. Her husband, like the majority of his contemporaries, was constantly on the move, living out of a suitcase, never really calling one particular place his home. Ella O'Neill was never able to adjust fully to this type of life, and her son grew up with the knowledge that although his mother followed "The Count" as he migrated from one city to another, she never felt a part of it all:

. . . she obviously found her life, her present life, too much for her. There was her constant complaining of her early happy years with her lot as an actor's wife, her frequent complaining about the hardships of the road, particularly the isolation from her own kind of people. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, as Jim Harris relates the first years of his marriage to Ella Downey, he is re-telling Ella O'Neill's story:

. . . For the first year, it was all right. Ella liked everything a lot. . . . After that we got to

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

living housed in. Ella didn't want to see nobody, she said just the two of us was enough. . . . But she never did get to wanting to go out any place again. . . . She lived in the house and got paler and paler, and more and more nervous and scary, always imagining things. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Ella Downey, like Ella Quinlan, enters her marriage with the intention of escaping to a happier lifestyle. She soon begins to realize that she can never successfully adapt to her husband's world. Because of her marriage to a Negro, Ella finds herself alienated from the world of the whites, lost in the strange world of the blacks. Slowly she begins to lose her sanity, regressing into a world dominated by childlike fantasies in which she and Jim are segregated from the real world from which she wishes to escape. Her insanity offers Ella a refuge, a means of escaping into a better world, a world in which she and Jim are children, playing children's games as they did in their long-past days of childhood:

. . . I'll just be your little girl, Jim--and you'll be my little boy--just as we used to be, remember, when we were beaux; and I'll put shoe blacking on my face and pretend I'm black and you can put chalk on your face and pretend you're white just as we used to

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, All God's Chillun Got Wings in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, pp. 115-16.



do--and we can play marbles--only you mustn't all the time be a boy. Sometimes you must be my old kind Uncle Jim who's been with us for years and years. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Ella Harris finds her escape in childlike insanity. Ella O'Neill found her escape in a morphine stupor. Both were seeking an escape for similar reasons. Like Ella Harris, O'Neill's mother did not find her marriage to be what she had anticipated:

. . . Yet her marriage to an actor had proven sadly different from what the convent schoolgirl had dreamed. Her awakening as Mrs. James O'Neill came quickly. Most of her former schoolmates, with the social outlook of the day (actors, regardless of what they might be individually, simply were not quite respectable), dropped the actor's wife; they made her feel déclassée. . . .<sup>2</sup>

As Mrs. James O'Neill, Ella found out that she could not adapt successfully to her husband's world, just as Ella Harris discovers that she cannot fit into her husband's Negro society. Acting and actors, which had once seemed a perfect means of escape from the drab world which she had known as a convent girl, quickly lost their charms:

. . . From the audience she had found the theater enchanting; close up, it was grimy and sleazy, anything

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>2</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 10.

but glamorous, her husband's associates anything but compatible. Rather than hang around backstage, she would remain in the lonely hotel rooms. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Ella O'Neill's alienation from her own peer group, the realization that her married life was not measuring up to her lofty expectations, combined with her strict Catholic upbringing, offer some insight into the reasons why she allowed herself to become a morphine addict. Although O'Neill dealt directly with Ella's addiction only in Long Day's Journey Into Night, it is evident that he realized his mother's condition affected his parents' relationship as early as 1923.

Although the obvious parallels between Ella Downey Harris and Ella Quinlan O'Neill clearly establish the fact that O'Neill was dealing with his mother as a character in the play, one of the major aspects of Ella Harris' characterization remains confusing. O'Neill portrayed her as a prostitute, a woman of the lower-class white society who resorted to an interracial marriage because she could find no other avenue of escape from a world of total desolation. Ella Harris had fallen as low as a white woman could fall, so low that even the bleak

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

world of her Negro husband appeared to be a bright horizon. From all accounts, Ella O'Neill was a "good Irish-Catholic girl," one whose sheltered life was beyond reproach. At one time, she had even considered entering a nunnery. Exactly why O'Neill chose to portray his mother as a low-class prostitute is the most confusing autobiographical aspect to be found in the play, yet Ella Harris cannot be classified as anything else. Autobiographically, the play is clearly a tribute to the understanding of James O'Neill and the manner in which he so gently dealt with the playwright's mother. Exactly why O'Neill chose to distort the facts and transform his mother into a prostitute is a question which remains unanswered. One possible explanation could be based on the theory that O'Neill never fully forgave his mother for her morphine addiction, a condition which greatly influenced the entire O'Neill family's life. However, as in the majority of such speculative explanations, only one person knew the true explanation, and he was notoriously secretive.

The confusion which dominated O'Neill's innermost emotions during the fall of 1923 as he examined his feelings about his mother underwent an abrupt reversal during the early months of 1924. By March of that year,

the playwright had completed Desire Under the Elms, which marked a direct reversal of the feelings he had expressed about James and Ella in his last play, All God's Chillun. In All God's Chillun, O'Neill symbolically heightened the character representation of his father, making James O'Neill seem almost like a martyred saint. O'Neill reversed that pattern in Desire Under the Elms, canonizing instead Ella's character-representation while at the same time systematically creating for James a double as villainous as his playwright's imagination would allow. Banned in both Boston and London, the play quickly became the subject of much heated and controversial criticism, making it one of the playwright's most profitable and successful works.

The play centers upon Eben Cabot's intense hatred for his father, Ephraim. Eben views his dead mother--like himself--as being mistreated and misunderstood by his tyrannical father. Eben holds his father solely responsible for his mother's death, and Eben's intense hatred and resentment for Ephraim form the focal points of the play. Eben is convinced that his mother died because his father worked her beyond her physical endurance. He is also convinced that his father robbed him of his mother's property, which he should have inherited at the time of

her death. More important, perhaps, is Eben's feeling that Ephraim robbed him of the benefits of having a mother. It is Eben's resentment and hatred which motivate him to rob Ephraim of something which he cherishes--Abbie Putnam, the young woman whom Ephraim brings home as his bride. Eben's seduction of Abbie, therefore, is not based on lust, as so many of the puritanical critics of O'Neill's day claimed, but rather on revenge not unlike the biblical "eye for an eye."

When examined from the autobiographical viewpoint, Desire Under the Elms becomes one of O'Neill's most intense personal tragedies. Having overcome his fear of examining his family by re-creating them as characters in his plays after he completed All God's Chillun, O'Neill continued to push his family explorations beyond their former limits. In Desire Under the Elms, O'Neill's emotions are as confused as they were when he created All God's Chillun, yet his continuation of the struggle to sort out these emotions proves that, if nothing else, the playwright was preoccupied with the conflicts which dominated his family.

It has been previously established that O'Neill's accusations of and attacks on his father in Desire Under the Elms are based on the playwright's emotions rather

than on accurate biographical facts. O'Neill twisted the truth until it suited his purpose, which in this case was the creation of a saintly mother-image for Ella, one which could replace the prostitute image he had created in All God's Chillun. Early in the first act, Eben established the fact that not only he, but his stepbrothers as well, recognized the fact that his late mother was an excellent woman, one who was unjustly abused by a cruel husband:

Peter: (reminiscently) She was good t' Sim 'n' me. A good step maw's scurse.

Simeon: She was good t' everyone.

Eben: (greatly moved, gets to his feet and makes an awkward bow to each of them--stammering) I be thankful t' ye. I'm her--her heir. (He sits down in confusion).

Peter: (after a pause--judicially) She was good even t' him.

Eben: (fiercely) An' fur thanks he killed her!<sup>1</sup>

In the lines that follow this establishment of the late Mrs. Cabot's goodness and her unjust "murder" by her husband, Eben accuses his stepbrothers of ingratitude and cold-heartedness. The fact that neither Simeon nor Peter made any attempt to intervene on behalf of their stepmother when they knew that she was being abused by

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Desire Under the Elms in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, p. 141.

their father is enough to convince Eben that they were ungrateful and unfeeling toward a woman who had done them only good. However, Peter and Simeon are quick to remind their stepbrother that he was well aware of his mother's situation, and although he was mentally and physically mature enough to have intervened himself, he also did nothing. Eben is somewhat taken aback by this, and cannot offer a suitable defense for his own obvious shortcomings in the situation. At this point, Eben is not allowed by O'Neill to pursue the question of "Who Gets the Guilt" any further, for all of the guilt is quickly and totally transferred to Ephraim. Eben never again mentions any sort of guilt feelings which he might possess in connection with his late mother's death. Autobiographically, there is no record of O'Neill's blaming anyone other than his father for Ella's addiction to morphine. O'Neill chose to represent Ella's addiction as an actual "death" in this play, for he felt that when she became addicted to morphine, she had in a sense experienced a sort of living death, as later exemplified in the characterization of Mary Tyrone in Long Day's Journey Into Night. However, at this point in his career, O'Neill was not yet prepared to expose his mother as a morphine addict, but he was

prepared to expose his father as the villain who was responsible for her "death."

Ella O'Neill's addiction has generally been linked in time to the months shortly after her youngest son's birth. O'Neill, an infant at the time his mother became addicted to morphine, was in no way responsible for his mother's addiction. Like Eben, his psychological double in the play, O'Neill was unable to take any of the blame for his mother's misfortunes. Therefore, also like Eben, he transferred the guilt to the person whom he believed to be responsible, to his father. O'Neill generally believed that his father's miserliness was the cause of his mother's addiction, based on the assumption that James provided his wife with a "cheap quack" instead of a competent physician at the time of the playwright's birth. However, the fact that O'Neill would question both his psychological self and his "brothers," who may or may not represent Jamie O'Neill, leads one to believe that perhaps O'Neill was not exactly convinced at this point in his career that James was solely responsible for Ella's "death." Like Eben, O'Neill hesitated in placing the blame directly on the head of one person; but once he became convinced that the villain was his father, he set out



to destroy him symbolically. The crucifixion of James O'Neill began in this play, to reach its zenith in Long Day's Journey Into Night.

Although the article by Dr. Phillip Weissman has already been mentioned in the previous chapter in connection with this play, it must again be discussed, this time in connection with O'Neill's feelings about Ella. Dr. Weissman, being a Freudian, attempted to deal with the playwright's "unconscious autobiography" as if O'Neill were suffering from an Oedipus complex. Weissman views the play as O'Neill's attempt to come to terms with his sexual fantasies involving his mother:

. . . as Dr. Weissman pointed out, young Eben's desire for his father's new wife, Abbie, and the subsequent love affair between them represents O'Neill's "usually unallowable unconscious wish [to attain] a maternal and sexual object rightfully belonging to the father. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

From the Freudian viewpoint, Dr. Weissman's article could be readily accepted. The majority of the critics who attacked the play did so on the grounds that Abbie and Eben were incestuous, and more than one mentioned the Oedipus complex. O'Neill was questioned about the

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 539.

Freudian aspects of the play, but denied any connection between the play and an obvious attempt to expound Freudian principles:

I respect Freud's work tremendously--but I'm not an addict! . . . Whatever of Freudianism is in Desire must have walked right in through my unconscious.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, we have O'Neill's denial, for whatever that is worth. Perhaps the true key lies within the play itself, within Eben's actions and lines as he becomes involved deeper and deeper with Abbie. On the morning following their first night of love-making, Eben's first reaction upon seeing Ephraim is one of triumph. Yet the triumph he feels is one not of sexual pride because he has cuckolded Ephraim, but of triumph in the fact that he has been the instrument of his mother's long-awaited revenge:

Cabot: (grimly sarcastic) Ye're feelin' right chipper, hain't ye? Whar'd ye steal the likker?

