

## THE IMPRISONMENT OF MARY'S SOUL IN O'NEILL'S *LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT*

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Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), is considered the greatest US playwright. He came into the scene in the 1920s when the country did not have a tradition in drama. His talent was revealed in a group called the Provincetown Players, and he went on to become a major influence on the development of the modern American theater, exploring difficult subjects. In fact, O'Neill developed it into a form of literature, freeing it from the character types of melodrama that were common at that time. Each of his play was an exploration of human behavior, since he studied the forces behind life, such as fate, which is frequently associated with the devil and the sea. O'Neill got three Pulitzer Prizes, and the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936.

His play *Long day's journey into night* was written in 1940, but published and performed only in 1956, three years after O'Neill's death. It contains autobiographical elements and the writer asked his family and editors to publish it only 50 years after his death, for one of the characters was still alive. They did not know, but that character is himself portrayed in Edmund, the young sick poet of the play.

The action in the play takes place in August 1912, in a single day at the summer home of the Tyrone family. The members of the family are: the father, James Tyrone, a former quite successful actor; Mary his wife, who is a drug-addicted; the older son, the alcoholic Jamie; and the younger son, Edmund, who got tuberculosis. The play explores the tragic tension of family relations, and raises questions related to forgiveness and redemption, all drenched in Irish tradition.

This analysis will be focused on Mary, who is, besides alcohol, the link between the other members of the family. She is a character whose life is guided by the leading figure of her husband, and that led her to castration, isolation, unhappiness, and the imprisonment of her soul. Although loved by her family, Mary becomes neurotic, frustrated and drug-addicted in order to escape from reality, and also to forget her past, which started in the 'freedom' of her father's home, but brought her to the confinement of poor hotel rooms with her husband, children and the ever-present dead child. This is a feminist reading, since feminist criticism brings women to the center of the analysis, highlighting their importance, role and the way they are portrayed in the work of art.

In the first scene, O'Neill brings Mary smiling and behaving in a quite normal way, which gives the false impression of a normal family, but from the beginning to the final scene, not only Mary, but all characters follow a similar journey inside their own night. Each one has moments of confession, revelation and clarification, through the several conflicts among them. The father and the sons bitterly discuss their past, while waiting for their mother to come downstairs, since it is upstairs that she takes morphine to help her put up with her present life style. Mary's journey into night has no return, for she loses her mind completely, and this is a recurrent image of women in literature – the madwoman. A woman who is unfit, outcast, misfit, and has to be guarded either by a father or a husband. This treatment is similar to what children have, since they need a tutor to guide them through life.

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Mary's habit of going upstairs to take drugs in a certain way might remind the reader of Charlotte Brontë's image of the madwoman in the attic, in her 1847 *Jane Eyre*. Different from Berta, Mary oscillates between sanity and insanity. One point of similarity is the image of the room in the upper floor of the house. It is there that both characters can behave freely from what is considered inappropriate for society, which is limited to her own family members in Mary's case, once the Tyrones are gregarious enough to keep people outside their family. It is upstairs that she hides her problem, and acts freely about it. There, she can be herself and can escape from emotions that tortures her mind, because once Mary is downstairs, she is able to see her sons and husband and that reminds her of how she has wasted her life and dreams. Upstairs Mary is free to use morphine as a drug, but it is also a place of imprisonment where she tries to hide herself from the real world with its torturing memories.

Her insanity is caused by frustration and also by the weakness of her character, since she is a very sensitive person in a world marked by lack of understanding for what she needs as a woman and the several nuances of the term, and as a human being. Mary is weak enough not to fight for what she wanted, she takes comfort in just blaming people now that she has no possibility of fulfillment.

The first description of Mary reinforces her "...extreme nervousness. Her hands are never still. They were once beautiful hands, with long, tapering fingers, but rheumatism has knotted the joints and warped the fingers, so that now they have an ugly crippled look" (*Long day's journey into night*, 1956, p. 12). Mary nervousness expresses her uncomfortable position within her life, but another powerful image appears from this quotation: the image of the hands. Like Mary, they were once beautiful, but a physical disease destroyed their beauty, but it is a disease of the mind that has destroyed her, and she became socially ugly, once she becomes a drug addicted and insane.

During the whole play, Mary complains about her hands, and according to Schneider, quoted by CILOT (1996, p. 173), the hands have a major role "...because it is the corporeal manifestation of the inner state of the human being." Mary inner self is tapering of anxiety, since there seems to be no escape for her. There is no possibility of return neither to her father's house where she once was happy, nor to the convent where she dreamed of becoming a pianist. She is now forever linked to that family she does not love, like fingers are tied to the hands.

Since O'Neill's play is full of Irish influence – his family came from Ireland – it is appropriate to mention that according to Sean O'Faolain in his *The Irish – a character study*, the basic family unit was symbolized by the hands in ancient Ireland. As Mary hands are distorted by a physical illness, so is her family by a psychological one, for all the members of the family are crippled by life, being hope for the future the least thing that crosses their mind, once they have a deep feeling of defeat. All the Tyrones have surrendered to their fate, which is to lament their past and to blame the other family members for their own failure.

Mary's state of mind influences the mood of the whole family in a negative way, however she is the only character who is not blamed by the other family members. This suggests a kind of implicit understanding from them of how they are truly responsible for the prison she lives in, and for the consequences of her kind of life, since Mary seldom leaves their home fearing people's comments of her problem and also because her life style made it impossible for her to make friends, once they got used to move frequently because of Tyrone's job as an actor.

