

"THE GUILT WE SHARE": AN ANALYSIS OF GUILT  
WITHIN THE FAMILY IN THE MULTIACT PLAYS OF EUGENE O'NEILL

THESIS

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

In his dedication to Long Day's Journey into Night, Eugene O'Neill said that the play was "written in tears and blood." There were times when I felt that the same phrase could aptly be applied to this thesis. Thankfully, there were several people who helped me over a number of trouble spots. I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to the following:

To Dr. Vernon Lynch, who introduced me to the works of a man named O'Neill. Dr. Lynch's encouragement, wisdom, and wit gave me the confidence and sense of ease I needed to undertake this work.

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## C H A P T E R     I

### INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1940 Eugene O'Neill began work on a play which was apparently the culmination of many years of anguish. The play was Long Day's Journey into Night, and of his work on it, Louis Sheaffer quotes O'Neill's wife Carlotta as giving the following account:

"It nearly killed him to write this play." . . . "After his day's stint he would [be] physically and mentally exhausted. Night after night I had to hold him tight in my arms so he could relax and sleep. . . . Thus the play was written."<sup>1</sup>

She also commented that he was "'bedeviled into writing it. . . . He had to get it out of his system, . . .'"<sup>2</sup>

However, an examination of O'Neill's earlier writing seems to indicate that he had been trying to get it out of his system for many years. Many of his works are a reflection, to some degree or another, of the turmoil he experienced not only in his early years with his

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<sup>1</sup>Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), p. 509.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 505.



father, mother, and brother, but also in later years in his relationships with his wives and children. After examining biographical evidence of guilt in O'Neill's relationships with his loved ones, this study will show evidence of familial guilt within his multiact plays.

Before turning to a more detailed examination of this subject, however, perhaps the question of why guilt was such a common point of focus in his plays should be examined. Guilt is a common theme in the writings of many authors, but few felt compelled as did Eugene O'Neill to deal with it so extensively--and so personally. When his life is examined even casually, the broad bases for guilt feelings are obvious: his mother Ella was addicted to morphine and felt inadequate as a mother and wife. His father James felt as if he had ruined his chance at greatness by "selling out" to the sure fortune of his role in The Count of Monte Cristo. His brother Jamie had caused, though unwittingly, the death of his infant brother Edmund, and in later years turned to alcoholism and debauchery. O'Neill himself was not immune; even as a young child he felt guilt associated with his mother's addiction to morphine (which she acquired at the time of his birth) and with the knowledge that Ella had never wanted her

youngest child. These elements of guilt are only a few present in his early life, and they, along with the guilt he experienced as a husband and father, will be discussed in the first chapter of this study. Suffice it to say at this point that ample grounds exist to show that O'Neill's life was steeped in guilt--a point which, in part at least, explains his preoccupation with this subject.

Given the fact that guilt was all around him, the question remains as to why his plays are as autobiographical as they are. That they are highly autobiographical is hardly a point of contention; one of the critics commenting on this aspect has said,

. . . that such plays as "All God's Chillun Got Wings," "Desire Under the Elms," "The Great God Brown," "Mourning Becomes Electra," "A Touch of the Poet," and "A Moon for the Misbegotten" . . . had been symbolically disguised portraits of the members of O'Neill's family, locked in various stages of conflict with each other and God.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently, these works are so personal because O'Neill derived a therapeutic effect by writing them. O'Neill had lost touch with his religious faith as an adolescent; so he could not turn to religion for relief from his sins:

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Gelb, "'Written in Tears and Blood . . .,'" New York Times, 4 March 1973, sec. 2, p. 19.

Basically, this Catholic apostate used the drama as a confessional; his chief objective was certainly not popular success, not even critical acclaim or literary immortality, but his own salvation. He sought through his writings to ease the pressures and storms within him, to justify himself to himself, if not to the world.<sup>1</sup>

Edwin Engel, an O'Neill scholar, even suggests that his writing may have saved him from the fate of his brother:

Tormented though he himself was, O'Neill was spared his brother's fate, and that of his sons. His playwriting must have saved him. The theater, which he had once tried to make religious, was a substitute for the Church which he had left and served him probably as the Church would have, as a place of refuge rather than of worship. . . . he used the theater as a vast public confessional, a great therapeutic couch.<sup>2</sup>

It appears, then, that his writing was for him a healthy outlet. By resolving the conflicts he had experienced within his families in the context of his plays, he was better able to live with himself and the memories of his loved ones.

Another basis for this belief in the therapeutic effect of his plays lies within the context of his

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>Edwin A. Engel, "Ideas in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill," in Ideas in Drama, ed. John Gassner (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 121-22.

characters' actions. On at least two occasions, characters haunted by guilt turn to writing as an outlet. Orin Mannon, in Mourning Becomes Electra, writes the story of the Mannon family's sins in an effort to find peace. Likewise, in Days Without End, John Loving confesses his infidelity to his wife by writing a "novel" which parallels his actions. If these two instances are anything more than coincidence, they point out the purgative value O'Neill saw in writing about his guilt.

Yet another explanation of his focus on guilt in his plays is that such a topic fits in well with his concept of tragedy as a form of drama. Most of O'Neill's plays deal with a character's fall to destruction as a result of some driving force. More often than not, this driving force is guilt, and it often leads to self-imposed punishment or destruction. But though his characters often lose in their struggle, their spirit is seldom defeated. Hence, the viewer receives a lift of sorts in seeing man's strength of character in the midst of failure. In a letter to Arthur Quinn, O'Neill dealt with his concept of tragedy:

"I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind--  
(Fate, God, our biological past creating our present,

whatever one calls it--Mystery certainly)--and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression."<sup>1</sup>

Not all of his critics agree that O'Neill was a writer of tragedy. One who did agree was Joseph Wood Krutch:

True tragedy may be defined as a dramatic work in which the outward failure of the principal personage is compensated for by the dignity and greatness of a character. . . . O'Neill is almost alone among modern dramatic writers in possessing what appears to be an instinctive perception of what a modern tragedy would have to be.<sup>2</sup>

Whether the individual agrees with Krutch's view is not relevant to the question. What is relevant is the fact that O'Neill felt he was following the standards of the best tragedians. If O'Neill felt that by writing tragedies he was making it possible for the members of his audience to see, as he put it, "'their lives ennobled by it,'"<sup>3</sup> then it appears that his preoccupation with guilt

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), p. 199.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Wood Krutch, Introduction to Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, by Eugene O'Neill (New York: The Modern Library, 1941), pp. xxi-xxii.

<sup>3</sup>John Mason Brown, "American Tragedy," Saturday Review of Literature, August 6, 1949, p. 125.

as a destructive force fits into his concept of tragedy. Also, if his audience felt ennobled, he may have felt even more so, since the characters he was dealing with were so often patterned after his own life.

Before guilt may be examined in O'Neill's families, the term "guilt" must first be defined. For the purpose of this study, guilt will be defined as "the realization that one has transgressed a moral, social, or ethical principle, associated with a lowering of self-esteem and a need to make retribution for the transgression."<sup>1</sup> As this definition indicates, guilt does not necessarily occur just because one has gone beyond a boundary set up by his own sense of ethics or by society. People can break moral or social laws without feeling guilt. In such people, guilt occurs only when a transgression brings about a lowering of self-esteem. Also, as the above definition relates, the guilty party feels a need to make retribution for his transgression. Therefore, since guilt carries with it a strong need to seek atonement, guilt often leads to other actions.

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<sup>1</sup>Dictionary of Behavioral Science, 1973 ed.,  
s.v. "guilt."

There are various causes behind guilt in a family. Spouses may feel guilt for inadequately fulfilling their responsibilities as husband, wife, or parent. Being an inadequate breadwinner or an unsuccessful disciplinarian of one's children would be a cause of such guilt. Also, guilt might arise from hurting other family members out of spite or neglect. A child who hurts a brother or sister out of a sense of jealousy or a father who realizes he has been too busy to show adequate love to his children may well suffer such a sense of guilt. Third, a child may feel guilt for failing to live up to parental expectations, as in the case where a younger child has not performed on the same scholastic level as an older brother or sister. Moreover, a child can exhibit guilt for simply feeling unwanted. He may interpret an act of punishment or a lack of affection as proof of his unworthiness. Such antecedent circumstances of guilt are among those most commonly found in families.

There are certain recognizable behaviors in a person suffering guilt. First, various emotional states are associated with guilt. A sense of despair, anguish, self-hatred, remorse, nervousness--combinations of these emotional states are often present in a person haunted by

guilt. Also, there are various "tactics" used by a guilty party to ease the heavy burden upon him. One most obviously would be an effort to confess. If a person has the strength of character to admit his sin and accept punishment if it is due, he may well receive relief from his guilt. Two other tactics are discussed in an article entitled "The Meaning of the Oedipus Myth," by writer-psychologist Rollo May. Writing of the moment when Oedipus learns of his crime, May relates the following:

. . . Oedipus turns upon Tiresias and Creon with the charge that these words are inventions, part of their strategy to take over the state. These forms of behavior, termed "resistance" and "projection," are an understandable part of every man's bitter struggle against the impossible heavy and painful burden of responsibility in learning the truth about himself and of enduring the revolutionary impact on his self-image and identity. The former, resistance, is an acting-out of the conviction "I cannot bear to admit it is I, so I will not see it!" The latter, projection, is a way of crying out "If it is true, it is somebody else; not I! not I!"<sup>1</sup>

Resistance and projection are common results of guilt in O'Neill's plays. Some characters, like Lavinia Mannon, refuse to admit their guilt until they are forced to.

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<sup>1</sup>Rollo May, "The Meaning of the Oedipus Myth," in Guilt: Man and Society, ed. Roger W. Smith (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 175.



Others, like Mary Tyrone, seek to blame their guilt on those around them. But interestingly enough, O'Neill manages to produce a fourth effect--that of characters almost relishing the punishment that is due. Thus, many of his characters actively seek punishment as the only means to achieve peace with themselves. One writer notes this tendency in O'Neill's plays. They are a means of punishing himself: "O'Neill's plays are crosses. Follow the road he travels and you will often hear the sound of flagellation. Look and you will see that the whip is brought down by a tormented soul on his own back."<sup>1</sup> Whether O'Neill's characters seek to use confession, resistance, projection, or self-punishment, they all are after the same goal. Guilt carries with it a strong motivation to achieve a sense of redemption.

In tracing the above-mentioned ideas, the following study will be divided into three sections. First, O'Neill's life will be examined to find the basis for guilt within his families. This examination will not be limited to guilt he himself felt; rather it will also deal

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, "O'Neill: The Man with a Mask," New Republic, March 16, 1927, p. 91.

with guilt experienced by his mother, father, brother, wives, and children. The second section will focus on parent-child guilt as it is exhibited in his multiact plays, and where applicable, such guilt will be discussed in terms of how it relates to himself or the members of his family. The third section will deal with husband-wife guilt in a similar manner. These last two sections will focus only on those characters who actually feel guilt, not on those who should feel guilt. (Some, chiefly father figures, do not.) This analysis will be confined only to multiact plays exhibiting family guilt. (Two plays, Bread and Butter and More Stately Mansions, will not be examined, since they are works which O'Neill never completed to his satisfaction and they were never meant for publication in their present form.)

## C H A P T E R     I I

### AN ANALYSIS OF GUILT IN O'NEILL'S FAMILIES

In one of his most famous plays, Mourning Becomes Electra, Eugene O'Neill presents a family tormented by its own sins and, it seems, the sins of its ancestors. Of course, it is well known that O'Neill based this great play on Aeschylus' Oresteia, which focuses on the descendants of the house of Atreus, a family that has had a curse placed upon it. Upon reflection, one wonders whether O'Neill might have thought there was a similar curse placed on his own "house." In the preface to his book The Curse of the Misbegotten, Croswell Bowen speculates on this matter: "I once mentioned my preoccupation with a possible O'Neill curse to Saxe Commins. 'I know what you mean,' he said, 'but it's not so simple as a curse. It's a mystic thing.'"<sup>1</sup> If O'Neill literally believed there was a curse placed on his family, it appears that there might be good arguments to prove his case, for did he not

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<sup>1</sup>Croswell Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten: A Tale of the House of O'Neill (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959), p. xi.

desert a wife and children as his father's father had done? And was not the curse of drunkenness to haunt his own son Eugene Jr. as badly as it did himself and his brother Jamie? And was not O'Neill's son Shane to find himself a dope addict just as his grandmother had been?

Whether or not a curse existed is merely speculation, but facts do show that almost every member of O'Neill's immediate family experienced the sharp pain of guilt. An analysis of O'Neill's "first" family--his father, mother, and brother--will reveal the causes behind their culpability.

Of the three members of his immediate family, his father, James O'Neill, seems to have experienced the least amount of guilt--and rightly so. He more often occupies the role of scapegoat, being blamed for sins he did not commit. Any student of O'Neill would most likely pity the man more than blame him, for much of his life was spent with a weak, fault-finding wife and thankless sons. But like any man, he had faults and made mistakes which were sources of guilt.

One of the earliest incidents to leave him with a sense of guilt was an affair with a young girl named Nettie Walsh. They lived together for a time, but, either

motivated by his conscience or his common sense, James left her. Unfortunately, he fathered a child by her, a son. This incident apparently brought out a deep sense of remorse:

James O'Neill was a devout Catholic--in his youth he had even thought for a time that he had the calling for the priesthood--and he always went to Mass on Sunday, even when he was on tour. At one period early in his theatrical career, however, he lapsed in the strict observance of his Church's commandments and became the father of an illegitimate child.<sup>1</sup>

It was an incident that left a lasting mark on him, for even near his death, he believed his illness was in part a divine retribution for this affair.<sup>2</sup>

Sheaffer remarks that one of James O'Neill's most common pleas in relationship with his sons was "'God deliver me, . . . from my children!'"<sup>3</sup> His prayer for deliverance was understandable. He saw his sons waste excellent educations. (It was a fact in Jamie's case, and appeared true in Eugene's.) He saw them turn to drinking

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>3</sup>Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), p. 126.

and whoring publicly and to acting frivolously toward jobs that he had gotten for them. Many times in his life he must have asked himself where he had erred. Like any father, he must have felt very real pain in seeing his sons on what seemed to be a collision-course with destruction. Eugene was to prove himself a good son in many ways, but the animosity between his father and Jamie was to last until his father's own death.<sup>1</sup>

James O'Neill's role as Edmond Dantes in The Count of Monte Cristo is legendary. It brought him a great deal of fame and riches. But in another way it was a curse. O'Neill felt that it kept him from developing into a versatile actor who could achieve the fame of a man of Edwin Booth's stature. As a young actor, James showed a great deal of promise. Booth was reported to have said that the young James O'Neill played the role of Othello better than he did.<sup>2</sup> But then Monte Cristo came along, and for the most part he was trapped in the role, even into his sixties. He saw his acceptance of the role season after season as a serious mistake and expressed

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 218.

remorse "'for having betrayed his talents as an actor and sold out for money.'"<sup>1</sup> It is understandable that he felt his family also suffered--not for money, but for the fame and pride he would have had if he had gone on to true greatness. (Ironically, he probably supplied Eugene with a very common theme in his plays, the tragic mistake of the artist who sacrifices his concept of art for financial security--an idea found in The Great God Brown, among other plays.)

Perhaps the greatest source of conflict between father and sons in Long Day's Journey into Night is in the miserliness of James Tyrone, James O'Neill's counterpart. If James were as stingy in real life as the play implies, he would certainly feel a sense of remorse--after all, he is blamed for his wife's addiction, and it is implied that his choice of a sanatorium for Edmund was based more on money than on concern for his son. But evidence in real life is contradictory. Certainly there are grounds for his developing an overconcern for wealth. While still a boy, he had to help support his family after his father deserted them. His long hours of hard work definitely

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<sup>1</sup>Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten, p. 120.

taught him the value of a dollar.<sup>1</sup> And the episode concerning his choice of sanatoria for Eugene was apparently based on fact. He did think Eugene should go to a cheaper, more practical, sanitorium.<sup>2</sup> But conflicting evidence shows a more magnanimous side. He bought for Eugene and Agnes the cottage known as Peaked Hill near Provincetown, and he had the deed made out in Eugene's name.<sup>3</sup> An old friend, Tom Dorsey, thought he was quite generous--"'always good for a touch.'"<sup>4</sup> If any conclusion can be drawn from this evidence, it is that he likely felt some guilt, but that it was guilt forced upon him by his wife and sons.

Ella Quinlan, later to become Ella O'Neill, was a product of a somewhat sheltered environment.<sup>5</sup> Her father was a moderately wealthy liquor and tobacco merchant in Cleveland, Ohio. She attended a parochial school in Cleveland and then went on to St. Mary's Academy in

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>3</sup>Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup>Doris Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p. 45.

<sup>5</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 13.



Notre Dame, Indiana. As a result of this Catholic academy's influence upon her, she gave consideration to becoming a nun. Persuaded by one of the nuns, Mother Elizabeth, to spend a year outside the academy before making a final decision, Ella took the advice, and as it turned out, not only did she not become a nun, but she also deserted her faith for a number of years. Her reunion with the church occurred when she underwent a cure for her morphine addiction, most likely in 1914. After various unsuccessful attempts at achieving a cure in a sanatorium, she finally ended her addiction by going to a convent.<sup>1</sup> The cure was successful, and its nature implies that her desertion of her faith must have caused her considerable mental anguish.

Another source of guilt for Ella O'Neill was found in her marriage to James. James was apparently a very romantic figure to her. He was ten years older and handsome. After her father's death, Ella left Cleveland and went to New York, where James O'Neill was acting. She lost little time in looking him up, and she seems to have been quite taken in by him.<sup>2</sup> But she soon lost her

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

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

romantic conceptions of being an actor's wife. The life of travel and the general atmosphere of the theatre apparently did not suit her, and as a product of a sheltered environment, Ella was to learn that she was not well suited to be an actor's wife.<sup>1</sup>

Besides the rigors of travel, another aspect of her marriage caused a deep sense of guilt. The product of a socially prominent Catholic family, she never really got over marrying below her class to a common actor:

She had never got over the cruel hurt she suffered when convent schoolmates from wealthy or socially ambitious Irish Catholic families would cut her for the sin of marrying an actor; and she had never got over her deep conviction that theater people were not her equals.<sup>2</sup>

That this view of her marriage had a bad effect on her relationship with James is obvious. It appears to have been a source of most of the conflict in their married life:

Ella could never forgive James for exposing her to his rough-and-tumble world; and he could not forgive her for the pride with which she held aloof from that

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten, p. 37.

world. Yet each satisfied in the other a perverse need to torment and pardon. They could express their love only in cycles of punishment and reconciliation.<sup>1</sup>

One of the greatest emotional scars on Ella's conscience was the death of her son Edmund. Edmund was the second son to be born to Ella and James. Ella, under the demands of motherhood, tried to take care of her sons as much as she could, living in New York while James traveled. However, she did not like being separated from James for a great length of time, so in the winter of 1885, she left her children with her mother and joined her husband.<sup>2</sup> During this time, Jamie, a child of six, contracted measles, and, though warned to stay out of Edmund's room, he went in anyway. The baby contracted the disease and died. Ella blamed herself for Edmund's death:

Ella's dismay at having left Edmund grew into an intolerable guilt, which she spent the rest of her life trying to shift to her husband and children. Young Jim was the first to suffer, for Ella was convinced that he had tried to kill his brother.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill, pp. 12-13.

<sup>3</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 53.

