

# **The Angel and the Dope Friend: O'Neill's Mary Tyrone as Irish Catholic Mother**

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Realism, a prominent theater movement in late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, became a powerful mode of stage expression during the Victorian era of the “angel in the house.” One such work, and arguably the first major trendsetter within the burgeoning Realist canon, was Norwegian Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. Ibsen’s protagonist Nora Helmer serves as a powerful opening model for subsequent Realist works, as a woman who ultimately chooses to remove the domestic mantle in order to find and understand her human self. Those who came after Ibsen’s Nora are, on some level, left in her wake, seen in Enoch Brater’s treatment of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and Clifford Odets’ treatment of Edna in *Waiting for Lefty*. Yet, for Irish-American playwright Eugene O’Neill, women as wives, mothers, and sexual beings are often entrenched in a crisis of identification that separates them from the Nora model. Through critical comparison, it becomes clear that O’Neill’s Irish Catholic, drug-addled mother cannot follow her predecessor’s path. *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* reveals O’Neill’s unwillingness to abandon his model of Irish-Catholic, domestic womanhood precisely because he distorts the model through substance abuse, in contrast to the image of escape typified by Nora in *A Doll’s House*. It is virtually impossible for O’Neill to let Mary Tyrone slam the door on her home and family. He decidedly traps Mary in a perpetual and failed motherhood due to both her Irish-Catholic heritage and the addiction that supplants it.

### **Introducing Realism and Long Day’s Journey Into Night**

Theater movements, especially the rise of Realism, in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sought to capture the complexities of real life, the “truth of the matter,” in contrast to the emotional, overbearing melodrama of previous decades. In her 2003 book *Realism*, Pam Morris writes that

“Thematically and formally, realism is defined by an imperative to bear witness to all the consequences, comic and tragic, of our necessarily embodied existence”<sup>1</sup> For working purposes, one can define Realism as the move in Western theater away from melodramatic, over-the-top theatrical production towards that which genuinely seeks to imitate the rhythms, emotions and patterns of “real” existence. Over time, Realism has become a somewhat fluid concept that subsequent playwrights have adapted in various ways, but the core focus has remained the same: to “bear witness,” as Morris notes, to our actual, physical lives as authentically as possible. French author Emile Zola writes in 1881 that playwrights throughout the evolution of theater have sought to “heighten the reality of the dramatic work, to make advances into truth, to liberate natural man more and more,”<sup>2</sup> and it is in modern Realism that such aims came to the theoretical forefront. Arguably, Realism ever seeks a connection to the truth of human life and human behavior in setting and in subject.

O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (1956) is an Irish-American family saga confined to, as the title suggests, a single day in the lives of the Tyrone clan. The playwright constructs this early 20<sup>th</sup> century middle-class family — father James, often called “Tyrone,” sons Jamie and Edmund, and, lastly, Mary the wife — as a troubled one, affected by an anguished past of sibling rivalries, marital discord, and substance abuse. O’Neill also forces his characters to perpetually relive the past, unable to move beyond the wrongs each has done to the others, leaving them trapped in painful cycles of repeated actions and words. Mary, the critical example, is a morphine addict who feels resentment towards Tyrone, an actor, for dragging her along his theatrical tours; deep-seeded anger towards Jamie for infecting her long-dead infant, Eugene, with measles; and resigned sadness towards Edmund for his weakness and ill-health. Ultimately,

O'Neill leaves the family in their Connecticut summer house, sitting around the dining room table incapable of moving forward.

### **The “Angel in the House” and the Realist Response**

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is arguably a seminal theatrical text tackling the domestic model of the “angel in the house.” The birth of the “angel” concept, however, extends beyond Ibsen's boundaries to much earlier in the Victorian era. In 1854, Coventry Patmore wrote a poetic tribute to his devoted wife entitled “The Angel in the House,” which soon became a cultural phenomenon, particularly in Britain. The “angel in the house” was integral to the overriding domestic ideology of the period: the husband labored through the morally trying public world, while the wife remained at home, a model of faith, kindness and motherhood whose heart was a refuge for her weary man. Not necessarily his inferior but always his support, she labored for the well-being of the home in all of her actions. Sarah Stickney-Ellis in her 1839 text, *The Women of England, Their Social Duties, Their Domestic Habits*, asserts that, “it is impossible but that woman should feel her own inferiority, and it is right that it should be so.”<sup>3</sup> Women, instead, are called upon to uphold “the weight of social and moral duties,” ones that might overpower those whom Stickney-Ellis terms “unsanctified [spirits].” Due to the “very weakness and susceptibility of her own nature,” a domestic woman cannot meet her husband on equal terms. Rather, “her part is to make sacrifices, in order that his enjoyment may be enhanced.”<sup>4</sup>

