

Fog as a Symbol of Alienation in Both Physical and Psychological World in O’Neill’s Long Day’s Journey into Night

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ABSTRACT

Eugene O’Neill is the father of modern American drama. His masterpiece Long Day’s Journey into Night is one of the most famous plays in English literature. It is a play about a twentieth-century family and the grueling realities it had to face. It is a semi-autobiographical play that concerns with the Tyrone family. There are four main characters in the play. The father and the mother and their two sons Jamie and Edmund. Apparently, the family seems to be a happy one but the harsh reality is that they are bind to each other not only by hope and love but also by guilt, anger, and their pasts. The story deals with the mother’s addiction to morphine, the father’s covetousness, the older brother’s self-indulgence, and the younger brother’s illness with tuberculosis. To depict the lack of communication among the family members, their isolation and attempt to hide the reality from each other and themselves, O’Neill uses fog as a metaphor. Fog illustrates obscurity, confusion, and frustration. The setting of the play is seaside Connecticut in Tyrone’s summerhouse, Monte Christo cottage, near a harbor. The fog is used to set the scene since the house is located near a harbor. But more important is the use of fog to symbolize the condition of the family and at the same time to parallel the family’s attempt to obscure reality. As the fog descends around Tyrone’s summer home another fog falls on the family within. The atmospheric changing conditions of the play correspond to the family’s change of attitude, from one of hope to one of despair. The fog is used also by O’Neill not only to symbolize a way to escape reality but to symbolize the inability of a man to see beyond what is apparently real.

Introduction

Eugene O’ Neill was the only American dramatist to be awarded Nobel Prize. He won the Pulitzer Prize for four plays, including Long Day’s Journey into Night. O’Neill was born in 1888. But he did not achieve success as a playwright until his 30th play Beyond the Horizon, appeared in 1920. He had numerous personal problems including failed marriage. So, his vision of life was essentially tragic. He depicted his own personal experiences, the human dilemma in his plays, with one exception, all of them are tragedies. Long Day’s Journey into Night is also very similar to his family situation as a young man, but more importantly, it has become a universal play representing the problems of a family that cannot live in the present, mired in the dark recesses of a bitter, troubled past.

The fog is presented as a symbol in many of O’ Neill’s plays. There was a fog on the night in 1916 when O’ Neill’s first play to be published was performed in a fish -shed on a wharf in Provincetown. The fog seems to have entered into O’ Neill’s soul and has remained there ever since. Many of his plays depict the fog playing an important role, or providing an active symbol. “Fog, fog, fog, all bloody time”, says Anna Christie’s father shaking his fist at the universe, “You can’t see where you was going, no!”(Anna Christie, Act-4, concluding line). In Iceman

Cometh, the fog has thickened into a yellow, suffocating fog. In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, it envelops the Tyrone's, shutting them, out from life, filling their lives with dark night. When the play opens the fog has cleared although reference is made to the foghorns which sounded during the previous night. By noon, a haze indicates that the fog is coming back. By nightfall, the fog has returned and the foghorns and ships' bells are again heard. This is parallel to the gradual disillusionment of the family to which it undergoes. When the play opens, the other members of the family think that the mother has been cured of her drug addiction, by noon they suspect her, and by nightfall, they are convinced that she will never be cured. All of them, including the mother, attempted to obscure and deny the reality-the fog also obscures reality.

Literature Review

In his last plays O'Neill was revealing the story of his unfortunate family. As O'Neill was writing *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Iceman Cometh*, the tragedy of his family was taking shape in his mind. Both these plays present tortuous family relationships, and it is evident that O'Neill was moving towards a full disclosure of his family nightmare. O'Neill has changed the name of his family. The name he has chosen –Tyrone– reflects his pride in his Irish ancestry. But the Tyrones are almost like the O'Neills. Through this family O'Neill is actually revealing his own family tragedy. He mentioned to his friend George Jean Nathan about *Long Day's Journey into Night* that he is writing a play that would cover one day in family life.

“A day in which things occur which evoke the whole past of the family and reveal every aspect of its inter-relationship..... At the final curtain there they still are, trapped within each other by the past, each guilty and at the same time innocent, scorning, loving, pitying each other, understanding, and yet not understanding at all.”

