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## Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* as Intertext

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### Abstract:

This paper focuses on the way in which intertextuality is employed in Eugene O'Neill's seminal play *Long Day's Journey into Night* and the effects triggered by the various borrowings and references to other literary texts, both in terms of character construction and influence on the overall message of the play. Moreover, this essay will attempt to assess the way in which the modernist-postmodernist transition is reflected in O'Neill's play and how the text manages to negotiate the fine line between the two in terms of intertextuality.

**Keywords:** American drama, Eugene O'Neill, intertextuality, modernism, postmodernism.

Within the large paradigm it has established, intertextuality is indeed a slippery term. Ever since its first use by Julia Kristeva (1980: 69), with relation to both Saussure's proto-semiotics and Bakhtin's heteroglossia, to denote the various mediated encodings from other texts that occurs in the transfer of meaning in the author-reader nexus, intertextuality has grown to be extensively used for an impressive range of terms, from the mere literary allusion to extended textual networks that wholly influence the reading process and are the catalyst of appropriating the meaning of any given literary text, as per Roland Barthes. Intertextuality is also a key point in the modernist versus postmodernist debate, as the point of reference has been known to shift dramatically between the two (Irwin 2004: 228). If the practice of intertextuality in modernist works gravitates around works of hardcore science, intricate notions of philosophy and what could well be classified as 'high' literature, the move towards postmodernism manifests itself through the almost opposite type of works, with frequent references being made to popular or 'low' forms of culture. This paper approaches one of Eugene O'Neill's landmark plays, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, from the perspective of the various forms of intertextuality present within the text. By inscribing various signs that refer and allude to other works, O'Neill guarantees a performative nature to his text, which moves beyond its capacity of being represented on stage. Rather, the many intertextual markers compel the reader to engage with the text, search for deeper meanings and establish connections across the literary spectrum. Moreover, these markers introduce a transitory dimension to the text: they establish the groundwork by which *Long Day's Journey into Night* may be contemplated at the intersection of the larger cultural trends of modernism and postmodernism.

The first occurrence of intertextuality is laid out by the description of the small bookcase placed strategically in the living room of the summer house of the Tyrones. Even though the bookcase is described as "small", its layout and content is fully evocative of the range of literary background in front of which both the characters and the play itself unfold. As it will be later noted in the play, the small bookcase belongs to Edmund Tyrone, and the fact that "a picture of Shakespeare" is placed strategically above the bookcase and his works are not present in it is fully

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~~from~~ to the dynamics of the relations between him and his father. The actual works present in the  
~~bookcase~~ are quite revelatory as well: "novels by Balzac, Zola, Stendhal, philosophical and  
~~philosophical~~ works by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Engels, Kropotkin, Max Stirner, plays by  
~~Shaw~~, Shaw, Strindberg, poetry by Swinburne, Rossetti, Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Kipling, etc."  
(O'Neill 1956: 11). Besides the equal representation of all literary genres (novel, drama, poetry),  
~~the~~ authors stemming from both 'high' and 'low' literature, the presence of 'philosophical and  
~~philosophical~~ works' denotes the wide range of readings possible in this world, from the merely  
~~low~~ to the highly philosophical.

Before looking at the reflections of these influences at the level of the text itself, it might  
~~be~~ useful to make some preliminary considerations on the nature of these presences from the  
bookcase. At the first level, it should be noted that the authors of not only the works from the  
bookcase, but also, in many cases, of trendsetting, extended and multidimensional schools of  
~~thought~~, all come from the 'traditional' world of Europe. This apparently simple consideration gains  
~~surprising~~ depth when looked at from the level of the entire play and the conflicts contained within  
it. As the entire play can be read as a metaphor for the collapse of the myth of the traditional  
American family, the works from the bookcase suggest an overarching alienation plaguing the  
Tyron family – they are to be seen as detached from the American mental spaces of family and  
~~incapable~~ of adapting themselves to the precepts of this form of societal culture. Furthermore, the  
link to Europe is strengthened by the strong Irish heritage of the family, which also works to  
~~suggest~~ the contrast between what an American family (regardless of its heritage) 'should be'  
versus what it actually 'is'. These tensions are further suggested and potentiated when making the  
links with the typical traits of the works of the authors mentioned at this early point in the play. The  
novels of Balzac and Stendhal are famous worldwide for their frank and realistic depiction of the  
decay of society in post-Napoleonic France, while Zola was the first to promote a rigorous depiction  
on reality (including informal language and secularity) on the stage in his 1880 essay *Naturalism on  
the Stage*, one of the landmark pieces of literary naturalism. The philosophy of Schopenhauer and  
Nietzsche foreground a destruction of regular axiology that may culminate in spiritual crisis or  
various incarnations of atheism; this is also treated from a different perspective in the philosophical  
works of Peter Kropotkin and Max Stirner, who actively promoted a form of anarchism that was  
later reformulated in the theories of Marxism (Lacey 1996). The plays present in the bookcase  
evoke a theater background, and the sense of drama and tragedy plaguing the Tyrones, particularly  
in the case of Strindberg and Ibsen. Last, but not least, the impressive range of poetry books perhaps  
signals to the most significant extent the fine line between the 'highs' and 'lows' of literature as  
negotiated between modernism and postmodernism. The analysis of the intertextual undertaking  
may be further enlarged by the "large glassed-in bookcase" belonging to James Tyrone himself,