In her tragic night of the soul, Mary examines her past from an idealized perspective. As a teenager she went to a convent, and there she found love and attention,

things she had in her father's house. The nuns used to praise her talent with the piano, and she developed a deep desire of becoming a successful pianist, but fell in love for Tyrone, a young, handsome and promising actor. So, Mary, as a woman, had to give up all her dreams to follow her husband on tours around the country. It was her decision based on cultural patriarchal values, and after the period of enchantment, she perceived how unhappy she became, for she did not have a life of her own anymore, but she became a wife and mother, condemned to take care of everyone, except herself.

Mary in fact, never knew truly freedom. In her childhood, she was guided by her father, after by her spiritual father, God, and then, by her husband. So, she moved from male hands to male hands, but only as a single woman she had dreams and hopes for the future. As a married woman, she found herself caught in a trap for the rest of her life. She says that 'only the past when we were happy is real,' referring to her single life, and states that "The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too." (*Long day's journey into night*, 1956, p. 87). The way she behaves, suggests that the past is something open to question, even unknowable. The past invades the present, and not only her, but all the Tyrones struggle to understand the formative past that shapes the present action. Mary reveals her ongoing past gradually and continuously when O'Neill makes her open the world of the mind, memories and fear; due to that the action is largely retrospective.

One of the things that Mary most complains about is the lack of a home. As a married woman, she never had one of the most important things for her: a house, so she can not forgive her husband for keeping her waiting for that dream to come true, when he really has decided not to build their home. "Your father could afford to keep on buying property but never give me a home" (*Long day's journey into night*, 1956, p. 71). Mary has spent all her married life in poor hotel rooms, being treated by cheap doctors, for her husband was traumatized by the idea of getting poor, so he saved their money and bought some properties, and never bought his family a home, except a summer house which Mary hates because it has a terrible appearance of decadence, although they have a fine financial life.

A house for her is a symbol of stability, of family, of roots, and Mary complains about not having these things with Tyrone: "The really good servants are all with people who have homes and not merely summer places," (*Long day's journey into night*, 1956, p. 61). Everything she got from her marriage is frustration, even the servants are of inferior quality for the service. All these feelings are openly discussed within the family and it is an eternal source of discussion, which makes the relations deeply tense and stressful.

Due to her frustration and behavior, Mary becomes an unwelcome presence, all the other family members avoid her companionship, because they know she can only talk about how frustrated her life is, and how guilty they are for her present life. In fact, the figure of the mother in literature is always full of shadows, since many male writers portrays them in a negative way as controlling and neurotic. The mother becomes the Freudian villain, for according to him, she reduces the children, especially her sons to dependency, ambivalence, and psychic impotence. She becomes the origin of the neurosis of her children; all this thought provoke the disemotionalization of the role of the mother. And this is really what happens with the figure of women portrayed in Mary in struggle with her past.

One example that is linked to this idea of reducing the children is the fact of Mary having lost one of her children. It is the most symbolic loss she has suffered. In order to follow her husbands on tours, she lost her new born baby with a family member after telling her older son, Jamie not to get close to the baby, for Jamie had a contagious

disease. The baby ends up dead because of Jamie's disobedience, and since then, she blames her son for having entered the baby's room on purpose and also blames her husband for demanding her presence on his tours. So, making the other people feel guilty is a way of bearing the pain of her own guilt, since her decisions in life, most of the times, have proved to be unsuccessful and brought her only sadness and frustration.

In fact, Mary blames her husband for not giving her a home and comfortable life, she blames her older son, Jamie, for having killed his baby brother, and finally blames her younger son, Edmund, for having brought her the disease that caused her drug addiction, since she started to use morphine to bear the pain after Edmund was born. These people in fact are responsible for her suffering; the point is, they seem to love her, but her behavior tends to separate them, and it is only in alcohol that they find a escape for their traumas caused also by that mother who keep feeding unintentionally their failure and low self-esteem. Jamie and Edmund are a failure; they have no job, no profession, no dreams, no hopes for the future. Edmund has tried to commit suicide and Jamie seems to do that everyday for he drinks himself more than the average. These two man have also failed in having a normal relationship with women, what suggests that their relationship with their mother also affects their romantic life, however, they have no sign of homosexuality. This is truly a reflection of Freud's theory about the figure of the mother and how it affects her sons.

But Mary is indeed a woman marked by loss. She has lost her youth, her dreams, her talent, her health, her child, her mind, and O'Neill was deeply haunted by what people lost, like lack of love, lack of belief; he longed for something, a missing something to give significance to the absurdity of existing in a painful world when the tormented soul and tormenting devils co-exist. And it is in search of this that the characters in the play seem to be, especially Mary seems to be lost, for she can not go back to the past and is not able to adapt to that present.

Mary is a mix of purity and innocence, because she projects in fate and on other people the reason of her own failures. She accepts her destiny concerning her lack of power to act. She just tries to survive in a dream-state provoked by drug, since it – for some minutes – preserves her from the pain of living a life who did not treat her properly. Her view of life seems to be frustrating to the individual. The fault for her frustration may lie in life itself or it may be in the insufficiency of given individuals: herself. Mary, then, tries to accept life with all of its tragic defeat, once she is completely imprisoned.

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