Eben: (good-naturedly) Tain't likker. Jest life. (Suddenly holding out his hand--soberly) Yew 'n' me is quits. Let's shake hands.

Cabot: (suspiciously) What's come over ye?

Eben: Then don't. Mebbe it's jest as well.  
(A moment's pause) What's come over me? (Queerly)  
Didn't ye feel her passin'--goin' back t' her grave?

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 577.

Cabot: (dully) Who?

Eben: Maw. She kin rest easy now an' sleep content. She's quits with ye.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the remainder of the play, Abbie and Eben make Ephraim the butt of their bad joke. Ephraim's neighbors know that Abbie's child is not his son, but Eben's. He is made to look like an utter fool, and he appears to be suffering deeply as he is confronted with the realities of what has actually happened to him following the murder of the child. Eben sets out to make his father suffer at the beginning of the play, and succeeds in doing so. As the play concludes, Ephraim is left alone on the farm, a broken old man without hopes or dreams.

O'Neill's purpose, like Eben's, was to make a villain suffer for his crimes. The pain and desolation which Ephraim Cabot is left to face alone as the play concludes are proof that O'Neill was successful. Using the play as his attack-vehicle, he gained a sort of pseudo-revenge for the treatment his mother had received from his father. Like Eben, his psychological double, O'Neill somehow must have felt that the manner in which he dealt with

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Desire Under the Elms in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, p. 181.

his father would allow his mother to "rest easy" in her grave.

O'Neill's third attempt at dealing with his mother as a character within his plays is found in the Mourning Becomes Electra trilogy. The play is often overlooked from the autobiographical standpoint because Ella O'Neill's double in the play, Christine Mannon, cuckolds and poisons her husband, General Ezra Mannon, a double for James O'Neill. Despite the play's classical derivation, "this play was to be yet another examination of the emotional fabric of the O'Neill family."<sup>1</sup>

In the first play of the trilogy, Homecoming, the Mannon household is awaiting the return of General Mannon from the battles of the American Civil War. From the first of the play, it is evident that Christine Mannon and her daughter, Lavinia, are the most bitter of enemies. Lavinia has discovered that her mother is carrying on an affair with Captain Adam Brant, a ship's captain she met during her husband's absence. Lavinia, who is a double for O'Neill, promises to tell her father everything about the mother's affair unless she promises to stop the affair

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 721.

with Brant immediately. Christine has no choice but to agree to her daughter's terms.

Upon General Mannon's return, it is discovered that he has a heart ailment, and must not become upset. He greets Lavinia and his wife warmly, but being extremely tired from his long journey home, prepares for bed. That night, as he and Christine are in their bedroom, Christine starts an argument with him, setting off a fatal heart attack. According to her plan, Christine gives him poison instead of his heart medicine. Lavinia enters the room as her father is dying, just in time for him to tell her that her mother is the cause of his death. Christine, in a fit of rage, tells Lavinia that she told Ezra of her affair with Brant, thus setting off the heart attack. Under all the pressure, Christine faints, and the box of poison slips from her hand. Lavinia picks up the box, although she does not know at this time what it contains.

The second play of the trilogy, The Haunted, begins with the homecoming of Orin Mannon, Lavinia's brother and a double for the playwright's brother, Jamie O'Neill. Lavinia manages to speak to Orin before Christine enters, and she warns him that their mother will lie to him about their father's death, but Orin, who has always

been exceptionally close to his mother, is reluctant to believe his sister.

Christine manages to get Orin alone, and promises him that their relationship will be as it was before he went off to war. However, the warnings of his sister, combined with her tale of Captain Brant, have put Orin a bit on edge. He wants to believe his mother, but Lavinia's words are preying on his mind. Christine promises that he will be "her baby" again if he will only ignore Lavinia's influences:

. . . Oh, how happy we will be together, you and I,  
if only you won't let Vinnie poison your mind against  
me with her disgusting lies. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Orin half-heartedly believes his mother because he wants to very badly, but Lavinia's words are still within his mind. He is bitter about the war, and bitter against the father for making the son take a part in it. Christine sympathizes with him, trying to exert the same sort of influence over him that she had before the war took him away:

Christine: . . . Oh, if only you had never gone  
away! If only you hadn't let them take you from me!

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Mourning Becomes Electra in Nine Plays  
by Eugene O'Neill, p. 772.

Orin: (uneasily) But I've come back. Everything is all right now, isn't it? . . . And I'll never leave you again. . . . You're my only girl!<sup>1</sup>

Orin is partially taken in by Christine's promises. However, he and Lavinia later follow Christine to New York shortly after Ezra's funeral, and observe her meeting with Brant. Christine and Brant plan to run away together, and Orin and Lavinia overhear their plan. In a fit of rage, Orin kills Brant. When Christine is informed by Orin that he has murdered her lover, she commits suicide.

In Christine Mannon, O'Neill created a woman who bore little resemblance to his real mother. O'Neill, from all accounts, loved his mother while his psychological double in the play, Lavinia Mannon, hated hers. Christine's unfaithful relationship with her husband also bears no resemblance to Ella's relationship with James. The only part of Christine's character which seems to fit into the real Ella's lifestyle is her relationship with Orin, a double for Jamie O'Neill. For some reason, despite all his other faults, Jamie was tied to his mother much as Orin was tied to Christine. After James O'Neill died, it

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 776.

was Jamie--not Eugene--who looked after Ella and saw that she was taken care of. Jamie lived with his mother, helped her conduct her business affairs, and stayed by her side until she died in 1922. He even gave up drinking for a while for her sake, which must have been quite a sacrifice for someone who loved his drink as did Jamie. O'Neill went further in his study of Jamie's devotion to Ella, apparently not satisfied with what he had created in Mourning Becomes Electra. His last play, A Moon for the Misbegotten, written in 1943 following Long Day's Journey Into Night, tells further of Jamie's devotion to Ella. (This play will be dealt with in the chapter on Jamie O'Neill.)

O'Neill's next portrait of his mother is as unnatural as was his portrait of Ella O'Neill in Mourning Becomes Electra. The play is Ah, Wilderness!, and the character is Essie Miller. Essie is the wife of Nat Miller, editor of the town's local newspaper. The playwright turned to his memories of a family he had known in his adolescent days, the John McGinley family, as he created a model of his mother for the play, just as he did in the case of the portrayal of James O'Neill in the same play.

As with the characterization of his father in Ah, Wilderness!, O'Neill's mother-figure in the play is



far removed from what his own mother was actually like:

The greatest disparity in characterization . . . is the mother. Mrs. Miller is nothing like Ella; she is, however, very much like Evelyn McGinley, who bore a physical resemblance to Queen Victoria and had all the maternal, bustling good-natured officiousness that Eugene missed in his own mother.<sup>1</sup>

The play is centered upon seventeen-year-old Richard Miller, a romantic young idealist who proves to be the very soul of honor. Loosely patterned on the playwright himself, young Richard enjoys a picturesque relationship with both his parents. However, on the night he chooses to stay out at a local "gin mill" in the company of a well-known prostitute, his heart broken because he has been led to believe that his true love has rejected him, it is his mother, not his father, who shows true signs of concern. She is thrown into a mild state of shock when her son rolls home sometime after midnight, totally drunk, and his parents discover where he has been. Despite her initial shock at her son's behavior, it is his mother who sees to it that he is able to sleep off the previous night's ill effects on the morning following his escapade. In reality, Ella O'Neill was accustomed to seeing Eugene,

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 85.

under the influence of his brother Jamie, come home drunk by the time he had reached Richard's age:

. . . By the time he had reached young Richard's age, he was, under the tutelage of his brother, familiar with prostitutes, alcohol, and whorehouses.<sup>1</sup>

Ella was not, like Essie Miller, easily shocked. Her husband was a regular drinker and her eldest son was on his way to becoming an alcoholic; so it must have seemed almost normal that her youngest son follow in the footsteps of his elders. A majority of the biographers of the O'Neill family mention the fact that O'Neill was known as a regular customer in some of the New London bars by the time that he had reached seventeen, but none of them mentions his being punished by his parents for drinking.

Unlike Essie Miller, Ella was not one to rush to the defense of her son when he got himself into trouble. In the play, Nat and his wife choose to become highly insulted when the irate father of a local girl comes to the Miller home to demand that young Richard be punished for attempting to corrupt her morals. It is made clear by the father that Richard has sent the girl some "radical" poetry,

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 406.

and the father, one of Nat's largest newspaper advertising clients, threatens to withdraw all of his advertising from Nat's newspaper unless young Richard is punished for his actions. Nat does not believe that his son and his poetry are as contemptible as the girl's father portrays them, and after a heated argument between the two men, Nat ushers him out of his home in a gruff and threatening manner. Nat and Essie discuss the incident as merely a stage which their son is passing through, a trifling matter at most. Both parents defend their son to the fullest degree. In reality, Ella reacted in just the opposite manner. The incident is based on fact, for a New London father once told O'Neill that he would be shot on sight if he ever tried to see the daughter following their only date. The girl was Maibelle Scott, and Ella, under the misapprehension that a girl who telephoned the O'Neill home to talk to Eugene a few days after he was warned to stay away from the Scott home was Maibelle, told her: "You'd better stay away from him. He isn't a good influence for you or any other girl."<sup>1</sup> Instead of defending her son, as did Essie Miller, she chose to side with the Scotts.

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 233.

Essie's relationship with her family in the play is a warm one. She is gentle, kind, and more important, involved with her family's affairs. Ella's drug addiction never allowed her to take much of an active part in family affairs, especially not as active a part as does her fictional counterpart. Jamie and Eugene were generally answerable to their father, who controlled the family's affairs since Ella was usually either not interested or not able to become involved herself. Morphine and its staggering aftereffects seemed to rule Ella O'Neill's life:

. . . When she was on morphine she was not fit for social intercourse, and when she was between cures she was too self-conscious and apprehensive to be sociable on a large scale.<sup>1</sup>

The difference between Essie and Ella lies within these facts. Essie's fictional position in life is made to seem a simple one. She raises her children in an appropriate middle-class manner, takes care of her home, and lives an apparently full and normal life, enjoying herself and those who surround her, enjoying life to the fullest. There seem to be no truly dark clouds in Essie Miller's world. Ella O'Neill's world was filled with dark clouds.

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 93.

She was constantly on the move from the time she married James, bringing up her children in a series of hotel rooms, never truly having a home she could call her own. Her morphine addiction caused Jamie and Eugene to be brought up by a series of nurses, with the boys never truly knowing what a normal family life could be like. According to the Gelbs, O'Neill, in one of his rare moments of recollection, spoke of his childhood impression of Ella:

. . . Eugene worshiped his mother . . . on her side she was anxiously loving. . . . But there were other times when she seemed a stranger off in another world, without thought or feeling for him. 'She used to drift around the house like a ghost. . . . I didn't know what was wrong, and kept trying to reach her.'<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill, despite the love he may have felt and carried around within himself for his mother, was actually never really able to reach her. There would never be between them the warmth and the closeness which existed between the fictional Richard Miller and his mother. Perhaps following his father's death he and his mother became somewhat more comfortable in their relationship, but they never experienced the closeness of Richard and Essie Miller. Ella was simply not Essie. Therefore, O'Neill

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

never spoke truer words than he did at the time he told an interviewer that Ah, Wilderness! was what he had wished that his adolescent years had been like. He was forced to turn to Evelyn McGinley for his mother-model because all of his observations and knowledge of what a normal relationship between mothers and sons should be were based on his observations, not his experiences. Ah, Wilderness! is O'Neill's only comedy. Yet when viewed from an autobiographical viewpoint, the comedy seems to take on more somber tones. Autobiographically, the play is one of O'Neill's most revealing works, and yet it is also one of his saddest attempts at dealing with the question of exactly what his own mother actually represented to him.