Nor was the guilt short-lived. As late as 1912, more than twenty-five years after the incident, a nurse reported hearing Ella, apparently in a drug-induced reminiscence, weeping, "'My son, my son, my poor dead baby, my son, my little son, . . . '"<sup>1</sup> Whether Ella ever found any peace from this pain is unknown, but Edmund's death must have caused her years of anguish.

Probably the central point of focus in Long Day's Journey into Night is the dope addiction of Mary Tyrone. In real life, it appears that the O'Neill family was haunted by guilt to an extent similar to that of the Tyrone family in the play. Ella's addiction, which occurred on and off from Eugene's birth in 1888 to her cure in 1914, was probably the single greatest source of guilt in her life. Under the unbearable strain of her conscience, she tried to project her guilt, blaming her addiction on James, who, she felt, had gotten her a cheap "quack" doctor to help in the birth of Eugene. This doctor did prescribe morphine for her pain, but most biographers doubt the validity of her placing the blame on James' shoulders: "As to his part in Ella's drug

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 19.

addiction, James in all probability was guiltless. In view of his feeling for Ella, whom he loved to the end, it seems most doubtful that he would have entrusted her to the care of a third-rate doctor."<sup>1</sup> The Gelbs suggest that Ella, out of some sense of guilt, unconsciously grasped at the drug as an escape:

According to medical evidence, it is unusual for a person to become addicted to morphine unless he actively wishes to sustain the sense of unreality that it provides.

Thus 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 effect as a means to escape. Morphine offered her a never-never land in which she could hide.<sup>2</sup>

Her addiction undoubtedly added to her sense of inadequacy, and it is questionable that the generalizations she made about the cause of her addiction really alleviated any of her guilt.

The last major source of guilt that Ella harbored in her life was not so much the fault of her nature as of the lifestyle she was forced to lead. As the wife

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>2</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 59.

of an actor who spent most of his season travelling, Ella was forced to divide her time between her roles as wife and mother. If James felt lonely in their separation, she felt obligated as a wife to go to him. But when she left her children, she felt inadequate as a mother:

Since she and James could not bear long separations, she felt torn between husband and children. The only solution, always temporary, was for her to attend to the youngsters in their New York apartment until her longing for her husband became intolerable. Then, leaving her mother in charge, she used to join him on tour until maternal feelings and anxiety, not unmixed with a sense of guilt, drove her back home.<sup>1</sup>

Evidence exists that even after her sons had grown to maturity, she still felt pangs of guilt as a mother. After all, she, like James, had seen Jamie's life deteriorate to drunkenness and irresponsibility. Like any mother, she certainly shouldered some of the blame for her eldest son's lifestyle. Also, she saw Eugene's life headed in a similar direction, and when Eugene tried to commit suicide in 1912, she must have felt partially responsible:

Ella managed for a while to maintain her balance, but after the news about Eugene, followed by his appearance, her good intentions began to crumble. His

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, pp. 16-17.

presence reminded her of the course his life had taken in recent years, of things in general she preferred to forget. She increasingly took refuge in the euphoria induced by, as she called it, her "medicine," but which her family called "that damned poison."<sup>1</sup>

Such evidence implies that she was aware of her inability to fulfill the dual roles of wife and mother, a realization that added to the load of guilt she was forced to bear in her life.

Perhaps the most tragic figure in Eugene's immediate family was his brother Jamie. James Sr., as noted above, never suffered from a great amount of guilt. Ella, largely in her reaffirmation of faith and her defeat of her morphine addiction, was to spend her later years in relative peace. Eugene was to find a certain amount of solace in his playwriting. But Jamie was to be haunted almost all his life, finding peace only in death.

Understandably, the death of Jamie's baby brother was to be a major source of his guilt. Why he exposed Edmund to measles after being warned against doing so is a point of conjecture. Since he was only six years old at the time, it is possible that he did not realize the true

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 220.

danger of exposure. But perhaps, subconsciously, he felt a sense of jealousy toward his little brother, seeing him as a rival for his parents' love; he might have seen the opportunity to give Edmund the disease as a form of retribution. Whether his motives were innocent or not, the fact remains that Ella sought to place the bulk of the blame on his shoulders:

The school-enforced separation, clearly proving that her husband came first, rocked his young soul and sealed his lifelong enmity to the father. Loneliness, self-pity, betrayal, he felt all this; most of all, aware that "Mama" blamed him for Edmund's illness and death, he felt judged and condemned.<sup>1</sup>

On the heels of his brother's death came another source of anguish, one that would grow and remain for the rest of his life: a sense of being unworthy of his parents' love. Not long after Edmund's death, Jamie was sent off to boarding school. A sensitive child, Jamie probably saw a correlation between Edmund's death and school: his parents saw him at fault, and, as a form of punishment, they sent him away: "The following fall, only six months after Edmund's death, Jim was packed off to boarding

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 18.



school . . . Jim could hardly have failed to interpret his exile as punishment for a crime."<sup>1</sup> The rejection he felt apparently grew, as in his late adolescence he began to turn more and more to a life of irresponsibility, fueled by liquor and debauchery.

This feeling of unworthiness seemed to be focused primarily on his mother.. Most of his relationships with women can be interpreted as a form of revenge against his mother:

He used women as he used drink, for release of tension, and always he used them. His love belonged to one woman, his mother; with the others he took perpetual revenge on her for being his father's wife. He went the round of easy chorus girls and prostitutes, preferring what his brother Eugene would call "bedlock" to wedlock.<sup>2</sup>

Jamie had an unnatural physical attraction toward his mother; Freudians interpret it as a classic Oedipus complex. Fairly late in his mother's life, he gave the following account to Eugene:

"Mama--there's never been another like her, my little kid brother! She takes that bath every

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup>Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill, p. 82.

morning, all that sweet-smelling stuff in it--what for? The old man! The old bastard doesn't appreciate her even now. Sometimes I go into the bathroom and dip my hands into the water before it's all run out--umm!" His face was aglow with the thought.<sup>1</sup>

After his father died, it appears that Jamie tried to take his place. He even gave up drinking at her request and began dressing smartly as he became his mother's constant companion.<sup>2</sup>

But his mother's death was another major blow. He turned immediately to drinking and even hired a "blond pig" prostitute to accompany him on the train back to New London, his mother's coffin on the same train.<sup>3</sup> He spent the day of her funeral in a drunken stupor and did not attend his mother's service.<sup>4</sup> It is as if he viewed his mother's death as another way of punishing him, and his degrading actions appear to show himself truly unworthy of his mother's love. Jamie's health deteriorated even more rapidly after his mother's death, and ravaged by alcohol,

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 429.

<sup>2</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

he died in Riverlawn Sanitorium on November 8, 1923, at age forty-five.

Jamie's turning to drinking as an outlet probably offered a sense of escape from the torment he experienced, but drinking also carried with it a certain sense of remorse. Perhaps seeing it as only a temporary respite from his troubles, he viewed it as a weakness in his character: "He drank constantly and used to stand before a mirror for long periods, gazing at himself with loathing, while he called himself every foul name he could think of."<sup>1</sup>

A final source of culpability in Jamie's life is found in his relationship with Eugene. He held a sense of resentment against Eugene for being the cause of his mother's addiction.<sup>2</sup> Also, since he was considerably older than Eugene, he seemed to show a warped sense of pride in playing the role of the devil's advocate, teaching Eugene how to drink and introducing him to some of his prostitute friends. What appears to be a sense of comradeship between the two in their drinking bouts and sexual exploits

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>2</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 55.

can more aptly be interpreted as Jamie's destructive attitude toward his brother. In at least one period of drunkenness, he admitted his motives:

He found perverse amusement in teaching his younger brother to drink and to be a "heller" with women. In moments of drunken confidence he told Eugene than [sic] he had done this because he realized how talented his brother was and that Eugene's success in the world would show him, Jamie, up for what he was-- "a bum."<sup>1</sup>

When Eugene began to gain a bit of fame, Jamie claimed to have given him the ideas for many of his plays.<sup>2</sup> Unable to live with the fact that, unlike himself, Eugene was to become a success in life, Jamie was apparently motivated to pull his brother down to his own level.

The guilt that O'Neill's father, mother, and brother exhibited most definitely affected the writings of Eugene, as later chapters of this study will reveal. But a look at Eugene's own life is even more enlightening. While Long Day's Journey into Night and A Moon for the Misbegotten were written to help bury the "ghosts" of his immediate family members, most of the rest of the plays

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<sup>1</sup>Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 106.

O'Neill wrote contain elements relating more personally to Eugene himself. Basically, the guilt he felt can be divided into two areas: that relating to his role as a son and that relating to his roles as a husband and father.

To say that the origin of his guilt came early in his life is an understatement, for Eugene felt guilty for being born. One could assume that Ella would have been eager to have another child, since she and James had lost Edmund when he was still a baby, but whether she did not want to risk having another possible source of guilt or whether she simply saw that another child would keep her away from James again is a matter of conjecture. Whatever the reason, she was not looking forward to replacing the void in her life made by Edmund's death. When he was thirteen, Eugene heard Ella tell an acquaintance that she had not wanted another child.<sup>1</sup> This knowledge must have left Eugene feeling unwanted and hurt.

Of course, coupled with his awareness of being "unwanted," the playwright also knew that it was his birth that started Ella on her road to addiction:

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 253.

Eugene was not to escape his share of his mother's guilt any more than his brother or father. The sense of guilt was absorbed by him and shadowed his whole life. For he was convinced that it was his birth that made Ella into a narcotics addict.<sup>1</sup>

Again, since Ella's addiction was such a prominent focal point in the O'Neill household, and given the fact that her own weakness made her try to place the blame elsewhere, one can only assume that the torment it caused in Eugene was immense. Perhaps it was so great that it made him subconsciously hate his mother, as one critic has suggested:

Most likely O'Neil was unaware of the grim pattern that gradually developed in his works beneath other, more visible patterns, but this in no way alters the evidence that he had a strong matricidal impulse and through his plays took symbolic revenge again and again on Ella O'Neill, drug addict.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the extent of his torture, however, he must have felt that Ella was not the only member of the family to blame him. He probably felt that James and Jamie likewise blamed him for the family "curse."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 500.

<sup>3</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 135.

Like Jamie, Eugene also felt that he was unworthy of his parents' love. Like Jamie, Eugene was to find himself "exiled" into a boarding school at a very early age. He attended St. Aloysius Academy for Boys in Riverdale, New York, from 1895 to 1900. Like Jamie, Eugene seemed to have been especially hurt that his mother would allow such a separation. Many of his plays present characters looking for a strong mother figure. Also, in his marriage to Carlotta, he appeared to be attracted to her maternal, protective qualities. Even near his death, he was still searching:

As she was once passing his bed, he reached out and took one of her hands, "You're my Mama, now."

"No, Gene, I'm not your Mama, I'm Carlotta."

"But he was insistent," she recalls, "and repeated that yes, I was his Mama. And, you know, I really was--his mother, wife, mistress, secretary, everything. He was always looking for a mother."<sup>1</sup>

The years of his adolescence and early adulthood did not make him feel any more worthy, for despite showing certain promise, he seemed to be destined for failure like Jamie. He was dismissed from Princeton in 1907 for a disciplinary problem and for poor grades. Soon afterward he

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, pp. 669-70.

met and married Kathleen Jenkins. This union was destined to failure, and he went gold prospecting in Honduras. After that trip turned out to be a debacle, he found himself back in New York. Though Kathleen was now pregnant, he did not live with her. He soon was aboard a ship bound for Buenos Aires. He lived there for a time, and appeared to be most content with drifters and alcoholics, for he felt himself to be a failure.<sup>1</sup> After a few weeks, he "bottomed out," which was most likely a form of self-punishment:

O'Neill started for the bottom under the illusion that he was simply living life to the fullest; instead, as one riddled with guilt feelings and unknowingly bent on punishing himself, he was responding to one of the strongest drives in his unconscious. The peace he sometimes found in the depths came from more than knowing he could sink no farther; it came from the flagellant satisfaction of doing penance for his sins.<sup>2</sup>

On his return to New York, he lived a similar life style at a tavern known as Jimmy the Priest's, which was to be a setting mirrored in many of his plays. During this time, he arranged for a divorce from Kathleen by hiring a

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<sup>1</sup>Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten, pp. 30-31.

<sup>2</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 171.



prostitute and being "found" in bed with her by witnesses. While at Jimmy the Priest's, once again he appeared to dive for the depths and tried to end his life through suicide (interestingly enough, through an overdose of a morphine-containing substance called veronal). The sense of failure which led to his attempted suicide was explained in later years by his second wife, Agnes Boulton O'Neill:

Gene went up to his dusty dismal room, sat on the cot and brooded. Somehow this whole episode with the prostitute, the connection of all of it with the nice and really innocent Kathleen, whom he now for some reason recalled regretfully and who seemed like himself just another pawn of fate; the rejection of him by his parents (for of this he was sure now) and no Jamie there to talk things over with--all this threw him into a depth of despair from which he could not or did not want to emerge.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps his attempted suicide had a purgative effect, for he never again sank to the depths he found himself in while at Jimmy the Priest's.

At some indistinct time in his adolescence, O'Neill found himself a rebel from the Catholic faith in which he was reared. Whether he rebelled to punish his

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<sup>1</sup>Agnes Boulton, Part of a Long Story (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1958), p. 201.

parents by causing them additional anguish or whether he felt religious faith was wasted effort, since he saw his once-devout mother a dope addict, it seems that O'Neill never really got over the loss of his faith:

Eugene's rejection of Catholicism hounded him for the rest of his life. The anguish of this rejection of faith is clearly revealed in Days Without End. In the play, completed by O'Neill when he was forty-five, he expressed his torment at having lost his faith and his desire to confess and receive forgiveness.<sup>1</sup>

While evidence points to the fact that the playwright sought a reunion with the church, he might have held back simply because such a reunion would bring him a sense of peace, but subconsciously the need to stay outside the church and punish himself may have been a greater force than his urge to find peace.<sup>2</sup>

Eugene's sexual initiation was a traumatic experience.<sup>3</sup> Like so many other rites of initiation, his sexual initiation was brought about by Jamie's urging. Whether it was this one incident, or the active sex life he led afterwards, Eugene apparently held a large measure of guilt:

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<sup>1</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 410.

<sup>3</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 101.

After Eugene's reluctant initiation he went on to lead a sex life more active, more uninhibited than that of most of his generation. . . . Yet there would always remain in him a residue of puritanism, of regarding sex as immoral, a result to some extent of his Catholic indoctrination.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps his goal of degrading himself and his mother was the cause behind his promiscuity. After all, he had seen Jamie on a similar course, and Eugene may have learned to view sex as degradation. But no matter how morally debased he became, he would never be able to end the stigma of guilt attached to his promiscuity.

Again, following the precedent set by Jamie, and, to a lesser degree, by his father, Eugene was to find himself in a vicious confrontation with the bottle. There is evidence that drinking was for him a means to achieve punishment. One incident is particularly enlightening:

Another night, in the presence of Bobby Jones and Terry Carlin at Peaked Hill, O'Neill urinated into a half-empty bottle of whiskey and then drank from it, an act that clearly tells of self-hatred, an impulse toward self-abasement.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 96.

Also, the period of time spent at Jimmy the Priest's found him, like his friends, often desperate for a drink--so desperate, in fact, that they often had to improvise to find alcohol:

Alcohol mixed with camphor was found--after one got used to the taste--to have a pretty effect. Varnish diluted with water was also discovered to have its points. And there were days when even wood alcohol mixed in small doses with sarsaparilla, with just a soupcon of benzine to give it a certain bouquet, was good enough, in the brothers' view, for any man who wasn't a sissy.<sup>1</sup>

In such acts, it appears that O'Neill found in drunkenness, as in sex, a means to degrade himself, but such a degradation did not come cheaply--it was paid for through mental anguish.

Unlike Jamie, however, Eugene was to feel a keen sense of remorse for the way he treated his father, especially for his irrational attitude toward his father's "miserliness," in light of the fact that he did not skimp on his sons' education, and he bought the house at Peaked Hill for Eugene and Agnes. Like his mother, it appears,

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<sup>1</sup>George Jean Nathan, "Three Friends: Lewis, O'Neill, Dreiser," in The Borzoi Reader, ed. Carl Van Doren (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), p. 600.

Eugene tried the tactic of projection to alleviate his own feelings of guilt. Sheaffer believes that "beyond the normal conflict between the male generations, he needed, as a means of easing his burden of guilt feelings, to think the worst of his father."<sup>1</sup> So in James, Eugene found someone to blame Ella's addiction on: his father was a tightwad, because he had gotten a cheap doctor for his mother; therefore, his mother's "curse" was his father's fault. Deep down inside, though, Eugene must have known the truth, and in a perverse way, he attacked his father in place of his weak mother:

When he enthusiastically joined in his brother's war of attrition against the father, his fervor, without his knowing it, was largely born of frustration, from being unable to move against his primary target--a guilt-ridden drug addict who crumpled at the first unkind word or, even worse, used a line of defense that stirred up all his own guilt feelings. The darkness and bitterness in O'Neill demanded a worthy opponent; his father, who had broad shoulders, was made to order for the role.<sup>2</sup>

Near the end of his father's life, Eugene came to feel a real sense of remorse for his treatment of his father.

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 134.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

When his father's serious illness brought the prospect of impending death, Eugene was burdened by the knowledge that his actions had undoubtedly brought much pain into his father's life.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, there is ample evidence to show that the formative years the playwright spent growing up in the O'Neill household brought very strong feelings of guilt into his life. But the guilt was not to end when he married, for in his wives and children he found guilt of a different sort.

Though his marriage to Kathleen Jenkins has been discussed above as one of the major causes of his sense of failure as a young man, at least brief reference to that marriage needs to be made at this point. His hasty decision to marry Kathleen soon proved catastrophic, but in his trying to run away from the mess he had caused, his guilt was only compounded. He showed a need to confess for the way he had treated her:

The recent past was also on his mind, however, for he told Fred [Hettman] about running out on a girl whom he had gotten pregnant. "I believe Gene was sorry for what he had done, because he told me the same

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<sup>1</sup>Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten, p. 117.

story two or three times and seemed sad about it all--it was like a confession he wanted to get off his chest."<sup>1</sup>

It appears that his treatment of the innocent Kathleen had caused serious pangs of conscience.

The problems Eugene faced in his marriage to Agnes Boulton are heavily reflected in his plays, as the third chapter of this study will indicate. He and Agnes were married on April 12, 1918, and the marriage was to last officially until July 2, 1929. But the later years of their marriage were spent in anger and separation.

Whether O'Neill could ever have expected a sense of peace in marriage is questionable, for, as his earlier life indicated, he was unable to live in harmony with himself. He was compulsively driven to create anguish in his married life as a way of self-punishment.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, his wife and children were often hurt by his efforts of self-torture--a fact that added to his guilt. Often the punishment was not only mental, for at times he would even come at Agnes with his fists.<sup>3</sup> To an acquaintance, he

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 174.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 432.

<sup>3</sup>Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten, p. 144.

once made the following confession:

"Did I ever tell you what a son of a bitch I've been to Agnes? No, well it's true and I'll tell y'all about it." Reveling in guilt, rather like the times his brother used to face a mirror and call himself the worst names he could think of, . . . <sup>1</sup>

There were many happy times in O'Neill's marriage to Agnes, but they were obviously unable to take his mind off the incidents that blackened his conscience.