placed "father back" in the setting. What is an apparent contrast between the small and the large bookcases is in fact a growing unitary organism, given the fact that both bookcases exhibit elements of both 'high' and 'low' forms of literature: "sets of Dumas, Victor Hugo, Charles Lever, three sets of Shakespeare, The World's Best Literature in fifty large volumes, Hume's History of England, Thiers' History of the Consulate and Empire, Smollett's History of England, Gibbon's Roman Empire and miscellaneous volumes of old plays, poetry, and several histories of Ireland". The bookish dimension inherent to James Tyrone, which translates into his incapacity to be an adequate father-figure and a husband for the rest of his family, is configured in the remark strategically placed by O'Neill at the end of this long series of elicitation from both bookcases: "The astonishing sets about these sets is that all the volumes have the look of having been read and reread" (O'Neill 1956: 11-12).

The role occupied by Shakespeare in *Long Day's Journey into Night* is pivotal to the full understanding of the play and the way in which it outlines a perspective on universal themes such as family crisis, the role of the parents, or theater itself. Besides the portrait of Shakespeare strategically placed above Tyrone's small bookcase at the beginning of the play, a parallel reading of Shakespeare and O'Neill is validated by a very important consideration made by James Tyrone at one point in the play: "I studied Shakespeare as you'd study the Bible" (O'Neill 1956: 153). This almost religious fervor that the character manifests towards Shakespeare is reflected in the numerous times that he almost instinctively quotes lines from the Bard's masterpieces in sometimes very awkward moments of acute crisis. Furthermore, Shakespeare is also important in the discussion of the modernism-postmodernism nexus, as his work was referenced frequently in 'high' modernist works but has also managed to transpose into everyday lingo and therefore also become potent material for postmodernist explorations of the collective psyche. Within the spectrum of such a theme as family crisis, the most obvious reference to a work by Shakespeare is *King Lear* – a play that foregrounds "the way in which universal sins – love-corrupting power, flattery, ingratitude, lust, and adultery – generate universal suffering" (Brinzeu & Chetrescu 2000: 64). *King Lear* is indeed evocative of the failure of the father figure and the corroding nature of a family from its core, extensively illustrated in O'Neill's play from multiple perspectives – that of the husband and father, the wife and mother, and the two sons, representatives of two very different outlooks and outcomes in life, one under the influence of hedonistic impulses and the other affected by ever-tightening constraints and thus avidly desiring freedom. *King Lear* is also repeatedly used in the O'Neill's play to signal the ingratitude that children manifest towards their parents, another dominant theme in Shakespeare's opus. When James Tyrone is confronted by his children, he repeatedly quotes from Shakespeare and most ostensibly from *King Lear*: "Ingratitude, the vilest weed that grows" (O'Neill 1956: 33) and "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a

thankless child" (O'Neill 1956: 33). The fact that O'Neill uses a quote from *Othello* to describe his father and his vocal yearning for recognition (O'Neill 1956: 21). The fact that O'Neill acknowledges at one point that the father created by the end of the play is a hybrid between *Othello* and *Iago* is a status as an anti-hero, who is a hybrid between Chetrescu 2000: 56-57). The fact that another of the characters of the play, her ultimate capitulation to the father's gown is paralleled to *Hamlet* is a remark at the beginning of the play which fuels the potential position beyond the Shakespearean line in *Long Day's Journey into Night* according to the play against each other. By doing this, O'Neill is between 'high' and 'low' incarnations of Edmund, Jamie, and their father, as well as of Friedrich Nietzsche:

