

***Long Day's Journey into Night:* True Tragedy or Transcendental Idealism?**

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ABSTRACT

This essay mainly questions the validity of some “bright” optimistic criticism on Eugene O’Neill’s famous tragedy, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, especially the validity of Frederic I. Carpenter’s argument that “the play focuses on the Transcendental idealism of Edmund Tyrone” (158), that “he achieves what O’Neill had prophesied for his autobiographical hero: ‘the birth of a soul’” (155), “which would result in his ultimate triumph” (158), that Edmund will “journey into light.” With many insightful comments by other critics and abundant references of the play itself, this essay carefully examines many statements by Carpenter to suggest that his optimistic argument about “Transcendental idealism” of the play is unconvincing and questionable. In other words, this essay will explore the reasons to show why such an argument is inappropriate by closely examining the main characters and the important relevant events in the play. The aim of the essay is to draw a conclusion that the play does not really focus on any “idealism,” transcendental or not. Rather, as one of the most powerful modern tragedies, it focuses on the tragic condition of human anxiety and suffering and on the human self-destructive struggle against desperation, alienation and loneliness in the modern world. More precisely, the play demonstrates the dark side of the universal condition of man through the tragic effects of the miserable and desperate Tyrone family. Thus, if we can identify any –isms in the play, tragic realism, pessimism, naturalist fatalism or determinism are much more strongly displayed than Carpenter’s “Transcendental idealism.”

KEYWORDS

true tragedy, textuality, Transcendental idealism, journey into light, ultimate triumph, optimism, pessimism

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Introduction: Textuality vs. "Transcendental Idealism"

Some critics suggest that in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Eugene O'Neill might have intended to invite the reader to look beyond the entanglements of destructive mutual recriminations and incorrigible human limitations; so, the reader should rise above the level of the dramatic characters of the play to look for some possible hope. These positive and optimistic critics are obviously represented by Frederic I. Carpenter who has even gone further to argue that "the play focuses on the Transcendental idealism of Edmund Tyrone" (158). "For him,—as for the author and the audience—the play has been 'a play of discovery, like Oedipus'"; "he achieves what O'Neill had prophesied for his autobiographical hero: 'the birth of a soul'" (155), "which would result in his ultimate triumph" (158). In order to understand what Carpenter really means by "Transcendental idealism" and why it is unconvincing, we should trace the background of his argument first. Carpenter argues that O'Neill was greatly influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy of tragedy, when he was in his teens, and such influence laid the foundation of "his future theory of tragedy":

When Eugene was eighteen, he first read Nietzsche's *Thus Spake [sic] Zarathustra*. Decades later he declared that "*Zarathustra* has influenced me more than any book I've ever read." The poetic exhortations of this imaginary prophet, combined with the more sober philosophy of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, not only inspired the young playwright but suggested his future theory of tragedy. When Zarathustra proclaimed: "You must have chaos in you to give birth to a dancing star. I tell you that you still have chaos in you," he spoke to the young man's present condition in terms of future prophecy. And when Nietzsche traced the birth of Greek tragedy to the pagan rites of the god Dionysus, he seemed to combine history with prophecy. For the young playwright was indeed a worshiper of Dionysus, and he felt chaos within himself. But he also felt within himself the potential "birth of a

dancing star,” and he dreamed of the drunken laughter of Lazarus. To O’Neil, Nietzsche suggested the element of transcendence implicit in all tragedy. (32)

Carpenter is not wrong by interpreting the young O’Neil’s own life with Nietzsche’s philosophy, as the young O’Neil had had “chaos” in him before he became “a dancing star,” and his criticism on O’Neill may be influential, especially among the optimistic critics of the playwright. But, he is only half right by indicating Edmund’s future with Zarathustra’s claim in terms of the textuality of *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. It is clear that Edmund has “chaos” in him in the play, but there are hardly enough textual references to suggest any sign of Edmund becoming “a dancing star” within the text of the play itself. He might become a dancing star in the future beyond the scope of the play, but that is not the concern of this essay which mainly focuses on the play itself, rather than on anything beyond, anything without solid textual support. Thus by declaring that “the play focuses on the Transcendental idealism of Edmund Tyrone” (158), he really makes a seemingly attractive statement without any specific convincing support because he lacks necessary solid textual references to back up such a glamorous claim, because there are no such supporting references in the play anyway. After carefully combing through the entire text of the play several times, I am finally convinced that Carpenter may be an influential critic on O’Neill to a certain degree, but his positive argument on Edmund’s future is far fetched and unconvincing.