O'Neill's definitive portrait of his mother is found in Long Day's Journey Into Night, the play which the author understandably did not want produced until twenty-five years after his death because of its moments of obviously clear autobiographical authenticity. In the play, O'Neill exposes Ella as he knew her in 1912, the year in which the play is set. According to the majority of the O'Neill biographers, O'Neill appears to have stuck closely to the facts when he created a model for his mother, despite the pain he felt in his re-creation of what must have

been an intensely painful situation, a play he wrote in his own "tears and blood."

One of the major points of the play is Mary Tyrone's addiction to morphine. Already dealt with to some extent in the first chapter of this paper, there are other aspects of Mary's addiction which must be brought into light if her characterization in relation to the real Ella O'Neill is to be presented. As mentioned earlier, the entire Tyrone family at one time or another during the course of the play blames James Tyrone's miserliness as the cause of his wife's addiction. He is accused of leaving his wife in the hands of a "cheap quack" who introduced her to morphine as a means of reducing her pain following Edmund Tyrone's birth. Mary blames James' miserly selection of a doctor at the time of Edmund's birth for her addiction, yet at one point she goes a step further, actually blaming Edmund's very birth as a cause for her addiction as well:

Mary: . . . I was so healthy before Edmund was born. You remember, James. There wasn't a nerve in my body. Even traveling with you season after season, with week after week of one-night stands, in trains without Pullmans, in dirty rooms of filthy hotels, eating bad food . . . I still kept healthy. 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.

Tyrone: Mary! For God's sake, forget the past!

Mary: (With strange objective calm) Why? How can I? The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us.<sup>1</sup>

Mary later confronts Edmund personally. She first blames his birth, then attributes her addiction to his tubercular condition as he tries in vain to convince her that the entire family will help her overcome her problem if only she will give them some sign of hope that she is trying to help herself:

Edmund: (Trying to catch her eyes) Mama! Please listen! I want to ask you something! You-- You've only just started. You can still stop. You've got the will power! We'll all help you. I'll do anything. Won't you, Mama?

Mary: (Stammers pleadingly) Please don't--talk about things you don't understand!

Edmund: (Dully) All right, I give up. I knew it was no use.

Mary: (In black denial now) Anyway, I don't know what you're referring to. But I do know you should be the last one--Right after I returned from the sanatorium, you began to be ill. The doctor there had warned me I must have peace at home with nothing to upset me, and all I've done is worry about you. (Then distractedly) But that's no excuse! I'm only trying to explain. It's not an excuse! (She hugs him to her--pleadingly) Promise me, dear, you won't believe I made you an excuse.

Edmund: (Bitterly) What else can I believe?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 92-93.



Louis Sheaffer, in his two-volume biography of the O'Neill family, echoes the same sentiments as those found in Mary Tyrone's speeches:

. . . While he and his father had finally made their peace, attaining some degree of rapport and mutual understanding, a shadow had always lain between him and his mother; neither could ever forget that his birth, by triggering her drug addiction, had caused her to live a large part of her life in hell. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Mary Tyrone's excuses for returning to her never-never land of morphine stupors continue throughout the play. She gradually regresses from the sunlit world of reality and hope at the beginning of the play to the fog-shrouded world of her dope dreams as the play concludes. As she states, her past, present, and future seem intertwined. As has been evidenced in Chapter I, O'Neill allows his father-figure to cleanse himself of all guilt in the case of his wife's addiction by pleading a state of ignorance which continued until the effects of morphine were so deeply rooted in Mary's existence that only a visit to a sanatorium could cure her, and then for only a limited period of time. Also discussed earlier was the fact that although Mary was able to "dry out" for periods of time,

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, pp. 94-95.

she always returned to morphine as a means of escape, a way of closing herself away from the realities of life. As he created the character of James Tyrone, O'Neill could not allow his father to be absolved of the blame for the mother's addiction. Yet when he created Edmund, O'Neill could not allow himself the same absolution.

Like Mary Tyrone, Ella O'Neill continued to use morphine for many years, and although she was finally cured of her addiction, during the year of 1912 the entire O'Neill family, like the Tyrone family, was often plunged into a long day's journey into night because of her addiction. Mary Tyrone's characterization is not a creation of O'Neill's imagination, but one he created from some of the most personal and bitter memories with which any dramatist has ever dealt. The question of whether or not O'Neill actually felt deep within himself that he was in any way responsible for Ella's addiction will always remain unanswered. Yet from the evidence assembled within the play, it becomes evident that at times such as those the playwright spent in writing of his Long Day's Journey, he felt that he was held at least partially responsible, particularly by his mother.

Another aspect of O'Neill's characterization of his mother revolves around her distant past, concentrating

heavily on the times before she married James O'Neill. In the play, Mary Tyrone is obsessed with two major topics--her life with her father and her life in St. Mary's Convent, where she was educated. The more her morphine-induced fog separates her from reality as the play progresses, the more she moves "ghost-like" into the past.

As Mary's morphine begins to take effect early in the second act, she begins to taunt her husband with the fact that she gave up a matchless home when she married him, and since that time has been subjected to a series of second-rate hotels, never having a real home to call her own. In a later conversation with one of her household maids, much the same sort of dialogue occurs when she begins to relive her memories of her late father:

. . . He spoiled me. He would do anything I asked. He would have sent me to Europe to study after I graduated from the Convent. I might have gone--if I hadn't fallen in love with Mr. Tyrone. Or I might have become a nun. . . .<sup>1</sup>

In the last act of the play, James and Edmund also discuss Mary's memories of her father while Mary wanders around upstairs, withdrawn totally from reality. By

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night, p. 104.

all accounts, James' explanation of his father-in-law reads like a biographical summary:

Tyrone: . . . She's moving around a lot. I hope to God she doesn't come down.

Edmund: (Dully) Yes. She'll be nothing but a ghost haunting the past by this time. (He pauses-- then miserably) Back before I was born--

Tyrone: Doesn't she do the same with me? Back before she ever knew me. You'd think the only happy days she's ever known were in her father's home, or at the Convent, praying and playing the piano. . . . As I've told you before, you must take her memories with a grain of salt. Her wonderful home was ordinary enough. Her father wasn't the great, generous noble Irish gentleman she makes out. . . .<sup>1</sup>

In the play, Mary's father was a wholesale grocer. Ella's father was half-owner of a popular liquor and tobacco shop in Cleveland, Ohio, as well as the owner of substantial real estate holdings. He was financially sound, yet according to all sources, he was by no means wealthy. Whether O'Neill chose to portray his grandfather as a grocer or tobacconist is relatively unimportant. What is important is the fact that he correctly portrayed his grandfather's devotion to his mother, and in turn, his mother's devotion to his grandfather's memory. O'Neill must have heard repeatedly his mother's stories of her

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 136-37.

life with her father, and also must have heard his father's stories of what his grandfather was actually like. The importance of the entire subject revolves around Mary's attachment to the past and her disregard of the present when under the influence of morphine, not the amount of her father's wealth. James Tyrone, like James O'Neill, was never able to measure up to his wife's expectations financially. The effects of this situation haunted O'Neill's memory to the point that he chose to include these recollections in his re-creation of his mother's autobiographical portrait.

Mary Tyrone's memories of her life as a student at St. Mary's Convent are also an important aspect of her characterization. As in the case of her memories of her father, she slips progressively more into the past and her memories as she increases her dosage of morphine, allowing her to drift into the fog of unreality. In her memories, she can find hope. In Act Two, she tells Edmund of the day when she will be able to escape from the clutches of narcotics, of the day when her long-lost faith will return and give her the courage to overcome:

. . . some day when the Blessed Virgin Mary forgives me and gives me back the faith in Her love and pity

I used to have in my convent days, and I can pray to Her again--when She sees no one in the world can believe in me even for a moment any more, then She will believe in me, and with Her help it will be so easy. I will hear myself scream with agony, and at the same time I will laugh because I will be so sure of myself. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Edmund somberly dismisses his mother's words as a part of the morphine's effects, for he and his father and brother have listened to her empty promises before. Even Mary herself later makes a mockery of her hopes, admitting to herself that the Blessed Virgin is beyond her reach, existing only in her dreams:

. . . If I could only find the faith I lost, so I could pray again! (She pauses--then begins to recite the Hail Mary in a flat, empty tone) "Hail, Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with Thee; blessed art Thou among women." (Sneeringly) You expect the Blessed Virgin to be fooled by a lying dope fiend reciting words! You can't hide from her! . . .<sup>2</sup>

Not only is Mary unable to hide from the watchful eyes of the Blessed Virgin, but she is also unable to hide from the all-knowing eyes and ears of her family. As Edmund and James sit around the card table in the parlor during the last act, they listen painfully to her moving

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

and moaning around upstairs. Speaking to his father, Edmund sums up the lost hopes of all the Tyrone men:

. . . Yes, she moves above and beyond us, a ghost haunting the past, and here we sit pretending to forget, but straining our ears listening for the slightest sound. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Their hope, like Mary's hope of regaining her lost faith, vanishes. By this point, they know that Mary has lost all contact with reality, and they dread dealing with the impending scene which they know will commence when she descends from upstairs, lost inside a fog of morphine.

In the final scene, Mary drifts into the downstairs area, first clumsily attempting to play her piano, then dreamily entering the parlor where the Tyrone men sit dejectedly watching her. They try in vain to bring her back into the world of reality, but she is beyond reality, dwelling fully in the long-past days' stay at St. Mary's:

No! (And instantly she is far away again. She murmurs gently but impersonally) You must not try to touch me. You must not try to hold me. It isn't right, when I am hoping to be a nun. . . .

I had a talk with Mother Elizabeth. She is so sweet and good. A saint on earth. I love her dearly.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

It may be sinful of me but I love her better than my own mother. Because she always understands, even before you say a word. Her kind blue eyes look right into your heart. You couldn't deceive her, even if you were mean enough to want to. . . .

All the same, I don't think she was so understanding this time. I told her I wanted to be a nun. I explained how sure I was of my vocation, that I had prayed to the Blessed Virgin to make me sure, and to find me worthy. I told Mother I had a true vision when I was praying in the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, on the little island in the lake. I said I knew, as surely as I knew I was kneeling there, that the Blessed Virgin had smiled and blessed me with Her consent. But Mother Elizabeth told me I must be more sure than that, even, that I must prove it wasn't simply my imagination. She said, if I was so sure, then I wouldn't mind putting myself to a test by going home after I graduated, and living as other girls lived, going out to parties and dances and enjoying myself; and then if after a year or two I still felt sure, I could come back to see her and we would talk it over again. (She tosses her head--indignantly) I never dreamed Holy Mother would give me such advice! I was really shocked. I said, of course, I would do anything she suggested, but I knew it was simply a waste of time. After I left her, I felt all mixed up, so I went to the shrine and prayed to the Blessed Virgin and found peace again because I knew she heard my prayer and would always love me and see no harm ever came to me as long as I never lost my faith in her. (She pauses and a look of growing uneasiness comes over her face. She passes a hand over her forehead as if brushing cobwebs from her brain--vaguely) That was in the winter of senior year. Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Mary Tyrone's story is based on what now is recorded fact. Both the Gelbs and Louis Sheaffer reaffirm

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 174-76.



the factualness of O'Neill's account of his mother's vision at the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, and both also reaffirm the advice of the kindly Mother Elizabeth of St. Mary's Academy. Like Mary, Ella was moved enough by her vision to have given serious consideration to entering a nunnery. Mother Elizabeth gave Ella the same advice which the fictional Mother Elizabeth gave Mary Tyrone. Ella also married shortly after her graduation, and was apparently "so happy for a time." O'Neill distorted nothing when he re-created these memories of his mother's convent days, the days which she, like Mary Tyrone, retreated into when reality was left wandering behind her.