In many ways, O'Neill's marriage to Carlotta Monterey Barton was to be the nearest he would ever come to finding happiness in his lifetime, for his marriage to her on July 22, 1929, was to last until his death. She was to play essentially a dual role in her life with Eugene. As a strong mother figure, she protected him from the outside world, guarding him jealously at times. She sought to keep the outside world at a distance, to minimize contacts with his children and acquaintances which might cause him discomfort.<sup>2</sup> As a wife, she was to fill the role of mistress, lover, and companion. But his marriage to Carlotta was to extract a certain penalty as

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 316.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 334-35.



well, for she was a very demanding and jealous wife, able in almost every respect to return any mistreatment O'Neill could cause her. Sheaffer feels that the marriage fulfilled a masochistic impulse on O'Neill's part:

Her virtues and strong points almost everyone recognized, but few if any seemed to realize that her sadistic impulses and unforgiving nature also served as a welding factor between her and O'Neill. Had he, with his deep guilt feelings, been married to someone like Hickey's Evelyn, a stubborn good woman, endlessly forgiving, his troubled conscience would have become intolerable.<sup>1</sup>

As the couple aged, their bouts were to become more physical:

When the nurse appeared on the twenty-ninth, Carlotta tearfully reported that the previous night "he threatened to kill me with his gun and I came in with a butcher knife." In the ensuing brawl, according to her account, he began choking her and she dug her fingernails into his hands, then he, releasing her, "knocked her out cold" with a blow to the jaw. Apparently verifying the essentials of her story, her jaw was swollen slightly and so was his right hand.<sup>2</sup>

Their arguments finally culminated in a temporary separation, but whether it was the need for love or for additional punishment, O'Neill asked her for forgiveness and

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 647.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 558.

returned to Carlotta.<sup>1</sup> As in the case of his marriage to Agnes, these years of tribulation appeared late in the marriage, when both he and Carlotta were growing senile and even more stubborn. However, his marriage to her seemed to fill one of his greatest needs: "Torture and be tortured; for one of his nature, Carlotta was more or less, an ideal mate."<sup>2</sup>

The final aspect of O'Neill's life to bring him anguish was his role as a father. He had fathered three children: Eugene Jr., borne by Kathleen, and Shane and Oona, borne by Agnes Boulton. Apparently, Eugene never relished the role of father. When Agnes told him she was pregnant the first time, he seemed to hope that the doctor had made a mistake.<sup>3</sup> He first met his son, Eugene Jr., when the boy was nearly twelve years old, and he seemed to be reluctant at the meeting, fearing that the boy would resent him.<sup>4</sup> It seems that he never really was able to be a good father, leaving the rearing of the children to

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 657.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 558.

<sup>3</sup>Boulton, Part of a Long Story, p. 299.

<sup>4</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 66.

their mothers, and "chafing" at his fatherly responsibilities.<sup>1</sup> Though he had Eugene, Shane, and Oona join Carlotta and himself from time to time, none of the children spent any extensive amount of time with their father. That this lack of responsibility left his mind in torment was apparent in later years. He was to learn that his eldest son committed suicide, and he was wracked with guilt at this news. According to Carlotta, he "'just became more ill, more unhappy, but never said anything.'"<sup>2</sup> Shane became a dope addict, mimicking the "down-and-out" lifestyle his father had had for a while. And his daughter Oona married Charlie Chaplin, many years her senior, an action O'Neill did not approve of. He was subsequently to drop both Shane and Oona from his will. The anger that he held toward his children in later years might have been an attempt at self-exculpation. As an acquaintance of Oona was to put it, it seemed "'as if O'Neill could not forgive his children because he had abandoned them!'"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 632.

<sup>3</sup>Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten, p. 287.

If it could be truthfully stated, it would be comforting to say that the story of the O'Neill curse of guilt stopped with Eugene. Unfortunately, his three children all showed some degree of guilt relating to their father. Each child felt much the same way that Eugene felt toward his parents. Since they, like Eugene, had felt unloved and unwanted, all his children showed evidence that they believed they were unworthy of their father's love.

The tragic urge that Eugene and Jamie felt to find escape in liquor was duplicated by Eugene Jr. For a time, he was welcomed warmly into Carlotta's and Eugene's life, visiting them frequently. But O'Neill's attention toward his son must have made Carlotta jealous, so much so that O'Neill was forced to decide whom he was to please. His apparent choice of Carlotta must have affected Eugene Jr., as he was invited back less frequently. "The son had always worshipped his father and now he emulated him by finding escape in liquor."<sup>1</sup> He ruined a promising career as a classical scholar and teacher, and eventually slashed

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Bunzel, "The O'Neills: A Tragic Epilogue to the Drama," Life, October 26, 1962, p. 72.

his wrists, leaving the following suicide note along with an empty bourbon bottle: "'Never let it be said of O'Neill that he failed to empty a bottle. Ave atque vale."<sup>1</sup>

Shane O'Neill's life was nearly as tragic as his half-brother's. Unlike Eugene Jr., however, Shane never really found a niche for himself:

Essentially, in fact, he was to remain a child most of his life, a lost, quietly despairing child. But he had little if any chance to turn out otherwise. During his early, formative years, he was reared, because of the family's special mode of living, in near-isolation. . . . His father, whom he worshipped, felt at a loss with the young, particularly his own. If Shane, originally a demonstrative, affectionate youngster, grew up shy and remote, it was partly, no doubt, because he had unconsciously patterned himself on a withdrawn father whose plays, not his flesh-and-blood offspring, were his "children."<sup>2</sup>

The lack of love and attention on the part of his father, along with the fact that, as a sensitive child, he probably felt at least partially responsible for his father's desertion of the family, must have combined to make him feel unworthy. He turned to a life of self-degradation centered around alcohol and drugs, and attempted to take

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 631.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

his own life on at least two occasions.<sup>1</sup> He fought a heroin addiction for many years.<sup>2</sup> He was to find limited contentment in his marriage to Catherine Givens, but even that was marred by the mysterious crib death of their three-month-old boy. All in all, Shane seems to have been faced with the O'Neill "curse" most of his life.

The youngest of Eugene's children, his daughter Oona, did find a large degree of happiness in her life. There is no evidence that she was seriously haunted by a sense of guilt relating to her father. Perhaps in explanation of this fact, however, it should be noted that she was less than two years old when Eugene ran away with Carlotta to Europe. In effect, then, she never really benefitted--or suffered--from her natural father's presence. She visited Carlotta and Eugene very rarely, and probably felt a certain coolness in these visits, particularly on the part of Carlotta. Yet one revealing fact remains: in 1943 she married Charlie Chaplin; she was only eighteen years old--he was fifty-four, the exact same age as Eugene at the time. Luckily, their marriage turned

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 563.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 615.

out to be a happy one, but her mother Agnes suggests that her marriage to Chaplin was partially caused by her searching for a father figure that she never had as a young child.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps she felt driven to find a fatherly love that had never been given to her in her youth.

To all appearances, the O'Neill family received more than its share of hardships. Apparently, various factors combined to produce the disastrous effects noted above. For one, the influence of Catholicism, particularly its teachings concerning punishment and penance, may have caused the O'Neills to see the unhappiness brought into their lives as a form of divine retribution. Also, there were several highly sensitive family members--Ella, Jamie, Eugene, and Shane probably more than the others. Such a degree of sensitivity may well have caused them to "internalize" the punishment, to feel that they were personally to blame for pain caused others. Or perhaps there was a mysterious "Force" behind the family's problems--the same "Force" that Eugene made reference to as being so common in his plays. Whatever the cause, one can only feel pity for the haunted House of O'Neill.

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<sup>1</sup>"Haunting Recollections of Life with a Genius," Life, August 25, 1958, p. 60.

The guilt exhibited by the O'Neill families reflects the characteristics of guilt discussed in the introduction of this study. For the most part, the O'Neills felt a lowering of self-esteem, reflected, for example, in Jamie's and Eugene's acts of debasement and in the self-destructive nature of not only Eugene but also his sons. Moreover, the need to make retribution for a transgression is reflected in such actions as Ella's return to the church and Jamie's abrupt change in lifestyle after his father's death. Indeed, as the following chapters will show, the transgression, the lowering of self-esteem, and the need to make retribution are all parts of the guilt-atonement cycle seen in so many of O'Neill's plays.

The types of actions producing guilt, as discussed in the introduction, were also plainly visible in the O'Neills. James felt that his lack of greatness as an actor had been a great disappointment to his family. Ella felt unfulfilled in her roles as wife and mother, never really able to live comfortably in both roles. Eugene's desertion of his wives and children certainly reflects an inadequacy he felt as a husband and father. Eugene, Jamie, Eugene Jr., and Shane all exhibited, though often



irrationally, a sense of being unworthy of love. Also, Eugene most assuredly felt guilt for not living up to his parents' expectations early in his life. Such actions show the O'Neill family suffering from some of the most common causes of guilt in family relationships.

Finally, the tactics used to alleviate one's guilt, also as discussed in the introductory chapter, are clearly evident in the O'Neill family. Ella's return to the convent in a successful attempt to stop her dope addiction implies a confession on her part. Ella also tried to project her guilt onto others, blaming both James and Eugene for her addiction. A third tactic, resistance, apparently was not used by any of the O'Neills, largely because the final tactic, self-punishment, was so commonly used. The O'Neills seemed more prone to accept guilt and punish themselves than they did to refuse to admit that any guilt existed. The deliberate acts of self-abasement and the attempts at suicide indicate the more common O'Neill tactic of self-punishment.

With guilt playing such an obvious role in O'Neill's life, it is understandable that such guilt would be reflected in his plays. The following chapter, devoted to a study of marital guilt in O'Neill's multiact plays,

will reveal the playwright's extensive use of his marriages and his parents' marriage to provide the basis for guilt between married couples in his works.

## C H A P T E R   I I I

### GUILT RESULTING FROM HUSBAND-WIFE RELATIONSHIPS

When viewed in chronological order, O'Neill's plays exhibit an interesting pattern relating to husband and wife guilt. The early multiact plays written between 1918 and 1921--Beyond the Horizon, Gold, and The First Man--do not focus heavily on this aspect of guilt. Most likely, the lack of concern for guilt in marriage in these plays is explained by two reasons: his own marriage to Agnes Boulton was not experiencing strife as yet, and because his parents were still living, he evidently did not feel free to deal with their marriage openly in his plays. However, beginning with Welded, written in 1922, the subject of guilt between husband and wife becomes a more common theme. His marriage to Agnes, now four years old, began to exhibit strain, and both of his parents were now dead. James had died in 1920; his wife, early in 1922. This second group of plays, consisting of Welded, All God's Chillun Got Wings, The Great God Brown, Strange Interlude, and Days Without End, show O'Neill dealing with the troubles facing his own marriage to Agnes and reflecting upon his parents' marriage as well. The final group

of plays, all written during his marriage to Carlotta, which, in its early years at least, was relatively peaceful, shows a slightly different preoccupation with marital guilt. It seems that in Mourning Becomes Electra, A Touch of the Poet, The Iceman Cometh, and Long Day's Journey into Night O'Neill is seeking to "bury the ghosts" of his past, both in his marriage to Agnes and in his parents' marriage. These plays are more reflective and focus not so much on the tribulations of marriage as on the need for forgiveness. The following examination of marital guilt in O'Neill's multiact plays will study his plays in these three groups. Also, when it is feasible, the plays will be compared to specific incidents in O'Neill's or his parents' marriage.

O'Neill's Beyond the Horizon, his first major success, is a play that revolves around the conflicts of a young man who has trapped himself in a lifestyle that is unsuited to his character. Robert Mayo is essentially a dreamer at heart, always concerned with what lies beyond the horizon. His biggest mistake in life occurred on the night before he was to go in quest of his dream aboard his uncle's ship. Ruth, a young neighbor girl, in telling Robert good-bye, reveals that she loves him. Robert had

always presumed that she was in love with his brother Andrew, who is as much a homebody as Robert is a dreamer. Robert then discovers that he loves Ruth and decides to remain on his father's farm and marry Ruth. Andrew, feeling uncomfortable as a third party, takes Robert's place aboard his uncle's sailing vessel, an action that Robert and his parents see as a grave mistake. Thus, each brother makes a decision contrary to his true nature. Robert, the dreamer, is tied to the life of a farmer, and Andrew, a natural man of the land, goes "beyond the horizon."

The play essentially focuses on the theme of being true to one's dream. However, an examination of Ruth's and Robert's marriage also shows a source of guilt, mostly on the part of Robert. His role as a farmer is ill-suited to him, and he leads his family to financial ruin. He confesses to Ruth, "I'll be frank, Ruth. I've been an utter failure, and I've dragged you with me. I couldn't blame you in all justice--for hating me."<sup>1</sup> His failure as a husband and father leads him to a destructive end. He later contracts tuberculosis, and exhibiting a fatalistic attitude, appears almost to seek out death. In

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Beyond the Horizon, in The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 148.

the final scene of the play, he makes his way out of the house to a hill overlooking the sea. He expresses a sense of elation over his impending death:

ROBERT. (in a voice which is suddenly ringing with the happiness of hope) You musn't feel sorry for me. Don't you see I'm happy at last--free--free!--freed from the farm--free to wander on and on--eternally! (He raises himself on his elbow, his face radiant, and points to the horizon) Look! Isn't it beautiful beyond the hills?<sup>1</sup>

His death serves a dual purpose. He is now freed from the farm, finally able to roam as he pleases, and he is also freed from a marriage in which he has been an utter failure.

Two similarities exist between this play and O'Neill's life. First, O'Neill bears a remarkable similarity to Robert Mayo. Both had an instinct directed toward dreaming and traveling to far away places. Robert's ill-chosen marriage to Ruth essentially parallels O'Neill's own marriage to Kathleen Jenkins, except that O'Neill did not, as Robert did, stay tied down. The dreamer in him carried him off to Honduras and Buenos Aires. But O'Neill's sense of guilt in his marriage is

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 167.

reflected in Robert Mayo. Secondly, Robert's almost thankful acceptance of tuberculosis as a means out of his problems is similar to O'Neill's attempted suicide, which, as noted in Chapter I, was largely motivated out of his sense of guilt toward Kathleen.

Gold never achieved the measure of success that Beyond the Horizon brought O'Neill. It paints a largely unrealistic portrait of a sea captain's search for gold. Captain Bartlett and his crew, shipwrecked on a tropical island and ravaged by thirst, stumble upon a treasure of "gold," which is actually a box of cheap metal trinkets. The captain sees the find as his at last achieving the success he has always wanted in life:

Aye, I'll rest to home 'til the day I die. Aye, woman, I be comin' home now. Aye, Nat and Sue, your father be comin' home for the rest o' his life. I'll give up whalin' like ye've always been askin' me, Sarah. Aye, I'll go to meetin' with ye on a Sunday like ye've always prayed I would. We'll make the damn neighbors open their eyes, curse 'em! Carriages and silks for ye--they'll be nothin' too good--and for Sue and the boy. I've been dreamin' o' this for years.<sup>1</sup>

Bartlett reveals that his treasure represents a real success in life, implying that a certain amount of guilt

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Gold, in Six Short Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1951), p. 131.

existed in his unfulfilled life with Sarah and the children.

However, Bartlett is separated from his treasure. When a rescue ship comes, he and his coconspirators bury the treasure so that they will not be forced to share it with anyone else. Also, Bartlett allows the murder of two men, who because of a secret cache of drinking water have not experienced the delirium of the others and have seen the folly of the other men's actions. Because of an imagined threat, the captain reluctantly allows them to be killed, all the while rationalizing that since he did not lift a hand against them, he is blameless.

When he is eventually reunited with his family, the captain's gnawing desire to return and get the treasure affects his life with his wife Sarah. It becomes a consuming passion which overshadows everything else in his life. Also, haunted by his conspiracy in the murders, he is unable to face his wife, as she reveals: "But then, all to once. God gave me sight and I saw 'twas guilt written on your face, in the queer stricken way you acted, and guilt in your eyes. . . . I see it now, as I always see it when you look at me."<sup>1</sup> Subconsciously knowing the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 156.



truth about the treasure, he still seems driven by the promise of wealth, unable to back down because of his pride. Shamed that Sarah senses the truth, he feels he must prove himself and his lie to her. He forces Sarah to christen his new ship, which he is naming after her. Knowing that her husband is living a lie, she at first refuses to place her "stamp of approval" on his mission. But Bartlett forces her by threatening to take their son Nat along on the trip to recover the treasure. His ailing wife finally submits to his blackmail and shortly thereafter dies. Bartlett's daughter Sue, who vaguely realizes his motives for going on the trip, secretly arranges for a family friend to command the ship, and it leaves while Bartlett is with his dying wife. This ship also is lost in a shipwreck, and near the end of the play, with the prospect of failure once again facing the sea captain, he pulls out a brass bracelet he had smuggled back and confesses the lie he has been living.

Largely adding to the unreality of the play, Bartlett's feeling of guilt toward his wife is minimal. He is so consumed by greed that his guilt is limited more to a state of discomfort than to any real remorse. When he does confess at the end, it is more a confession aimed

at himself for living a lie than at his wife for sins he has committed against her.

Though the marital guilt is slight within the play, Gold does hold one interesting similarity with O'Neill's life. In the character Bartlett, much of James O'Neill, Sr. can be seen. O'Neill's play can be interpreted as an effort to show guilt in James's sense of greed (as Eugene saw it) and in his father's failure to claim the success of a truly great actor. Sheaffer discusses this similarity:

. . . just as James had frittered away his talent on the Dumas dramatization, Bartlett, . . . betrays his better self by treasure-hunting; just as the fortune James made from Monte Cristo . . . failed to bring him a sense of security, since he lost most of the money in bad investments, so the cache in Gold proves worthless-- . . . Finally, again like James O'Neill, who had sought wealth not merely for his own sake but for that of his family, Bartlett, trying to justify his greed and crimes, says he wants to give his wife and children, especially his wife, the best of everything.<sup>1</sup>

In this light, then, the marital guilt appears to focus upon guilt Eugene saw in his parents' marriage.

The last play in this group of early plays is The First Man. It is a play which also suffers from an

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, pp. 12-13.

atmosphere of unreality. Centering around the life of Curtis and Martha Jayson, it shows the impact of the birth of a child on their marriage. An anthropologist, Curtis is about to embark on a trip in search of the "missing link" in man's development. He has a surprise to tell Martha, namely that he has secured permission for her to go on the expedition as his assistant. She also has a surprise for him, namely that she is pregnant. The news sets up a wall of resentment between them. Jayson and his wife had years before experienced a terrible loss, the sudden death of their two children. They had vowed to live the rest of their life together as man and wife without children, so he sees her desire to have the baby as a betrayal of their agreement. Also, a baby would threaten his work, especially in the role his wife had always had as his valuable assistant. Curtis Jayson is vehement in his outrage, even to the point of suggesting an abortion. Martha is adamant, though, and vows to have the baby.

The marital guilt begins to emerge at this point. Martha, apparently suffering because her actions have brought strife into her marriage, suddenly begins resisting the birth of the baby. The labor is extremely protracted, and her screams of pain punctuate the action in

the play. Her sister-in-law Emily comments on the difficult labor; "It's almost as if her suffering was a punishment, don't you think?"<sup>1</sup> Martha, as ultimate self-punishment, dies after giving birth. Before her melodramatic death, though, she asks her husband's forgiveness for ruining their marriage.