The moral preservation of the family was a primary concern for the domestic woman at this time, lest she be Stickney-Ellis' “unsanctified spirit” who does not see the nobility of this task. She must deny herself for the well-being of her home, her children and her husband. Particularly in England, this belief system came into public knowledge through the moral dissemination

campaigns of the Evangelicals. The most famous among these was the Clapham Sect, a group best known for their work in the abolitionist movement. Catherine Hall cites abolitionist William Wilberforce, a prominent member of the Sect, as articulating this public-male, private-female construction cogently in his volume *Practical Christianity*. His man is beaten down by the immoralities of the public sphere and discouraged by the intellectual and spiritual quagmires of classic literature and the learned world. At the close of the work day, he returns to the hearth “worn and harassed by earthly cares and professional labors.” It is the wife, the “faithful [repository] of the religious principle,” whose lack of education confers upon her an “unimpaired sense of devotion” and the ability to revive her husband’s “languid piety.”<sup>5</sup> This model would eventually dominate sexual politics in the Victorian era. The “bourgeois idea,” through propaganda, was advocated as “the only proper way to live,” while the working mother or wife was presented as “unnatural and immoral.”<sup>6</sup>

The rise of Realism gave way to a critical discussion, if not rejection, of this model. This assertion is supported by actress and acting theorist Stella Adler, who writes, in *Stella Adler: The Art of Acting*, “the main objective of Realism is to overthrow the lies of private and public life.”<sup>7</sup> In effect, she rejects the public-private “bourgeois ideal” as false and popularly constructed. Eugene O’Neill, heir to the Realist tradition, writes in a 1939 letter that the Ibsenian universe was an “entire new world of drama,” a “theatre where truth might live.”<sup>8</sup> The Victorian angel, by contrast, as the keeper of the bourgeois ideal, is bound to remain limited — until she, like Nora, thrusts open the door of liberation herself through Ibsen and the growing Realist movement in drama. Whereas the “angel” is the moral and religious refuge, the Realist woman of Zola, August Strindberg and Ibsen lives in a causal universe conceived by the processes of evolution and, later, the authority of psychology as a viable conception of the world order.

Realist critics would also debate and deconstruct the dichotomy between men and women's intellectual and moral selves created by the public-private dynamic. The angel's family unit, according to Adler, is more complex in Realist theater. "What the Realistic playwright is often saying is that the family . . . is far more complicated than the monarchy. In *A Doll's House* Ibsen says the whole family situation is false. This big truth is the key to Realism."<sup>9</sup> In Adler's view, Realism "gets at and uncovers the truth of the human being, of the middle class and its way of life"<sup>10</sup> and aims to break down societal constructions that seek the truth of the family and middle class life.

Ibsen thus rejects the "angel in the house" model in the character of Nora Helmer. The Norwegian playwright asserts a Realist vision of domestic life in his text, with the task of capturing a "description of humanity."<sup>11</sup> While Ibsen saw the fate of the Helmers in *A Doll's House* to be a catastrophe for all involved, including Nora,<sup>12</sup> her role in working against the domestic model, and thus in setting a precedent for other theatrical women, is essential to our analysis of Mary Tyrone as a woman in the Realist canon. Ibsen's discussion of these ideas in *A Doll's House* was not unprecedented; Joan Templeton cites his play *The Pillars of Society* as typifying a "New Woman," Lona Hessel, as one who rejects the domestic model in favor of an independent lifestyle. Yet it was Ibsen's "stroke of genius" to create in Nora a "little *husfru*, a rebel who throws normality to the winds" by leaving her home.<sup>13</sup>

Templeton asserts that the play is the "greatest literary argument" against the doctrine of separate spheres: that the 19<sup>th</sup> century converted an already-existing domestic belief into a true ideology of gender and marriage that the play criticizes in that final door slam. Nora's "doll-identity" is shown to be "absurd and demeaning," and her husband's hypocritical "forgiveness" shows her that "men expect women to live for love while they themselves would never do so."<sup>14</sup>

In that final act, Nora claims that by sheltering her in a life of domesticity, both her father and Torvald “did me a great wrong. It’s your fault that I’ve never made anything of my life.”<sup>15</sup> Were Nora to accept the “angel” model, she would see her keeping of the home sphere as succeeding, as “making something” of her existence. Instead, Nora tells Torvald that “I am no wife to you,”<sup>16</sup> and that the duty Torvald claims she has to her children is on par with another, “equally sacred” duty: “My duty to myself.”<sup>17</sup> This assertion —that Nora rejects the domestic ideology by leaving her husband and children — establishes her as a model for women in Realist theater. She is ushering a new era of change, one that Ibsen, Templeton cites, would welcome as progress. While Toril Moi would note that Ibsen also engages in metatheatricality rather than strict Realism, Nora still stands as something of a guidepost to which we might compare other playwrights’ treatment of women in the Realist canon.