Why did O'Neill deal so sharply with his mother's memory? Why did he expose her in finality as a morphine addict who chose to live in the past rather than face the present? The answer possibly lies in a seemingly insignificant speech by Edmund Tyrone:

(With bitter misery) The hardest thing to take is the blank wall she builds around her. Or it's more like a bank of fog in which she hides and loses herself. Deliberately, that's the hell of it! You know something in her does it deliberately--to get beyond our reach, to be rid of us, to forget we're alive! It's as if, in spite of loving us, she hated us!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

Among other things, O'Neill believed that his mother deliberately chose to withdraw from him, from James, and from Jamie, and that she chose the effects of morphine over reality. Despite repeated cures in a number of sanatoriums, despite the unheeded pleas of her family, she chose to escape, to alienate herself from everything but the past and its memories. O'Neill stated in the play's dedication that he wrote the play with deep pity, understanding, and forgiveness for ". . . all the four haunted Tyrones." Yet the question of his pity, understanding, and forgiveness is questionable in the case of Mary Tyrone-Ella O'Neill. James is granted absolution through his explanations, as are Jamie and Edmund, to a varying degree. However, Mary is made to look more and more inexcusable with each feeble excuse, with each morphine-clouded entrance. Mary's memories are activated by a longing for hope, yet she makes no attempt to give hope to any of her family: "She is too concerned with herself to have much concern to spare for the misfortunes and sorrows of the others."<sup>1</sup> O'Neill may have understood. He may even have pitied. But did he forgive? Understandably, he wanted to

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 516.

hide the play until he was long-departed from the realm of questions. Long Day's Journey Into Night is a hard play, a play with hard characterizations. O'Neill lived it, and he wanted to assure himself that he would be dead before his characters came to life on the stage.

O'Neill's autobiographical portraits of his mother are varied, yet from his first attempts to his last ones, a pattern is visible. In his first attempts, O'Neill was looking for a means of excusing Ella, of making her seem the victim of pressures beyond her control. Ella Downey was such a victim, lost in a world in which she could not belong, a victim of an unseen, unknown force which dragged her down into a bottomless pit of unreality. Eben Cabot's mother was another such example. She was symbolically murdered by a cruel husband while her son stood by in a state of semihelplessness. In both of these cases, the playwright as a character played no direct part in the final outcome of the women's situations.

O'Neill's pattern varied drastically in the case of Christine Mannon. In this instance, he created a character of unlimited and unfeeling cruelty, one who would eventually be destroyed because of her disregard for her family or their feelings, a woman so totally shrouded in

her own selfish ends that she cared for little else. Essie Miller is a study in retrogression, a characterization of the dreams O'Neill let overpower him before he was able to face the realities of Long Day's Journey Into Night.

Christine Mannon and Mary Tyrone are quite similar. In Mary's instance, O'Neill created a mother who, like Christine, was more concerned with herself than with her family. Both women are selfish, and both meet tragic ends as their parts reach conclusion. And it is so that in finality O'Neill saw his mother as a woman who destroyed herself, a woman who worked toward her destruction because of her total disregard for those around her.

### C H A P T E R   I I I

JAMIE:   JAMES O'NEILL, JR.

Although his feelings for his father and mother vacillated, O'Neill was generally sympathetic toward the older brother he adored, James O'Neill, Jr. While it is true that Jamie was a ne'er-do-well, it is also true that he somehow managed to possess that rare, appealing quality which solicited his younger brother's love, if not always his approval.

Jamie was Eugene's tutor, introducing him to the world of drink, prostitutes, and disorderly conduct. It was Jamie's example of agnostic behavior toward anything which their father held sacred, such as acting and sobriety, which first led young Eugene down the path of rebelliousness. Jamie was Eugene's idol during the playwright's adolescent years, and for a time, it appeared that the younger brother's footsteps were following those of the elder. They were partners in many crimes, drinking and whoring together, planning various schemes to undermine their father whom they jokingly referred to as "The Count," making spectacles of themselves in New London, New York,

and any other place where an opportunity to create havoc presented itself. Eugene finally matured, and was able to pull himself out of the pit of self-destruction. Jamie, unfortunately, was never able to do the same, despite the many efforts of various individuals who tried to rehabilitate him.

At forty-five, Jamie died an alcoholic, old and broken before his time. His cynical, self-destructive attitude finally destroyed him, and inside himself his younger brother wept. Jamie's influence, however, did not die. O'Neill began examining his feelings for his brother shortly after Jamie's death, concluding the examination in the last full-length play he would live to write, A Moon for the Misbegotten. O'Neill had a great love for Jamie, despite Jamie's many faults. The proof of this love is found in O'Neill's first love--his plays.

On November 8th, 1923, Jamie O'Neill died in a sanatorium for alcoholics in Paterson, New Jersey. He was the last living member of O'Neill's immediate family, and his death is important because it marks the birth of O'Neill's mature attempts at analyzing and re-creating his family as characters within his plays. O'Neill had always relied most heavily on his personal experiences for subjects

and characterizations for his plays, yet aside from his elementary attempt at lionizing his father in Abortion early in his career, he had not really made a full-scale attempt at characterizing members of his own family. In January of 1924, however, he completed All God's Chillun Got Wings, which is a thinly disguised characterization of James and Ella O'Neill's stormy, tragic relationship. In March of the same year, he completed Desire Under the Elms. This play is important because it marks O'Neill's first attempt at symbolically destroying his father for the manner in which James treated (or O'Neill believed at the time he treated) his wife. It is also important because it is O'Neill's first attempt at characterizing Jamie.

In Desire Under the Elms, O'Neill dealt with Jamie as a multiple personality, represented by two rather dim-witted characters. They are Simeon and Peter Cabot, sons of Ephraim Cabot and older half-brothers of Eben Cabot, who represents O'Neill. Like Jamie, Simeon and Peter are dreamers who are bored with their lives and desire to find themselves a better style of living. Jamie was never content with his life as an actor following in the footsteps of his father, and he unsuccessfully made various attempts

to break away from James O'Neill's influence. He was never successful in his attempts because his style of drinking was not tolerated in acting companies other than his father's, and he was always forced to return to James' company in order to survive. Simeon and Peter dream of leaving their father's stone-ridden New England farm in favor of the glittering promises of the California gold fields of the late 1850's, but their lack of funds for such a venture prevents them from leaving. As a result, they are tied to their father's farm and a life which holds little appeal for them. They despise farming much as Jamie despised acting. However, they are forced to follow their father's profession just as Jamie was forced to follow James' profession--there was no other avenue of escape open to them.

Fortunately, Simeon and Peter finally find their means of escape, thanks to Eben. Upon returning from a trip to a nearby village, Eben brings home the news that Ephraim, their tight-fisted father, has married a pretty woman of thirty-five and is bringing her back to the farm. Simeon and Peter have counted on inheriting shares of the farm when their seventy-five year old father dies, but Eben's news dampens their hopes. They realize that



Ephraim's new bride will inherit the farm upon the old man's death, so they begin to give serious consideration to planning their long walk to California. Eben finalizes their plan by offering them three hundred dollars each if they will sign a legal document transferring their shares of the farm to him. Thinking Eben is surely insane for making them such an offer, they quickly agree and sign the paper. Eben digs the money out of Ephraim's supposedly secret hiding place, and the deal is finalized.

Once they have their money, Simeon and Peter do not set out for California immediately. Instead, they spend their time drinking whiskey and watching Eben do all of the farm work by himself. They are awaiting the arrival of Ephraim. When he and Abbie, his new bride, do arrive at the farm, the brothers see that Eben's report of a new stepmother was not exaggerated. They greet their father accordingly:

Cabot: (commandingly) Ye git t' wuk!

Simeon: (as Abbie disappears into house--winks at Peter and says tauntingly) So that that's our new Maw, be it? Whar in hell did ye dig her up? (He and Peter laugh).

Peter: Ha! Ye'd better turn her in the pen with the other sows. (They laugh uproariously, slapping their thighs).

Cabot: (so amazed at their effrontery that he stutters in confusion) Simeon! Peter! What's come over ye? Air ye drunk?

Simeon: We're free, old man--free o' yew an' the hull damned farm! (They grow more hilarious and excited).

Peter: An' we're startin' out fur the gold fields o' Californi-a!

Simeon: Ye kin take this place an' burn it!

Peter: An' bury it--fur all we cares!

Simeon: We're free, old man! (He cuts a caper).

Peter: Free! (He gives a kick in the air).

Simeon: (in a frenzy) Whoop!

Peter: Whoop! (They do an absurd Indian war dance about the old man who is petrified between rage and the fear that they are insane).

Simeon: We're free as Injuns! Lucky we don't skulp ye!

Peter: An' burn yer barn an' kill the stock!

Simeon: An' rape yer new woman! . . .<sup>1</sup>

Simeon and Peter are drunk, and their drunkenness, combined with their newly acquired riches, allows them to release all of their hostilities toward their father. Eben has set them free, and thanks to him, they are now able to follow their dream, wherever it may lead them. They tauntingly belittle their father, threatening him with destroying all that he loves--his farm, his barns, his stock, and his new woman. Here O'Neill is simply playing out a role he often assumed in life, the role of watching as Jamie rebelled against James and the profession which the father loved and the son hated:

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Desire Under the Elms in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, pp. 156-57.

. . . James and Jamie complained about each other to Eugene, and Eugene found himself sympathizing with first one and then the other. Gradually he came to side with Jamie, for Jamie was clearly the most defenseless. Hatred of his father, despair over his mother, and disgust with his own shortcomings gnawed at Jamie and by the time he was in his late twenties his youthful drinking habits had hardened into chronic alcoholism.<sup>1</sup>

As Eben sets Simeon and Peter free, so was O'Neill symbolically setting Jamie "free." In reality, Jamie's only escape from James and acting was a state of drunkenness, a state from which Jamie was forced to return when his small allowance from his father was exhausted. Jamie was forced to live under his father's thumb because James O'Neill, like Ephraim Cabot, was notoriously tight with his money. O'Neill sided with his brother not because of love, but also because of experience with James' miserliness. O'Neill had watched and listened to his brother and father in their bitter quarrels, but had never had anything to offer Jamie other than sympathy. By allowing Jamie's doubles to verbally abuse their miserly father, attacking the things he held sacred, O'Neill symbolically gave Jamie what life had never been

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 100.

able to give him--a chance to tell James O'Neill off and then escape to the promises of a new life which could not be controlled by the father.

The play, from an autobiographical standpoint, was primarily designed to attack James O'Neill for the manner in which the playwright felt that his father had treated Ella. The characters of Simeon and Peter could easily have been eliminated from the play without damaging it or its message. However, O'Neill added the brothers, and by adding them as representations of Jamie, he also allowed Jamie to get his revenge on James. The struggles between James and Jamie had ceased long before O'Neill even dreamed of creating the play, but they were not forgotten--at least not by O'Neill.