Jayson also experiences a sense of remorse. Realizing the mental and emotional agony he has caused his wife through his uncompromising attitude, he analyzes the love-hate relationship in their marriage: "There was something in each of us the other grew to hate. And still we loved as never before, perhaps, for we grew to pity each other's helplessness."<sup>2</sup> When Martha is in the throes of birth pains, his guilt increases: "Isn't it fiendish that I should be the one to add to her torture--in spite of myself--in spite of all my will to conceal it! She'll never forgive me, never! And how can I forgive myself?"<sup>3</sup> Before she dies, there is an emotional moment between them, as he relates it:

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, The First Man, in The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 591.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 598.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 597.

CURTIS. (looking around him bewilderedly) Yes. (Suddenly remembrance comes and a spasm of intolerable pain contracts his features. He presses his hands to the side of his head and groans brokenly) Martha! (He appeals wildly to the others) Her eyes--she knew me--she smiled--she whispered--Forgive me, Curt!--Forgive her--when it was I who should have said forgive me--but before I could--she--(He falters brokenly.)<sup>1</sup>

The unreality in the play, some of which stems from its melodramatic actions, lies in part in Curtis's reaction to the child. One would think that, out of guilt felt over his actions toward his wife, he would cling to the baby, forsaking his selfish ambitions for the satisfaction he would find in rearing the child. However, on the day of Martha's funeral, Curtis embarks on the anthropological expedition, leaving the rearing of the infant boy to Curtis's aunt. Curtis shows no real sense of guilt at the end of the play.

Speculating on the marital guilt within the play, one wonders whether O'Neill was at least to a degree writing about his marriage to Agnes. The play was written in 1920, and Shane O'Neill was born in 1919. Viewed in this light, The First Man could well be interpreted as an expression of guilt O'Neill might have felt toward Agnes's

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 602.

pregnancy as a form of betrayal. As Sheaffer notes, O'Neill once wrote Agnes, "'I wanted you alone . . . in an aloneness broken by nothing. Not even by children of our own. I don't understand children, they make me uneasy.'"<sup>1</sup> If Agnes experienced any sense of anguish over threatening her relationship with Eugene, O'Neill may very well have felt guilt at making her feel at fault for bringing a source of strife into their marriage. Travis Bogard also sees evidence of O'Neill's "personal resentment at Agnes's pregnancy in 1919."<sup>2</sup>

In the second group of plays dealing with marital guilt, O'Neill at times appears to use them as "testing grounds" for his own marriage. The husbands' actions often suggest that O'Neill was looking for relief from the sense of guilt he himself experienced in his marriage to Agnes. Whether he achieved any real sense of peace is questionable, however, since the endings in two of the most autobiographical of the group (Welded and Days Without End) are rather tentative and indefinite.

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup>Travis Bogard, Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 151.

Welded, written in 1922, has been described as "a study of the conflict between two souls whose power to torture each other is measured only in terms of their great mutual passion."<sup>1</sup> Thus, it is a play that presents a love-hate relationship that exists in many of O'Neill's plays. Michael Cape, a young playwright, comes home and surprises his wife Eleanor, who had not expected him back from the separation from her he took to attempt to complete a play. As they are about to proceed in their love-making, their mutual friend John visits. As an actress, Eleanor had years earlier engaged John as her manager. Michael is made jealous by John's appearance, and after John leaves, Michael and Eleanor argue. One grasps the root of their conflict in one of Eleanor's speeches: "I feel a cruel presence in you paralyzing me, creeping over my body, possessing it so it's no longer my body--then grasping at some last inmost thing which makes me me--my soul--demanding to have that, too! I have to rebel with all my strength-- . . . "<sup>2</sup> Eleanor and Michael are both

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), p. 184.

<sup>2</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Welded, in Six Short Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1951), p. 267.

faced with the same troublesome dilemma: each feels a strong passion for the other but rebels at being possessed. As their argument intensifies, each leaves the house to have an affair in an attempt to hurt the other. But both Michael and Eleanor are unable to commit adultery because of the sense of guilt it brings. Eleanor, going to John's apartment in revenge, falters when John presses her for a sexual liaison. She sees a vision of Michael: "Yes--I swear I saw him--standing at the head of the stairs waiting for me-- . . . "<sup>1</sup> Michael's revenge is more self-destructive. He goes to a prostitute and at one point quotes an unidentified piece of writing: "'O love of mine, let down your hair and I will make my shroud of it.'"<sup>2</sup> A bit later, he repeats the sentiment: "Save me, you! Help me to kill! Help me to gain peace!"<sup>3</sup> Like Eleanor, however, Michael balks at his attempt at revenge. He returns to the apartment where he and Eleanor seek each other's forgiveness. Yet their peacemaking has an indefinite tone to it. Neither really feels that their problem is over:

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

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 288.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 289.



CAPE. We've failed!

ELEANOR. Are we weak? (Dreamily) I'm happy.

CAPE. Strong! We can live again! (Exultantly--  
but as if testing her, warningly) But we'll hate!

ELEANOR. (in her same tone) Yes!

CAPE. And we'll torture and tear, and clutch for  
each other's souls!--fight--fail and hate again--(he  
raises his voice in aggressive triumph) but!--fail  
with pride--with joy!<sup>1</sup>

There is extensive evidence that Welded is a play written about O'Neill's second marriage. Beside the obvious duplication in the husbands' professions, another similarity is found in some words O'Neill wrote in a copy of the play he gave to Agnes: "'I love you! Forgive me all I've ever done, all I'll ever do.'"<sup>2</sup> Like the play, his inscription ends with an expression of his awareness that the trouble in their marriage had not been laid to rest. According to Sheaffer, Agnes had called the play a "carbon copy" of their relationship.<sup>3</sup> Also, Sheaffer reveals that while O'Neill was working on the play, he drank heavily and at one point cut up every photograph of Agnes he could find and scattered the pieces about the floor.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 302.

<sup>2</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 133.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

That the play was autobiographical was even apparent to Stark Young, a mutual friend. Bowen quotes Young's account of the play's rehearsals:

" . . . --and I felt that this play was in the nature of a confession and a benediction. I can see them now at some of the rehearsals sitting side by side there in the third row and listening to every speech, good or bad, and taking it all as bona fide and their own."<sup>1</sup>

Few plays were to deal with the guilt O'Neill experienced in his marriage to Agnes with more punishing reality than did Welded.

With the death of his mother on February 28, 1922, O'Neill must have felt free to deal with the guilt he saw in his parents' marriage, for All God's Chillun Got Wings, the next play he was to write after Welded was completed, reflects his parents' marriage. The play caused an uproar, since it dealt with an interracial marriage. On the surface, O'Neill appears to be attacking society and its prejudice as the cause of Jim and Ella Harris's tortured marriage, but a closer examination reveals a deeper cause.

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<sup>1</sup>Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten, p. 149.

In this play, because of a variety of misfortunes and her own weaknesses, Ella is forced to turn to her only real friend in life, Jim Harris, a black man. Their decision to be married proves a tragic one, for the sharp sense of persecution which they feel drives them to France to seek solace in a less prejudiced environment. However, realizing they are running away from their problems rather than facing them, Jim and Ella return to America. At this point the source of conflict in their marriage surfaces, for Ella is unable to live with Jim as an equal:

ELLA. Yes, we both graduated from the same High School, didn't we? That was dead easy for me. Why I hardly even looked at a book. But Jim says it was awfully hard for him. He failed one year, remember? (She turns and smiles at JIM--a tolerant, superior smile but one full of genuine love. HATTIE [Jim's sister] is outraged, but JIM smiles).

JIM. Yes, it was hard for me, Honey.

ELLA. And the law school examinations Jim hardly ever could pass at all. Could you? (She laughs lovingly).<sup>1</sup>

While on the one hand Ella wishes Jim success in his endeavors to get his law degree, the more sinister side of

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, All God's Chillun Got Wings, in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, with an Introduction by Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: The Modern Library, 1941), p. 118.

her nature cannot permit her to admit Jim is her equal. At one point she tells Jim, "I want the whole world to know you're the whitest of the white! I want you to climb and climb-- . . . "<sup>1</sup> Moments later, after Jim leaves the room, she confesses to the symbolic African mask on the wall, "He won't pass, you wait and see. Not in a thousand years!"<sup>2</sup> And her prediction holds true. Just before his final attempt at passing his bar exam, Ella becomes psychotic in her attempts to destroy his efforts. She carries a butcher knife around the house, and at one point her jealous hatred is revealed in its most pitiable state: "( . . . She cannot contain herself but breaks out harshly with a cruel, venomous grin) You dirty nigger!"<sup>3</sup> Under such pressure, Jim does fail the exam. He accepts his failure in a manner that shows he is truly a broken man:

Pass? Me? Jim Crow Harris? Nigger Jim Harris--become a full-fledged Member of the Bar! Why the mere notion of it is enough to kill you with laughing! It'd be against all natural laws, all human right and justice. It'd be miraculous, there'd be earthquakes and catastrophes, . . . and God'd be tipped head first right out of the Judgement Seat!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

At the end of the play the couple is shown in its tragic new relationship. Ella has become an innocent little girl again, and Jim is cast as "Uncle Jim," her protector. Ella realizes her guilt in the outcome, wondering if God will forgive her.<sup>1</sup> Jim, who is more the victim than the victimizer, also seeks forgiveness:

Forgive me, God--and make me worthy! Now I see Your Light again! Now I hear Your Voice! (He begins to weep in an ecstasy of religious humility) Forgive me, God, for blaspheming You! Let this fire of burning suffering purify me of selfishness and make me worthy of the child You send me for the woman You take away!<sup>2</sup>

While society is partially at fault, Jim, and to a larger degree, Ella, also must bear the weight of their sins.

At first glance this play has little relationship to anything in O'Neill's life. Yet the similarities between the play and O'Neill's parents' marriage are many. First, the characters in the play bear the same first name as O'Neill's parents, a fact that could hardly be called a coincidence. Also, Ella O'Neill viewed James, and all actors, as being below her own social class. Ella O'Neill, in her weakness of character, also chafed at being dependent on her husband, and both Ella Harris and Ella O'Neill

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

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

sought respite from their guilt--Ella Harris in insanity and Ella O'Neill in her morphine addiction.<sup>1</sup> It is also of interest to note that the reader feels pity toward the husband Jim Harris, a pity that O'Neill adopted later in life toward his father as a victim of circumstances. Considered in these terms, then, All God's Chillun Got Wings appears to be a highly personal play which O'Neill disguised in a smoke screen of racial messages.

The Great God Brown is probably the most innovative play Eugene O'Neill ever wrote. Its use of masks and its theme make it one of his more interesting efforts. Like so many of his earlier plays, however, it deals primarily with the conflict of an artist living in an imperfect and materialistic world. The main character, Dion Anthony, faces a problem in his marriage similar in scope to that of another dreamer discussed earlier in this chapter, Robert Mayo of Beyond the Horizon. Like Robert, Dion is essentially a financial failure, a fact which is revealed in a conversation with his wife Margaret:

MARGARET. We've only got about one hundred dollars left in the bank.

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Gelb, "'Written in Tears and Blood . . .,'" New York Times, 4 March 1973, sec. 2, p. 19.

DION. (with dazed surprise) What! Is all the money from the sale of the house gone?

MARGARET. (wearily) Every day or so you've been cashing checks. You've been drinking--you haven't counted--<sup>1</sup>

Dion sends Margaret to their friend Billy Brown, a successful architect and materialist, to ask him to give Dion a job. Dion's speech is revealing:

Then I ask my wife to go and ask Billy Brown--that's more deadly than if I went myself! (With wild mockery) Ask him if he can't find an opening for a talented young man who is only honest when he isn't sober--implore him, beg him in the name of old love, old friendship--to be a generous hero and save the woman and her children!<sup>2</sup>

The expression, "--that's more deadly than if I went myself!" hints at the death wish so common in many of O'Neill's characters. The added embarrassment of his having Margaret go ask for help adds to his feeling of failure. His statement implies that his death is shortly forthcoming. In a farewell to his wife, he expresses his deep sense of remorse for his failure as a husband:

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, The Great God Brown, in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, with an Introduction by Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: The Modern Library, 1941), p. 322.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 324.

Look at me, Mrs. Anthony! It's the last chance! Tomorrow I'll have moved on to the next hell! Behold your man--the sniveling, cringing, life-denying Christian slave you have so nobly ignored in the father of your sons! Look! (He tears the mask from his face, which is radiant with a great pure love for her and a great sympathy and tenderness) O woman--my love--that I have sinned against in my sick pride and cruelty--forgive my sins--forgive my solitude--forgive my sickness--forgive me! (He kneels and kisses the hem of her dress).<sup>1</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Dion's heart gives out and he dies.

Dion, like most of O'Neill's "artists," is apparently a reflection of O'Neill himself. One of O'Neill's critics, Edwin Engel, calls the play "a personal allegory depicting the ordeal of Eugene O'Neill."<sup>2</sup> The ordeal is multifaceted, involving guilt expressed toward his parents and toward his lack of religious faith. But marital guilt is one of the causes behind Dion's self-destructive end. Perhaps in the resolution of Dion's marital guilt, O'Neill was seeking to salve his own conscience for destroying his marriage to Kathleen and for the strife he was presently feeling as an artist tied down to a wife and children.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 343.

<sup>2</sup>Edwin Engel, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 155.



Another of O'Neill's most innovative, and financially successful, plays is Strange Interlude. An industrious effort, it covers approximately forty years in the lives of its characters and was written in nine acts. One of the many points of focus in the play is marital guilt. Nina Leeds, daughter of a possessive professor, lost her fiancé Gordon in World War I. She feels guilty because she had not physically given herself to him before he died. She tries to make up for her "sin" by becoming a nurse in an army hospital and giving herself freely to the soldiers she meets. Her promiscuity forces a deep sense of remorse on her, and she returns home looking for punishment. However, her father has just died; so she turns to Charlie Marsden, an old friend, who becomes her father figure. Charlie, who himself has more than a fatherly love for her, finally decides that she should marry Sam Evans, a young man who has expressed his love for Nina. Nina interprets Charlie's suggestion as a punishment: "Thank you, Father. You've been so kind. You've let me off too easily. I don't feel as if you'd punished me hardly at all. But I'll never, never do it again, I promise--never, never!--"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Strange Interlude, in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, with an Introduction by Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: The Modern Library, 1941), p. 528.

Thus, her union is not a product of any love, and the stage is set for an unhappy marriage.

Nina soon becomes pregnant and finds a sense of contentment in her marriage. However, her peace is not to last, for she learns from Sam's mother of the Evans's family curse: insanity. Confronted with this news, Nina agrees with her mother-in-law that abortion is the only answer, since Sam does not know of his family's history of insanity, nor does he know of Nina's pregnancy.

In the fourth act, Sam is seen as a man haunted by his failures. His life with Nina has turned sour, and he thinks it is his fault, since he is doing poorly in his job and has not (he thinks) given Nina the child she wants. In one of the many asides O'Neill incorporates in this play to reveal the thoughts of his characters, Sam muses on his plight:

(He sits down on the edge of the bench nearby, his shoulders hunched--despondently)

    Couldn't deny it . . . been going stale ever  
     since we came back from that trip home . . . no  
     ideas . . . I'll get fired . . . sterile . . .  
 (With a guilty terror)  
     in more ways than one, I guess! . . . <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 549.

Nina is tortured as well, largely because she knows she has robbed Sam of the happiness he would have had as a father. She realizes that her new-found revulsion directed against Sam and his weakness is hurting him, yet she sees no way out of her predicament. Finally her guilt motivates her to have a child by another man. By this time Sam is contemplating suicide, telling himself, " . . . you'd better resign from the whole game . . . with a gun!"<sup>1</sup> He is saved when he learns Nina is pregnant, but, of course, Nina does not tell him that the child was fathered by Ned Darrell, a mutual friend. Her life is further complicated by the fact that she and Darrell have fallen in love. Ned, however, cannot live with his guilt for having deceived Sam; so he deserts Nina and travels abroad to do scientific research. Nina, forced to live without her lover, turns inward and focuses all her love and attention on her unborn child, exhibiting a strong sense of personal power.

After the baby is born, Darrell returns and desires to claim his son and his lover, no matter what the cost to Sam. Nina, however, will not permit him to upset

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 574.

her life. She has become accustomed to her role--she realizes that Sam is dependent upon her as his wife; Charlie has fallen comfortably into a fatherly role; her baby is, of course, dependent on her; and now her lover has come back. She realizes that her life is at last comfortable, and she muses on her multifaceted existence:

. . . they dissolve in me, their life is my life  
 . . . I am pregnant with the three! . . . husband!  
 . . . lover! . . . father! . . . and the fourth  
 man! . . . little man! . . . little Gordon! . . .  
 he is mind too! . . . that makes it perfect!  
 . . . <sup>1</sup>

Nina achieves a position that few O'Neill characters do: she has, through her own strength, risen above guilt. In the latter portion of the play, she is caught in a struggle to maintain her dominance over the men in her life, losing out to Sam, who dies; to Ned, who finally breaks her hold on him; and to her son Gordon, who leaves to marry the young and beautiful Madeline. Nina at the end of the play is humbled, but still does not feel guilty. She admits to Charlie, whom she is going to wed in a marriage of convenience, that she sees life as "an interlude, of trial and preparation, say, in which our souls have been

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 616.

scraped clean of impure flesh and made worthy to bleach in peace."<sup>1</sup>

There is little tangible basis for a comparison of Strange Interlude and O'Neill's life as it concerned marriage. The only similarity of any importance lies in Sam's consideration of suicide to end the guilt he faces because of his failure to bring Nina marital happiness. Yet even with this similarity, O'Neill felt guilt because he had fathered children and deserted them, not because, like Sam, he had been unable to father a child. In its early stages, then, Strange Interlude does deal with guilt arising from dishonesty and inadequacy in marriage, but it has no clear evidence of strong autobiographical influences.

O'Neill's next play, Days Without End, was to deal with his marriage much more personally. The play focuses on the problems faced by John Loving, who actually exists in the play as two characters, the tortured John and his tormenting alter ego called, ironically, Loving. Days Without End must have been a difficult play to write, since O'Neill worked on it on and off for roughly six

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 681.

years, from 1927 to 1933. One must remember that these were turbulent years in his life, largely due to his desertion of Agnes and the children in 1928. Most attention drawn to the play focuses on the issue of O'Neill's religious faith, for the play appears to be his effort to reembrace Catholicism. His effort was to fail, as later writings were to reveal, but perhaps he did get from the play a sense of relief through the confession of John.

John Loving is a man without faith as the play begins. His cynical alter ego Loving tries to convince him that he should be his own man, functioning outside the convenient forgiveness to be found in religion. The central issue of the play over which John and Loving are in conflict is John's infidelity. John had threatened an otherwise ideal marriage through his sexual affair with Lucy, a friend of the family. Revealing his need to confess his guilt, John is outlining the plot for a "novel" he is writing, a work which parallels exactly his affair with Lucy. However, John has reached a stumbling block. His erring character is about to confess to his wife, and does not know what her reaction will be. Loving poses the question to John: "How are you going to end this interesting plot of yours? Given your hero's ridiculous

conscience, what happens then?"<sup>1</sup> There seems to be only one choice--John must summarize the plot for his wife Elsa and see her reaction. His plot summary turns out to be a thinly-disguised confession, a confession, interestingly enough, given in the presence of not only Elsa but also John's visiting uncle, a Catholic priest named Father Baird:

JOHN.

