

# Ibsen's Influence on Eugene O'Neill's Family Tragedy

## INFLUENCE D'IBSEN SUR LA TRAGÉDIE FAMILIALE D'EUGENE O'NEILL

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**Abstract:** In his career of literary creation, Eugene O'Neill has been widely influenced by Ibsen and Strainburg. The former has influenced his subject matter and theme, and the latter has influenced his colorful style. Ibsen's problem drama has special influence on O'Neill and leads to his own family tragedy plays. Focusing on the tragic family life of ordinary people and concerning over women's role in family life have also become the focus of O'Neill's writings.

**Key words:** Ibsen, Eugene O'Neill, family tragedy

**Résumé:** Dans sa carrière de la création littéraire, Eugene O'Neill était largement influencé par Ibsen et Strainburg. Le précédent influençait son sujet et son thème, et le dernier influençait son style diversifié. Le problème dramatique d'Ibsen a une influence spéciale sur O'Neill et entraîne aussi sa propre tragédie familiale. Concentration sur la vie tragédique familiale des personnes ordinaires et ce qui concerne le rôle des femmes dans la vie familiale devenaient aussi le centre des oeuvres d'O'Neill.

**Mots clés:** Ibsen, Eugene O'Neill, Tragédie Familiale

### 1. INTRODUCTION

When the world entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the American theater was still about a desert and very much lagged behind that of the European continent. In 1900 or thereabouts, there was little indication that the United States would make important contributions to World Theater. It was Eugene O'Neill who broke the still of the American Theater, brought the beginning of a remarkable era in the American Theater.

O'Neill started writing most of his plays after the First World War, which was a period of chaos and general world-weariness and bewilderment in the history of America. Having witnessed the disaster brought by the war, people no longer lived in their rosy dream of pastoral world. The spiritual support collapsed down. Reason was doubted. Traditional concepts of value were overthrown. The two main themes of Renaissance were challenged. Love could not conquer all, the universe no longer sang in harmony. Science and material richness did not bring people into the paradise of the American dream. The American people, especially the American intellectuals were experiencing a complete disillusionment. As a serious playwright, O'Neill had to face all these problems and went into the depth of them to find out the source root of the spiritual

tragedies of modern men. Just at this moment, Ibsen was introduced to America. Ibsen's "problem drama" found its echo in American audience. O'Neill began to read Ibsen carefully. In his autobiographical play Long Day's Journey into Night, we can find on his bookshelf the plays written by Ibsen. As a pioneer of modern American drama, O'Neill also held that drama should be used as a tool to raise social problems. In almost all his plays, O'Neill focuses on various aspects of modern American society and the dark sides of human nature. Among them, family tragedy occupies an important position. Marriage problems cause family tragedy, this becomes the main topic in O'Neill's writings, just as it first appeared in Ibsen's A Doll's House.

### 2. FOCUSING ON THE TRAGIC FAMILY LIFE OF ORDINARY PEOPLE

When Ibsen began to make plays, he made his situation very ordinary. He believed that the more familiar the situation was, the more interesting the play would be, which was quite on the contrary to the traditional belief that the stranger the situation, the better the play. This started a revolution in play making and brought the stage much closer to ordinary people's life. Just as

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George Bernard Shaw said: "Shakespeare had put ourselves on the stage but not our situations. Our uncles seldom murder our fathers, and can not legally marry our mothers; we do not meet witches; our kings are not as a rule stabbed and succeeded by their stabbers; and when we raise money by bills we do not promise to pay pounds of our flesh. Ibsen supplies the want left by Shakespeare. He gives us not only ourselves, but ourselves in our situations. The things that happen to his stage figures are things that happen to us."<sup>2</sup> This realistic situation is best shown in A Doll's House. As we can see from it, this is a typical middle class family. An ordinary husband, a wife and children. We can even see the four walls of the house. The actors and actresses are "living" on the stage instead of performing. The hero and heroine are not at all perfect angels. They are ordinary man and woman with a lot of contradictions in their mind. Their love and hate, struggle and failure, illusion and disillusionment are all very true to life. Even though Nora is somewhat raised to a mystic level as she accepts her inevitable quest, the sacred pursuit of her identity, she is still deriving from a much closer and realistic setting.

Long Day's Journey into Night is considered to be one of the most important family tragedies of Eugene O'Neill's writings and the finest American play ever written. It won him the last Pulitzer Prize. The play is so painfully and convincingly realistic that its reception was an immediate success. The family described in it is modeled after O'Neill's own family. The play is written without a very complicated plot. It contains no exciting outward action, we hear talk within a single family within a single room for 24 hours. But the play was highly praised by almost all reviewers after the opening night, 7 November, 1956, using such phrases as "emotional dynamite", "harrowing", "shattering", "heart-breaking", "a stunning theatrical experience". The chief reason for this is O'Neill's adoption of Ibsen's "familiar situation".