Seven years after the creation of Desire Under the Elms, O'Neill again made an attempt to move from the realm of fictionalized characterizations into the realm of autobiographical ones. The play is Mourning Becomes Electra, and again O'Neill is using one of his plays as a means of analyzing his family and his relationship toward them. O'Neill's characterization of Jamie in this instance is particularly accurate.

Jamie is represented by Orin Mannon, the psychologically maladjusted son of General Ezra Mannon and

his wife, Christine. Ezra forced his son to follow him into the bloody battles of the American Civil War; and although the General saw to it that Orin emerged from the war as a hero, he was not forgiven for making his son take part in something which he utterly detested. As a result, Orin is not grief-stricken when he returns home from the war and discovers his father's death. His sister, Lavinia, who represents O'Neill, is the first to discover Orin's true feelings concerning their father's death:

Lavinia: Isn't it a shock to you, Orin?

Orin: Certainly! What do you think I am? But--oh, I can't explain! You wouldn't understand, unless you'd been at the front. I hardened myself to expect my own death and everyone else's, and think nothing of it. I had to--to keep alive! It was part of my training as a soldier under him. He taught it to me, you might say! So when it's his turn he can hardly expect--(He has talked with increasing bitterness. Lavinia interrupts him sharply).

Lavinia: Orin! How can you be so unfeeling?

Orin: (again shamefaced) I didn't mean that. My mind is still full of ghosts. I can't grasp anything but war, in which he was so alive. He was the war to me--the war that would never end until I died. I can't understand his peace--his end. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Jamie's experiences "at the front" occurred not in the front lines of an actual physical battle, but rather

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Mourning Becomes Electra in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, p. 761.

at the front of various stages across the United States. Like Orin, he hardened himself with the same type of cynicism which is so obviously present in Orin's character. Jamie flaunted his cynicism by becoming an alcoholic and one of the acting profession's worst actors, not caring what happened to himself from one day to the next. He was not concerned with the daily process of living, but rather with drinking himself to death. He and his father battled constantly, and all James O'Neill gained from his never-ending attempts to reform his son's behavior was more cynicism and drunkenness on Jamie's part. Before James' death, Eugene and his father half-heartedly reconciled their differences, but James and his eldest son were never to be reconciled. Jamie could not understand when his father and brother patched up their differences shortly before James' death; and instead of making a similar attempt, Jamie continued to engage in his personal war against all attempts to rehabilitate him:

. . . Jamie's feeling for his father was not enhanced by the rapport between James and Eugene, and he seemed determined to never draw another sober breath. . . .<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 414.

Whether or not Jamie was unfeeling regarding the matter of his father's death is speculative. However, after James' death Jamie did return to New London, where he dutifully began to devote himself to taking care of his mother. Ella had finally been cured of her narcotics addiction, and she and Jamie became extremely close:

Jamie, who stayed at the Mohican Hotel, visited his mother daily. He was overwhelmed by her transformation into a person of strength and character. Now totally dependent upon her for his every material need, he decided to do what he would never have done for his father. He swore to her and to himself that he would not take another drop of liquor as long as she lived.<sup>1</sup>

Jamie made good his promise, and he and Ella lived together as close companions until the time of Ella's death.

Jamie and Ella's relationship is another aspect of O'Neill's autobiographical probings. In the play, Orin is strongly attached to Christine, the mother who has always protected him from the dominative influences of his father. When Orin returns home from the war, he is in a state of confusion. Christine's promise that he will resume his place as her first love is combined with Lavinia's warnings of their mother's affair with Adam Brant.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 434.

Orin remains confused until Lavinia drags him to Brant's ship, where Christine has gone to meet her lover. As son and daughter listen, they overhear Christine's confession of murdering Ezra Mannon as part of her plan to rid herself of her family ties in order to run away and marry Brant. After Christine leaves, Orin, as Lavinia has so shrewdly planned, murders Brant and then wrecks his cabin to make the murder appear to be a robbery attempt. He and Lavinia then return home to confront Christine with what has happened.

When he confronts his mother with his knowledge of her crime and with the fact that he has murdered Brant, Orin is sadistic and painfully cruel. However, once he realizes how much he has hurt Christine, he is again the child he was before the war, tied to his mother by an unnatural, invisible cord. When Christine goes into a state of shock because of Orin's actions and the death of her lover, Orin's sadistic strain of cruelty quickly begins to weaken:

. . . Mother! Don't moan like that! You're still under his influence! But you'll forget him! I'll make you happy! We'll leave Vinnie here and go on a long voyage--to the South Seas--

Lavinia: (sharply) Orin!

Orin: (Not heeding her, stares into his mother's face. She has stopped moaning, the horror in her



eyes is dying into blankness, the expression of her mouth congealing to one of numbed grief. She gives no sign of having heard him. Orin shakes her--desperately.) Mother! Don't you hear me! What won't you speak to me? Will you always love him? Do you hate me? (He sinks on his knees before her) Mother! Say you forgive me!<sup>1</sup>

Lavinia then orders Orin to leave the room, and in a state of confused grief, he dutifully exits. Lavinia is then left alone to gloat about her victory over Christine, which is short-lived; for unable to adjust to the day's events, she follows Orin upstairs, where she kills herself with Ezra Mannon's pistol.

For the remainder of his appearances in the play, Orin is grief-stricken. Lavinia's attempts to pull him out of the deep despair which has shrouded him since their mother's death are hopeless. He refuses to allow his mind to dwell on anything other than Christine's suicide, for which he holds himself totally responsible. He continues to brood over his mother's death until he finally decides to follow her example, and kills himself with the same pistol.

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Mourning Becomes Electra in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, pp. 808-09.

O'Neill's characterization of Ella in the personage of Christine is the unexplainable part of Jamie's relationship with his mother. O'Neill presents her as an immoral woman who poisons her husband in order to marry her lover, and then commits suicide when her plans fall apart. Ella O'Neill was, from all biographical accounts, a faithful wife to her husband for as long as he lived. There is not even a mention of her becoming interested in another man following James' death. O'Neill was improvising here or merely adapting Aeschylus' Clytemnestra for reasons which remain unexplained, although the matter will continue to confuse biographical researchers until someone can produce a satisfactory explanation. To date, none has been offered by anyone.

O'Neill's primary goal in regard to Jamie's characterization in this play was to present his brother as a person deeply tied to his mother. Jamie was such a person, especially during the time following his father's death. As previously stated, James O'Neill's death left Ella in complete control of the family finances, and Jamie became totally dependent upon his mother for his every material need. This dependency is perhaps a primary reason why Jamie gave up his beloved whiskey-drinking

escapades and settled down to becoming his mother's constant companion. For whatever reasons, Jamie and Ella were inseparable until the time of Ella's death. When Ella died, however, Jamie resumed drinking heavily again, and literally drank himself into an early grave. Like Orin Mannon, without his mother's love he could not bring himself to deal with the world of reality.

O'Neill's next characterization of his brother appears in Ah, Wilderness! Jamie is represented in the play by Arthur Miller, the Yale undergraduate who disapproves of his younger brother Richard's socialistic philosophy and attitude in general. Dr. Sophus Winther, a contemporary of O'Neill's, presented an excellent summation of Arthur Miller in his 1934 study of O'Neill's works:

. . . Arthur Miller, the young man from Yale, has no doubts about his purpose in life. He knows that a Yale man is sure of his place in the sun. Fraternities, games, little affairs with women, from which he learns about life, are his most genuine interests.  
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Ah, Wilderness! is not a play based on actual events or actual characters within O'Neill's family, but

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<sup>1</sup>Sophus Keith Winther, Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study (New York: Russel and Russel, 1934), p. 240.

it is based rather on events and characterizations which O'Neill fictionalized to coincide with the family life which he wished he had experienced but did not. O'Neill was not dealing with family facts in this play, but with fictionalized nostalgia. Arthur Miller is the result of O'Neill's nostalgic attempts to create an idealized brother.

As Professor Winther so aptly stated, Arthur Miller has very few doubts about his purposes in life. He was created to be a Yale Man, and he flaunts this fact. Yet his college attendance has made him no more worldly than Richard, despite attempts to wield a superior influence over his younger brother's innocent activities. When Richard stumbles into the family parlor in a state of total drunkenness following his pathetic escapades with a prostitute in a local bar, Arthur is "shocked and condemning":

Arthur: He's drunk, that's what! (then shocked and condemning) You've got your nerve! You fresh kid! We'll take that out of you when we get you down to Yale!<sup>1</sup>

Arthur insinuates here that he can mould Richard's character, and can make him into the same type of

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Ah, Wilderness! in Sixteen Famous American Plays, p. 330.

upstanding young man that he himself has been moulded into. Arthur's condemnation of his younger brother's visit to a barroom and his subsequent encounter with his first prostitute is amusing from an autobiographical standpoint, for in reality, Jamie O'Neill saw to it that Eugene at seventeen felt at home in New London's brothels along Bradley Street:

Unlike Richard Miller, who is shocked by his encounter with a prostitute in a shady hotel and resists her efforts to entice him to an upstairs room, Eugene by now was boastfully at home with the ladies of Bradley Street, a narrow avenue at the northern end of town that encompassed the flourishing red-light district of New London; Jamie had seen to his indoctrination there, and the members of the Second Story Club saw to it that he continued his visits.<sup>1</sup>

In the play, Arthur plays no part in his younger brother's worldly education, which leaves him a far cry from Jamie, his supposed model. The Miller brothers are also not as closely tied together as were Jamie and Eugene, and Arthur is the model figure of all the things which Jamie was not. Arthur is apparently successful in his college career, while it is common knowledge that Jamie was expelled from college for sporting a well-known

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 89.

prostitute at a formal dance. Arthur frowns on his younger brother's drunkenness, but Jamie was the major influence on young Eugene's drinking habits. Arthur "keeps company" with a respectable local girl, while Jamie preferred the company of prostitutes and chorus girls over that of more respectable young ladies. In short, Arthur the college man and Jamie the college failure are exact opposites.

The major issue in this instance again revolves around the question of why O'Neill chose to distort the facts when he patterned Arthur Miller after his brother. As in the case of both Nat and Essie Miller, who are patterned after O'Neill's parents, the playwright was dealing with an idealized family in this play, and fiction was more in line with idealization than was fact. Arthur Miller is O'Neill's fictionalized brother, for his real brother would never have been able to fit into the fictionalized, idealized world of the Miller family.

O'Neill's next portrait of Jamie appears in Long Day's Journey Into Night, the play which lays bare the most intimate secrets of the playwright's immediate family. Jamie is accurately represented here by James Tyrone, Jr., also called Jamie by his family.

Autobiographically, this is O'Neill's most revealing portrayal of his brother and his relationship with the O'Neill family.

Like Jamie O'Neill, Jamie Tyrone's major non-supporter within the family is his father, James Tyrone, Sr. Their arguments revolve around the same primary points which James O'Neill and his eldest son battled over--money, acting, and ingratitude. In one of the play's major confrontations between father and eldest son, all that was required of O'Neill to achieve autobiographical authenticity was to allow his memory to reenact scenes which he had probably witnessed on more than one occasion. In this particular instance, the argument is begun over a very delicate subject between father and son--money:

Jamie: (With a scornful shrug of his shoulders)  
Oh, all right. I'm a fool to argue. You can't change a leopard's spots.

Tyrone: (With rising anger) No, you can't. You've taught me that lesson only too well. I've lost all hope that you will ever change yours. You dare tell me what I can afford? You've never known the value of a dollar and you never will! You've never saved a dollar in your life! At the end of each season you're penniless! You've thrown your salary away every week on whores and whiskey!

Jamie: My salary! Christ!