Two subsequent examples — both American, and both Realist — demonstrate the influence of the Nora model in this type of theatrical production. In an interview with Enoch Brater, playwright Arthur Miller states that Linda Lowman, the mother in his *Death of a Salesman* (1949), is often portrayed, albeit incorrectly, as a weak figure: “she is not the passive weakling she is generally portrayed as.”<sup>18</sup> Rather, Miller sees Linda as a “fierce protector of her husband and also of herself.”<sup>19</sup> Brater himself argues that Linda, blind to the cruelties of the American dream, conveys values shaped not by the cycles of corporate America, but rather by “love, devotion, compassion, and empathy. She has never sought Heaven on Earth, only the final payment on the house.”<sup>20</sup> Despite Miller’s assertions, Linda’s agency in the action of *Death of a Salesman* is minimal when compared to the men who surround her, and she wants the establishment of a home as Mary Tyrone does. However, Miller’s masculine focus projects the

struggle with the public-private sphere model onto men — particularly Willy but also Happy and Biff — leaving Linda in its literal wake.

Clifford Odets' 1935 play *Waiting For Lefty* portrays an American housewife who removes her apron, figuratively casting off the type of lower-class housewifery assigned to her. Edna, rather than her husband, is the more dominant character in the episode "Joe and Edna." When Joe, frustrated, exclaims "This is a helluva house to come home to. Take my word!" Edna responds, "Take MY word! Whose fault is it?"<sup>21</sup> Still, her focus is not entirely on the economic preservation of the home; she reveals a similar desire to Nora's need for self-understanding and personal agency. When Joe accuses Edna of adultery, she exercises that agency, responding, "I'd leave *you* like a shot!"<sup>22</sup>

O'Neill, too, would respond to this question, but in a manner unique to his images of women, who Judith E. Barlow terms "his myriad Madonnas and whores."<sup>23</sup> Female characters in O'Neill are often trapped in the playwright's "equation of womanhood and motherhood,"<sup>24</sup> while still garnering complex portrayals in his male-dominated plays. Indeed, Barlow calculates that only one third of O'Neill's characters are female but also acknowledges that his women often "transcend the cultural and theatrical clichés he inherited."<sup>25</sup> He repeatedly engages with the woman as a "trope" for the bourgeois life, and "the insensitivity and materialism that annihilate the artistic soul."<sup>26</sup> This is also not revolutionary territory; the bourgeois conception fits well with Ibsen's, whom O'Neill admired deeply. O'Neill's women also blame fate and God at times, as in the case of *Strange Interlude*'s Nina Leeds, or embody a larger engagement with Freud, through the detachment "accompanied by hostility" between Christine Mannon and her daughter, Lavinia.<sup>27</sup> They might yearn, as Nina does, for "a beneficent 'mother God,'" but must also construct themselves within a male-dominated universe, a "wholly male world."<sup>28</sup>



Barlow cites that O'Neill's maternal female was deeply "a part of the cultural and religious air he breathed."<sup>29</sup> His mothers often "fail their offspring or spouses," as arguably Mary Tyrone has done, and live within O'Neill's constructed world "shaped around male desires" that are "imposed on women." As Barlow says, in short, "Mary Tyrone's dilemma is that she has found herself in an O'Neill play."<sup>30</sup> Her once-virginal innocence, the "shy convent-girl" in O'Neill's Irish-Catholic world, haunts her motherhood. While Mary is arguably O'Neill's most fully realized woman, endowed with more depth and gravitas than many of his other female characters, she cannot escape the "masculine perspective" that endows her and his other women as "mothers, virgins, and whores with powerful maternal desires or condemns them for lacking such feelings."<sup>31</sup> Her hands distorted by arthritic pain, she comforts herself physically with morphine, one of the play's deepest sources of conflict and contention between her and the three men that surround her. O'Neill creates in Mary an Irish-Catholic mother whose very Irishness and Catholicism mock her in her addiction. She is fascinating in her depth, a crippled Marian image whose theological namesake acts as an overhanging shadow, drawn to prevent her from escaping the semblance of home she aches to create.

### ***Mary Tyrone, the "Angel," and Issues of Home***

By situating Mary in a transient, ill-fitting home, O'Neill bars her from attaining a traditional bourgeois identity, rendering her unable to slam the door on domesticity as Nora does. Additionally, O'Neill formulates her escape as an addiction to prevent her from ever truly leaving the home.