In Long Day's Journey into Night, the characters are tortured by very complicated feelings: love is combined with hatred, and hatred with love, anger with regret, hope with desperation, togetherness with separation. The family tragedy is described in a rhythm of hate-love, accusation-regret, harshness-pity. This rhythm is established in the first encounter and becomes evident throughout the play and more insistent with the flow of time. Each swing of the pendular hate-love-hate-love blade will cut a little deeper through the layers of the character's self-protection. We can see all through the play, the four family members quarreling and complaining, blaming each other for the family tragedy. But at the same time, they "can't help liking each other in spite of everything". During their progress toward the night, each of them displays both hatred and love toward the other members of the family, each is filled

with guilt and remorse, each finally reaches a moment of frank confession. This torture of complicated feelings may be even more tragic than Hamlet's clear feeling --- love is love, hate is hate, there isn't any mixture in it, as Hamlet hates his uncle, but loves his mother. And this kind of family tragedy easily finds an echo in ordinary audience's heart. We share in the characters' experiences because it is a significantly lived experience, complex and deep and passionate, mirroring the experiences of us all.

We all search for a cause that remains secret in life, we all are to blame and not to blame for the "now" of our lives, we all have complicated feelings toward our dear ones. What the Tyrones suffer has universal significance. Their plight --- the defeat of hope, the unavoidable parent-child confrontations, the sense of guilt, the need to avoid reality, the loss of chances and family unity, the bewilderment in the face of the mysterious power of fate --- is presented with such directness and truth that the Tyrones, isolated in the New London house on an August day in 1912, come to represent every love-hating family, close and far apart, together and alone vulnerable, enmeshed in a tragic net.

### 3. CONCERNING OVER WOMEN'S ROLE IN FAMILY LIFE

As we can easily see in Ibsen's A Doll's House, the tragedy comes from that the husband regards the home for his own convenience. The wife is regarded only as the "doll" of the house, a sort of a plaything for the husband. The family is a property to the husband and the family tragedy is the property attitude of the husband toward it. The husband, Torvald Helmer, sometimes seems like a father who enjoys the innocence of a favorite daughter. Setting up rules of behavior (prohibiting Nora's macaroons, for instance), instructing his wife even in her very dress, Helmer shows that he regards her as a plaything or a pet rather than an independent person. Facing many facts, Nora begins to learn more about Torvald's weakness and shallowness. She observes that Torvald is quite different from the moralizing and respectable husband she has admired for eight years. She finally recognizes her position and finds her role repulsive as well as humiliating. She decides to save herself from that position of a doll and refuses to be the slave of marriage any longer.

In Long Day's Journey into Night, the wife Mary Tyrone had been brought up in the genteel, Victorian tradition of the late nineteenth century. A convent-reared girl, she was beautiful, innocent, romantic, and utterly unworldly. In fact, she was the exact opposite of her future husband, who had been bred in the school of hard knocks, was experienced, practical, successful, and very sophisticated. Mary's extreme idealization, both of her future husband and of life in general, partly inspired the tragedies of her own life and

<sup>2</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (second edition).

her sons.

After she met Tyrone for the first time, he became her wildest dream. Mary's description of her first meeting with Tyrone was cloaked in the mist of schoolgirl romanticism. "And he was handsomer than my wildest dream, in his make-up and his nobleman's costume that was so becoming to him. He was different from all ordinary men, like someone from another world... I fell in love right then."<sup>3</sup> But after the marriage, when Mary approaches to Tyrone, the romantic atmosphere surrounding the theater to which Tyrone belonged disappears. The vision of Tyrone on stage is not the same as Tyrone an ordinary man. His own inner self is odds with the persona he projects on stage. He is a miser and he has to travel from town to town, supplying no stable home for Mary as she becomes detached from her own original surroundings. What is even worse, he does not really understand his wife and is always at a loss of what is going on in her mind. He believes his happiness is his wife's. He finds great joy in saving money and buying land and neglects his wife's suffering from loneliness and mental breakdown.

The marriage is the peak of happiness and also the beginning of misery. Being too sensitive and romantic, it is very hard for Mary to accept the dreadful reality, to play her dual role as wife and mother. To ward off reality, she recollects the dreams that she had before as a convent girl. But the previous dreams can never come true now, so she starts to take morphine in order to hide in her young girl's dreams to search for peace. It is only under morphine or escaping in the fog, can she return to her past. And whenever she returns to her past, her face becomes "youthful", wearing a "mask of girlish innocence".

Both Ibsen and O'Neill refuse to be considered as feminists. But in these two plays, they have expressed their viewpoint of the society as male-oriented. Both of them point out that "the wonderful thing" is merely a code word for a relationship whose values are freed from the mystique which society has attached to marriage with concept like "duty," "respectability," "cozy home," "happy family," and the rest of the stereotyped images such phrases suggest. A "real wedlock" can only be attained when a couple, deeply committed to respect each other's personal worth, work naturally and thoughtfully to fulfill ideals which their separate individualities require. Helmer, by striving for goals which have been thrust upon him in the course of an education based on social morality and verbal commitment to goals empty of feeling or commitment, deprives Nora of her sense of identity. To discover the essence of personal truth is then, the "wonderful thing" which Nora Helmer, unable to find in her marriage, must seek through her own resources. And James Tyrone, after having experienced a lot of hardships as a descendent of an Irish family, and becoming a worldly

greedy miser and a materialist, crashes Mary's romantic dream about a happy home and also brings his own self-destruction. In order to find out "the wonderful thing" in her dreams, Mary refuses to be awoken by the foghorn and refuses to get rid of the drug. In this way, she shows her pretty passive protest against her marriage.