Surely, understanding Aristotle’s principle of the tragedy whose “tragic action should, by raising pity and terror, effect a catharsis or purification” (Frye 464), the reader can feel such “catharsis or purification” while reading the play. Eugene O’Neill was obviously experiencing such “a catharsis or purification,” while writing the play, as he clearly claimed that the play was “written with tears and blood.” And it was “the faith in love that enabled me to [. . .] write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for all the four haunted Tyrones” (O’Neill 7). But anyone can be easily puzzled and naturally ask: If the title of the play, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, is loaded with any symbolic meanings (but it is, indeed), how can it be possible that the play focus on “the Transcendental idealism of Edmund Tyrone”? Unless O’Neill has intended to create a great irony in the title, it is simply impossible for anyone to see any “Transcendental idealism” in it. Any title is, of course, the identification mark of the essence of the work

itself. Thus, even the title itself can prove that Carpenter's argument is questionable. Carefully examining the play, anyone can tell that it does not really focus on any "idealism," transcendental or not. Rather, as one of the most powerful modern tragedies, it focuses on the tragic condition of human anxiety and suffering and on the human self-destructive struggle against desperation, alienation and loneliness in the modern world. The fact that the play is one of the greatest modern tragedies has not really been challenged since its publication, and most critics will agree with the following claim by John Henry Raleigh:

When the drugged Mary Tyrone moves to the center of the stage at the end of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, we are witnessing the soul-chilling climax of the greatest tragedy in the history of the American theater and of the great tragedies of the Western theatre. . . . (199)

No doubt, this is indeed "the greatest tragedy in the history of the American theatre," for even up to the very final scene, all what we can see is only "the soul chilling" tragic aspect without any sign of Edmund becoming "a dancing star." As I mentioned in the title, this play is a true tragedy. By "true tragedy," I mean the terribly sad consequences of the Tyrones' situations, especially the heart-breaking ending of the play that the Tyrones have tried very hard to avoid and struggled desperately to change, but finally helplessly failed. The tragic ending of the play naturally proves and reflects both Jamie and Edmund's pessimistic view of life, which is well displayed in their pessimistic quotations and in the works of their favourite authors, such as Max Stirner, the author of *Egoism and Nihilism*, Émile Zola, whose *Les Rougon-Macquart* is an account of the decay of a family as the result of heredity and environment, with special emphasis on alcoholism, disease, and degeneracy, Arthur Schopenhauer, who is famous for his philosophy of pessimism, and especially Ernest Christopher Dowson, whose life itself is a real tragedy, if not mentioning his pessimistic verses that both Jamie and Edmund keep quoting in the play. Émile Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart* is a particular striking example in comparison with *Long Day's Journey into Night*, as both works clearly emphasize a kind of sad tragedy resulted from heredity and environment, with special emphasis on alcoholism and disease.

Indeed, the O'Neill's play is a true tragedy. Even Carpenter himself has to agree that "the pervasive theme of homelessness . . . makes the play 'An American

Tragedy” (154). As the fact that the play is a great tragedy is well established, there is no need for us to discuss it in great depth, but it is indeed quite necessary for us to examine the validity of Carpenter’s argument, especially the statement that “the play *focuses on* [stress mine] the Transcendental idealism of Edmund Tyrone.” Thus this essay will mainly show why Carpenter’s argument is unconvincing and inappropriate by closely analyzing his certain statements about the play and carefully examining the main characters and the relevant important events. In other words, this essay will question the validity of Carpenter’s argument with abundant textual references from the play. Now let’s see in what ways such argument by Carpenter is not convincing but really questionable.

Journey into Night or Journey into Light?

As argued above, the title of the play tells us clearly without any doubt that the Tyrones are journeying into the endless darkness of the night, just as the 1962 movie directed by Sydney Lumet faithfully shows at the very end: with the saddest music in the background, the Tyrones are slowly and gradually fading and finally disappearing into the pitch-darkness of the night. But, in developing “the Transcendental idealism of Edmund Tyrone,” Carpenter argues:

But her son Edmund, in almost perfect counter-point, begins as “mama’s baby, papa’s pet,” and ends as the only member of the family wholly clear headed and emotionally unwarped. For him—as for the author and the audience—the play has been “a play of discovery, like Oedipus.” And for Edmund Tyrone the commitment to the sanitarium [sic] will provide a release from the family furies and ultimately a “journey into light.” (156)