In order to contrast Mary with the domestic "angel," as Bette Mandl has done to some extent, one returns to her, Mary's, conception of "home." She tells Jamie in the opening scene of Act

Two that life with summer servants, as has been her experience at the New Haven home, is “trying.” “You don’t have to keep house with summer servants who don’t care because they know it isn’t a permanent position. The really good servants are all with people who have homes and not merely summer places.”<sup>32</sup> While the stage notes indicate that her surface frustration belies “indifference,” the repetition of these sentiments implies Mary’s deeper disappointment or anger over the issue of this displaced home. She muses to Tyrone about his upcoming touring schedule, when “we can go back to second-rate hotels and trains. I hate them, too,” she says, yet “I don’t expect them to be like a home.”<sup>33</sup> Still, the refrain remains; soon afterward, she recalls the stability of her father’s home as a memory: “You forget I know from experience what a home is like. I gave one up to marry you — my father’s home.” It is ironic that Tyrone dabbles in property sales while refraining from establishing a permanent home base aside from the summer house, an irony that is not lost on Mary. “It’s always seemed to me that your father could afford to keep on buying property but never to give me a home.”<sup>34</sup>

The house in which the play takes place, the summer house in New Haven, cannot be a home for Mary; it is too ingrained with transience and lower-quality goods for her to see it as the kind of ideal home she retains in her mind. O’Neill implies that in order for a home to be “real,” it must be financially secure, middle class, or bourgeois. “I’ve never felt it was my home,” she tells Edmund in Act I, “It was wrong from the start.”<sup>35</sup> Tyrone’s budgetary concerns dominate the house for Mary, now allowing her the opportunity to build the home and a surrounding community for herself. “Your father would never spend the money to make it right. It’s just as well we haven’t any friends here. I’d be ashamed to have them step in the door.”<sup>36</sup> While she loves Tyrone, he retains a kind of authority or dynamism in the house in whose shadow his wife finds herself, grappling with the fall-out as it pertains to her needs and wants.

She contrasts strikingly here with Nora in her desire to make and keep a permanent home; while Nora claims at the close of *A Doll's House* that she could never truly see herself as a wife and mother, and her domestic inklings are limited to some extent by her own will and self, Mary Tyrone connects the establishment of a home with the stability and goodness of her family and children. The lack of that stability has, in Mary's mind, deeply affected how she has functioned as a mother, particularly in light of how her sons have become the men they are. "You've never had the chance," she tells Edmund, "to meet decent people here,"<sup>37</sup> or to develop proper emotions and sensibilities. Mary tells her husband that "In a real home, one is never lonely."<sup>38</sup> Yet in her years of grasping at a "home" with her family, she has been lonely all her life: "The Mother of God, why do I feel so lonely?"<sup>39</sup>

O'Neill is toying with the popular understanding of the bourgeois home — the middle-class, domestic environment of the angel in the house — in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* by preventing Mary from attaining it. He skewers the possibility of Mary rejecting that home in the same manner as Nora Helmer by preventing its existence in Mary's mind, despite her feeling similar frustrations with, or disconnection from, being a wife and mother. Nora's husband, Torvald, had established a home and family by means of his economic strength, in keeping with the traditional domestic model. In a critical plot element of *A Doll's House*, Nora is forced to forge a document in order to keep the Helmer household financially secure (and thus, arguably, in the bourgeois state). Yet the continued existence of the home ultimately stifles Nora, and she removes herself from her domestic sphere by force of will. By not allowing Mary to support and live in a stable, middle-class home, O'Neill ironically traps her in a transient home life. He thus both connects and disconnects her from the domestic model: she is trapped in a "home" not her own, one that O'Neill has made to be "wrong from the start."

### The “Woman-Nation” and the Irish-American Tyrones

The model of the “woman-nation,” the nationalist occupation of Irish women as representative of “Mother Ireland,” often surfaced in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish drama. In Ireland’s self-conception, as embodied by the familial structure, women in Mary Tyrone’s time could not avoid associating with “Mother Ireland,” who was the protector of the nation’s sense of self-identity — a model which Mary, crippled by morphine, fails to uphold. O’Neill, as a self-proclaimed Irish-American playwright, appears to be cognizant of such ideas in his portrayal of Mary, the aggrieved mother of an ethnically Irish family.

Dublin’s prestigious Abbey Theatre, the seat of much of Realist Irish drama from approximately 1900-1930, also betrays the “angel in the house” conception, albeit on a much grander political scale. The nation-dramas of Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge, such as Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, betray a model of the “woman-nation” that, while evolving over time (until it reaches, as Maria-Elena Doyle writes, the critical point of Brian Friel’s *Translations*, where the woman-nation in Sarah is “powerless”), ties the female with the seat and preservation of Irish mythology. Indeed, Doyle posits that in Gregory’s conception, her women “are refashioned to fit the Victorian ideal of the domestic angel.”<sup>40</sup> If an Irish woman were to fully engage in the public sphere at this time, in the mind and politics of the Irish, she would be doing the “national interest”<sup>41</sup> a disservice by abandoning what Doyle calls the “gendered ideology of Ireland’s myth of self.”<sup>42</sup>

Doyle asserts that women’s suffrage movements in Ireland, for example, were seen as indicative of a disordered set of values and an inherent conflict with the faith. She quotes a commentator on the Irish women’s suffrage movement as making one such statement.