Tyrone: It's more than you're worth, and you couldn't get that if it wasn't for me. If you weren't my son, there isn't a manager in the business who would give you a part, your reputation stinks so. As

it is, I have to humble my pride and beg for you, saying you've turned over a new leaf, although I know it's a lie!

Jamie: I never wanted to be an actor. You forced me on the stage.

Tyrone: That's a lie! You made no effort to find anything else to do. You left it to me to get you a job and I have no influence except in the theater. Forced you! You never wanted to do anything except loaf in barrooms! You'd have been content to sit back like a lazy lunk and sponge on me for the rest of your life! After all the money I'd wasted on your education, and all you did was get fired in disgrace from every college you went to!

Jamie: Oh, for God's sake, don't drag up that ancient history!

Tyrone: It's not ancient history that you have to come home every summer and live on me.

Jamie: I earn my board and lodging working on the grounds. It saves you hiring a man.

Tyrone: Bah! You have to be driven to do even that much! (His anger ebbs into a weary complaint) I wouldn't give a damn if you ever displayed the slightest sign of gratitude. The only thanks is to have you sneer at me for a dirty miser, sneer at my profession, sneer at every damned thing in this world --except yourself!

Jamie: (Wryly) That's not true, Papa. You can't hear me talking to myself, that's all.

Tyrone: (Stares at him puzzledly, then quotes mechanically) "Ingratitude, the vilest weed that grows!"

Jamie: I could see that line coming! God, how many thousand times--! (He stops, bored with their quarrel, and shrugs his shoulders) All right, Papa. I'm a bum. Anything you like, so long as it stops the argument.

Tyrone: (With indignant appeal now) If you'd get ambition in your head instead of folly! You're young yet. You could still make your mark. You had the talent to become a fine actor! You still have it. You're my son--!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night, pp. 31-33.



The preceding portion of the play is easily documented, for judging from the amount of biographical material which deals with the constant warfare between James and Jamie, instances such as this one were commonplace in the O'Neill family's routine. By 1912, the time during which the events of the play were supposed to have occurred, Jamie had been acting for eleven years. Because of his reputation as an undependable actor and his all-too-frequent bouts of drunkenness, he was almost totally dependent upon James for his every material need. If James was tight-fisted with Jamie's "salary," he was not without justification. The following is a description of one of Jamie's many escapades which sadly taught James that his son would never live up to the once-lofty expectations which the father had once held for his son's future:

Not infrequently his good times led to repercussions. Once, after a New Year's Eve party at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco, Jamie and an actor named Bouton staggered off to their lodging house, had more drinks and finally dropped off to sleep, but not before their quarters was a shambles; Jamie had gone berserk. An angry landlady appeared at the stage door the following day and was referred to stage manager John O. Hewitt. After listening to her tale of destruction and conferring with Mr. O'Neill, Hewitt paid her the eighty dollars she loudly demanded. A few minutes later as father and son were standing in the wings, the former slowly eyed his namesake from head to foot and--alluding

to his birth in that city--said in a measured voice to those nearby: "Ladies and gentlemen . . . you see before you . . . my son of the golden West!" He ended with what is known today as a Bronx cheer, and marched off to his dressing room.<sup>1</sup>

Jamie's education and his subsequent lack of earning capacity also served as a source of embarrassment for James. In 1914, O'Neill and his friend Art McGinley visited James' company in Hartford, Connecticut, where James and Jamie were acting together in Joseph and His Brethren. James and Jamie were seated at opposite ends of a hotel's dining room, and James was doing his best to ignore Jamie's presence. In the Gelb biography of the O'Neill family, McGinley recalled James' words as the old man berated his eldest son: "Look at him--a thirty-five thousand dollar education and a thirty-five dollar a week earning capacity. . . ."<sup>2</sup> The Gelb biography continues with a summation of Jamie's worth as an actor earning thirty-five dollars per week:

But at that, Jamie was being overpaid. He maliciously twisted his lines on stage. In Chicago he delivered the line, "Let Ruben tell his own tale," as "Let

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 255.

Ruben smell his own tail." In a last act scene during which members of the company sat around a table loaded with fruit, Jamie chewed on grapes and aimed the pits at the other actors. One night he did something much worse. James had a scene in which he appeared as Pharoah, seated on a throne at the top of twelve steps. His speech was long, and it was always a trying time for him because his memory was not what it had been. All the supers were simulating rapt attention. Jamie, playing an old wise man dressed in a flowing white robe, was also supposed to be absorbed. But he was drunker than usual and swayed from side to side. James' eyes fell on his son and he faltered. Then he began to silently weep.

One of the actors in the company, a young Englishman named Leslie Austin, had learned James' speech so that he could prompt if necessary. But Austin was so overcome by James' anguish that he could barely utter the lines himself.

After this episode, James stopped speaking to his son. But he would not allow him to be dismissed from the company.<sup>1</sup>

Although in the play the father-son relationship is far from one of warmth and understanding, Jamie's relationship with his mother is a quite different matter. By the time the drama enters its final act, it is apparent that Mary Tyrone has again returned to the use of morphine. At the beginning of the play, like James and Edmund, Jamie had hoped that Mary had finally overcome her addiction. As the truth begins to emerge during the course of the play, Jamie is at first unnecessarily cruel and harsh in

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 255-56.

his judgment of his mother, but in the final scenes he exhibits none of his usual brash cynicism as he begins to talk realistically to his brother about their mother:

. . . I suppose it's because I feel so damned sunk. Because this time Mama had me fooled. I really believed she had it licked. She thinks I always believe the worst, but this time I believed the best. (His voice flutters) I suppose I can't forgive her--yet. It meant so much. I'd begun to hope, if she'd beaten the game, I could, too. (He begins to sob, and the horrible part of his weeping is that it appears sober, not the maudlin tears of drunkenness.)  
 . . .<sup>1</sup>

Prior to this outburst revealing a true, sensitive understanding of his mother's addiction, Jamie Tyrone might have appeared to some as an individual void of feeling. However, O'Neill knew his brother's true-if-hidden nature, and this understanding of Jamie is evident in the play. During his conversation with Edmund in the last act, the now-drunken Jamie quotes a few lines of Ernest Dowson's verse which ends with the line, "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion." Sheaffer reports that this particular poem was one of Jamie O'Neill's favorite lines of quotation when he was intoxicated,

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night, p. 162.

inasmuch as he equated his mother with a deeply loved literary personage:

There was a Cynara in his life: his mother. While this was not evident in his years of dissipation, it would be proven by time. A heavy drinker since youth, he quit cold right after his father's death, once he had his mother to himself, and never touched a drop until she lay dying; at that point he began drinking more heavily than ever, determined, probably unconsciously, to drink himself to death as early as possible. But other than Eugene eventually, practically no one saw the desperate soul behind the jaunty mask.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of his cynical nature, Jamie O'Neill, like Jamie Tyrone, deeply loved his mother. Although Ella disapproved of Jamie's drinking habits as much as he disapproved of her use of morphine, both of them apparently realized that each had a cross to bear. During the course of the play, Mary Tyrone defends her eldest son on three different occasions when her husband begins to denounce Jamie as a no-account bum who should be put out into the streets. Regardless of his faults, Mary displays a warm and affectionate feeling for her first-born. At one point, she even blames her husband for Jamie's alcoholism:

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 99.

Mary: . . . It's such a pity. Poor Jamie! It's hard to understand--(Abruptly a change comes over her. Her face hardens and she stares at her husband with accusing hostility.) No, it isn't at all. You brought him up to be a boozier. Since he first opened his eyes, he's seen you drinking. Always a bottle on the bureau in the cheap hotel rooms! And if he had a nightmare when he was little, or a stomach-ache, your remedy was to give him a teaspoon of whiskey to quiet him.

Tyrone: (Stung) So I'm to blame because that lazy hulk has made a drunken loafer of himself? Is that what I came home to listen to? I might have known! . . .<sup>1</sup>

Like James Tyrone, James O'Neill was a steady drinker, but there is no indication that he was not generally within the limits of respectable moderation when he drank. Consequently, Mary Tyrone's accusations in this instance are impossible to be either confirmed or denied. None of the biographers of the four O'Neills mention James O'Neill's drinking problem. It is therefore logical to assume that the playwright inserted this particular scene between his father and mother to relieve some of the guilt from their eldest son for his problem of alcoholism. In short, O'Neill used this scene primarily to point out to what lengths his mother would go in order to lay the blame for Jamie's alcoholism at the feet of persons other than Jamie himself.

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night, pp. 110-11.

The most personal portion of the play in terms of O'Neill and his brother occurs in the final act. Prior to this, there is really no important verbal interchange between the Tyrone brothers. They engage in similar patterns of worry over their mother and her condition and they joke among themselves about their father, but nothing of any consequence passes between them until Jamie, in a state of drunkenness, begins for the first time to communicate openly with his brother:

Jamie: . . . No drunken bull, but "in vino veritas" stuff. You better take it seriously. Want to warn you--against me. Mama and Papa are right. I've been a rotten bad influence. And worst of it is, I did it on purpose.

Edmund: (Uneasily) Shut up! I don't want to hear--

Jamie: Nix, Kid! You listen! Did it on purpose to make a bum of you. Or part of me did. A big part. That part that's been dead so long. That hates life. My putting you wise so you'd learn from my mistakes. Believed that myself at times, but it's a fake. Made my mistakes look good. Made getting drunk romantic. Made whores fascinating vampires instead of poor, stupid, diseased slobs they really are. Made fun of work as a sucker's game. Never wanted you to succeed and make me look even worse by comparison. Wanted you to fail. Always jealous of you. Mama's baby, Papa's pet! . . .

Think it over and you'll see I'm right. Think it over when you're away from me in the sanitorium. Make up your mind you've got to tie a can to me--get me out of your life--think of me as dead--tell people, "I had a brother, but he's dead." And when you come back, look out for me. I'll be waiting to welcome you with that "my old pal" stuff, and give

you the glad hand, and at the first good chance I  
get stab you in the back. . . .<sup>1</sup>

After his moment of confession Jamie falls into a drunken doze, leaving Edmund to ponder over his brother's harsh self-condemnation. Edmund is visibly miserable, but for perhaps the first time in his life, he is able to see Jamie for what he really is--a pathetic, drunken failure --not the glamorous hero he has always idolized. Edmund's dark mood is interrupted by his father, who has been listening to the conversation between his sons. James makes a half-hearted attempt to console Edmund:

. . . I heard the last part of his talk. It's what I've warned you. I hope you'll heed the warning, now it comes from his own mouth. (Edmund gives no sign of having heard. Tyrone adds pityingly) But don't take it too much to heart, lad. He loves to exaggerate the worst of himself when he's drunk. He's devoted to you. It's the one good thing left in him. . . .<sup>2</sup>

James soon ends his attempt at consoling Edmund by attempting to console himself, but only succeeds in arousing Jamie from his drunken stupor. Jamie takes note

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 165-66.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 167.



of his father's presence, and once again resumes his characteristically cynical belittlement of James' abilities as an actor. The three Tyrone men are clearly on edge by this point in the play, and are easily drawn into a typical family row which is only successful in drawing Mary Tyrone from upstairs into their midst. Mary is by now totally lost to them in her dope-dreams of becoming a nun, and all their attention becomes directed toward her. Other than their mutual sadness over the condition of their mother, nothing of any consequence passes between the brothers as the play quickly rushes toward the final curtain.