The play was written in 1941-42, first published in 1956. Because of its deeply personal nature O'Neill requested that the play be published posthumously. And it was published three years after his death. When it premiered in Sweden in February, 1956, the subject of the drama stated as “An autobiographical account of his explosive home life with a drug addicted mother.” (Wikipedia, *Long Days' Journey into Night*). O'Neill was the son of a Broadway touring stage actor, was born in a hotel room on Broadway in New York City. His father James O'Neill resembles to James Tyrone. Eugene and his older brother James Jr. traveled with their father and mother. The restlessness and turbulence of this lifestyle led his mother Mary Ellen into morphine addiction. Much like the Tyrones, the O'Neills had a summer home in New London, Connecticut. Edmund Tyrone is drawn directly from O'Neill's early life. O'Neill was also educated at boarding school and suffered from tuberculosis, which caused him to have a nervous breakdown. Though O'Neill led a life of adventure, he found the most fruitful theme of his plays at home. Like Strindberg, he is obsessed with the theme of tormenting family relationships. He depicts the picture of lack of communication among the members of the Tyrones but at the same time he emphasizes the role of a family to protect them and to heal their pain. Like a typical husband-wife, Tyrone and Mary love each other. The two sons with their father are concern about their mother. The youngest member of the family is seriously ill and the rest of the members are worried about it. At the same time the members of the family are sympathetic to each other but they also accuse each other for their sorrows and sufferings.

Methodology

This paper investigates the dilemma that all the characters are suffering from, in the play and how the symbol of fog is used to intensify that dilemma. Qualitative method has been used to develop an in-depth understanding of different characters and their behavior and the reasons that are responsible for such behavior. The psychological turmoil is more prominent in the play than physical movement. Psychological approach has been used to analyze different characters and their state of mind. The information has been gathered from different sources. These include the stage performance of the play, the original play itself, different materials, research papers, interpretations and web links on the play.

Result and Discussion

Fog as a symbol

Fog is a thick cloud, that confounds us and causes us to lose our sense of direction (Joseph Joe Panek, *Fog- As a Symbol*, 2009). Fog is a visual metaphor for dealing with feelings of confusion, frustration, anxiousness, hurt and guilt. Fog is something that creeps between people and makes it impossible for them to see each other. In our life sometimes, we feel we are trapped in relationships, or very lonely, or facing an addiction problem, unable to make tough decisions. These situations seem to drive us into a foggy atmosphere, that we don't know how to get out of these, and we feel like we are surrounded and overwhelmed by fog. The danger and confusion that fog can cause in our physical world, the same kind of danger and confusion it can cause in our mental world. In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, O' Neill uses fog as a representative of the ways in which isolation and separation manifest themselves within a personal relationship.

The 'fog people'

Fog is a reiterating metaphor in the play. It has different implications for different people. Fog is a symbol for the whole Tyrone family, but most especially for the mother as she often talks about the fog compared to the other members of the family. In her state of addiction, Mary does not mind the fog, which comes as an effective screen between her and reality.

"MARY (dreamily). It wasn't the fog I minded, Cathleen. I really love the fog" (*Long Day's Journey into Night*, Act-3 p-84).

It is the foghorn she minds as it drags her back to reality. While the fog hides her from the world and the world from her, the foghorn keeps on reminding her and warning her, with the result she has to go in for stronger doses of morphine. The drug assists Mary to drift into her past where she felt safe and warm in the comforts of her home and her convent days, where there is no alcoholic and stingy husband, whoring and alcoholic Jamie, and sick Edmund.

"MARY. It hides you from the world and the world from you. You feel that everything has changed, and nothing is what it seemed to be. No one can find or touch you anymore" (*Long Day's Journey into Night*, Act-3, p-84).

After consuming the morphine, Mary pours out all of her heartaches and wishes. Her dissatisfaction with her present life, home, and family makes her yearn all the more for her former, happy life at the convent. She considers her former home 'wonderful', her father 'noble', her convent days the 'happiest', her piano playing 'outstanding', her desire to be a nun 'sincere'. She even condemns Tyrone for not providing her a good home, her fate and addiction. From the play, we realize that Mary decides to live in her past by building a fog wall around her that will safeguard her precious memories. Therefore, being in a fog can be isolating for others, but for Mary it is like living in her happy moment.

Edmund also expresses the idea that the fog is a way to escape reality. But he also sees another significance in it. For him, it is a metaphor of the confusion of life. People lose their way in the fog as they do the same in life.

EDMUND. Everything looked and sounded unreal. Nothing was what it is. That's what I wanted-to be alone with myself in another world where truth is untrue and life can hide itself. (*Long Day's Journey into Night*, Act-4, p-113)

And when he recites Baudelaire's prose poem, we come to know how he tries to resolve his sufferings, by been trapped in a kind of intoxication.