With our language dying, our traditions fading, our faith paling, the landmarks of our nationality disappearing around us one by one, has the Irishwoman ... money and time and energy and place in her heart for a fight ... when the issue of a nation's existence is at stake! The suffrage movement is turning the thoughts of the average Irishwoman Englandwards. That is the greatest danger in the present state of this country.<sup>43</sup>

Alan Finlayson notes that one of the most enduring elements of the portrayal of the Irish nation is the gendering of that portrayal as female. He cites a 1915 issue of a popular periodical, the *Catholic Bulletin*, for a poem entitled "The Spirit of Erin." In the piece, Ireland is "'our own dear Caitlin,' an ever watchful spirit guarding 'her four provinces with a warrior's courage and a mother's care' ... 'keeping her honour untarnished, and holding a lofty contempt for all that is mean and ignoble.'"<sup>44</sup> The poem is one of many examples in which women and their characteristics were projected onto the national image, creating a connection between them. Finlayson also asserts that in Irish writing of this time, women were often spoken of in connection to both "religious imagery and mythic archetypes," while men were described in drier, more scientific terminology.<sup>45</sup> For women, sexual identity and national identity were "mutually interdependent," linking the Irish woman, in her mourning and protection of the nation and its people, to religious iconography of the "vulnerable virgin."<sup>46</sup> While the struggle for a national identity is not unique to Ireland, Irish culture is particular in its insistence on the woman and mother as its preserving lifeline. In Ibsen's Norway, for example, historian Mikael Birkeland posed the question in 1866: "Who are our true ancestors?" and the dominant cultural task in Oslo at that time "was to 'demolish foreign elements and rebuild national unity'"<sup>47</sup> without an emphasis on feminine national imagery.

O'Neill characterizes Mary's connection to this imagery through an ironic lens, rendering her incapable of inhabiting the role of the Irish woman-nation in a household of Irish-American men. Instead, he places an actual Irish element apart from her: Cathleen, a woman unencumbered by

the clutches of substance abuse, fills the role of a feminized symbol of Ireland. O'Neill inserts Cathleen as a kind of foil of Irishness who enters Mary's morphine-ridden home life to taunt her in her failure.

The family's Irish heritage appears early on in the text, beginning with the descriptions in O'Neill's stage notes. Mary has a face "distinctly Irish in type," with pale skin and "thick, pure white hair." Her voice, when "merry," has "a touch of Irish lilt in it."<sup>48</sup> O'Neill gives not only Mary a description tinged with Irishness, but also her husband, James, "whose inclinations are still close to . . . his Irish farmer forebears."<sup>49</sup> The play's first act is riddled with Irish dramatic tropes,<sup>50</sup> including the pair of grown sons, the elder of whom, Jamie, "possesses the remnant of a humorous, romantic, irresponsible Irish charm."<sup>51</sup> Edmund's story of Shaughnessy, the tenant on Tyrone's farm and a "Shanty Mick" in Tyrone's words, is told with admiration for the man's wit and wily verve. "I told him you'd be tickled to death over the great Irish victory," Edmund tells Tyrone, "and so you are."<sup>52</sup> The Irish immigrant experience was integral to the playwright's personal identity; "the immigrant experience seemed to have remained in his genes."<sup>53</sup> *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, then, retains an ingrained sense of Irishness in its characters and their sensibilities.

If Mary, potentially the mother and keeper of Irish identity, were to successfully inhabit such a role, the family's Irish characterization would remain solidly founded. However, O'Neill also portrays that identity in a negative light, implying Mary's failure to maintain its vitality. When Irishness is related to the family's larger heritage, Tyrone views it with pride, even claiming that Shakespeare was Irish Catholic.<sup>54</sup> Yet that Irishness is also connected to hurtful memories within their family histories. Tyrone tells Edmund that when he was a child, "my father deserted my mother and went back to Ireland to die,"<sup>55</sup> leaving the family in a state of deep financial hardship.

Mary idealizes her Irish father, who “spoiled” her; “he would do anything I asked.”<sup>56</sup> He also tells Edmund that Mary is mistaken in her idealized image of her Irish father; “Her father wasn’t the great, generous, noble Irish gentleman she makes out,”<sup>57</sup> but a “steady champagne drinker, the worst kind.”<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, while the use and abuse of alcohol — or, rather, substances — would prove a common theme in contemporary Irish drama,<sup>59</sup> it manifests itself with a particular bitterness here.