Unfortunately, there is no evidence which can either substantiate or repudiate the truth of O'Neill's confessions which are put into the mouth of Jamie Tyrone. No doubt Jamie O'Neill, like his fictional counterpart, hated his own life, but whether or not he had a desire to drag his younger brother down to his own level is a matter for speculation. Eugene and Jamie were known to frequent the same bars and houses of prostitution during their youth, but exactly how much of this brotherly carousing was done to mould the younger brother into the same type of failure as was the older brother is again a matter for

speculation. Being ten years older than Eugene, Jamie was doubtlessly some sort of influence on Eugene and his activities, but since their conversations were never recorded other than in the plays, it is to the plays that we must turn for the answer to more than one question. O'Neill was known as a highly emotional individual, and it is understandable that he would become emotional when dealing with his family as he did in this particular play. Therefore, no one will ever know whether or not the confessions of Jamie Tyrone are truly the confessions of the playwright's brother. The only true answer lies within the two O'Neill brothers. One had been dead eighteen years before the play was written, and the other--as usual--made no public comment.

The final chapter in the saga of Jamie Tyrone occurs in A Moon for the Misbegotten, which serves as O'Neill's epitaph for his brother. The plot, which is based on a series of confusions, is essentially a simple one. Phil Hogan and his Amazon-like daughter, Josie, are the tenants of a farm which Jim Tyrone has recently inherited as a part of his late mother's estate. Phil, Josie, and Jim are pure Irish, and they genuinely enjoy each other's company. They also enjoy making fun of each

other, and they make it a point of their Irish pride to trick each other on any possible occasion. At the beginning of the play, Jim has promised to sell the farm to Phil; but Jim is later offered five times what the farm is worth by an oil tycoon who does not relish the Hogans and their herd of pigs for his neighbors. Jim has also not come into his late mother's estate money at this point, and he is in desperate need of cash in order to return to his beloved Broadway and the life of a Broadway sport.

Josie Hogan is deeply in love with Jim Tyrone, and he loves her, "after his fashion." Josie has bluffed many people into thinking that she is the town prostitute, but both Jim and Phil know the truth. Jim can see behind her facade, and he loves her for her "true self," for her brassy Irish charms and her genuine womanliness. However, he is a profligate, and knows that he could never make her a decent sort of husband. He idealizes her, and in contrast to the "tarts" with whom he has always spent his time, she is his idea of a perfect woman. Phil can see that the two are in love, and contrives a plot to trap Jim into marrying Josie. At this point, the confusion begins.

Phil returns from the town's tavern, where he and Jim have been drinking heavily. He tells Josie that

Jim plans to sell the farm to the oil tycoon, which he knows is a lie. Josie is infuriated at Jim's actions, and her love for him, combined with her hurt at his "betrayal" of her and her father, makes her easy prey for Phil's scheme. Phil plans to get Jim drunker than he already is, and then have Josie seduce him. Phil will then burst into the bedroom, and with some of the neighbors as witnesses, force Jim to marry Josie. In this manner he will get to keep his farm, but more importantly, he will get Josie a husband--the man they both know she deeply loves.

Jim had previously made a date with Josie to sit in the moonlight, but since the time is now approaching midnight, she and Phil decide that he has forgotten. Josie is preparing to go to the tavern to entice Jim home with her when he is heard coming up the lane, in a state of complete drunkenness, heading for the Hogan house. Phil is quick to excuse himself, pretending to be too drunk to converse with either of them, and presumably returns to the tavern to continue his drinking. His exit leaves Jim and Josie alone in the moonlight. She soon learns from Jim's conversation that her father has lied to her about Jim's selling the farm, but still she plans to seduce him because

of her great love for him. However, Jim will not allow himself to be seduced, and despite his drunken condition, he tells Josie that he knows about her phony prostitute image. Josie is overcome by his obvious sincerity and his obvious need to confess some dark sins which are in the process of destroying his soul. In a maternal fashion, she draws him to her ample breasts. At this point, Jim Tyrone begins to confess the sins of Jamie O'Neill.

Jim is outwardly and inwardly shaken by the time he arrives at the Hogan farm. He has been drinking steadily all day and into the night, and as he states, he is a victim of "the old heebie-jeebies." He makes it clear to Josie from the start of their conversation that he has come to her for comfort and understanding, and will not tolerate her usual pseudo-prostitute image. Josie is quick to realize his condition is unstable, and once she fully realizes his deteriorating state of mind, she begins to understand that her beloved Jim has come to her in order to confess. She draws him to her motherly breasts and listens as he begins to unburden his nagging conscience:

Tyrone: Ever since Mama died.

Josie: (Deeply moved--pityingly) I know. I've felt all along that sorrow was making you--(She pauses --gently) Maybe if you talked about your grief for

her, it would help you. I think it must be all choked up inside you, killing you.

Tyrone: (In a strange warning tone) You'd better look out, Josie.

Josie: Why?

Tyrone: (Quickly, forcing his cynical smile) I might develop a crying jag, and sob on your beautiful breasts.

Josie: (Gently) You can sob all you like.

Tyrone: Don't encourage me. You'd be sorry. (A deep conflict shows in his expression and tone. He is driven to go on in spite of himself) But if you're such a glutton for punishment--After all, I said I'd tell you later, didn't I?

Josie: (Puzzled) You said you'd tell me about the blond on the train.

Tyrone: She's part of it. I lied about that. (He pauses--then bursts out sneeringly) You won't believe it could have happened. Or if you did believe it, you couldn't understand or forgive--(Quickly) But you might. You're the one person who might. Because you really love me. And because you're the only woman I've ever met who understands the lousy rotten things a man can do when he's crazy drunk, and draws a blank--especially when he's nutty with grief to start with.

Josie: (Hugging him tenderly) Of course I'll understand, Jim, darling. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Without Josie Hogan's reassurances of understanding and her overt motherly gestures, Jim Tyrone might not have unburdened himself in painful confession. Therefore, Josie is a significantly important part of the play. O'Neill takes great pains to make Josie's genuine tenderness and understanding believable, and the major part of

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, A Moon for the Misbegotten (New York: Random House, Inc., 1952), pp. 93-94.

Jim's confessions, which are conducted while he reclines securely in Josie's loving arms, strongly border on having Freudian overtones. As if she were a part of some unseen, driving force, Josie encourages Jim to continue:

Tyrone: Trying to welch now, eh? It's too late. You've got me started. Suffer? Christ, I ought to suffer! (He pauses. Then he closes his eyes. It is as if he had to hide from sight before he can begin. He makes his face expressionless. His voice becomes impersonal and objective, as though what he told concerned some man he had known, but had nothing to do with him. This is the only way he can start telling the story.) When Mama died, I'd been on the wagon nearly two years. Not even a glass of beer. Honestly. And I know I would have stayed on. For her sake. She had no one but me. The Old Man was dead. My brother had married--had a kid--had his own life to live. She'd lost him. She had only me to attend to things for her and take care of her. She'd always hated my drinking. So I quit. It made me happy to do it. For her. Because she was all I had, all I cared about. Because I loved her. (He pauses) No one would believe that now, who knew--but I did.

Josie: (Gently) I know how much you loved her.

Tyrone: We went out to the Coast to see about selling a piece of property the Old Man had bought three years ago. And one day she suddenly became ill. Got rapidly worse. Went into a coma. Brain tumor. The docs said, no hope. Might never come out of coma. I went crazy. Couldn't face losing her. The old booze y'en got me. I got drunk and stayed drunk. And I began hoping she'd never come out of the coma, and see I was drinking again. That was my excuse, too--that she'd never know. And she never did. (He pauses--then sneeringly) Nix! Kidding myself again. I know damned well just before she died she recognized me. She saw I was drunk. Then she closed her eyes so she couldn't see, and was glad to die! (He opens his eyes and stares into the moonlight as if he saw this deathbed scene before him.)

Josie: (Soothingly) Sssh. You only imagine that because you feel guilty about drinking.

Tyrone: (As if he hasn't heard, closes his eyes again) After that, I kept so drunk I did draw a blank most of the time, but I went through the necessary motions and no one guessed how drunk--(He pauses) But there are things I can never forget--the undertakers, her body in a coffin with her face made up. I couldn't hardly recognize her. She looked young and pretty like someone I remembered meeting long ago. Practically a stranger. To whom I was a stranger. Cold and indifferent. Not worried about me any more. Free at last. Free from worry. From pain. From me. I stood looking down at her, and something happened to me. I found I couldn't feel anything. I seemed dead, too. I knew I ought to cry. Even a crying jag would look better than just standing there. But I couldn't cry. I cursed to myself, "You dirty bastard, it's Mama. You loved her, and now she's dead. She's gone away from you forever. Never, never again--" But it had no effect. All I did was try to explain to myself, "She's dead. What does she care now if I cry or not, or what I do? It doesn't matter a damn to her. She's happy to be where I can't hurt her ever again. She's rid of me at last. For God's sake, can't you leave her alone even now? For God's sake, can't you let her rest in peace?" (He pauses--then sneeringly) But there were several people around and I knew they expected me to show something. Once a ham, always a ham! So I put on an act. I flopped on my knees and hid my face in my hands and faked some sobs and cried, "Mama! Mama! My dear mother!" But all the time I kept saying to myself, "You lousey ham!" You God-damned lousey ham! Christ, in a minute you'll start singing 'Mother Macree'!" . . .

Josie: (Horrified, but still deeply pitying) Jim! Don't! It's past. You've punished yourself. And you were drunk. You didn't mean--

Tyrone: (Again closes his eyes) I had to bring her body East to be buried beside the Old Man. I took a drawing room and hid in it with a case of booze. She was in her coffin in the baggage car. No matter how drunk I got, I couldn't forget that for a minute. I found I couldn't stay alone in the drawing room. It became haunted. I was going crazy. I had to go



out and wander up and down the train looking for company. I made such a public nuisance of myself that the conductor threatened if I didn't quit, he'd keep me locked in the drawing room. But I'd spotted one passenger who was used to drunks and could pretend to like them, if there was enough dough in it. She had parlor house written all over her--a blond pig who looked more like a whore than twenty-five whores, with a face like an overgrown doll's and a come-on smile as cold as a polar bear's feet. I bribed the porter to take a message to her and that night she sneaked into my drawing room. She was bound for New York, too. So every night--for fifty bucks a night--  
. . .<sup>1</sup>

At this point, Jim is overcome with the reality of what he has just told Josie, and he wants to stop. Josie wants him to stop too, for she has taken about all that she can of playing priest-in-the-confessional, but she musters up her courage and encourages Jim to continue. He does, relating his disgusting experiences with the prostitute as the train carrying his mother's body sped them toward New York. He had sought comfort in the arms of a prostitute, but had only found himself repulsed at the thought of what he was doing, combined with the realization that his own mother lay just a few feet from him, cold and dead in the baggage car. Jim concludes his tale by confessing that he was too drunk to make even an

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 94-97.

appearance at his mother's funeral, and he turns to Josie for some sort of redemption, expressing a wish that he could allow himself to believe in spiritual redemption as a part of God's blessing:

Tyrone: . . . Wish I could believe in that spiritualists' bunk. If I could tell her it was because I missed her so much and couldn't forgive her for leaving me--

Josie: Jim! For the love of God--!

Tyrone: (Unheeding) She'd understand and forgive me, don't you think? She always did. She was simple and kind and pure of heart. She was beautiful. You'd like her deep in your heart. That's why I told you. I thought-- (Abruptly his expression becomes sneering and cynical--harshly) My mistake. Nuts! Forget it. Time I got a move on. I don't like your damned moon, Josie. It's an ad for the past . . . I'll grab the last trolley for town. There'll be a speak open, and some drunk laughing. I need a laugh. (He starts to get up)

Josie: (Throws her arms around him and pulls him back--tensely) No! You won't go! I won't let you! (She hugs him close--gently) I understand now, Jim, darling, and I'm proud you came to me as the one in the world you know loves you enough to understand and forgive--and I do forgive!