EDMUND. Be always drunken.....Drunken with what? With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will. But be drunken. (*Long Day's Journey into Night*, Act-4, p-114)

Edmund consumes alcohol and retreats himself into the fog of forgetfulness. We feel his sense of isolation and grief in these words,

EDMUND. It was a great mistake, my being born a man. I would have been much more successful as a seagull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home. (Long Day's Journey into Night, Act-4, p-135)

When Edmund tells the father that in the past for a very few moments he had been able to escape from himself and thus belong to life itself, he speaks of his existence before and after these episodes as being one of the 'fog people' – one who attempts to understand and explain the mystery of life.

Tyrone, like Edmund, uses alcohol to forget the pain when he comes to know that his wife has once more, started taking drugs. Besides, Tyrone was distressed when Doctor Hardy confirms about Edmund's illness. He drinks whiskey to stop thinking about the criticisms he faced for being stingy by his own family. Even though Tyrone never mentions loving the fog, he too does hide himself in it to escape the guilt for not looking after his wife well. Furthermore, he is disappointed that his son Jamie did not grow up responsible liked he dreamed of. . "A waste! A wreck, a drunken hulk, done with and finished!". (Long Day's Journey into Night, Act-4, p-148)

Jamie, the eldest son of Tyrone escapes reality into his fog by getting himself drunk and spending money and time with whores. Tyrone and Mary might think Jamie's act as immoral, but it is the only best way Jamie knows to get away from the painful reality. Jamie too realizes that his lifestyle is a wreck, but he cannot help it. He knows that he had disappointed his parents. Tyrone also accuses Jamie of influencing Edmund to drink alcohol and lead a decadent lifestyle. So, in order to run away from accusations and family sorrows Jamie did not mind living, a life of immorality. We can say that all the members of the family prefer to hide within their walls of fog. Therefore, it is evident that the Tyrone's are indeed "fog people".

Act wise analyses

Act-1

The play takes place on a single day in August 1912, from around 8:30 am to midnight. To set the scenes of the play, we see the reference of fog made by O' Neill in all the four acts. In the setting of Act-1 he states, *It is around 8:30. Sunshine comes through the windows at right.* (Long Day's Journey into Night, Act-1, p-10)

In this act in contrast with the symbol of fog, the symbol of sunlight is used. As the play opens, sunlight streams in through the window as a note of hope, and its effect is heightened by the mention of the fog of the previous night which has now gone without a trace. Mary's remark:

MARY. Take advantage of the sunshine before the fog comes back, because I know it well. (Long Day's Journey into Night, Act-1, p-35)

strikes a note of premonition. The desperate battle that she fights with herself is emphasized here. There is a note of hope here though we are made to witness her strength of will is breaking down under a new stress. The fog provides here a physical manifestation of the haze or cloud hanging over the Tyrone family. Like the seemingly casual, unimportant remarks at the very beginning of this act the fog and the references to the fog grow in significance and importance as the play develops. The first impression that the Tyrone's convey is one of domestic felicity. As the Tyrone's appear, they could easily be taken for a happy carefree couple. Their 'small talk' about her getting too fat and about his digestion at first belies the tension they both feel – and the specter which hovers over the Tyrone household. Their conversation is too gay and trivial, too casual and unimportant. At this point in the play there is only the very slightest undercurrent of concern, unrest and anxiety-but this will grow in intensity

as the play and the day progress. The stage direction suggests that the tension is mounting. The mother's 'merry tone is a bit forced', Jamie eyes her with 'an uneasy, probing look', Tyrone's remarks are often made 'contemptuously' or 'scathingly'. Edmund responds 'irritably' and attempts to ignore what is said. These pictures not only show that there is a certain animosity amongst various ones of the family, but also we 'sense' there is a dark secret they all share.

They all are concerned about Edmund's 'summer cold'. They all know that Edmund is seriously ill, but they pretend that nothing serious has happened. Tyrone, Jamie, and Edmund suspect Mary but hope that their suspicions are unfounded. But almost from the beginning, they have suspected the truth. Jamie is the first to be suspicious. He tells his mother that they're all proud of her and happy, but that she has to be careful. Mary replies with a stubborn, bitterly resentful look and says she doesn't know what he means. Although both know the truth, they are afraid to admit it to themselves or to each other. Ironically, they all feel that if they won't admit what they know to be true, it won't be true.