The most Irish member of the family is not actually a Tyrone, but Cathleen, the summer servant. She haunts Mary and the family with her physical Irishness, as each Tyrone is more removed from the habits and life of the old country by time or by generation than she. Cathleen is a “buxom Irish peasant” possessed “by a dense, well-meaning stupidity.”<sup>60</sup> Jamie, noting that Cathleen had earlier burst into song, calls her “Our wild Irish lark!” while Edmund remarks, “God, what a wench!” Later, when Mary notes the moan of the foghorn, Cathleen replies, “It’s like a banshee,” an Irish mythical creature. She later criticizes Mary’s girlhood dream of becoming a nun, saying “Sure, you never darken the door of a church, God forgive you.”<sup>61</sup>

Where Cathleen is physically and morally sound, Mary is ever hampered by her arthritic hands, which she views as ugly and maimed. She takes her “special kind of medicine”<sup>62</sup> to salve the pain of her physical weakness, creating a crippling cycle of dependence. Due to the nature of this addiction — its physical manifestation and its uncanny tendency to dominate the Tyrones’ lives — she cannot fulfill the role of protecting Irishness in the way that Irish women were asked by their culture to do. If the idea of the “woman-nation” is integral to an Irish version of the domestic model, Mary cannot reject it because O’Neill leaves her limited.

### **Irish Catholicism and O'Neill's Virgin Mary**

The model of Catholic motherhood that O'Neill creates and toys with in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* has its counterpart in the 19<sup>th</sup> century period of the “angel in the house.” Like their Protestant peers in England, Catholics in Victorian society also reflected on such domestic phenomena. Anne Hogan discusses the model's influence on Irish literature in George Moore, who, despite distancing himself from the Catholic faith of his childhood, still wrestles with the remnants of that Catholicism in his novels in a way that likens him to O'Neill, his fellow agnostic. Hogan sees the titular character of Moore's *Evelyn Inne*, herself a Catholic, as neither the traditionally “desexualized nineteenth-century heroine,” nor a “new mould.”<sup>63</sup> Yet Evelyn, breaking off a love affair with an atheist, joins a convent, and she cannot escape her proscribed Victorian piety; she is unable to “reconcile both her religious and sexual selves,” furthering debate over the role of women in the church.<sup>64</sup> If the Victorian woman was the keeper of the faith in a dangerous, outer world, than the Irish Victorian woman, ever engaged in Catholicism, could not disavow her own “languid piety” in an increasingly agnostic public sphere.

Carol Marie Engelhardt also discusses the connection between Victorian ideas of the Virgin Mary with the “angel in the house” in England. The Anglican Church, the dominant religious group in that country, refrained from a particular devotion to Mary that their Catholic counterparts had historically pursued. However, Engelhardt connects the images of the Virgin and the domestic angel as they relate to the “Woman Question.” She argues that the angel, the “Victorian representation[s] of the ideal woman,” resembles Mary in their mutual definition as mother. Mary's sinless (“or at least . . . exceptionally good”) nature also likens her to the idealized woman of the domestic sphere. While the English tradition, Engelhardt says, divides



the two on the subject of their personal power — the “angel in the house” lacks power, the Virgin Mary was “understood by Catholics and Protestants alike as a powerful figure”<sup>65</sup> — the connection serves O’Neill’s portrayal of Mary Tyrone well.

O’Neill, notably, did reject the practice of a full and authentic Catholic faith in his own everyday life. In a 1940 letter to George Jean Nathan, where he first discusses *Long Day’s Journey*, a “deeply tragic play,” O’Neill writes that in the face of the Second World War, he cannot feel sympathy with any overriding belief system. In a letter where he expresses “the O’Neill in me,” he argues that “such faiths” as sociological idealism or “Holy Wars” are “not for me. Or any other faith, I’m afraid, except a profound pessimism, convinced of the futility of all faiths, men being what they are.”<sup>66</sup> He closes by saying that if America must “reinvent a God,” then that God had better be “infinitely more noble than the state.”

Yet O’Neill’s “rejection” of faith — of his Irish Catholicism — is not a complete one. Edward L. Shaughnessy, in his book *Down the Nights and Down the Days: Eugene O’Neill’s Catholic Sensibility*, argues that O’Neill retained a deep impression of Catholicism on his moral sensibility, reflecting a culture of guilt, forgiveness, confession, et cetera in his works. He sees the Tyrones as being haunted by the “contributing impulses” of Ireland and Catholicism, and the mother-son relationship as ingrained with the Irish understanding of the Blessed Virgin Mary.<sup>67</sup> He believes, convincingly, that O’Neill, who sought so often to replicate dynamics of his personal experience on the stage, has retained “some affection for the Church,” if only because of its powerful role in his parents’ lives.

