

Medicine on the big and small screen: *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

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Long Day's Journey Into Night (1962)

Starring Katherine Hepburn, Sir Ralph Richardson,
Jason Robards, Jr., Dean Stockwell
Directed by Sidney Lumet; screenplay by Eugene O'Neill.
Released 1962, running time 2 hours 54 minutes.

Reviewed by Therese Jones, PhD

Beginning in the cheerful sunshine of a summer morning and ending in the enveloping fog of a dark night, Eugene O'Neill portrays a single day in the lives of the Tyrone family in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Just as the four family members move in and out of their seaside Connecticut home, they also move in and out of their shared past, hurling bitter recriminations, lamenting lost opportunities, and incessantly laying blame on one another. The action is simple—from day to night, from light to dark, from sobriety to intoxication. The setting is almost exclusively that of the shabby and stuffy interior rooms of the house. The pattern of character interaction is one of alternately reproaching and forgiving, only to be followed by another volley of accusation and apology.

James Tyrone (Sir Ralph Richardson), aging actor and inveterate miser, moves between criticizing his sons and allying with them in their desperate hope for the continued recovery of Mary Tyrone (Katherine Hepburn), wife, mother, and morphine addict. Mary was prescribed the drug after Edmund's birth (Dean Stockwell), and besides understandably hating and distrusting doctors, she most often blames James for not obtaining better medical care for her, and for not providing a proper home for their family. She eventually succumbs to the lure of the drug, this time triggered by her anxiety over Edmund's health (likely consumption).

Jamie, the older son (Jason Robards), is in his mid-30s and on his way to the dissolute life of an alcoholic. His sneering cynicism is fueled by a child-like need to hope for his mother's sobriety and a hostile resignation that she will fail not only herself but also her family.

The film ends with the family barely illuminated in a small circle of light in the fog-bound house, extraordinarily isolated from the world and one another because of loss and addiction but inescapably bound to one another by suffering and dependency.

In 1941, Eugene O'Neill wrote, "I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood," as the inscription on the completed manuscript of *Long*



Day's Journey Into Night, which he began in 1939, three years after being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Although he was only 50, he had chronic health problems and felt an urgent need to embark on what would be his most autobiographical work. The process of confronting the dead members of his family—laying bare the pettiness of his father, the morphine addiction of his mother, and the alcoholism of his brother—was reportedly devastating. O'Neill was determined to withhold the play from the public until 25 years after his death, but just two years after he died in 1953, his widow withdrew it, presented it to Yale University Press, which published it in 1956, the same year as the first American production of the play.

The setting of the film is the family's summer cottage in New London, Connecticut. It was the one, consistent dwelling for a family whose lives were bound up in the peripatetic life of a professional actor. James Tyrone, dashing and handsome, was a popular actor in 1876 when he

courted and married Mary Ellen Quinlan. Although both came from Irish Catholic families, they had little else in common: James had no formal schooling while Mary was the pampered daughter of a middle-class family, that provided her with education and culture. She would never forgive James for having to live the rough and ready life of the theatre. The character consistently mourns the loss of any real stability throughout the drama, “I’m so sick and tired of pretending this is a home! ...for me it’s always been as lonely as a dirty room in a one-night stand hotel.”

In 1883, James first took the stage in the melodrama, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. An audience favorite, it provided the actor with the financial means of supporting his family, and he ultimately acted the title role more than 4,000 times. Throughout the film, James is bitterly mocked for his miserliness, which he attributes to a childhood of extreme poverty. The fear of deprivation and the need for security combine to derail James’ promising artistic career for a sure popular thing: “What the hell was it I wanted to buy, I wonder, that was worth--Well, no matter. It’s a late day for regrets.”

For Mary, life on the road had dire consequences. Her second son, Edmund, died in infancy from measles beginning a long period of grief and guilt. (Eugene O’Neill, the playwright, was the third son in the O’Neill family, and when he wrote the play, he used his dead brother Edmund’s name as his character.) She yielded to James’ suggestion that another child might remedy her melancholy and apathy, and she gave birth to their third son, Eugene, in 1888. Because the delivery was difficult and the recovery slow, her treating physician prescribed morphine to address both her pain and depression—until it trapped her. Although Mary blames her husband for the addiction, accusing him of engaging an incompetent doctor to save money, the practice of prescribing morphine to women was common until 1914 when the drug became strictly regulated. In the film, Mary rails against doctors, “They’ll do anything to keep you coming to them. They’ll sell their souls! What’s worse, they’ll sell yours, and you never know it till one day you find yourself in hell!”

Sidney Lumet directed the 174-minute screen version of the play with a remarkable cast including Hepburn, who emerged from a three-year retirement, to play Mary Tyrone. Almost all of the original play script is retained, making the film less an adaptation of the play and more a slight opening up of the original one-set drama. There are a few exterior scenes such as the front porch, but the interior of the cottage is the focus of the film. The strength of the performances and the power of O’Neill’s script are

what set the film apart, keeping it from being just a lengthy and tedious recording of a stage play and giving it momentum as such talented and experienced actors move in and out of the pattern of attack and remorse.

The film is in black and white, a choice that adds to the dramatic contrast between the hopefulness of morning and the desperation of night as Mary, ultimately lost in the fog of memory and morphine, trails her wedding gown down the stairs and through the narrow corridors of the cottage. The absence of color also enhances the dream-like quality of the film—fog, moonlight, whiskey, morphine—in which the characters drift in and out.

Given the emphasis on monologue, dialogue and gesture, there are, not surprisingly, many close-up shots of the characters. Hepburn’s performance is especially compelling with its quickly changing shifts in mood because of the drug—from denial to shame, from deception to frankness, and from anger to self-pity. While there is little camera movement, there are several memorable shots that establish mood and evoke pity: Mary ascending the staircase to inject herself with morphine, her body shadowed by the banister and rails like the bars of a prison; James, bowed with age and shuffling in despair down a long hall toward the empty dining room; and the final image of all four characters seated around a table, the men in deep shadow with a spotlight on Mary, as the camera pulls slowly up and back.

For contemporary audiences, Mary’s “accidental” addiction and subsequent seesawing between bouts of sobriety after treatment to relapse will likely resonate with the current health crisis of prescription opioid abuse, and even resemble some of the elements of televised stories of addiction and intervention. The denials, accusations, rages, and alcohol use of the male characters also feel familiar as audiences are now more informed about co-dependency and trauma. Perhaps, most importantly, the film provides an opportunity for viewers to witness one of Eugene O’Neill’s greatest artistic and personal achievements.

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