JAMIE

Strong for a moment— then shrinks  
The stuff you read and claim you  
unpronounceable name, for example

EDMUND

Nietzsche. You don't know what it is

JAMIE

Enough to know it's a lot of bunk

TYRONE

Stand up, both of you! There's life in  
Edmund, and the one Edmund got  
The faith you were born and brought  
Edmund has brought nothing but sorrow  
Forget their quarrel and are as one

the small and the large bookcases exhibit elements of Charles Lever, three sets of the History of England, Gibbon's Roman History, and the stories of Ireland". The capacity to be an adequate reader is the remark strategically placed in both bookcases: "The capacity of having been read and understood is pivotal to the full range of universal themes such as the portrait of Shakespeare in the play, a parallel reading made by James Tyrone at O'Neill 1956: 153). This capacity is reflected in the masterpieces in sometimes also important in the pronounced frequently in 'high' and therefore also become within the spectrum of such capacity is *King Lear* – a play of power, flattery, ingratitude, O'Neill 2000: 64). *King Lear* is the picture of a family from its – that of the husband and very different outlooks and the other affected by ever-so repeatedly used in the hands of their parents, another mentioned by his children, he says: "Ingratitude, the vilest of man's tooth it is / To have a

*baseless child*" (O'Neill 1956: 92) are only two such examples. Shakespeare is also used by his sons to sarcastically comment on Tyrone's behavior. With regard to James Tyrone's snoring, Jamie uses a quote from *Othello* not only to criticize his father's snoring, but also to signal the duplicity of his father and his vocal yet shallow care for his family: "The Moor, I know his trumpet" (O'Neill 1956: 21). The fact that Tyrone is compared to Othello, something which the character itself acknowledges at one point in the play (O'Neill 1956: 153), is revealing in terms of the indecision reached by the end of the play as to whether Tyrone is the main character (just as the hesitation between Othello and Iago is present in the case of Shakespeare) and regarding Tyrone's potential to act as an anti-hero, wholly similar to the nature of the Shakespearean character (Brinzeu & Chiriacescu 2000: 56-57). The connection with Shakespeare can also be explored in the case of another of the characters of the play: Mary Tyrone's gradual descent into the haze of morphine and her ultimate capitulation to the drug and its rapturous mirage when she comes holding her wedding veil is paralleled to *Hamlet's* Ophelia; an almost metatextual dimension develops when Jamie remarks at the beginning of the scene: "The Mad Scene. Enter Ophelia!" (O'Neill 1956: 174), which fuels the potential postmodern nuances that one may encounter in O'Neill's play. Moving beyond the Shakespearean links in the actual text, one may categorize the characters of *Long Day's Journey into Night* according to the 'high' or 'low' cultural references that they employ to argue against each other. By doing so, the conflicts between the characters become dialectic exercises between 'high' and 'low' incarnations of culture. One such early example is the discussion between Edmund, Jamie, and their father regarding the issue of faith, which is aptly related to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche:

JAMIE

*Stung for a moment— then shrugging his shoulders, dryly. (...) Your poetry isn't very cheery. Nor the stuff you read and claim you admire. He indicates the small bookcase at rear. Your pet with the unpronounceable name, for example.*

EDMUND

*Nietzsche. You don't know what you're talking about. You haven't read him.*

JAMIE

*Enough to know it's a lot of bunk!*

TYRONE

*Shut up, both of you! There's little choice between the philosophy you learned from Broadway loafers, and the one Edmund got from his books. They're both rotten to the core. You've both flouted the faith you were born and brought up in — the one true faith of the Catholic Church — and your denial has brought nothing but self-destruction! His two sons stare at him contemptuously. They forget their quarrel and are as one against him on this issue. (O'Neill 1956: 79)*

A tri-focal battleground is profiled here, which fully reveals the conflicts between the three characters who engage with each other in this scene. If Jamie and Edmund quarrel with each other on the awareness towards a certain dimension of culture, James Tyrone intervenes in his typical patriarchal figure determined to set the record straight for both of his sons by underscoring how much the both of them have strayed from the path promoted by the Catholic Church, an integral part of their Irish upbringing and heritage, and how this ultimately affects in a fundamental way their human structure by culminating in 'self-destruction'. At this specific point, a cultural-philosophical reference has proven detrimental towards the crystallization of the dynamics between characters regarding the sensitive topic of religion and upbringing, an aspect which denotes the significant layers of interpretation of the intertext at hand.