(Forcing himself to go on)

Well I--I know you can imagine the hell he went through from the moment he came to himself and realized the vileness he had been guilty of. He couldn't forgive himself--and that's what his whole being now cried out for--forgiveness!

FATHER BAIRD.

(Quietly)

I can well believe that, Jack.

JOHN.

He wanted to tell his wife and beg forgiveness--but he was afraid of losing her love. . . . And here's where I'd like to have your opinion, Elsa. The question doesn't come up in my story, as you'll see, but--Could his wife have forgiven him, do you think?<sup>2</sup>

When Elsa reveals that she could neither understand nor condone the affair, John has the character in his novel indirectly kill his wife. Just getting over the flu, she

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Days Without End (New York: Random House, 1934), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

runs out into a storm, catches pneumonia, and dies. John, being true to his plot, knows Elsa is just getting over the flu. She shortly thereafter walks out into the inclement weather. Perhaps out of some sense of her inadequacy as a wife reflected in John's desire to have an affair outside of marriage, she is now made to suffer guilt, a guilt which she attempts to ease through "suicide." She returns hours later very ill.

Of course, John's guilt is now compounded. The destructive Loving presents John with a way out: "She seems to have taken her end in your story very seriously. Let's hope she doesn't carry that too far! You have enough on your conscience already--without murder! You couldn't live, I know, if--"<sup>1</sup> In the conclusion to his novel, John sees the opportunity for the peace that he is seeking: "Death will not be an end but a new beginning, a reunion with her in which their love will go on forever within the eternal peace of love of God!"<sup>2</sup>

John and Elsa are saved the fate of death, however. Elsa, summoning up great personal strength, forgives

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 113.



John. Shortly thereafter she begins a rapid recovery. John sees there is still hope and goes to the church where he asks for and apparently receives forgiveness. He addresses the statue of Christ:

O Brother Who lived and loved and suffered and died with us, Who knoweth the tortured hearts of men, canst Thou not forgive--now--when I surrender all to Thee--when I have forgiven Thee--the love that Thou once took from me! . . . Ah! Thou hast heard me at last! Thou hast not forsaken me! Thou hast always loved me! I am forgiven! I can forgive myself--through Thee!<sup>1</sup>

With John's confession, he has destroyed his alter ego Loving, who falls forward and dies, and the play has a very uncharacteristic element: a happy ending.

The autobiographical parallels found in the play are interesting. O'Neill, of course, is John, and Agnes is Elsa. The act of infidelity must have represented his love affair, whether physical at this stage or not, with Carlotta. The guilt that John experiences in the play is that which O'Neill possessed for the pain he was causing Agnes. Due to the length of the play's period of compensation, however, it holds an interesting twist:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 154.

Considering that O'Neill conceived the story idea not long after his brief romantic entanglement with Carlotta, a period when he thought their romance [his and Agnes's] was over, it seems clear that the play was born of his guilt feelings toward Agnes. Thus the crowning irony behind "Days" is that by the time he came to write it, Carlotta, originally the model for the woman who seduces the hero, had become the model for his devoted wife.<sup>1</sup>

The sense of peace John achieved in the play was apparently never duplicated in O'Neill's real life. But the play evidently had a therapeutic effect in that it helped O'Neill relieve some of the enormous burden associated with his treatment of Agnes and stood as a tribute to his marriage to Carlotta. Bogard comments, " . . . Days Without End takes an important autobiographical step at the same time as it attempts to hymn the marriage in which he found peace."<sup>2</sup>

The last group of plays which reveals O'Neill's preoccupation with guilt in marriage began with his writing Mourning Becomes Electra. This play, fashioned after the story of Agamemnon, his wife Clytemnestra, and their two children, Orestes and Electra, is set in America's

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 402.

<sup>2</sup>Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 325.

Civil War days. The conflict between the members of the family in Aeschylus' tragedy is given a more modern setting by O'Neill.

At the beginning of the trilogy, the reader learns that Ezra Mannon (Agamemnon's counterpart) and his son Orin (Orestes' counterpart) are soon to return from the Civil War. In her husband's absence, Christine (Clytemnestra) has taken a lover, Adam Brant (Aegisthus), who is actually Ezra's cousin bent on revenge for his mother's ill treatment by Ezra. Christine no longer loves her husband, as she admits when confronted by her daughter Lavinia (Electra): "I loved him once--before I married him--incredible as that seems now! He was handsome in his lieutenant's uniform! He was silent and mysterious and romantic! But marriage soon turned our romance into--disgust!"<sup>1</sup> When Ezra comes home, he is determined to end the source of conflict in their marriage--his cold, puritanistic attitude:

MANNON. That's always been the Mannons' way of thinking. They went to the white meeting-house on Sabbaths and meditated on death. Life was a dying.

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Mourning Becomes Electra, in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, with an Introduction by Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: The Modern Library, 1941), p. 714.

Being born was starting to die. Death was being born.  
(Shaking his head with a dogged bewilderment) How in  
hell people ever got such notions! That white  
meeting-house.<sup>1</sup>

He reveals that he has known of the conflict in their marriage for some time, even to the point that his volunteering for the Mexican War was an attempt at suicide.<sup>2</sup> He concludes his plea for renewed love in their marriage:  
"I'm sick of death! I want life! Maybe you could love me now! (In a note of final desperate pleading) I've got to make you love me!"<sup>3</sup>

However, Christine has long since given up her love for Ezra, and in an action which reveals her amazing power, she substitutes poison for his medicine. Just before he dies, he points an accusing finger at Christine in the presence of Lavinia and says, "She's guilty--not medicine."<sup>4</sup> Moments later, Christine faints and drops the box which contained the poison. Lavinia finds it, and the stage is set for the last act.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 738.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 739.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 740.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 748.

Christine has perhaps overestimated her ability to live with a murder on her conscience. After friends come to comfort her in her grief, she comments, "I'm so nervous. It's been a little harrowing--all these people coming to stand around and stare at the dead--and at me."<sup>1</sup> After Orin returns from the war, Lavinia manipulates him, using his jealousy, and they plot to kill Christine's co-conspirator in the murder, Adam Brant. After Christine learns of Brant's death, she commits suicide, partly out of her guilt for the murder and partly out of grief for her lost lover Adam. The rest of the play focuses on the guilt passed on to the children.

As for autobiographical elements in the play, there is the suggestion that O'Neill is presenting a highly exaggerated picture of his parents in Mourning Becomes Electra. Barbara Gelb comments that " . . . the conflict between husband and wife is expressed in terms of the conflict between Ella and James O'Neill."<sup>2</sup> The lack of communication on the part of husband and wife as well as the inadequacy the husband was made to feel are similar

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 758.

<sup>2</sup>Barbara Gelb, "'Written in Tears and Blood . . . ,'" p. 19.

elements in the play and in James's and Ella's marriage. There is no discernible similarity between the play and Eugene's marriage, except for the reference to suicide so common in O'Neill's works.

A Touch of the Poet, the next play O'Neill wrote, does bear a closer resemblance to the marriage of James and Ella. The play's protagonist is Con Melody, a man whose father had risen from a common man to become an estate owner in Ireland. Con himself had served with distinction in the British army, rising to the rank of major. His fondest recollection is his being commended by the Duke of Wellington for his bravery at the battle of Talavera. Even before that day of honor, however, his life had begun to degenerate. He frittered away his inheritance and was "trapped" into marriage when Nora, then his lover, became pregnant. Being an honorable man, he felt obligated to marry her, and it was at this point that he left for the war, leaving his wife and child in the castle that was still left from the estate. When the war was over, he sold what was left of his estate and brought his family to America, where he set himself up as a "gentleman" tavern owner. Once the play begins, it is clear that he has tried to maintain the impression of being a

part of the gentry. Nora and his daughter Sara are forced to work like peasants while he does not lift a finger. He spends wasted money on his handsome mare, for he sees in her a reflection of the gentlemanly life-style he idolizes. He dresses and talks as a gentleman, viewing himself as a Byronic hero. He is fond of quoting the poet:

"I have not loved the World, nor the World me;  
 I have not flattered its rank breath, nor bowed  
 To its idolatries a patient knee, . . .  
 . . . in the crowd  
 They could not deem me one of such--I stood  
 Among them, but not of them . . . "1

Melody, surrounded with Irish "peasant" friends, is a paradox: he mistreats his wife and daughter and drinks heavily but still views himself as a gentleman.

Beneath this mask of gentlemanly manners, however, there lives a man who feels guilt for his actions, especially toward his patient and loving wife:

MELODY: You won't even cure yourself of that damned peasant's brogue. And your daughter is becoming as bad.

NORA: She only puts on the brogue to tease you. She can speak as fine as any lady in the land if she wants.

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, A Touch of the Poet, in The Later Plays of Eugene O'Neill, ed. Travis Bogard (New York: The Modern Library, 1967), p. 161-62.

MELODY (Is not listening--sunk in bitter brooding.):  
 But, in God's name, who am I to reproach anyone  
 with anything? Why don't you tell me to examine my  
 own conduct?<sup>1</sup>

Nora is also bearing a load of guilt--her pre-marital pregnancy which, out of her anguish, has also made her too ashamed to seek forgiveness in the church. She confesses her feelings to Sara:

It's the pain of guilt in my soul. Can a doctor's medicine cure that? No, only a priest of Almighty God--(With a roused rebellion again.) It would serve Con right if I took the chance now and broke my promise and woke up the priest to hear my confession and give me God's forgiveness that'd bring my soul peace and comfort so I wouldn't feel the three of us were damned.<sup>2</sup>

Melody pays the price for his false pride as the play unfolds. Sara has fallen in love with Simon Harford, the young son of a wealthy aristocrat. Simon, out of a sense of social guilt, has left his family, and like Thoreau, he "went to the woods" to find his values. Simon's father, shocked to learn that his son has fallen in love with a peasant Irish girl, attempts to bribe Melody to stop the love affair. Enraged, Melody and a

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 229.



friend, Jamie Cregan, go in a drunken effort to challenge Harford, as any gentleman would, to a duel to satisfy Melody's sense of honor. However, all Melody accomplishes is to get in a fight with the butler and some policemen. To add to his embarrassment, in an attempt to keep the whole disgraceful matter from coming to light, Harford pays the bond to have Melody and his friend Jamie turned loose. The whole episode awakens Melody to see himself as the peasant that he is. He returns home, kills his mare, the symbol of his pride, and also claims to have killed "the Major," as he relates in a true Irish brogue:

Be Christ, if he wasn't the joke av the world, the Major. He should have been a clown in a circus. God rest his soul in the flames av tormint! (Roughly) But to hell wid the dead. . . . Be God, I'm alive and in the crowd they can deem me one av such! I'll be among thim and av thim, too--and make up for the lonely dog's life the Major led me.<sup>1</sup>

Nora is resigned to her husband's new role, seeing it as Melody's necessary self-punishment: "God pity him, he's had to live all his life alone in the hell av pride. (Proudly) And I'll play any game he likes and give him love in it. Haven't I always?"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 257.

Melody is clearly comparable to O'Neill's father. Bogard notes the similarities:

Both have a touch of the peasant as well as the poet in them, revealed in their deep-rooted fear of the horrifying poverty of old-country Ireland. Both make unprofitable real-estate deals. . . . Both love but are alienated by their wives and children. Both make a pretense of the grand manner, born in the one case of chivalric derring-do and in the other of an actor's manner acquired in a romantic melodrama, and in each instance, the period is the same--the era of Napoleonic heroics. Both men are actors in their quoting, their strutting and in the use of their roles as a mask to hide their pain.<sup>1</sup>

Melody's sense of aloofness suggests that O'Neill saw a similar quality in his father. Through Melody's self-punishment, perhaps O'Neill is reflecting an attitude that he would like to have seen in a father elevated above his sons in his pride.

The portrait of Nora is interesting for both its similarities and contrasts with Ella O'Neill's character. Like Ella, she is completely devoted to her husband. The description of Ella in Chapter I revealed that though Ella viewed herself as a member of a higher social class than James, her devotion to her husband, or perhaps her dependence upon him, produced in many ways a loving wife. Also,

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<sup>1</sup>Bogard, Contour in Time, pp. 387-88.

like Ella, Nora has lost her faith, a basis for further guilt. Unlike Ella, however, Nora has a strength of character that builds respect--instead of chafing in her role as dependent on Con, she fulfills that function admirably, supporting him in whatever way she can. Nora may well represent, in some characteristics at least, the wife O'Neill wishes Ella had been, for despite Nora's and Con's differences, they are essentially a happily married couple.

O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh is essentially a reminiscence. Its setting is Harry Hope's bar, most probably based on Jimmy the Priest's, O'Neill's early hangout, and "Hell Hole," one of his favorite dives during his marriage to Agnes. The bar in the play is the home of a collection of failures--exsoldiers, old anarchists, pimps, and prostitutes, to name a few. They are living on Hope's hospitality, alcohol, and their own pipe dreams. Alcohol helps to keep them in a comforting daze, and each believes in his pipe dreams that he could be a success--if he only wanted to. All of the down-and-out inhabitants are eagerly waiting for Theodore Hickman, better known as Hickey, a fun-loving, free-spending hardware salesman. Hickey comes every year to help celebrate Harry Hope's birthday. He buys everyone drinks and tells jokes, his favorite one being the one about finding his wife in bed with the iceman. But this year Hickey is a changed man. He preaches a new doctrine:

But I didn't mean booze. I meant to save you from pipe dreams. I know now, from my experience, they're the things that really poison and ruin a guy's life and keep him from finding any peace. If you knew how free and contented I feel now. I'm like a new man. And the cure for them is so damned simple, once you have the nerve. Just the old dope of honesty is the best policy--honesty with yourself, I mean. Just stop lying about yourself and kidding yourself about tomorrow.<sup>1</sup>

He has come to the bar to help his friends reform their lives, an effort that proves futile as the play progresses.

Early in the play, Hickey makes only vague references to why he changed, but as the play unravels, he is driven to tell the men what has given him his peace of mind. His secret is the simple fact that his wife is dead:

She's rid of me at last. Hell, I don't have to tell you--you all know what I was like. You can imagine what she went through, married to a no-good cheater and drunk like I was. And there was no way out of it for her. Because she loved me. But now she is at peace like she always longed to be. So why should I feel sad? She wouldn't want me to feel sad. Why, all that Evelyn ever wanted out of life was to make me happy.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, like another haunted man in the play, Don Parritt, Hickey seems to be holding back something which bothers

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1957), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

him. (Parritt will be dealt with in Chapter III.) Both are caught in a struggle between the shame of their crime and the compulsive need to confess and be punished. Finally, Hickey is led to reveal the horrible truth. His drinking and marital infidelity had become too great a burden to bear:

I saw I couldn't do it by killing myself, like I wanted to for a long time. That would have been the last straw for her. She'd have died of a broken heart to think I could do that to her. She'd have blamed herself for it, too. Or I couldn't just run away from her. She'd have died of grief and humiliation if I'd done that to her. She'd have thought I'd stopped loving her. . . . I had to kill her.<sup>1</sup>

Engel notes that for all his preaching, Hickey is no better than the ones he is trying to save: "Thus Hickey insists that when he killed his wife 'there was love in [his] heart, not hate.' And this is his pipe dream, for the contrary is true."<sup>2</sup> Hickey found himself, like so many of O'Neill's characters, in a love-hate relationship with his wife. He wishes, "If she only hadn't been so damned good--if she'd been the same kind of wife I was a

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 226-27.

<sup>2</sup>Engel, The Haunted Heroes, p. 291.

husband."<sup>1</sup> An O'Neill critic also comments on this love-hate relationship: "... as a final irony, Hickey, in the very process of a touching disquisition on his lasting and passionate love of Evelyn, inadvertently blurts out: 'You know what you can do with your pipe dream now, you damned bitch!'"<sup>2</sup> As his final act to seek punishment, he has called the police to come pick him up at the bar. Just before he is taken away, he shows that he seeks further punishment, his death: "Oh, I want to go, Officer. I can hardly wait now. . . . I want to go to the chair."<sup>3</sup>

Sheaffer points out the real-life person whom Hickey was based on: "The tragic truth is that he (O'Neill) knew him all too well, for the Hickey who long harbored a hatred he could not acknowledge, particularly to himself, the Hickey tortured by guilt feelings and self-loathing, was O'Neill himself."<sup>4</sup> While O'Neill obviously was never a hardware salesman and never killed his

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh, p. 238.

<sup>2</sup>Helen Muchnic, "Circe's Swine: Plays by Gorky and O'Neill," in O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 107.

<sup>3</sup>O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh, p. 245.

<sup>4</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 499.

wife, a retrospective examination of his life with Agnes apparently showed him that he also lived with a pipe dream for many years. While he never killed Agnes, or himself, O'Neill's desertion must have been motivated by his desire to find peace, but, like Hickey, it was a peace he never got, at least for as long as he lived.

The final play to be examined for evidence of marital guilt is O'Neill's most autobiographical play, Long Day's Journey into Night. The play has been aptly described by Walter Kerr in his book on the theater entitled Pieces at Eight:

Long Day's Journey into Night is not a play. It is a lacerating round-robin of recrimination; self-dramatization, lies that deceive no one, confessions that never expiate the crime. Around the whiskey bottles and the tattered leather chairs and the dangling light cords that infest the decaying summer home of the Tyrones (read O'Neills), a family of ghosts sit in a perpetual game of four-handed solitaire, stir to their feet in a danse macabre that outlines the geography of Hell, place themselves finally on an operating table that allows for no anesthetic. When the light fails, they are still--but not saved.<sup>1</sup>

The play focuses more on parent-child guilt, for as Sheaffer notes, O'Neill is really "the eternal son," a man

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Kerr, Pieces at Eight (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), p. 121.

forever in search of his parents.<sup>1</sup> Yet, certain elements in James and Mary Tyrone's marriage do reflect a sense of culpability.

The play itself contains very little physical action. It takes place on a single day in August of 1912. There is a heavy sense of uneasiness on the part of the Tyrone men, for Mary has just returned from another of her "cures." The family is awaiting the final diagnosis of the ailing Edmund. (O'Neill switched names with his dead brother.) The men fear that if he does have tuberculosis, Mary will once again resort to her addiction as an escape. Mary senses their fear: "It makes it so much harder, living in this atmosphere of constant suspicion, knowing everyone is spying on me, and none of you believe in me, or trust me."<sup>2</sup> When the diagnosis of the disease does come, Ella indeed is driven to use the drug. The men likewise turn to their own escape, alcohol. There are arguments between James and his sons over a variety of things, but near the end of the play, Edmund and James, with Jamie passed out in a chair, reach at least a temporary

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 506.

<sup>2</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 46.



truce and drink together in an effort to forget what Mary is doing to herself. At the end of the play, Mary is clutching her wedding gown, symbol of her lost innocence, and reminiscing of her days at the Catholic convent. The last lines in the play are particularly revealing. After recalling the peace of the convent, she closes with the following: "That was in the winter of my 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>

O'Neill seems to be suggesting through those lines that the root of the problem in James's and Mary's marriage, and thus in James's and Ella's marriage, was that Mary lost her sense of innocence because of her marriage to James. O'Neill presents Mary as a woman better suited to the life of a convent than to being the wife of an actor, and therein lies the problem. Earlier in the play Mary criticizes James for the life they led: "I didn't know how often that was to happen in the years to come, how many times I was to wait in ugly hotel rooms.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

I became quite used to it."<sup>1</sup> Also, Mary as her sons so often do, is quick to criticize James for his miserliness. When the question arises as to whether Doctor Hardy, the doctor treating Edmund, is capable, she says to James, "Oh, we all realize why you like him, James! Because he's cheap!"<sup>2</sup> Of course, the implication Mary is making is that he is like the "cheap quack" who started her using morphine. Mary, then, reveals the sense of spitefulness she has against her husband and implies that the blame for the life she has had to lead rests squarely on his shoulders. As for her own guilt, it is easily assuaged-- in the fog of her addiction.

