Ireland in Long Day's Journey into Night

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Ireland in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*

Playwright Eugene O’Neill once stated that “One thing that explains more than anything about me is the fact that I am Irish” (Ardolino 63). O’Neill’s relationship with his own identity as an Irish-American and with Ireland itself permeates his works, from his writing process and style to the actual content of his plays. *Long Day’s Journey into Night* is the play that perhaps best exemplifies this Irish connection.

Growing up, O’Neill was raised in a family that was immensely proud of their Irish roots. They “traced their surname to the Ui Neill, the line of Irish kings who reigned at Tara from 380 AD to 1022 over a part of Ulster including the section which later became county Tyrone. Eugene was named after Eoghan, the legendary founder of the Irish royal line” (64). When he was a child, he “devoured volumes of Irish history” (ibid) and watched his father play legendary Irish heroes on stage. O’Neill’s fascination with Irish history stayed with him through adulthood, and he was particularly impressed by Seán Ó Faoláin’s 1943 biography of Gaelic lord Hugh O’Neill, titled *The Great O’Neill*. He wrote about the book in a letter to a friend:

> It is a biography of Hugh O’Neill but also a study of Irish history in Elizabethan times. I learned from it a lot of Irish past I had mislearned before…. Hugh O’Neill, as O’Faolain portrays him in the light of historical fact, is … a fascinatingly complicated character, strong, proud and noble, ignoble shameless and base, loyal and treacherous, a cunning, politician, a courageous soldier, an inspiring leader…. In short, Shakespeare might have
written a play about him. He was … one of the most … intelligent and successful of the Elizabethan power-grabbers. (65-66)

Perhaps the most influential exposure to Irish culture for Eugene O’Neill came in the year 1911, when the Abbey Theatre toured in the United States. Until that point, O’Neill had only ever been exposed to his father’s Broadway style of acting, “old, ranting, artificial, romantic stage stuff,” as he called it, leading him to have “a sort of contempt for the theatre” (O’Ceallaigh Ritschel 129). As he expressed through Jamie in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, O’Neill “viewed his father’s theater as the arena where the actor performed as a trained seal” (134). Due to a connection his father had, O’Neill “had free passes to all the Abbey performances” during the tour, and seeing these productions “came as a revelation” to him (O’hAodha 13).

The shows put on by the Abbey Theatre completely changed the way he thought about theater and its storytelling possibilities. One of the most obvious differences between the American and Irish theater styles was in the acting. Professional English and American actors were very tawdry and overly melodramatic to the point of seeming larger-than-life, taking much longer than necessary to finish a scene due to “walk[ing] to and fro with multiplication of gestures” (O’Ceallaigh Ritschel 133). The style of the Irish Players, on the other hand, was “far more life-like for O’Neill than the large and exaggerated style of Broadway theater. The Irish form appeared much more natural and truthful as the actors slowly and deliberately delivered their lines” (131-132). He so preferred the “‘superb unmannered acting’ of the Irish Players” that it “became O’Neill’s ‘standard for the art’” (131), and when he directed the plays *Bound East for Cardiff* and *Thirst* in Provincetown five years later, he “tried to emulate” it (134).

Perhaps the most influential part of the tour for O’Neill was seeing the plays of John Millington Synge. Synge’s style of writing, and the “folk lyricism” with which he conveyed his
subject matter, undoubtedly had an effect on O’Neill, and experts on the two have long drawn connections between them. In the years following the tour, O’Neill continued to interact with Synge’s work. He took a playwriting class at Harvard in 1914, where he learned about “how […] Synge used the speech rhythms of the Irish counties to create a character” (140), a means similar to O’Neill’s use of American vernacular in his own plays. When reading Synge on his own, O’Neill “encountered a methodology of turning observations and experiences into artistic plays” (141). In other words, O’Neill saw, perhaps for the first time, that the subject of dramatic plays did not have to be epic tales of heroism and royalty, it could just as well be in the everyday, in the seemingly mundane.