Such cultural warfare which parallels the one between the family members of O'Neill's play can be most extensively encountered in the final act, where the focus of the discussion is driven at one point through references to works stemming from both 'high' and 'low' literature, where 'low' is largely understood to denote works which have largely escaped the confines of what now constitutes the canon. It is at this precise moment when the authors listed in the two bookcases at the beginning of the play and the actual intertextual reference come together.

A first such example is Ernest Dowson, a decadent British poet and novelist, whose poem *Vita summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam* lifts its title in turn from an ode by Horatio. Edmund uses Dowson's poem to highlight the indifference manifested towards 'sense' and the loss of it hypostasized by the fog: "Our path emerges for a while, then closes / Within a dream" (Dowson, quoted in O'Neill 1956: 133). Three intertextual layers emerge here, thus creating the effect of a postmodern palimpsest: Horatio's initial quote from one of his ode is transposed into the title of Dowson's poem, which in turn is quoted in O'Neill's play for dramatic effect and to potentiate the strong metaphoric undercurrent of the entire work. The 'dream' mentioned at the end of Edmund's quoting from Dowson is used as a further point of reference for James Tyrone, who engages his son with another intertextual reference, this time to Shakespeare's *Tempest*: "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep" (Shakespeare, quoted in O'Neill 1956: 134). The intertextual struggle has now verged on the degree of a literary dialectic, such as the ones eminently promoted in postmodernism.

Another such example can be argued for the quoting of Arthur Symons' translations of Baudelaire: "Be always drunken. Nothing else matters: that is the only question" (Baudelaire, quoted in O'Neill 1956: 135), to which James Tyrone replies: "Pah! It's morbid nonsense! What little truth is in it you'll find nobly said in Shakespeare" (O'Neill 1956: 135). The discussion is repeated at key points in the case of both Algernon Charles Swinburne, who was repeatedly criticized for his "lack of thought" and blamed "for moral reasons" (Thornley & Roberts 1984: 110)

and the ultimate hero of the play denote the sense of encasement. The entire confrontation is set up by Tyrone when he is manifested by his son:

*Where you get your  
bookcase at rear.] Voltair  
madmen! And your poets! T  
Whitman and Poe. Whoremo  
there [he nods at the large be*

In sum, the numerous influences that influence the profile of the play through the apt handling of the text through the murky waters of foregrounding not only the characters affecting his characters. In the fragmented and fractured selves of a complex piece of literature as there are intertextual references.

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 It's morbid nonsense! What  
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and the ultimate hero of decadentism, Oscar Wilde, whose *Ballad of Reading Gaol* is employed to  
 denote the sense of encasement experienced by both Jamie and Edmund in the Tyrone household.  
 The entire confrontation between 'high' and 'low' works of literature seems to be perfectly summed  
 up by Tyrone when he tries to ultimately dismiss the literary preoccupations and preferences  
 manifested by his son:

*Where you get your taste in authors – That damned library of yours! [He indicates the small  
 bookcase at rear.] Voltaire, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Ibsen! Atheists, fools, and  
 madmen! And your poets! This Dowson and this Baudelaire, and Swinburne and Oscar Wilde, and  
 Whitman and Poe. Whoremongers and degenerates! Pah! When I've three good sets of Shakespeare  
 there [he nods at the large bookcase] you could read. (O'Neill 1956: 137-138)*

In sum, the numerous intertextual references in *Long Day's Journey into Night* significantly  
 influence the profile of the characters and the way in which they relate to each other. Moreover,  
 through the apt handling of the meta dimension of these references, O'Neill manages to navigate  
 through the murky waters of the borderline between modernism and postmodernism, thus  
 foregrounding not only the cultural context in which the play was written but also the dilemmas  
 affecting his characters. In this way, the analysis of such references manages to underscore the  
 tormented and fractured selves of O'Neill's characters and contributes to a further layer of meaning  
 to a complex piece of literature, which can be approached and analyzed from as numerous points of  
 view as there are intertextual references in the work itself.

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