It is true that early in the play, Edmund shows some promising hope for his journalist job for a local paper in which he has published some poems or parodies. This may be considered a good sign for Edmund to prove his literary potential, and his father has eager expectations of him, “He’s been doing well on the paper. I was hoping he’d found the work he wants to do at last” (36). Even the cynical and jealous brother, Jamie, grudgingly admits, “Not that they’d ever get anywhere on the big time.” *Hastily*. “But

he's certainly made a damned good start" (36). But, Edmund himself does not believe there will be surely "a journey into light" for him:

No, I'm afraid I'm like the guy who is always panhandling for a smoke. He hasn't even got the making. He's got only the habit. I couldn't touch what I tried to tell you just now. I just stammered. That's the best I'll do, I mean, if I live. (154)

This is what Edmund tells his father right after recalling his high moments in life while sailing on the sea, and the above quoted passage faithfully reflects O'Neill's true life in the autobiographical sense, for "he directed his energies into play writing after some early endeavors in journalism and poetry" (Gassner 2). What the reader can get from Edmund's own talk is really nothing like "a journey into light," but something uncertain. The big condition here is "if I live," and his consumption was a dangerous disease at the time of the play's setting—1912. Thus, Carpenter's argument is questionable, especially for all the entanglement of "the family furies," complaints, jealousy and miseries intermingled with care and love.

First, the implied conclusion of Carpenter's statement is that there is no hope for the Tyrone family because the condition of Edmund's "journey into light" is his "commitment to the sanatorium" which becomes "a release from the family furies." According to this logic, "the sanatorium" is Edmund's hope for his mental or spiritual release. By going there, or rather escaping from the family, he can achieve his spiritual "journey into light." But this does not change anything about the "family furies" which will surely continue as many references, including the ending scene of the play, strongly suggest, let alone the direct indication of the endless night symbolically suggested in the title. Second, if Edmund succeeds in releasing himself "from the family furies," he will have to cut off all connections with his family physically, emotionally and spiritually, but the sensitive Edmund can never do that, as he really cares for his family, especially his mother. It is the love and care entangled with complaints, grudges, blame, and even hatred that make things so complicated that any "journey into light" becomes impossible. Third, even if Edmund finally becomes clear about his family and personal problems, obviously he is not able to change anything about "the family furies," as he has no solutions to them because there is none offered in the play. Thus, we may ask Carpenter and his like: even if it were "the play of discovery, like Oedipus" what would come out

of this discovery? Carpenter may not realize that his comparison between Oedipus and Edmund is quite ironic. After discovering the prophetic secret of his doomed life, Oedipus finally punishes himself by gouging his eyes out and exiling himself forever in darkness, but is it rather ironic to say that after discovering the true causes of his father's misery, his brother's deep jealousy and his mother's hopeless condition of drug addiction, Edmund still can "journey into light" and achieve "his ultimate triumph"? What is "his ultimate triumph" anyway? We doubt that even Carpenter himself can provide any clear answer to it because such "ultimate triumph" does not exist in the play.

The simple truth is that in any normal situation, the Tyrones cannot ignore each other's trouble as they really care for and love each other although they complain about, blame and even hate each other in the anomalous situations suffered under alcoholism and morphine. The way John Henry Raleigh describes Mary and the Tyrone men illustrates this point well enough:

For she does love them all, deeply, and is quite sentimental about them. In her most sentimental moments she is capable of misty-eyed dreams of the future happiness of the family. Edmund, the gifted son, is an especial love. Yet she is capable of the most searing and corrosive statements to all of them [. . .]. Love for all of the Tyrones is ambiguous, unresolved tension between tenderness and hate, sentimentality and irony. (135)

Indeed, the sensitive Edmund can never completely ignore or forget about his family, especially his mother. His heart-piercing appeal to Mary at the very end of the play firmly proves the point. Obviously the desperate appeal suggests that Edmund wishes to shock his mother back to her senses with this last straw because he deeply loves and cares for her, as she also deeply loves him in normal situations. Thus, it can be logically argued that even if Edmund can survive after the sanatorium, he will surely still care for his family afterwards. If so, he will certainly come back to face "the family furies." Then, how can he achieve his "ultimate triumph" and "journey into light" if "the family furies" keep coming back? The desperate appeal also strongly disproves Carpenter's statement that Edmund "ends as the only member of the family wholly clear headed and emotionally unwarped."