Act-2

In act-2 O'Neill describes in the stage direction-

It is around quarter to one. No sunlight comes into the room now through the windows at right. Outside the day is still fine but increasingly sultry, with a faint haziness in the air which softens the glare of the sun. (Long Day's Journey into Night, Act-2, p-44)

In act-2 some changes in the setting can be noticed. No sunlight comes into the room now, and there is a faint haziness in the air. The change from the brightness of a sunny morning to a darker atmosphere is felt at once. It is the first touch of darkness that is soon to envelop the Tyrones. Very slowly fears and suspicions assail them, and each is filled with nervous apprehension until the truth of Mary's relapse is clear to them. The fog or haze which obscures reality parallels the attempts of each member of the family to obscure or hide reality. As Edmund sits reading, he listens for some sound from upstairs, knowing, but at the same time attempting to deny the truth about his mother. He suffers a prolonged struggle between fear and hope. Being less experienced, he keeps hoping and believing, while Jamie is quick to take refuge behind a show of cynicism. The truth can no longer be hidden from anyone as Mary rambles on, unearthing old grievances and accusations. Tyrone, realizing the truth, looks drained of hope and wins our total sympathy. The world of the Tyrones has broken up, and a chasm has yawned between Mary and her family. The morale of the Tyrones sinks under the blow of this fresh disappointment, and they turn on one another with accusations and incriminations. As their mood darkens, so does the day, the fog threatening to swallow them up.

'I can hardly see the other shore', says Mary, and Tyrone sums up the change, "We're in for another night of fog, I'm afraid". (Long Day's Journey into Night, Act-2, Scene-2, p-70) Their long day is thus bracketed between foggy nights.

Act-3

We can get the change of the mood of the play with the setting of the third act.

It is around half past six in the evening. Dusk is gathering in the living-room, an early dusk due to the fog which has rolled in from the Sound and is like a white curtain drawn down outside the windows. From a lighthouse beyond the harbour's mouth, a foghorn is heard at regular intervals, moaning like a mournful whale in labour, and from the harbour itself, intermittently, comes the warning ringing of bells on yachts at anchor. (Long Day's Journey into Night, Act-3, p-83)

In the third act, the fog has returned and the darkness matches the despair of the Tyrones. By now the truth of Mary's relapse to the slavery of morphine is fully revealed. O'Neill shifts the dramatic interest to the other dark

circumstance, namely Edmund's sickness. Slowly and naturally the members of the family move to the next crisis. Mary alone remains unmoved by this fresh catastrophe, for she is fortified by morphine against the pain of reality. She slips back to the past before the tragedy started when her days were spent in innocent joy. Now she loves the fog because, "it hides you from the world and the world from you" but she hates the foghorns because they warn you and call you back. For her, the fog is like the narcotics that obscure reality. We are told that "rheumatism medicine" stops "all the pain". This emphasis on Mary's dissatisfaction with her present life and longing for her past life. She tells Cathleen that the medicine kills the pain and that, "Only the past when you were happy is real." (Long Day's Journey into Night, Act-3,p-90)

Act-4

The setting of the last act forecasts the final turmoil of the play.

It is around midnight. The lamp in the front hall has been turned out, so that now no light shines through the front parlour. In the living- room only the reading-lamp on the table is lighted. Outside the windows the wall of fog appears denser than ever. As the curtain rises, the foghorn is heard, followed by the ships' bells from the harbour. (Long Day's Journey into Night, Act-4, p-108)

The last act of the play is one of the most shattering experiences that the theatre can afford. The tragic power of it is undeniable. The total surrender of the Tyrone family to despair and night is shown with the greatest psychological truth. An actress, Jessica Lange who played the role of Mary in theatre says about the last scene of the play,

"The four actors on stage, absolutely still, all lost in Mary's sad dream. You could hear a pin drop in the audience. It is a sublime moment to play. Unforgettable."

It is midnight now and the fog has thickened. The saddest wailing of the fog horn and the bells from the harbor are symbols of reality, penetrating the dark and blanketed world of the Tyrone family. All the Tyrone family members, except Mary, are drunk now. She uses her memories as an illusion to make reality tolerable. Edmund remarks that the mother builds a wall around herself, a bank of fog in which she hides.

Conclusion

The psychological worlds of the Tyrone family are parallel to the natural world outside. O'Neill uses fog to depict these two parallel pictures. He uses fog with twofold purposes. He uses fog to set the scenes of the play, the gloomy outside nature reflects the helplessness, alienation, suffering and intention to hide the reality of the Tyrone family. Like the fog in nature outside, all the four characters in the play prefer to hide themselves within their walls of fog. "The reference to fog always has a double meaning in this play, referring both to the atmosphere and to the family." (Studyworld & 123 helpme.com). Ironically the family is a prison for all of them because they are caught in a web of circumstance and are under the influence of Forces-Fate, God, biological past-which control and shape their destinies. Croswell Bowen commented thus: "In the end, the characters stand self-revealed, and the audience knows and feels that this family is bound together by ties of love and hate and need."

About the author

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