James suffers the recriminations of his wife with a certain nobility. In the context of the play, James comes off as a basically appealing character:

Like a lugged bear he stands as the target for all of his family's recriminations. Yet, perhaps more than any of the others, he shoulders the responsibilities of their lives. He has kindness in him, and a devotion to his wife that overrides all her animosity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>3</sup>Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 430.

Such a depiction would appear to indicate that O'Neill was making up to his father for the failure James was made to feel as a husband in real life.

The one sense of guilt Tyrone does show is over his failure as an actor. He remarks, "I'd be willing to have no home but a poorhouse in my old age if I could look back now on having been the fine artist I might have been."<sup>1</sup> Even given this one source of guilt, James Tyrone is depicted as probably the least understood and most respectable of the Tyrone clan. Again, it is as if Eugene was finally trying to set the record straight on the type of man his father really was.

Thus, one sees that O'Neill's plays do deal extensively with marital guilt. If any conclusion can be drawn from them, it is that the bulk of such guilt was patterned primarily after two marriages, that of O'Neill's parents' marriage, and his own marriage to Agnes. The plays which reflect his parents' marriage basically balance out. In plays like Gold and A Tough of the Poet, the husband is primarily at fault. In All God's Chillun Got Wings and Long Day's Journey into Night, the wife, with

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night, p. 151.

her weakness of character, is to blame. But in plays that reflect his marriage to Agnes, the husband is almost without exception the cause of the strife. Only in The Great God Brown is the husband viewed with any real sympathy.

In these plays, the husbands' jealousy, selfishness, infidelity, or general cruelty is behind their guilt. This evidence leads conclusively to the fact that O'Neill felt a strong sense of remorse over his treatment of Agnes.

In the following chapter, guilt in parent-child relationships will be examined. As in this chapter, the next will present a variety of plays which contain guilt, and the study should reveal even a greater preoccupation with guilt in parent-child relationships than has just been discussed in this study of marital guilt.

## C H A P T E R     I V

### GUILT RESULTING FROM PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Sheaffer has given a characterization of Eugene O'Neill as it is revealed through his plays:

The primary image of Eugene O'Neill that emerges from his writings is that of an eternal son, a man constantly examining and dramatizing his ambivalent feelings toward his mother and father, forever bound to them emotionally, a man never able to mature fully, never free to be a real parent himself. In a basic sense, he was free only to be a writer, a man trying to make peace with himself.<sup>1</sup>

The dual impact of this image is interesting, because it indicates that O'Neill's feeling of inadequacy as a son became such a preoccupation in his life that he was never able to fulfill his role as a father. As the following study will reveal, parent-child guilt is represented in O'Neill's plays from two perspectives. On the one hand, the children, out of some feeling of unworthiness on their part, feel betrayed by a parent; hence they spend much of their life looking for either a mother or a father in their relationships with other people. Usually, this

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, pp. 49-50.

search has strong Oedipal overtones. On the other hand, the characters are not free of judging themselves from the perspective of parents: out of some sense of inadequacy as parents, they desert their children, either physically or emotionally, and suffer guilt for these actions.

The multiact plays to be discussed in this chapter fall into three groups very similar to those discussed in Chapter II. The Straw, Gold, Anna Christie, and The First Man are in the first group of plays. Written between 1918 and 1923, these plays deal with parent-child guilt as a minor theme. The second group, consisting of plays written after O'Neill's parents' and Jamie's death, show an increasing concern for the parent-child guilt. Again, it is as if his loved ones' deaths freed him to write about his family, but in somewhat disguised plots. Desire Under the Elms, The Great God Brown, Strange Interlude, and Dynamo are in this second group. The third group contains plays which are more personal and autobiographical. They were written between 1929-1943, in the peaceful early years of his marriage to Carlotta. In this more reflective period of his life, O'Neill composed Mourning Becomes Electra, A Touch of the Poet, The Iceman Cometh, Long Day's Journey into Night, and A Moon for the Misbegotten.

The Straw is a play which deals with Eileen Carmody, the eldest daughter of a widower named Bill Carmody. Eileen contracts tuberculosis and is sent to a sanatorium, where she meets and falls in love with Stephen Murray, a character who bears a resemblance to O'Neill himself. Despite the serious nature of her illness, Eileen and Stephen find themselves happily in love as the play ends.

The parent-child guilt in the play results from Bill Carmody's treatment of his daughter. Bill is a tightwad who has left the care of his younger children to Eileen. When Eileen becomes ill, he is reluctant to admit that her hours of work have worsened her condition. In a conversation with another daughter, he reveals his rationalization of Eileen's illness:

MARY. (anxiously) Is Eileen very sick, Papa?  
 CARMODY. (spitting--roughly) If she is, it's her own fault entirely--weakenin' her health by readin' here in the house. (Irritably) Put down that book on the table and leave it be. I'll have no more readin' or I'll take the strap to you!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, The Straw, in Six Short Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1951), p. 38.

Compounding his guilt, Carmody has delayed getting Eileen a doctor and refuses to send her to a sanatorium until he is threatened by her doctor.

Later in the play, forced to admit that his miserliness has worsened her condition, he does what so many of O'Neill's characters do when they are wracked with guilt--he turns to drink:

CARMODY. (somerly--as if to himself) There's something wrong in the whole of this--that I can't make out. (With sudden fury he brandishes his fists as though defying someone and growls threateningly) And I'll get drunk this night--dead, rotten drunk! . . . I'll get drunk if my soul roasts for it--and no one in the whole world is strong enough to stop me!<sup>1</sup>

In Carmody's actions, a close parallel can be seen to O'Neill's life. As the analysis of his life revealed, O'Neill attacked his father for his miserliness in choosing a sanatorium for his son. The Straw suggests the strong sense of betrayal Eugene felt because of his father's actions, and Bill Carmody's guilt may well be patterned after the remorse James O'Neill was made to feel over his son's illness.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 106.



In Gold Captain Bartlett's greed and pride threatened to ruin his relationship with his children just as it did with his wife. In his effort to live in his fantasy of having acquired easy riches, Bartlett also manages to drag his son into the affair. Nat Bartlett wanted to believe in the treasure almost as much as did his father. When Nat implies that he knows his father's secret about the buried "gold," Bartlett's response suggests his guilt:

BARTLETT. (he gets to his feet with a forced burst of laughter) Ye fool of a boy! Ye got that notion out o' some fool book ye've been reading didn't ye? And I thought ye'd growed up to be a man! (More and more wild in his forced scorn) Ye'll be tellin' me next it's buried treasure I be sailin after--pirates' gold buried on that island--all in a chest--and a map to guide me with a cross marked on it where the gold is hid! And then they be ghosts guardin' it, ben't they--spirits o' murdered men? They always be, in the books. (He laughs scornfully.)<sup>1</sup>

Bartlett's statement has the ring of a confession.

Bartlett is forced to confess the lie he has been living when he sees Nat become as obsessed with greed as he has been:

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Gold, p. 152.

(He stops short, throwing his head back, his whole body tense and quivering with the effort he makes to force this sustaining lie out of his brain--then, broken but self-conquering, he looks again at NAT--gently) No, Nat. That be the lie I been tellin' myself ever since. That cook--he said 'twas brass--But I'd been lookin' for ambergris--gold--the whole o' my life--and when we found that chest--I had to believe, I tell ye! I'd been dreamin' o' it all my days! But he said brass and junk, and told the boy--and I give the word to murder 'em both and cover 'em up with sand.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after his confession, in a final effort at self-punishment, Bartlett dies.

If Gold reflects James O'Neill's greed (as his sons saw it), as suggested in Chapter II of this study, it would then follow that Eugene's ending to this play reflects a similar confession from his father. Whether James ever expressed remorse over his miserliness in real life (as James Tyrone does in Long Day's Journey into Night), it at least shows Eugene's awareness of a problem in his relationship with his father.

In Anna Christie, O'Neill first presented the story of a parent deserting a child and the pain that such a desertion brings with it. Chris Christopherson had deserted his wife and children years before the play

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 193.

begins. He has received partial relief from his guilt in knowing that after his wife died, his daughter Anna has been left with some relatives on a farm, far removed from "dat ole davil sea" which Chris blames his troubles on. However, when Anna arrives, it is revealed that due to a cousin's seduction, she was introduced into a life of sin and became a prostitute. Unwilling to admit his negligence as a father, Chris blames his and Anna's life on the sea: "Dat ole davil sea make dem crazy fools with her dirty tricks. It's so."<sup>1</sup> After Anna lives for a while on her father's barge, she begins to find a new life and happiness. She falls in love with a stoker named Mat Burks, but when Mat learns of her sinful past, he leaves her, thus destroying the promise of her future happiness. She turns on her father, blaming her life of prostitution on him:

And who's to blame for it, me or you? If you'd even acted like a man--if you'd even had been a regular father and had me with you--maybe things would be different!

CHRIS (In agony) Don't talk dat vay. Anna! Ay go crazy! Ay von't listen!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Anna Christie in Anna Christie, The Emperor Jones, The Hairy Ape (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1972), p. 83.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

His guilty reaction is understandable, and she later forgives him after the following apology: "Ay've been tanking, and Ay guess it vas all my fault--all bad tangs day happen to you. (Pleadingly) You try for not hate me, Anna. Ay'm crazy ole fool, dat's all."<sup>1</sup> The play ends with Anna's reconciliation with Mat, a reconciliation which leads to their marriage.

While the story of Anna and Chris Christopherson appears to be far removed from O'Neill's life, certain parallels do exist. First, there is the desertion by the father. While James O'Neill never really deserted his family, his extended trips on tour did leave Eugene feeling left out, as the first chapter of this study shows. Also, Engel suggests another parallel. Eugene's turning to alcohol and sexual degradation in an effort to punish his parents is comparable to Anna's turning to prostitution;

Whether or no this final step towards degradation is gratuitous is debatable. Given the initial impetus, fictitious females are known to have traveled the rest of the road to shame under their own power. But voluntarily to substitute prostitution for tending children on the ground that in the latter position one is "caged in" and "lonesome" is both novel and

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

improbable . . . . Anna's tragic choice appears to have been made as much out of consideration of O'Neill's needs as of her own.<sup>1</sup>

A final point of comparison lies in the fact that O'Neill, like Chris, knew the guilt of deserting a child for the sea, for he had done essentially the same thing in his desertion of Kathleen and Eugene Jr.

The theme of desertion is also found in the last of these early plays, The First Man. Martha and Curtis Jayson had agreed not to have any more children after they had lost their two children years earlier. Yet, Martha tries to explain to Curtis that she has felt unfulfilled:

And I thought of our children who had died--and such a longing for another child came to me that I began sobbing. You were asleep. You didn't hear. (She pauses--then proceeds slowly) And when we came back here--to have a home at last, I was so happy because I saw my chance of fulfillment--before it was too late. (In a gentle, pleading voice) Now can you understand, dear?<sup>2</sup>

Curtis, of course, does not understand, and after Martha dies in childbirth, Curtis leaves for the expedition, placing the baby in the hands of his aunt who is to take

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<sup>1</sup>Engel, Haunted Heroes, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup>O'Neill, The First Man, p. 585.

care of him. Curtis shows no real sense of remorse for leaving, as his speech near the end of the play reveals:

CURTIS. (gladly) Yes, I must go! What good would I be for him--or anyone--if I stayed? Thank God, you understand. But I'll come back. (The light of an ideal beginning to shine in his eyes) When he's old enough, I'll teach him to know and love a big, free life.<sup>1</sup>

One can only believe that Curtis's rationalization is the same argument as the one used by Eugene to relieve his sense of guilt over the desertion of Eugene Jr. years earlier. Also, Curtis's reluctance to accept fatherhood may well reflect the feeling O'Neill had toward Shane, who had been born just before the play was written:

In summer 1920, about the time he presumably was conceiving The First Man, he told Agnes that he wanted to make an extended trip with her the following year on the Amazon River (such a trip would have taken months) and proposed leaving Shane with her parents. When they moved into a cottage in Provincetown in fall 1921, he suggested that a nursery, with sleeping quarters for Mrs. Clark, be arranged in the basement. Though the basement was clean and dry, Agnes objected, for it seemed to her that there was something wrong with the idea; perhaps she felt, unconsciously, that establishing Shane's quarters in the lowest part of the house would be a kind of symbolic burial.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 618.

<sup>2</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 49.

In the light of such evidence, O'Neill's highly unbelievable ending to The First Man suggests an effort to rationalize the playwright's guilty feelings as a father.

When Jamie died in 1923, three years after James died and one year after Ella died, O'Neill was free to deal more personally with the conflicts in his family. This examination of his family began with his writing of Desire Under the Elms.<sup>1</sup> This first play in the second group of plays dealing with guilt in parent-child relationships tells the story of an intense family conflict. Ephraim Cabot likes to think of himself as a "hard" man. Though in his seventies, he still commands the grudging respect of his three grown sons, the most rebellious of whom is the youngest, Eben. Eben's mother was Cabot's second wife, and Eben is convinced that Cabot had taken her farm land from her and then gradually worked her to death. At the beginning of the play, Cabot has been gone for some time in search of a new wife. He returns with Abbie Putnam, a voluptuous young woman who has married him only because she seeks to inherit his farm when he dies. The two older sons of Cabot, Simeon and Peter,

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Gelb, "An Epitaph for the O'Neills," New York Times, 4 October, 1959, sec. 2, p. 1.

when they see that they apparently will never get the farm, sell their claims to the land to Eben, who makes the purchase with money that his father had hidden. Simeon's and Peter's exit sets the stage for the conflict between Eben, Cabot, and Abbie.

Eben feels guilty as a son because he is attracted to Abbie; he feels guilt not because of the possible incestuous relationship, but because he feels that giving in to Abbie would be a desertion of the revenge he seeks to get for his dead mother. The conflict he feels resulting from his strong physical attraction to Abbie is revealed in O'Neill's stage directions:

Then with a little cry she runs over and throws her arms about his neck, she pulls his head back and covers his mouth with kisses. At first, he submits dumbly: then he puts his arms about her neck and returns her kisses, but finally, suddenly aware of his hatred, he hurls her away from him, springing to his feet.<sup>1</sup>

When it dawns on Eben that a love affair with Cabot's new wife would be an excellent way of getting revenge upon his father, he succumbs to Abbie's advances, and a torrid

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Desire Under the Elms, in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, with an introduction by Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: The Modern Library, 1941), p. 174.



love affair results. A child is born, and Cabot thinks that he fathered it. When Cabot and Eben have a fight later in the play, Cabot tells his son that Abbie had said she wanted a son to keep Eben from getting the farm. (Abbie did make such a statement before she fell in love with Eben.) In anger, Eben confronts Abbie with this news and storms out. Later, in an act to reveal that she does indeed love Eben, she smothers the child. She confesses to Eben, "I didn't want t' do it. I hated myself fur doin' it. I loved him. He was purty--dead spit 'n' image o' yew. But I loved yew more-- . . .<sup>1</sup> Eben is shocked to learn of the murder and runs to tell the sheriff. On the way back, he realizes he is as much at fault for the tragedy as Abbie is, and the two lovers decide to accept the punishment due them:

ABBIE. (shaking her head) I got t' take my punishment--t' pay fur my sin.

EBEN. Then I want t' share it with ye.

ABBIE. Ye didn't do nothin'.

EBEN. I put it in yer head. I wisht he was dead! I as much as urged ye t' do it!

ABBIE. No. It was me alone!

EBEN. I'm as guilty as yew be! He was the child o' our sin.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 203.

Abbie and Eben do not feel any remorse over their adultery and incest--all their guilt centers around the murder of their infant son.

There are several elements in the play which suggest it is slightly autobiographical. The relationship between Eben and his father suggests the relationship between Eugene and James O'Neill. James's strictness is reflected in Cabot, and Cabot's destruction of Eben's fragile mother raises a resentment in Eben similar to that felt by Eugene, who rationalized that his father was mostly responsible for driving the sensitive Ella to her dope addiction.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Eugene's effort to rid himself of the guilt he felt for his mother's addiction may have induced him to present the hard-hearted Cabot as he did. The mother-son love in the play also reflects Eugene's effort to find a maternal love that he felt deprived of in life. Finally, a psychoanalyst named Phillip Weismann believes that O'Neill's guilt as a father may well have produced the addition of infanticide in the play.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Gelb, "'Written in Tears and Blood . . .,'" p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>Gelb and Gelb, O'Neill, p. 539.

While The Great God Brown is generally interpreted as a play dealing with the conflict of a sensitive artist in a materialistic society, one critic views the play as an "epitaph" for the O'Neill family.<sup>1</sup> Dion does express a sense of anguish over his relationship with his parents. Of his father, Dion said, "When he lay dead, his face looked so familiar that I wondered where I had met that man before. Only at the second of my conception. After that, we grew hostile with concealed shame."<sup>2</sup> The tone of this statement mirrors that which O'Neill made after his father's death. Both Dion and Eugene felt remorse over the unnecessary conflict in their relationships with their fathers.

Dion describes his relationship with his mother in a similar expression of loss:

. . . she played mother and child with me for many years in that house until at last through two tears I watched her die with the shy pride of one who has lengthened her dress and put up her hair. And I felt like a forsaken toy and cried to be buried with her, because her hands alone had caressed without

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Gelb, "An Epitaph for the O'Neills," p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>O'Neill, The Great God Brown, p. 333.

clawing. . . . The last time I looked, her purity had forgotten me, she was stainless and imperishable, and I knew my sobs were ugly and meaningless to her virginity; so I shrank away, back into life, with naked nerves jumping like fleas, . . .<sup>1</sup>

The fact that Dion, like O'Neill, also felt remote in his relationship with his mother is particularly revealing. Dion turns to Cybel as a mother image, and he finds in her the mother love that "has given him courage and strength, the capacity to forgive, to love, to remove his cruel mocking mask."<sup>2</sup> Likewise, O'Neill found a mother of sorts in Carlotta, and his early years with her also found him writing plays like Long Day's Journey into Night and A Moon for the Misbegotten, plays which are essentially forgiving in nature. These facts tend to support Engel's contention that The Great God Brown serves as an epitaph, for Dion's relationship with his parents does reveal remorse that the playwright felt after his parents' death.

Strange Interlude offers two parent-child relationships that hold guilt. The one which serves as only

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 333-34.

<sup>2</sup>Engel, Haunted Heroes, p. 168.

a minor addition to the plot is Charlie Marsden's relationship with his mother. Charlie is the classic example of a "mama's boy." He is a grown man and an accomplished novelist, yet he still lives with his mother. Perhaps his greatest source of guilt lies in his encounter with a prostitute years earlier:

. . . I went . . . miserably frightened . . . what a pig she was! . . . pretty vicious face under caked powder and rouge . . . surly and contemptuous . . . lumpy body . . . short legs and thick ankles . . . oh, stupid kid! . . . back at the hotel I waited till they were asleep . . . then sobbed . . . thinking of Mother . . . feeling I had defiled her . . . and myself . . . forever! . . .<sup>1</sup>

His initial sexual encounter has left him with essentially two images of women: the purity of his mother and the licentiousness of all other women.<sup>2</sup> Another source of anguish for Charlie results from his mother's illness and death. He wanted to believe that the pain she suffered was caused by some minor ailment. Out of fear for the worse, he put off taking her to a doctor until it was too late. After she died of cancer, Charlie took a trip to

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Strange Interlude, p. 488.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 522.