Synge’s influence can also be clearly seen in specific parts of Long Day’s Journey into Night. According to scholars of O’Neill, he was particularly moved by the character of Maurya in Riders to the Sea, and Mary Tyrone’s act three line, “But even they can’t touch me now” (O’Neill 106), is seen as “almost a direct echo” of one of Maurya’s lines, “[…] there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me” (O’Ceallaigh Ritschel 136-137). More broadly, the way that Synge “presents an Irish identity only through Maurya’s suffering” is seen as having influenced O’Neill’s portrayal of each of the Tyrones, painting a “portrait of America” by showing “the extreme suffering of his characters” (137). For Synge, this Irish suffering is tied to people being “forgotten and abused by Britain and Catholicism,” whereas O’Neill’s American suffering “reflect[s] the forgotten Americans abused by their society and pipe dreams of fitting in with it, finding humanity in a world that would have preferred to forget the bums’ existence” (145). The way to deal with this, for both, is to find satisfaction in their lives where they can—to find the serenity to accept the things they cannot change, to borrow a phrase.
Ireland can be seen in *Long Day's Journey into Night* beyond just the influence of Synge and the Abbey Theatre. The importance that O’Neill places on his own Irish identity can be seen in the Tyrones’ actions and words, and in those of James and Mary in particular. The two are portrayed as two distinct “kinds” of Irish-Americans. Mary, on the one hand, is a member of “the lace-curtain Irish, the shabby genteel bourgeois who were despised by the shanty Irish for their sycophantic attempts to ape their Yankee betters” (O’hAodha 14). Some Irish-Americans, in the quest to assimilate, shed much of what made them stand out as Irish. A notable example is late nineteenth-century Boston-based dressmaker Josephine McCluskey, who changed her distinctly Irish surname to the more French-sounding Delavenu, “in order to secure the best class of customers” (McDowell et al 13). On the other hand, many, like James, were of the aforementioned lower-class “shanty Irish” who “never quite succeeded in ‘wiping the bog off their face’” (O’hAodha 13) and whom the higher-class Irish “were contemptuous of” (14) for impeding their own chances to climb the social ladder. Actor Brian Dennehy, who play James in a 2003 Broadway production of *Long Day's Journey*, spoke about this aspect of the character, specifically in relation to the scene in which he does yard work:

Brian Dennehy: […] And, in the play…to cut the hedge in his old ratty suit! Now, I lived in Ireland for fifteen years and what’s fascinating about the west of Ireland which is, or at least it was, very poor until its real estate got expensive—is that these farmers will go out with their black sticks to beat the cows as they go down the lane and they wear their olds suits and their vest buttoned up with a white shirt and a tie knotted tightly around their hat. They’re covered with mud—but they’re wearing an old suit. In those days, you’d see these old photos, of market day on Friday in those country towns; they’d wear a suit and vest.

Sheila Garvey: And that would be a way for him [Tyrone] to feel in touch with his roots.

BD: He liked to go out and cut the hedge in front of that pathetic little house, that cottage that he slopped together that infuriated her, understandably…and the hedge. (Hickey Garvey 156)
Some who have read and written about Ireland’s presence in *Long Day’s Journey* have paid particular attention to the off-screen character of Shaughnessy and the story Edmund tells of his pigs. They assert that the scene contains many “elements of Irish legend and history” (Ardolino 68) which may not be immediately evident to readers but was undoubtedly intentional on O’Neill’s part. To start, people point to Shaughnessy’s “ur-Irish power of speech” in his confrontation with Harker, relentlessly expressing his contempt and ultimately blaming Harker for the pigs’ trespassing on his land and their ill health. The pigs are seen as a manifestation of Shaughnessy’s words, dirtying “Harker’s pristine pond […] just as the Irishman’s invective debases Harker” (65). O’Neill further calls attention to the farmer’s gift of gab in his name: *Shaughnessy* sounds similar to the Irish-language *seanchaidhe*, a “traditional teller of tales in Irish folklore” (ibid).

Pigs and swineherds play important roles in some Irish folktales. Irish historian Geoffrey Keating, in his 1634 work *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, or *The History of Ireland*, asserts that “*Muicinis* or Pig Island is one of the ancient names of Ireland” (66). The mythological hero Manannán mac Lir is known for holding a feast for the Irish deities, and the swine he serves is what gives them their immortality. In another legend, “the King’s swineherd has a miraculous vision which foretells that Cashel would be the residence of the Kings of Munster forever. As a result of his vision, the swineherd gains freedom for himself, his family, and his friends, and he is also granted the right to proclaim the Kings of Munster” (66).

More broadly, some have seen O’Neill’s depiction of Shaughnessy as a representation of his “mockery of familial Irish patriotism.” Others, however, see the anecdote as a way “to exact a measure of literary revenge for the insults Irish immigrants to America suffered from the
Protestant establishment.” This interpretation is particularly striking, especially considering that the Shaughnessy character is much closer to the pervasive low-class “shanty Irish” stereotype than any of the Tyrones. James Tyrone’s staunch defending of Ireland is mocked outright by O’Neill, through Jamie and Edmund, whereas Shaughnessy’s “great Irish victory” is met with “pride” (64). Though having been born and grown up after the peak of anti-Irish sentiment in the United States, O’Neill undoubtedly felt its lingering effect on his parents and on American culture at large. Shaughnessy’s stubbornness and verbal pugilism may also have been intended to bring to mind the centuries-long Irish struggle against the British crown—even though “Harker is much more powerful socially and economically, he is no match for the lowly swineherd, who isn’t humble in the presence of ‘the king of America’” (65).

Overall, Ireland casts a long shadow over Long Day’s Journey into Night and O’Neill’s works as a whole. Being Irish is so central in O’Neill’s identity and his understanding of his own self, and it bleeds through into the substance and style of his plays.
Works Cited