#### 4. THE DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

Noticeable for their lack of action, Ibsen's dramas are classical in their staticism. Before the curtain rises, all the significant events have already occurred in the lives of Ibsen's characters, and it is the business of the play to reap the consequences of these past circumstances. The tight logical construction of each drama is the most important factor for the play's plausibility. With this in mind, Ibsen shows how every action of each character is the result of carefully detailed experiences in the earlier life of the person, whether in childhood, education, or genetic environment.

The same structure is also shown in O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night. In this play, the four characters revolve around two events which already occurred in their lives: Edmund's tuberculosis and Mary's returning to dope addiction. They discuss and complain in regret and remorse, with care and love, revolving around the question who is to blame. As the play progresses, their various psyches change like a swing pendulum, coming and going. The theme of the whole play is repetitious through the curtain-up to curtain-down, like the rhythm of symphony. The play's structure suggests that the rhythm of the love of the Tyrones is the rhythm of conflict, that each impulse of affection, generosity, or protectiveness has a corresponding one of resentment, selfishness, or envy. The understanding of such a dramatic structure is crucial to understand the author's realistic aesthetics.

The family is haunted by their memories of things happened in the past. None of them can forget the past: Mary can't forget the death of little Eugene, of which she always feels guilty. So she accuses Jamie as the murderer, and blames Tyrone for his responsibility for the wretched family life. Being the son of an Irish immigrant, James Tyrone inherits the theater, for the Irish have excelled at acting. His happy memory is linked with the life as a serious actor. He can't forget that it is to support the family that he gave up his art profession. He could have been a great Shakespeare actor if he had not taken so much consideration about money. So he always feels a kind of loss for profession and chances, and a kind of anger for his sons' ingratitude. Jamie can't forget the first time he met his mother taking dope, the kind of a thing only prostitutes do according to him. From then on, his spiritual support was broken down. Edmund can't forget that it's his birth that causes his mother's dope addiction. The two sons can't forget it

<sup>3</sup> Eugene O'Neill, *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, vol. III, New York: Modern Library, 1982.

is their father's stinginess that made their mother a dope fiend. So they are always fighting against their father. All of them blame each other as being responsible for the family tragedy. Everyone is the source for the other's trouble. That the past creates the present is basic to O'Neill's attitude towards life and is the main theme of this play. By the time we get to the play's middle and end, we are hearing echoes; ideas and words and sounds must resonate with implications because we have been there before. This helps to account for the feeling of circularity in O'Neill's plays, which is the result of both his method and his meaning. The play goes forward, but goes back as well, offering that Beckettian feeling that time has stopped even though it has progressed. The long day has journeyed into night at the same time that day and night have converged throughout. Endings and beginnings seem to come together to bring out the theme.

O'Neill considers that man's fate is governed by forces which cannot be understood or conquered. His heroes strive to understand their past in their struggle to belong to something outside themselves, something larger that would provide meaning. In this struggle against Fate, the individual is always the loser.

In another family tragedy by Eugene O'Neill, Desire Under the Elms, Eben and Abbie's pasts also lead them to their present and their future. They operate against the background of a larger process of retribution. This power of the past, this inability to avoid what the past has created, makes human beings victims of a fate they cannot control. The past hangs over the present as broodingly as the elms hang over the farmhouse, as oppressively as the gods hang over Greek tragedy.

Ibsen's influence can be found in many places of O'Neill's writings, especially in his family tragedies.

Besides what have been mentioned above, there are some more. For example, just as Ibsen, O'Neill is also never didactic in his plays. He just raises the question for the audience to think, never gives the answer to it. His characters are never simply classified as moral or evil characters. He never passes his judgment to the audience. Different from classical tragedies, in which there is always a conclusive ending, both Ibsen and O'Neill end their plays in an inconclusive way. In A Doll's House, Nora left home, we don't know what will become of her. In Long Day's Journey into Night, the play ends with Mary coming downstairs, losing herself again in her own imagined world. No one can tell what will the future of the family be. As a restless experimenter in dramatic technique, O'Neill has almost tried every method to create his plays. Romanticism, naturalism, symbolism and expressionism are all combined in his writings. But he never quits the use of realism. This is another influence of Ibsen on him. Ibsen is famous for his sharp observation of social problems and his use of facts to illustrate his ideas, so is O'Neill. No matter how symbolic O'Neill's plays are, you can always find the convincing characters and believable description of facts. Long Day's Journey into Night is a good example to demonstrate O'Neill's final achievement of investing a realistic structure in which to represent his dynamic realism of character. From masks, asides, and alter ego, O'Neill arrives at the simple device of alcohol to allow his characters to reveal the truth of their psychological depths while maintaining the mimetic illusion in the representation. From the biography of Eugene O'Neill, we get to know that O'Neill reads very widely. But studying Ibsen must have benefited him the most as well as the study of Strindberg.

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