Europe in an effort to forget his guilt, but the trip had no effect on him: "I couldn't forget Mother . . . she haunted me through every city of Europe . . ." <sup>1</sup>

The shame O'Neill felt as a result of his sexual degradation is mirrored in Charlie's feelings. Neither was able to forget his promiscuity years after the incidents occurred. While Eugene had no direct role in Ella's death, there may well be a correlation between Mrs. Marsden's cancer and Ella O'Neill's dope addiction. Each "affliction" was serious, and O'Neill must have felt the same sense of helplessness relating to his mother as Charlie did toward his.

Though Nina Leeds's relationship with her father terminated, on the surface at least, with his death early in the play, Engel believes that her relationship with her father was the most meaningful in the play:

The play was about the heroine's life with father and, only incidentally, about life with husband, lover, and son, despite the fact that these relationships constituted the strange interlude that gave the piece its title. Nina Leeds's childhood relationship with her father was the single reality of her life. No Electra, she simply discovered that such love was enough, a love consisting of comfort,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 593.

security, and peace. At the end of Act Nine, the interlude ended, she returned to her father's womb-like lap, "warm in his love, safe-drifting into sleep."<sup>1</sup>

Leeds himself feels guilt for destroying Nina's happiness with Gordon, an action based primarily on jealousy, as he reveals in a conversation with Charlie:

She knows in some queer way. And she acts toward me exactly as if she thought I had deliberately destroyed her happiness, that I had hoped for Gordon's death and been secretly overjoyed when the news came! . . . And it's true, you contemptible! . . .<sup>2</sup>

This jealousy gives insight into the strong Electra complex exhibited by Nina. At another point, Leeds's thoughts reveal the extent of his possessive jealousy: "Her eyes . . . I know that look . . . tender, loving . . . not for me . . . damn Gordon! . . . I'm glad he's dead! . . ."<sup>3</sup>

Nina's guilt relating to her father is also understandable. When she goes to the hospital to give

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<sup>1</sup>Engel, "Ideas in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill," p. 114.

<sup>2</sup>O'Neill, Strange Interlude, p. 493.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 498.

herself to the soldiers in an effort to make up for not giving herself to Gordon, she feels guilty for not feeling shame for her actions. When she returns home, she is looking for punishment from her father. She hopes that after the punishment she can find peace with herself in her father's love. She tells Charlie, "I've wanted to run home and 'fess up, tell how bad I've been, and be punished!"<sup>1</sup> Since her father is now dead, Charlie becomes her substitute father. When Charlie asks her what she wants to be punished for, she replies, "For playing the silly slut, Charlie. For giving my cool clean body to men with hot hands and greedy eyes which they called love! Ugh!"<sup>2</sup> She gratefully accepts Charlie's punishment (that she marry Sam Evans) and is soon beset by other problems relating to her husband, lover, and child. Near the end of the play, however, Nina returns to her "father" Charlie, finding contentment in her relationship with him. Her last line in the play tends to support Engel's theory that the father-daughter relationship was the most

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 526.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.



important to her: "Thank you, Father--have I been wicked?--you're so good--dear old Charlie!"<sup>1</sup>

Nina's actions also find a parallel in O'Neill's life. Perhaps, like O'Neill, Nina turned to promiscuity as a way of getting back at her father, but at the same time she received satisfaction for hurting her father, she was unable to live with her sin. O'Neill's plays suggest that his promiscuity also made him pay the price of years of remorse. Also, Nina is looking for a father in her relationships with other men, a fact reflected in O'Neill's parallel search for mother figures in his plays. Strange Interlude, then, does hold some autobiographical elements relating to parent-child guilt.

The last play in this second group of plays is Dynamo. It tells the story of Reuben Light, a preacher's son greatly affected by his mother's betrayal. The Light family lives next door to the Fifes, a family of atheists. Through his innocent crush on the Fifes's daughter, Ada, Reuben gets caught up in the conflict between the two families. To test Reuben's strength of character, Mr. Fife tells him a story he made up about killing another

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 682.

man and makes Reuben promise not to tell anyone else. Reuben's mother forces him to betray the "secret" but only after she promises not to tell Reuben's father. Reuben is unaware that Reverend Light is hiding in the closet according to his wife's plan to punish Reuben. When Reuben tells the secret and then learns of his mother's betrayal, he is deeply hurt:

REUBEN. Father! (Then his eyes turn to his mother's vindictive face and he thinks in a tortured agony of spirit)

He was hiding in the closet! . . . she knew it! . . . she cheated me! . . . when I trusted her! . . . when I loved her better than anyone in the world! . . .

(He cries out in a passion of reproach) Oh, Mother! Mother!<sup>1</sup>

Disillusioned by his mother's actions, Reuben runs away from home and deserts his religion, shouting, "There is no God! No God but Electricity! I'll never be scared again! I'm through with the lot of you!"<sup>2</sup> His running away is primarily a means of punishing his parents, especially his mother. His punishment is effective, for Mrs. Light dies not long after he leaves. When he returns

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Dynamo, in The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 448.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 453.

a cynical and embittered young man, he is clearly looking for the two things he has forsaken--his mother and his religious faith. He finds both in the dynamo:

(He gets down on his knees and prays aloud to the dynamo) Oh, Mother of Life, my mother is dead, she has passed back into you, tell her to forgive me, and to help me find your truth! (He pauses on his knees for a moment, then gets slowly to his feet. There is a look of calm and relief on his face now. He thinks reverentially)

Yes, that did it . . . I feel I'm forgiven . . .  
Mother will help me . . . I can sleep . . . I'll  
go home . . .<sup>1</sup>

His love for Ada is another source of conflict. He fears that his sexual relations with Ada are abhorrent to his new Mother God. He asks the dynamo for guidance:

Mother! . . . have mercy on me! . . . I hate her  
now! . . . as much as you hate her! . . . give me  
one more chance! . . . what can I do to get you to  
forgive me? . . . tell me! . . . yes! . . . I hear  
you, Mother! . . . and then you'll forgive me? . . .  
and I can come to you? . . .<sup>2</sup>

After he kills Ada, Reuben seeks final acceptance. Just before he electrocutes himself by grasping the dynamo's brushes, he pleads to it: "I don't want any miracle,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 474-75.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 487.

Mother! I don't want to know the truth! I only want you to hide me, Mother! Never let me go again! Please, Mother!"<sup>1</sup> In death, Reuben is reunited with his mother.

The same pattern seen in the previous plays is repeated in Dynamo; again, the main character's search for the parent of the opposite sex reflects O'Neill's search for his mother, who he feels betrayed him and was in turn betrayed by him. Dynamo is probably the most extreme example of this theme. Reuben's death is, as Bogard relates, a self-purification: "In killing himself and Ada, he has gone through a ritual of self-purification, destroying the sources of his guilt and the vestiges of the Father God in himself so that he may be worthy of God the Mother."<sup>2</sup>

In Mourning Becomes Electra, the first of the plays written after O'Neill's marriage to Carlotta, O'Neill deals extensively with the theme of love for one's parents of the opposite sex, for the play shows not only an Oedipus complex, but an Electra complex as well. One critic has

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 488.

<sup>2</sup>Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 319.

called the play "a great Greek dream interpreted by Austrian psychology."<sup>1</sup>

After Christine kills her husband Ezra, Lavinia plots to punish both Christine and her lover Adam Brant. However, Lavinia faces the problem of enlisting Orin's aid in her revenge plot. Orin's unnatural attraction to his mother is revealed a number of times, but perhaps the most extreme example occurs when Orin tells Christine that he dreamed of being alone with her on an island: "There was no one there but you and me. . . . The breaking of the waves was your voice. The sky was the same color as your eyes. The warm sand was your skin. The whole island was you."<sup>2</sup> Orin's speech would be more appropriately addressed to a lover than to his mother. Orin's attitude toward his father also fits into the classic Oedipus complex. He sees in his father a rival in his love for his mother, thus harboring resentment against him. When Orin goes to view his father's dead body, he says, "You never

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<sup>1</sup>C. John McCole, Lucifer at Large (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1937), p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>O'Neill, Mourning Becomes Electra, p. 776.

cared to know me in life--but I really think we might be friends now you are dead."<sup>1</sup>

Lavinia manages to play upon Orin's jealousy toward his mother. When Lavinia convinces him of Christine's adultery, Orin kills Adam Brant. When Christine finds out about the murder, she kills herself. Orin is now driven by guilt:

ORIN. (frantically--trying to break away from her)  
Let me go! I've got to find her! I've got to make  
her forgive me! I--! (He suddenly breaks down and  
weeps in a hysterical anguish. LAVINIA puts her arm  
around him soothingly. He sobs despairingly) But  
she's dead--She's gone--how can I ever get her to  
forgive me now?<sup>2</sup>

In an effort to regain the love of their lost parents, Lavinia and Orin undergo a perverse transformation: Lavinia begins to dress and act as her mother had, and Orin resembles his father in his appearance and mannerisms. Meanwhile Orin has become irrational in his actions. Not only must he bear the guilt of his mother's death, but he now has the added burden of the perverse love he has for his sister. Ultimately, he is driven to

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 780.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 811.

write down the story of his family's crimes as a means of alleviating the terrible burden he bears:

ORIN. (sardonically, addressing the portrait) The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth! Is that what you're demanding, Father? Are you sure you want the whole truth? What will the neighbors say if this whole truth is ever known? (He chuckles grimly) A ticklish decision for you, Your Honor!<sup>1</sup>

The confession serves another purpose: he uses it to blackmail Vinnie into giving up her love for a close friend, Peter Niles. In a last attempt, Orin tries to convince Lavinia, who is trying to escape punishment, that she needs to seek out forgiveness just as he does: "Were you hoping you could escape retribution? You can't! Confess and atone to the full extent of the law! That's the only way to wash the guilt of our mother's blood from our souls!"<sup>2</sup> Finally, the guilt becomes unbearable for Orin. He confesses his incestuous love for his sister:

ORIN. I love you now with all the guilt in me-- the guilt we share! Perhaps I love you too much, Vinnie!

LAVINIA. You don't know what you're saying!

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 836.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 839.

ORIN. There are times now when you don't seem to be my sister, nor Mother, but some stranger with the same beautiful hair--. . .<sup>1</sup>

Lavinia is shocked when Orin confronts her with what they have become and tells Orin, "I hate you! I wish you were dead! You're too vile to live! You'd kill yourself if you weren't a coward."<sup>2</sup> Orin sees suicide as a way of ending his pain, and he kills himself, putting a bullet through his head. In his death, Orin has joined his mother at last in an act of penance.

As for Lavinia, her guilt is slightly more complex. Her love for her father is clear early in the play when she shows her jealousy as Ezra and Christine go to bed the night he returns from the war. Certainly her vindictive actions toward her mother clearly indicate the resentment she holds for a rival for her father's love. However, Lavinia also feels guilty for "deserting" her father in her love for Adam Brant, her mother's lover. Though she avows she never loved Adam, her actions at the end of the play reveal otherwise. After Orin commits

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 853.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 854.



suicide, Lavinia clings to Peter Niles and reveals her true feelings:

Want me! Take me, Adam! (She is brought back to herself with a start by this name escaping her--bewilderedly, laughing idiotically) Adam? Why did I call you Adam? . . . Always the dead between! It's no good trying any more!<sup>1</sup>

Lavinia's words suggest that she is motivated by her jealous love for Adam as much as by her jealous love for her father.

Whatever the cause, Lavinia rationalizes her guilt, refusing to accept it as Orin has accepted his. Of her mother's suicide, she says, "She could have lived, couldn't she? But she chose to kill herself as a punishment for her crime--of her own free will! It was an act of justice."<sup>2</sup> Of her condemnation of Orin, she says, "One must have peace--one is too weak to forget--no one has the right to keep anyone from peace!"<sup>3</sup> Even after Orin's death, Lavinia tries to run away from her guilt. She plans to leave the Mannon house and its ghosts behind:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 865.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 829.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 855.

LAVINIA. I'll close it up and leave it in the sun and rain to die. The portraits of the Mannons will rot on the walls and the ghosts will fade back into death. And the Mannons will be forgotten. I'm the last and I won't be one long. I'll be Mrs. Peter Niles. Then they're finished! Thank God!<sup>1</sup>

Once she is faced with the fact that her actions were largely due to the jealous love she held for Adam Brant, she knows she no longer can hide behind the lie that her revenge was based on justice. She reveals her acceptance of a self-inflicted punishment in a conversation with Seth the gardener:

LAVINIA. (grimly) Don't be afraid. I'm not going the way Mother and Orin went. That's escaping punishment. And there's no one left to punish me. I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison! I'll never go out or see anyone! I'll have the shutters nailed closed so no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die!<sup>2</sup>

There is evidence that Mourning Becomes Electra is a very personal play. Sheaffer quotes O'Neill's purpose for writing the play: ". . . he chose to retell the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 859.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 866-67.

Oresteia trilogy 'because it has greater possibilities of revealing all the deep hidden relationships in the family than any other' of the classic tragedies."<sup>1</sup> The "hidden relationships" the playwright refers to appear to be based on his own family. First of all, the animosity between father and son existed both in the play and in the O'Neill family. James O'Neill never enjoyed any real sense of warmth with his sons, just as Ezra was incapable of a close relationship with Orin. Also, the strong Oedipus complex existed in both. This time, however, O'Neill appears to be focusing not so much on himself as on Jamie. As has been noted in the first chapter of this study, Jamie was unnaturally attracted to his mother. When his father died, Jamie stopped drinking and became her constant companion. Also like Orin, Jamie died shortly after his mother, and Jamie's turning to alcohol after Ella's death is just as deadly as, though a bit slower than, Orin's suicide after Christine's death. Finally, Lavinia's acceptance of her punishment parallels a similar acceptance on O'Neill's part:

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<sup>1</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 372.

O'Neill, speaking through the character of Lavinia Mannon (*Electra*), ends the play with a line that is part despair, part masochistic gloating: "I'm the last Mannon." O'Neill used precisely that phrase after the death, in rapid succession, of his parents and brother. He wrote to a friend, "I'm the last O'Neill."<sup>1</sup>

Just as Lavinia lived in the Mannon house with the ghosts of her ancestors, O'Neill was destined to "live" with the ghosts of his family members in the plays he wrote after their death. The similarities between O'Neill's life and incidents in Mourning Becomes Electra are remarkable.

In A Touch of the Poet there is a parent-child relationship which likewise carries a burden of guilt. Sara Melody is her father's sharpest critic. She sees through his false pride, and his strutting and vanity engender many arguments between father and daughter. At one point, Con implies that if all else fails, Sara could always seduce young Simon Harford, thus making him duty-bound to marry her. His comment causes the following exchange:

SARA (Quietly): All right, Mother. I'll leave him to look in the mirror, like he loves to, and remember what he said, and be proud of himself. (MELODY winces. SARA goes out right.)

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Gelb, "'Written in Tears and Blood . . .,'" p. 19.

MELODY (After a pause--shakenly.): I--She mistook my meaning--It's as you said. She goads me into losing my temper, and I say things--<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, Sara is more disappointed than her mother when Con "kills the Major" and accepts himself for what he is. When she sees her father a broken man, she responds guiltily:

SARA (Rushes to him and grabs his arm.): No! I won't let you! It's my pride, too! (She stammers.) Listen! Forgive me, Father! I know it's my fault--always sneering and insulting you--but I only meant the lies in it. The truth--Talavera--the Duke praising your bravery--an officer in his army--even the ladies in Spain--deep down that's been my pride, too--that I was your daughter. So don't--I'll do anything you ask--I'll even tell Simon--that after his father's insult to you--I'm too proud to marry a Yankee coward's son!<sup>2</sup>

For all her criticism, her father's fantasy world has been a real source of pride for her. The intensity of her guilt is shown in her offer to give up Simon if her father would become his old self. However, Sara, like her mother, is forced to accept Con's new lifestyle as a form of self-punishment he must bring to bear on himself.

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, A Touch of the Poet, p. 174.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 255.

Chapter II of this study has noted the similarities between Con Melody and James O'Neill. Sara's relationship with her father, then, must reflect Eugene's relationship with James O'Neill. Eugene sought to downgrade his father's noble pose--a pose he had acquired from the years of playing the handsome and heroic Edmond Dantes. Yet, if Sara's reaction is to be taken literally, it would suggest that O'Neill felt remorse over the years he spent berating his father. Perhaps, like Sara, Eugene worshipped his father's heroic stature, but by choosing his strong father as his adversary in life, he was never able to express his own true feelings. Sara's confession and apology may well have been Eugene's effort to confess and apologize to his own father.

In The Iceman Cometh, guilt motivates Don Parritt in a manner similar to the way Hickey is motivated. Parritt is running from his culpability over his betrayal of his mother. Early in the play, he avoids any sort of confession. His mother, who is one of the leaders in the anarchist movement, is presently in prison, having been turned in by an informer. When an old lover of Parritt's mother, Larry Slade, learns of her fate, he wishes whoever turned her in would find his soul rotting in hell. Larry

replies, "Yes, so do I."<sup>1</sup> Of course, Parritt was the one who had betrayed his mother. He tries to rationalize his betrayal, saying at one point that it was his patriotic duty; at another, he says that he sold out to get some money to use in buying the services of a prostitute. But as Parritt sees Hickey being slowly driven to a confession, he follows Hickey's example: "I may as well confess, Larry. There's no use lying any more. You know, anyway. I didn't give a damn about the money. It was because I hated her."<sup>2</sup> Also, like Hickey, Parritt sees he can hope to find peace only in death. He goes to Larry Slade, who has been forced to play the role of judge, jury, and executioner. Larry gives Parritt what amounts to a death sentence.<sup>3</sup> Parritt is thankful for his final release: "Thanks, Larry. I just wanted to be sure. I can see now it's the only possible way I can ever get free from her. I guess I've really known that

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>3</sup>Eric Bentley, "Trying to Like O'Neill," in O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 91.

all my life."<sup>1</sup> Shortly after this speech, Parritt jumps out of an upstairs window. Death--the iceman--has indeed come to bring relief to a haunted soul.

Sheaffer, who viewed Hickey as a reflection of O'Neill in his marriage to Agnes, also feels Parritt represents O'Neill in his relationship with his mother:

". . . the Hickey tortured by guilt feelings and self-loathing, was O'Neill himself, just as he also was the Parritt who writhed under the knowledge that he had condemned his mother to a living death."<sup>2</sup> Ella's dope addiction is the condemnation and "living death" Sheaffer makes reference to. As has been noted in Chapter I of this study, Eugene felt that his birth had condemned his mother to the torture of her morphine addiction. Also, as Parritt's act of betrayal led to his seeking relief in death, so O'Neill's act of "betrayal" may well have been one of the causes behind his attempted suicide in 1912. The Iceman Cometh appears to be a play that focuses as sharply on O'Neill's guilt as a son as it did on his guilt as a husband.

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh, p. 248.

<sup>2</sup>Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 499.



The most autobiographical play Eugene O'Neill ever wrote, of course, is Long Day's Journey into Night. It is, as John Raleigh notes, a play of betrayal: "The idea of betrayal, the 'turncoat' psychology, permeates all the Tyrones. Everybody has betrayed everybody else."<sup>1</sup> The complexity of the guilt between the Tyrone parents and their sons requires that each character be discussed individually.