Shaughnessy also quotes O’Neill as understanding the presence of Catholic symbols in his work; writing to a friend, Sister Mary Leo Tierney O.P., O’Neill says, “belief is denied to me in spite of the fact that my whole adult spiritual life is that search for a faith which my work

expresses in symbols.”<sup>68</sup> Shaughnessy also notes the influence that O’Neill’s Irish Catholic conceptions of faith, sin, guilt and redemption had on his understanding of Realism: he argues that O’Neill saw himself as “something more than a realist,” in his own words, “as a ‘confirmed mystic.’”<sup>69</sup> It is possible, then, that O’Neill is reconstituting his version of Realism with a religious or mystical sense, as we can arguably note in his portrait of *Long Day’s Journey’s* Realist, morphine-addicted Catholic mother.

### **Addiction and Catholic Motherhood: The Blessed Mother and Mary Tyrone**

Were she to have successfully connected with an Irish-Catholic domestic model, meaning a Mary-like motherhood of chastity and love, Mary’s marriage and life with Tyrone would have theoretically been conducive to the continuity of her girlhood belief in the Virgin. Yet Mary, having lost her belief, cannot reconcile the image of the Virgin Mother with her current, drug-addled life as an Irish-Catholic mother. That life — her marriage to James and the birth of her children — first led Mary to addiction, and has now barred her from the piety she once knew. Shaughnessy notes that Tyrone, in marrying a woman almost ten years his junior, would seek “above all things, to shield”<sup>70</sup> her piety and inexperience from the world. Instead, paradoxically, Mary now seeks to return to the Virgin and a false escape from her married life through morphine. However, O’Neill punishes her for what Shaughnessy calls her “betrayal” of her domestic role by virtue of her morphine abuse, effectively voicing his frustration with her failure. While at the close of the play, Mary may return to her childhood faith, she does so in a disillusioned and drug-addled stupor, while the Tyrone men mourn her failure to mother effectively, to imitate the Virgin Mary model.

In her addiction, Mary has grown disconnected from her disappointed and bitter children, both of whom are morally weak and searching for some kind of mother-figure. Shaughnessy reminds us that Irish-Catholic sons, raised in a culture that would borderline idolize the Virgin Mary, were, on some level, subliminally taught to see womanhood in this light. In Act IV, for example, Jamie recalls meeting with an overweight prostitute named Fat Violet. He pities her, an unattractive woman rejected by Mamie Burns' other customers, and chooses to let her "bless me with her woman's love."<sup>71</sup> Rather than sleep with her, he pays solely for conversation. "All I wanted was a little heart-to-heart talk concerning the infinite sorrow of life."<sup>72</sup> It would be a mistake to claim that Jamie is virtuously protecting the sexual honor of a woman; he drunkenly admits to regularly visiting other prostitutes.<sup>73</sup> Yet, O'Neill writes him as, on some level, seeking a chaste, motherly love and Christian charity over the moral weaknesses in which he often indulges; he refers to his conversation with Violet as a "Christian act"<sup>74</sup> and believes that "a man without a good woman's love" is "A God-damned hollow shell."<sup>75</sup> While O'Neill portrays both sons with varying degrees of moral degeneracy, he still maintains a locus on Mary's addictions over theirs.

To the Tyrone men and to Mary herself, her habit — arguably her weakness, although responsibility is always a contentious issue in this household — divides her from her family, her God and her religious namesake, a gulf that Mary notes with both bitterness and frustration. If Edmund's birth had been easier, Mary recalls, the family doctor would not have prescribed her the drug in the first place; without morphine, she might have been a good mother. "I was so healthy before Edmund was born,"<sup>76</sup> she reflects; later, she exclaims, "[Edmund] wouldn't have had to know his mother was a dope fiend — and hate her!"<sup>77</sup> Jamie, who "cannot help appealing pleadingly" to his addicted mother, cries in the final scene, "Hell! What's the use? It's no

good.”<sup>78</sup> Shaughnessy’s analysis of Mary’s attitude towards Jamie is valuable here: Mary focuses on feelings of disappointment and anger, removing her further from a motherly role. “In her attitude towards [her elder son],” Shaughnessy notes,

Mary Tyrone fails most glaringly to imitate her beloved model and namesake. Jamie, devoted to his mother in ways that cripple some men, has learned a bitter truth: her feelings for him can never be those of unalloyed grace. Her feelings for him are mixed: thus, something is forever held back.<sup>79</sup>