We know that it is Edmund who tells his father about Mary, “Yes, she moves above and beyond us, a ghost haunting the past, and here we sit pretending to forget” (152). If we can take this talk as Edmund’s being “wholly clear headed and emotionally unwarped,” we will have to agree that even Edmund acknowledges that there is neither any hope for Mary to recover, nor any hope for the family to be peaceful and happy, unless they can “pretend to forget” or blindly ignore Mary’s hopeless situation. Further, during Jamie’s confession, the shocked and frightened Edmund is speechless except for yelling at Jamie to shut up. “*Uneasily*” (4. 166), “*Almost frightenedly*” (166), “*Miserably*” (167) are the stage directions for Edmund’s reactions to Jamie’s bitter confession, which cannot be convincingly considered as being “emotionally unwarped.” Right after Jamie’s shocking confession, again, the stage direction clearly points out, “*Edmund buries his face in his hands miserably*” (167). If Edmund is “emotionally unwarped,” why does he still “*bur[y] his face in his hands miserably*?” Can we, then, still say that Edmund will achieve his transcendental victory by simply ignoring or completely forgetting about his mother’s hopeless situation of drug addiction and Jamie’s brutal confession against him? The answer cannot be a convincing “Yes.”

Edmund, Tyron, Jamie vs. “Transcendental Idealism”

Carpenter argues that Edmund’s transcendental enlightenment is developed in his understanding of his father and his brother after serious conflict:

Meanwhile Edmund Tyrone’s psychological journey into light is motivated by his conflict with—and his final understanding of—both his father and his brother. (156)

It seems to be true that Edmund understands his father better (though not completely) at the end of the play, and he may understand Jamie better after his revealing confession of jealousy against him. Yet Edmund’s attitude towards each family member is different. To a certain degree, he develops some compassion for his father, but he does not show such compassion for Jamie; also, even if Edmund finally understands both his father and his brother, it does not necessarily mean that he can successfully achieve a “psychological journey into light.” Further, if Edmund can spiritually achieve his transcendental

victory, we have to ask: what specifically does this “light” suggest? Here is Carpenter’s “illumination”:

The conflict of Edmund with his brother Jamie is much more fundamental, more subtle, and more significant. And the discovery of the sources of this conflict—indeed, the very discovery that this conflict exists at all—marks the true climax of the play. It provides the final moment of illumination, and of tragic catharsis. (157)

But “this conflict exists” indeed; as a matter of fact, Tyrone has mentioned it earlier, and right after Jamie’s drunken confession, Tyrone again tells Edmund clearly, “I heard the last part of his talk. It’s what I’ve warned you. I hope you’ll heed the warning, now it comes from his own mouth” (167). Here “the very discovery” is obviously an old fact only revealed to Edmund by Jamie himself instead of Tyrone this time. If this “provides the final moment of illumination, and of tragic catharsis,” the illumination and the catharsis are the reader’s and the playwright’s rather than Edmund’s in the play. We cannot consider it as Edmund’s “final moment of illumination” because illumination is an internal process of spiritual or intellectual enlightenment, but after Jamie’s own revelation of his bitter jealousy, there is nothing in the play to indicate that Edmund experiences such spiritual or transcendental enlightenment except the fact that “*Edmund buries his face in his hands miserably*” (167) according to the stage direction.

There is neither evidence in the play to prove that Jamie will try to overcome his jealousy nor convincing reference to show that Edmund will be ready to forgive Jamie after Jamie has confessed his bitter jealousy against him. Maybe, Edmund is too shocked to react to it, as he neither mentions nor does anything about it in the play. Beside the stage directions mentioned above, what Edmund does is shouting at Jamie to shut up. Thus Edmund’s silence toward Jamie’s bitter jealousy shows his helplessness in such a situation. At most it may suggest his tolerance toward it. But it is clear enough that Edmund is not really ready yet to forgive Jamie for his jealousy of and his grudges against him even at the very end of the play, and according to John Henry Raleigh, O’Neill would write another play to serve that purpose: “*A Moon for the Misbegotten* is the play devoted to understanding and forgiving Jamie, as *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* understands and forgives James and Mary Tyrone” (233).

But Carpenter continues to argue that Edmund will become the victor in terms of “Transcendental idealism”:

This conflict of old brother with younger—of Cain and Abel, of cynical materialist with aspiring artist—goes far beyond any simple conflict of character. (157)

Carpenter’s allusion of the biblical story of Cain and Abel illustrates Jamie’s bitter jealousy well enough, but it can be conveniently used to disprove his argument that Edmund will achieve his “ultimate triumph” and “journey into light.” The Bible states clearly that God said: “What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground” (Genesis 4. 11). The cry of Abel’s blood is an unhappy cry for justice, not an enlightened cry for forgiveness, nor a proud cry for “ultimate triumph.” Abel gets his justice, as God told Cain: “And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother’s blood” (Genesis 4. 12). Abel’s cry for justice indicates that he does not really forgive Cain for his crime; thus, Cain is “cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother’s blood.” Hence, even Carpenter’s own allusion can be conveniently used to disprove his argument that Edmund will forgive Jamie and will achieve his transcendental victory.