The father, James Tyrone, is made to feel guilt chiefly by his sons for his stinginess. Though James denies that his stinginess has caused any worsening of Edmund's condition, the vehemence of his denials implies that he is rationalizing. In response to Jamie's criticism of his stinginess, he proclaims his innocence in the matter: "I couldn't have sent Edmund to a better doctor. Hardy's treated him whenever he was sick up here, since he was knee high. He knows his constitution as no other doctor could. It's not a question of my being miserly, as you'd make out."<sup>2</sup> James then tries to place the blame on

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<sup>1</sup>John Henry Raleigh, "O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night and New England Irish Catholicism," in O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 132.

<sup>2</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night, p. 33.

Jamie: "The less you say about Edmund's sickness, the better for your conscience! You're more responsible than anyone!"<sup>1</sup> James finally submits when Edmund confronts him on his choice of a sanatorium:

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 stinking old miser--!

He chokes huskily, his voice trembling with rage, and then is shaken by a fit of coughing

TYRONE

Has shrunk back in his chair under this attack, his guilty contrition greater than his anger. He stammers.

Be quiet! Don't say that to me! You're drunk! I won't mind you. Stop coughing, lad. You've got yourself worked up over nothing.<sup>2</sup>

Moments later James admits his stinginess:

A stinking old miser. Well, maybe you're right. Maybe I can't help being, although all my life since I had anything I've thrown money over the bar to buy drinks for everyone in the house, or loaned money to sponges I knew would never pay it back--<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

The preceding quotation shows that James O'Neill's throwing money away in bad investments while skimping on his own family must have bothered his conscience, at least in his son's view.

Tyrone's confession of his miserliness seems to be the end product of Eugene's depiction of his father in the play. Engel comments on this aspect: "O'Neill went back to 1921 once more, to show his father as he really was--not God the Father, not an ogre, not the statue of an eminent dead man, but a credible, picturesque, pitiful human being--. . ."<sup>1</sup> The play seems to "bury the ghost" of James O'Neill, a burial made with forgiveness on the part of his playwright son.

Mary Tyrone's failure as a mother is based on a variety of incidents which have brought her guilt. Of her infant son's death she says to James, "It was my fault. I should have insisted on staying with Eugene and not have let you persuade me to join you, just because I loved you."<sup>2</sup> Her addiction is another fact that makes

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<sup>1</sup>Engel, "Ideas in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill," pp. 119-20.

<sup>2</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night, p. 88.

her feel unworthy as a mother. Often she tries to blame her "curse" on others--James for getting her a cheap doctor, Edmund for being born. However, her shame is revealed at one point in a conversation with James over Edmund's illness: "I should never have borne him. It would have been better for his sake. I could never hurt him then. He wouldn't have had to know his mother was a dope fiend--and hate her."<sup>1</sup> Mary also feels guilt over refusing to admit the serious nature of Edmund's illness. Instead, she has rationalized, "Oh, I'm sure you don't feel half as badly as you make out. You're such a baby. You like to get us worried so we'll make a fuss over you."<sup>2</sup> When she learns the serious nature of his disease, her guilt over her making light of his illness forces her into a denser fog of addiction. Her inadequacy as a wife and mother drives her to a confession, once her husband and sons leave the house rather than face her: "You're lying to yourself again. You wanted to get rid of them. Their contempt and disgust aren't pleasant company.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

You're glad they're gone."<sup>1</sup> Mary's mountain of guilt leads to her death wish, as she says, "I hope, sometime, without meaning it, I will take an overdose. I never could do it deliberately. The Blessed Virgin would never forgive me, then."<sup>2</sup> The escape she gets from her addiction does not permit Mary to gain any sense of redemption in the play for her inadequacy as a mother.

Ella O'Neill, like Mary in the play, was forced to live with her guilt for years after the time the play was set (1912). But the forgiveness which Ella O'Neill was some day to receive is foreshadowed in one of Mary's speeches:

. . . 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>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

In her return to religious faith, Ella would someday be able to live with herself again.

Jamie's guilt as a son is also a combination of many factors. His father berates him for his lack of initiative and his drunkenness. The death of his infant brother has also brought him pain, for Mary has maintained that he had exposed the baby to measles on purpose.<sup>1</sup> His sexual promiscuity is essentially an effort to achieve self-abasement.<sup>2</sup> Also, late in the play, on his mother's entrance, he bitterly remarks, "The Mad Scene. Enter Ophelia!"<sup>3</sup> When Edmund strikes him for his comment, he is sorrowful. Even in his relationship to Edmund, he has proven unworthy of any love. He tells his brother that he has been a bad influence on him in an effort to make him the failure that he himself has been. At the end of his confession, he warns Edmund to look out for him in the future: "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>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>2</sup>Raleigh, "O'Neill's Long Day's Journey," p. 136.

<sup>3</sup>O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night, p. 170.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 166.

Jamie Tyrone appears to be a carbon copy of Jamie O'Neill. All the main sources of guilt of Jamie O'Neill's life are found in the play. Though he receives a bit of relief for admitting his enmity toward Edmund, Eugene needed to write another play, A Moon for the Misbegotten, before the ghost of his brother's guilt could finally be laid to rest.

Most of Edmund's guilt as a son centers on his relationship with his mother, especially as the cause of her dope addiction. He tries to blame his mother's addiction on his father: "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 sick after I was born, she'd never have known morphine existed!"<sup>1</sup> However, Mary will not let Edmund forget his role in her addiction. She comments that her medicine gives her relief from her rheumatism:

MARY

Her face hardening stubbornly.

Know what? That I suffer from rheumatism in my hands and have to take medicine to kill the pain? Why should I be ashamed of that?

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

Turns on Edmund with a hard, accusing antagonism--almost a revengeful enmity.  
 I never knew what rheumatism was before you were born! Ask your father.  
Edmund looks away, shrinking into himself.<sup>1</sup>

Edmund has never been allowed to forget his "sin" of being born. Within the context of the play, it takes precedence over all other sources of guilt.

The depiction of Edmund in Long Day's Journey into Night is interestingly incomplete. Bogard criticizes the lack of "truth" in Edmund's depiction:

If Mary and Tyrone and Jamie are "true," then Edmund should be equally so. If the characters in the play are "what the past has made them," then Edmund's past is of grave concern, as are the ambitions and desires that will move him on in the future. The past, however, is not there as it is with the others. The future is never suggested. He remains a participating observer, a little apart, an eavesdropping creature of the imagination. The truth, whatever it was, is at least distorted.<sup>2</sup>

The incomplete picture of Edmund (and hence, Eugene) in the play is an enigma. Perhaps Eugene had sought only to forgive his parents and brother because he had already

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>2</sup>Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 435.



forgiven himself through the many plays in which he cast himself in the roles of his characters. A second possibility, and a more depressing one, is that Eugene could not forgive himself. Like Lavinia Mannon, perhaps he needed to punish himself as the last of his family. Whatever the reason, Long Day's Journey into Night clearly was an effort to lay to rest the guilt that existed within his family.

The last play O'Neill wrote was an effort to absolve Jamie of the enormous guilt this tragic member of the O'Neill family carried with him to his death. Like Long Day's Journey into Night, it was a play that had to be written to give O'Neill peace:

. . . he dramatizes an episode from the family history which suggests that James found at least a moment of companionship, understanding and love before he died. By attributing a measure of fulfillment to his brother, O'Neill could accept a measure of peace for himself.<sup>1</sup>

Moon for the Misbegotten is set on Phil Hogan's farm, a run-down piece of land which Hogan rents from Jamie Tyrone. Hogan lives on the farm with his daughter

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Hatch, "Theatre," Nation, May 18, 1957, p. 446.

Josie, an amazon who plays the role of a whore but is actually kind-hearted and pure. The play begins on a light note, with Phil and Josie getting the best of their rich neighbor, T. Stedman Harder, who has come to make Hogan keep his hogs from wallowing in Harder's ice pond. The play then moves to more serious business, Jamie's redemption. Phil tells Josie that Jamie confided his intention to sell his land, thus leaving Hogan and Josie homeless. They plan a scheme in which Josie is to get Jamie in bed with her, and Hogan is to arrive with witnesses in the early morning. They will then be able to blackmail Jamie into selling them the farm at the price they demand. Actually, Hogan knows Josie is only putting up a front in her lustful boastings, and he is really hoping that by getting Jamie and Josie together under the right set of circumstances, they may fall in love and find happiness.

When Jamie returns on this night, Josie soon learns of her father's effort at matchmaking. However, her anger at her father subsides when she realizes that Jamie has come to confess to her purity. He sees in her a mother image. When she scolds him for drinking so much and eating so little, Tyrone replies, "That's right.

Mother me, Josie, I love it."<sup>1</sup> Soon afterward, Tyrone begins his morbid trek into his past. He quotes the death wish in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale:"

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
In such an ecstasy!<sup>2</sup>

Two opposing forces seem to be at work on him: his desire to hide his actions and his compulsive need to confess. As his confession begins, an admission-denial quality can be seen:

You don't get it, Josie. You see, she was one of the smuttiest pigs I've ever listened to.  
JOSIE: What she? Do you mean the blonde on the train?  
TYRONE (Starts--sharply): Train? Who told you--?  
(Quickly) Oh--that's right--I did say-- (Vaguely) What blonde? What's the difference? Coming back from the Coast. It was long ago. But it seems like tonight. There is no present or future--only the past happening over and over again--now. You can't get away from it. (Abruptly) Nuts! To hell with that crap.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, A Moon for the Misbegotten, in The Later Plays of Eugene O'Neill, ed. Travis Bogard (New York: The Modern Library, 1967), p. 342.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 365.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 378.

Once he begins, the facts of his insult to his mother's memory come to light: his return to drinking when Ella becomes ill, her recognition of his condition just before she died, the prostitute he hired for fifty dollars a night on the train trip back east, his inability to attend his mother's funeral because of his drunkenness, and so on. He tries to explain his degrading actions to Josie: "It was as if I wanted revenge--because I'd been left alone--because I knew I was lost, without a hope left--that all I could do would be drink myself to death, because no one was left who could help me."<sup>1</sup> Shortly after his confession he passes out in Josie's loving arms. John Fitzgerald notes the symbolic pose of Josie and Jamie at the end of the scene:

The positioning of the actors in this last scene intensifies the fact that, after a terrible crucifixion of feeling, Jim has at last found peace. Unconsciously or not, O'Neill has for his closing effect carved out with his two live actors a classic Pietà. . . . Like a grim echo of Calvary, a son who has borne a heavy burden of guilt lies almost dead in his spiritual mother's arms and lap.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 392.

<sup>2</sup>John Fitzgerald, "Guilt and Redemption in O'Neill's Last Play: A Study of A Moon for the Misbegotten," Texas Quarterly 9 (Spring 1966): 156.

The next morning Jamie awakens in a mood of peacefulness which has resulted from his confession: "It's hard to describe how I feel. It's a new one on me. Sort of at peace with myself and this lousy life--as if all my sins had been forgiven--"<sup>1</sup> When he sees the bottle from the night before, he remembers his confession and becomes suddenly subdued. He tells Josie good-bye shortly thereafter and leaves. The last lines of the play are a benediction which Josie delivers: "May you have your wish and die in your sleep soon, Jim, darling. May you rest forever in forgiveness and peace."<sup>2</sup>

Though Jamie becomes subdued after he remembers the drunken confession of the night before, the overall tone of the play suggests that his confession to the mother image of Josie did relieve him of his load of guilt. Fitzgerald comments that ". . . in the clear daylight and without excitation from whiskey, he admits that he does recall his confession of the night before and will always remember what Josie's love has meant for him."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, A Moon for the Misbegotten, p. 405.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 409.

<sup>3</sup>Fitzgerald, "Guilt and Redemption," p. 157.

Any other interpretation of the ending would conflict with O'Neill's purpose in writing the play--to absolve Jamie of his guilt. Bogard comments that in Jamie's finding forgiveness, Eugene also benefitted:

A Moon for the Misbegotten is suffused with an elegiac tone, and like an elegy, the play attempts to mitigate the fact of death, both to assuage the sorrows of the living and to bless him who has died. Beyond that, as is proper with an elegy, the drama attests the value of the life that has been lived.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in A Moon for the Misbegotten, O'Neill was able to do for Jamie what he had done for his parents in Long Day's Journey into Night--have him find the sense of peace that eluded him while he was alive.

An analysis of the plays in their order of composition reveals that, just as he expressed his concern over marital guilt, O'Neill became more autobiographical in his concern over guilt in parent-child relationships as he developed as a playwright. Another interesting point is revealed in such an analysis. The guilt expressed is almost completely from the perspective of Eugene as a son rather than of Eugene as a father. Only in the earlier plays, such as The First Man and Anna Christie, is

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<sup>1</sup>Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 449.

there any real remorse expressed over his failure as a father. In the relative isolation of his marriage to Carlotta, the playwright was free to write again about his relationships with Jamie, James, and Ella O'Neill in an effort to end the haunting recollections of his early life with them.

## C H A P T E R      V

### CONCLUSION

Most critics of American drama rate Eugene O'Neill as the greatest dramatist our country has yet produced. His four Pulitzer prizes are more than any other American playwright has won. He is the only American playwright to have won the Nobel Prize. He wrote plays patterned after the ancient Greek tragedians. He was innovative in his works, bringing such devices as masks, choruses, and asides to the modern stage, using them with success in a theatre where they were foreign. He wrote of the degeneracy he saw around him, dealing with prostitution, murder, suicide, incest, and alcoholism; and he presented the idyllic nature of the American people, as he did in Ah, Wilderness! He illuminated social problems in his country, as he did in The Hairy Ape and All God's Chillun Got Wings. His power as a playwright allowed him to captivate an audience in a four-hour production, as he did with such plays as Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra. Yet for all his versatility and artistry, he was a condemned playwright. By far the majority of his



greatest plays show him in a struggle at once simple in statement yet complex in scope--an effort to accept himself and his sins.

This study has focused both on marital guilt and parent-child guilt as they are reflected in O'Neill's multiact plays. It has also shown the high degree of autobiography in his works, as every play discussed can be traced in some degree to influences in his own life. A summary of the findings of this study reveals certain patterns in his plays.

In guilt within marriage, O'Neill patterned his plays after two marriages he was familiar with: his parents' marriage and his own marriage to Agnes Boulton. Characteristically, the plays reflecting his parents' marriage fall into two groups. Where the husband is at fault, he is generally depicted as miserly and vain. Gold and A Touch of the Poet are the best examples of those plays. Where the wife is at fault, she is pictured as weak of character, yet scornfully superior in her social bearing. All God's Chillun Got Wings and Long Day's Journey into Night fall into this category. The conclusion may be drawn, then, that O'Neill saw these same qualities as the cause for the strife in his parents' marriage:

his father's miserliness never allowed him to provide Ella with the luxuries she was accustomed to, and he may well have been partially at fault in her addiction. Ella's weakness of character caused her to attack her husband for her own shortcomings, and her feeling of social superiority made her husband uncomfortable in his failure to gain the fame he sought.

The second group of plays reflects Eugene's marriage to Agnes and shows either a sensitive artist or dreamer chafing in his role as a husband. While he loves and needs his wife, he also despises her for her purity and for the threat she poses to his independence. Forced by his guilt, the husband introduces strife into his marriage, either as a way of ending the marriage or as a way of producing a confrontation which will lead to a reconciliation. In Beyond the Horizon, The First Man, and The Iceman Cometh the marriage is ended, each time in the death of either the husband or wife. In Beyond the Horizon, Mayo's death is a welcomed release. In The First Man, Jayson's selfishness produces his wife's death, and in The Iceman Cometh, Hickey kills his wife Evelyn. A reconciliation is found in Welded and Days Without End, but in each case, the reconciliation is somewhat forced.

In Welded, the Capes agree to "fail with pride," and in Days Without End, Loving's return to the church after his wife's miraculous recovery is melodramatic. The endings to these plays based on Eugene's marriage to Agnes could hardly be termed satisfying, but neither could the end of the marriage on which they were based.

The guilt found in parent-child relationships is almost exclusively based on Eugene's and Jamie's relationships with their parents. The father in these plays is generally pictured as a stubborn, often miserly man whose relationship with his children could at best be termed "cool." Carmody in The Straw, Bartlett in Gold, Cabot in Desire Under the Elms, Light in Dynamo, Mannon in Mourning Becomes Electra, Melody in A Touch of the Poet, and of course Tyrone in Long Day's Journey into Night are such characters. The mother, at the same time she betrays her son, is the focal point of his greatest adoration. Such mothers are seen in Amelia Light in Dynamo, Christine Mannon in Mourning Becomes Electra, and Mary Tyrone in Long Day's Journey into Night. Also, the mothers of Don Parritt and Jamie Tyrone in The Iceman Cometh and A Moon for the Misbegotten, respectively, are described by their sons as being this same character type. Finally, the

son, out of his feeling of unworthiness, seeks to punish his mother, usually through his own degradation. Reuben Light of Dynamo, Orin Mannon of Mourning Becomes Electra, Don Parritt of The Iceman Cometh, Jamie and Edmund Tyrone in Long Day's Journey into Night, and Jamie Tyrone in A Moon for the Misbegotten are such sons. The female counterparts of such characters are found in Anna Christie and Strange Interlude. With so many repetitions of the same parent-child conflict, the effect of O'Neill's childhood and adolescence can easily be seen.

One question remains unanswered in this study: did O'Neill in life ever find peace of mind through the cathartic effect of his autobiographical plays? One can only conclude that he did not.

In proof of this theory, Bogard was quoted in Chapter III as believing that Edmund's neutral depiction in Long Day's Journey into Night did not afford any sense of peace for Eugene's own guilt. James O'Neill was forgiven through the play, and Mary's ultimate forgiveness is predicted. As for Jamie, he is laid to rest in A Moon for the Misbegotten. But where is Eugene's redemption? There is no evidence that it exists.

Perhaps O'Neill planned yet another play which would finally absolve himself. If he did, he never got to write it, for the nervous disorder he was plagued with for many years became so serious that it brought an abrupt end to his days as a playwright. Even if he had written such a play, it is hard to believe that its promise of peace would be any more permanent than the redemption seen in such plays as The First Man or Days Without End.

Furthermore, O'Neill's struggle with guilt fits the pattern of many of the plays. Quite frequently, his characters are hounded by some inexplicable force, a force which they never overcome. One may well pity the characters for their failure to defeat this force, but at the same time, the characters' struggle reveals a nobility which one respects. In O'Neill's life, the mysterious force was the family guilt that haunted him, and though his plays show his inability to absolve his guilt, the fact that he continued to fight against it builds a similar respect.

Finally, the only real peace O'Neill affords any of his characters is the ultimate peace of death. Robert Mayo, Don Parritt, Isaiah Bartlett, Martha Jayson, Theodore Hickey, Orin Mannon, Christine Mannon, Reuben

Light, Dion Anthony--all these characters stand as evidence that O'Neill believed that real peace is to be found only in death. To believe that O'Neill would have afforded himself the luxury of peace in life that he denied so many of his characters is too great an inconsistency. One can only assume, then, that November 27, 1953, was the day Eugene O'Neill was freed of his burden of guilt. He finally was granted the death wish that he quoted from "Ode to a Nightingale" in his last play: "To cease upon the midnight with no pain,/In such an ecstasy!"

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