On that single August day, Mary Tyrone wants to regain her lost faith. She sees her addiction, caused by the pain of childbirth and her later arthritis, as cloaking her in lies that ever distance her from the Mother of God. In one of her most powerful exchanges, spoken aloud to herself, she attempts to pray, reciting the Hail Mary in what O’Neill’s stage directions note as “a flat, empty tone”<sup>80</sup>. She seethes at her failure, crying to herself, at herself, “You expect the Blessed Virgin to be fooled by a lying dope fiend reciting words! You can’t hide from her!”<sup>81</sup> She recognizes her failure to live up to the Marian model; her physical weakness first led her to ill-prescribed pain medication, and she has allowed herself, in what she sees as moral failure, to fall victim to its power. Earlier, she tells Edmund that she has “become such a liar,”<sup>82</sup> veiled from God through her sin. In the same scene, she hopes for the 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” — for then, “she will believe in me, and with Her help it will be so easy”<sup>83</sup>. In her prayer, Mary briefly resolves to “go upstairs” and take another dose of morphine, alleviating the pain of her failed, faithless life.

Fittingly, O’Neill positions Mary’s false return to a Marian faith in the most gripping moment of addiction in the play, her morphine reverie at the close of the final scene. In her stupor, Mary psychologically reverts to a past life in which her faith in the Blessed Mother was deeply felt and lived, the return she so desperately seeks. O’Neill’s stage notes mention that

Mary's "eyes look enormous," glistening like "polished black jewels," and that "the uncanny thing is that her face now appears so youthful. Experience seems ironed out of it. It is a marble mask of girlish innocence."<sup>84</sup> She recalls her lost faith *in the present tense* by mentally returning to a time before her marriage, specifically her convent days. "[Sister Martha will] . . . tell me to pray to the Blessed Virgin, and they'll be well again in no time."<sup>85</sup> When Edmund reaches out to her, she briefly returns to lucidity, then slips back into her reverie of the past; "You must not try to hold me. It isn't right, when I am hoping to be a nun."<sup>86</sup> Despite her stupor of faith at this crucial moment, she cannot fully reconcile herself to O'Neill's Irish-Catholic mother-image. Notably, here, Mary carries her wedding gown "neglectfully,"<sup>87</sup> a garment of white satin that drapes over one arm. She hands it off to Tyrone, who holds it with an "unconscious clumsy, protective gentleness."<sup>88</sup>

Subtly, O'Neill has asserted an alternating feeling of sadness and disgust with Mary's actions throughout *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. He has made her an almost pathetic portrayal of a Catholic wife, one whose faith has been destroyed and falsely regained through her illusory devotion to a powerful drug. He has parodied her personal tragedy through the embittered words of her children; when she enters the room in that final scene, Jamie drunkenly cries, "The Mad Scene! Enter Ophelia!"<sup>89</sup> Yet the men also respond with frustration and a heartbreaking tenderness, almost breaking down in response to her addiction. After Jamie taunts his mother, Edmund slaps his brother across the mouth; Tyrone affirms him, calling Jamie a "dirty blackguard!" When Jamie begins to sob, Tyrone begs him, "for the love of God," to stop before she speaks.<sup>90</sup> She is physically and mentally transformed, albeit temporarily, by her morphine fix in that scene; O'Neill mocks her desires by formulating her renewal of faith as little more than a drug-laden haze.

## Conclusion

Clearly, O'Neill has not modeled his Realist wife and mother after her prototype, Nora Helmer. His portrayal of Mary Tyrone does not voice a similar frustration with the "angel in the house" role to which Mary has been prescribed. His choice to addict her to morphine reflects no overriding empathetic interpretation of his Irish-Catholic wife and mother, and he does not portray her as deserving of respect for her difficult, transient life. Unlike Ibsen, nor much of Realism's subsequent works, O'Neill stifles any valid opportunity for Mary to remove herself from the domestic sphere and reject the unique model of the "angel" that dominates her.

Instead, Mary, a battered idealism affected by religious, national and economic interests, is literally crippled by what the men see —and thus what O'Neill creates — as a crisis of will. "It would serve all of you right," Mary exclaims to Edmund when he suspects her of doping, "if it was true!"<sup>91</sup> Her cry appears more pathetic in light of O'Neill's characterization of her in the final scene. The playwright's choice to let Mary fall victim to addiction cements her portrayal as a weak character, unable to come to grips with a motherly calling and seeking to return to a false, innocent, religious past. O'Neill cannot abandon his pretensions of Irish-Catholic motherhood in *Long Day's Journey*, nor can he allow his image of wife and mother to leave the domestic sphere as Nora does. Instead, he cripples Mary Tyrone with an addiction she may never overcome.

## ENDNOTES

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