Tyrone: (Lets his head fall back on her breasts--simply) Thanks, Josie. I know you--

Josie: As she forgives, do you hear me! As she loves and understands and forgives!

Tyrone: (Simply) Yes, I know she--(His voice breaks)

Josie: (Bends over him with a brooding maternal tenderness) That's right. Do what you came for, my darling. It isn't drunken laughter in a speakeasy you want to hear at all, but the sound of yourself crying your heart's repentance against her breast. (His face is convulsed. He hides it on her breast and sobs rackingly. She hugs him more tightly and

speaks softly, staring into the moonlight) She hears. I feel her in the moonlight, her soul wrapped in it like a silver mantle, and I know she understands and forgives me, too, and her blessing lies on me. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Unbelievable as the entire series of confessions made by Jim Tyrone may appear, O'Neill was dealing once again with the truth as he knew it. Knowing the truth, as Sheaffer states, caused him to write the play as a means of seeking absolution for his brother's tortured soul:

If, as O'Neill said, he wrote Long Day's Journey with "deep pity and understanding and forgiveness" for all his family, including himself, he wrote A Moon for the Misbegotten as absolution for his brother, called James Tyrone, Jr., in both plays. He had to write it, had to absolve him, since Jamie was never able in life to forgive himself, especially for his outrageous behavior on the train from California. It seems, as he confessed to Eugene, that he was driven by a compulsion to wallow in the mud, to profane his thoughts of his mother, and as related in The Misbegotten, he picked up a "blond pig who looked more like a whore than twenty-five whores, with a face like an overgrown doll's . . . one of the smuttiest-talking pigs I've ever listened to. . . . So every night--for fifty bucks--"

Although O'Neill wrote the play some twenty years later, his brother's agony and self-loathing are conveyed as sharply as though he had suffered through it all only yesterday. . . .<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 98-99.

<sup>2</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, pp. 87-88.

Regardless of O'Neill's motivations in terms of re-creating his brother's guilt-frustrations, there is enough evidence available today to prove that Jim Tyrone's story closely parallels the story of Jamie O'Neill. Point for point, biographers and researchers have amassed and assembled enough facts concerning Jamie's actions, O'Neill's reactions, and various other assorted data to allow at least a glimpse at the truth of autobiographical authenticity.

As has been previously stated, Jamie voluntarily gave up drinking after his father died and he found himself his mother's constant companion. When Jim Tyrone was finally able to convince himself that he needed to confess to Josie, this was the first subject which he chose. Perhaps the best documentation of what occurred shortly prior to Ella O'Neill's death in Los Angeles and what occurred shortly afterward is found in a letter from Mrs. Libbie Drummer, one of Ella's closest friends. Mrs. Drummer was living in Los Angeles when Ella and Jamie moved there to settle a part of James O'Neill's estate, and she was a frequent visitor in the apartment which Ella and Jamie rented during their stay in California. Mrs. Drummer's letter was written to another old friend of the O'Neill

family, a Mrs. Phillips, shortly after Ella's death. Mrs. Phillips passed the letter along to O'Neill:

"Well, she seemed to get worse every day and Jamie kept drinking harder all the time and the worst part of it [is] I think she knew he was drinking before she died and realized everything was helpless.

Then she passed away the following Tuesday morning. . . . The next day [the nurse] phoned me and wanted me to come out to the house to see if I could do anything with Jamie. . . . Min and I went and oh, my dear, it was pitiful. The two nurses were there with him and his condition was dreadful between dope and drink and his mother at the undertaker's, and he wanted to ship her home to Eugene as this Mrs. Reed wanted him to remain here. He was a little afraid of me and when he mentioned it I said by no means, you are going back with your mother or I wire Eugene. Then the next day I went to the undertaker's and had a talk with them. He had left the whole thing to them, even to buying his ticket. I told them not to let the body go back without him. . . . The nurse came the next day and said that she and this Mrs. Reed and her gentleman friend had seen him off and that he had ten bottles of whiskey with him and that he had a compartment. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

When Jamie arrived in New York, he was in the same condition which Jim Tyrone describes to Josie Hogan in the play--too drunk to even attend his beloved mother's funeral. O'Neill did not meet the train from California, but instead left that duty to William Connor, one of his parents' oldest friends. Connor's report confirms Jim Tyrone's confession to Josie:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 84-85.

Connor, who took along his nephew, Frank W. Wilder, had no difficulty in locating Ella's coffin. When the passengers had debarked, the two men, standing on the long empty platform, saw the coffin removed to a luggage wagon--but no Jamie in sight. After looking in vain through the cars and checking with the stationmaster about Jamie's compartment, they found him in a drunken stupor, with empty bottles all around, beyond knowing them, all he could do was mumble incoherently. With the aid of two redcaps half carrying him, they got him into a taxi, then deposited him in a hotel off Times Square, after which Connor telephoned Eugene and in a voice of cold disgust gave him a report.<sup>1</sup>

For the next two days, Jamie remained in his hotel room. He gave his brother no help in arranging for Ella's funeral, and from all accounts, spent the time drinking constantly. Other members of Connor's family visited Jamie at the hotel, and their remembrances of Jamie add further validity to Jim Tyrone's confession:

The funeral services were held on the morning of the tenth at St. Leo's on East Twenty-Eighth Street, near the Prince George Hotel, which Ella used to attend, but Jamie was absent. When Mrs. Wilder, Connor's sister, and her son Frank stopped by his hotel, they found him in the midst of sending a bellhop for liquor, still drunk, but able to recognize them. In reply to Mrs. Wilder's question whether he would attend, he gestured helplessly and said he was too broken up. . . .<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

Jamie did not attend the services in New York, nor did he make the trip to New London with his brother to bury Ella beside her husband in the O'Neill family plot in the New London Cemetery. He had returned to his characteristically heavy drinking again. In less than two years, Jamie O'Neill would be dead.

Like Josie Hogan, O'Neill played the part of the confessor as he wrote A Moon for the Misbegotten. Unlike Josie, however, he was not able to absolve his brother of his sins while Jamie was living. Josie was able to give "her Jim" the inward peace and absolution which O'Neill was only able to offer Jamie after death. O'Neill had little to do with Jamie after Ella's passing, and in the play he hoped to achieve the forgiveness and compassion which he had not allowed himself to feel toward his brother while Jamie was alive:

The play was Jamie's epitaph, and though it was a brutal exposure of his brother, it was far more forgiving than O'Neill could reason himself into being in 1923. The play was, in fact, an imaginative rearrangement of Jamie's last days, arising as much out of penitence on O'Neill's part as out of a desire to vindicate his brother. It was typical of the sort of wish fulfillment to which O'Neill was often addicted in his autobiographical writings.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 529.

Perhaps the best summation of O'Neill's feelings for Jamie are found in a letter he wrote in 1931 to an old school friend who had inquired about Jamie in a letter to O'Neill:

. . . "No, my brother is not alive. He died in 1923. Booze got him in the end. . . . He and I were terribly close to each other, but after my mother's death in 1922 he gave up all hold on life and simply wanted to die as soon as possible. He had never found his place. He had never belonged. I hope like my 'Hairy Ape' he does now."<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill wrote about Jamie and their relationship in at least five of the major plays. In some O'Neill may have been genuinely condemning, but in others he was genuinely sympathetic and fraternally understanding. The closeness which the two brothers enjoyed during their youth seemed to diminish as they grew older, but eventually the playwright was to rekindle the love which he felt for his older brother. Jamie was simply Jamie, and during the last years of his life O'Neill the playwright began to realize that fact.

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 88.



## C O N C L U S I O N

From 1923 to 1943, Eugene O'Neill completed fourteen major plays. Six of this fourteen--or 43%--were the six major autobiographical family portraits discussed in the preceding chapters. Of the eight remaining plays, two were historical (Marco Millions, A Touch of the Poet) and one was biblical ("Lazarus Laughed"). Two dealt with the tragedy of marriage (Days Without End, Strange Interlude), and can be related in varying degrees to O'Neill's second marriage to Agnes Boulton. The remaining three plays were also autobiographical. In The Great God Brown, O'Neill dealt with the psychological failures of an artist destined to fail. Dynamo dealt with a young man's inner struggles to either accept or reject the existence of God, a battle resembling O'Neill's life-long struggle to reach a similar decision. The Iceman Cometh presented a highly philosophical view of the human condition as seen by a group of social outcasts, most of whom are based on O'Neill's acquaintances at Jimmy the Priest's saloon, the New York waterfront dive where the playwright resided for a short time during 1910. With the exception of the historical and biblical works, all of these plays are tragic and autobiographical.

A sense of tragedy is the key to understanding the inner feelings which motivated O'Neill as he dealt with his family and himself as characters in the autobiographical plays. Since O'Neill's personal life was one of turmoil and tragedy, he was at his best when he was dealing with subjects and situations he had experienced. With the exception of Ah, Wilderness!, all of the plays discussed in the preceding chapters end tragically. In Abortion, Jack Townsend, unable to face the outcome of Nellie's abortion, commits suicide. In All God's Chillun Got Wings, Jim Harris is forced to accept the fact that his wife is insane and will only get progressively worse with the passage of time. In Desire Under the Elms, Eben and Abbie are hauled off to jail to face murder charges, and Ephraim is left alone and broken as his world collapses. In the Mourning Becomes Electra trilogy, all of the Mannons die tragically with the exception of Lavinia, who finds her own personal tragedy in her aloneness. In Long Day's Journey Into Night, Mary Tyrone's return to morphine addiction plunges the already-tragic Tyrone family into new depths of despair. In A Moon for the Misbegotten, Jim Tyrone realizes that he can find inner peace only in death.

Without question, O'Neill was an artist who dealt with tragedy and the tragic.

In the autobiographical family portraits which O'Neill created, the major questionable aspect is not the playwright's ability to deal with tragedy, but his inability to create and coordinate systematic character impressions of personages other than members of his own family. He was never able to create a suitable, stable equivalent of James, Ella, or Jamie. O'Neill brooded over his relationship with all three of them, but his life-long preoccupation with the mystery of what each of them represented was, at best, a mixture of ambiguous feelings and vacillatory decisions. Yet regardless of his ability to formulate original characterizations, he was nevertheless concerned--very deeply concerned--with who and what each of them represented.

Had O'Neill been able to create autobiographical family portraits which suited him, the percentage of autobiographical family portraits would more than likely have been considerably less than 43%. For this reason, he kept returning to the past, to remembrances of family situations, for the basis for his tragedies. The inability to coordinate satisfactory impressions of exactly who and what James,

Ella, and Jamie represented drove O'Neill to deal with them as characters time and again, and this inability resulted in some of the finest works any dramatist of the twentieth century has produced. O'Neill experienced enough of the tragic in his life outside the family to create outstanding tragedies, but had it not been for his inability to make a lasting decision concerning the whos and whats of his immediate family, it is doubtful that the world would have plays such as Long Day's Journey Into Night or Desire Under the Elms today. O'Neill proved, both financially and artistically, that he could deal with tragedy in a highly effective manner, as evidenced by his other plays. The autobiographical plays dealing with his family were not written for financial or artistic reasons. They were written because Eugene O'Neill was one of "the four haunted Tyrones," and until he had dealt with his ghosts of the past, he could not find satisfaction or peace within himself.

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