Although Carpenter realizes that his “transcendental philosophy” is tragic, strangely he still insists on painting a promising picture of Edmund’s “ultimate triumph” with “the element of transcendence”:

This transcendental philosophy which Nietzsche prophesied was, of course, tragic; and sometimes it seemed wholly pessimistic. The similar passages of poetry and philosophy which the autobiographical Edmund Tyrone declaimed to his father in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, were even more emphatically pessimistic, and they were therefore branded “morbid” by the father. Yet the element of transcendence in them is more significant than their pessimism. (32)

It is pessimistic indeed, as “he [O’Neill] devoted himself to uncompromising pessimism,” as John Gassner clearly points out (1). The quoted “passages of poetry and philosophy” well show Edmund’s true feelings and philosophy of life. But, the thing puzzling here is: if Edmund’s quoted “passages of poetry and philosophy” are “even more emphatically pessimistic,” how is it possible for him to easily conquer his “uncompro-

mising pessimism,” and achieve his “ultimate triumph”? Even less convincing, Carpenter fails to further elaborate on how “the element of transcendence in them is more significant than their pessimism.” In the context of the play, those “passages of poetry and philosophy” cannot and will not promise anything like “a journey into light” or an “ultimate triumph” for Edmund. Rather, they explicitly show the absurdity of life, which has seriously twisted the Tyrones’ personalities. That is why while his father is turning the lights off to save a little cost of electricity, Edmund cannot help but laugh “[a]t life. It’s so damned crazy” (151).

Following Carpenter’s point of view, one may argue that since Edmund is the alter-ego of Eugene O’Neill himself, Edmund should have forgiven Jamie, as O’Neill himself wrote the play “with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for the four haunted Tyrones” (O’Neill 3). Here we should pay attention to the word “haunted.” If the Tyrones are “haunted,” Edmund cannot be free from the “haunted” situation; therefore, again he cannot be convincingly considered as “wholly clear headed and emotionally unwarped.” Further, we should remember that “this monumental autobiographical edifice [is] so vaulted with pain and domestic secrets that he [O’Neill] ordered it to remain unpublished until twenty-five years after his death” (Wren 20).¹ This order can prove that although O’Neill himself had already forgiven the “four haunted Tyrones” at the time of writing the play, he could not publish and stage it in his life time, as it was so deeply personal and painful for him as well as his relevant relatives who might not forgive him for writing it.

Obviously the Tyrones are not ready to forgive each other in the play. It is true that the play had redeeming qualities for O’Neill himself while writing and re-examining those miserable experiences with a compassionate heart; it is also true that while the play has redeeming qualities for the reader appreciating O’Neill’s courage in the course of human compassion, it is not true that the dramatized Tyrones themselves can be surely redeemed in the play. Even the process of redemption for O’Neill himself was extremely painful, and that is “why O’Neill, when writing this autobiographical play six decades ago, was said by his wife Carlotta to emerge from his study gaunt and red-eyed, looking 10 years older than he had [*sic*] in the morning,” as Ben Brantley puts it (E1). Following this track, we can say that Edmund is not ready yet, rather he will

¹ This point is also noted by Harold Clurman in his review of the play (Clurman 214).

have to suffer more before he can fully understand and forgive Jamie and achieve “his ultimate triumph.” Indeed, as the alter-ego of O’Neill is written about in an autobiographical sense, Edmund has to wait for a long time before he can really understand and forgive his family members—O’Neill himself had waited quite long to write the play at the age of fifty-two.² Walter F. Kerr’s statement proves this point well enough:

He [O’Neill] seems to be asking forgiveness for his own failure to know his father, mother, and brother well enough at a time when the need for understanding was like an upstairs cry in the night; and to be reassuring their ghosts, wherever they may be, that he knows everything awful they have done, and loves them.³

Kerr’s statement clearly shows that O’Neill himself failed to understand his family members when he was young and when his relatives were alive, let alone forgive them. Naturally, if we literally interpret Edmund as the alter-ego of O’Neill himself, the logical conclusion is that now Edmund, at the age of twenty-three,⁴ is not really ready yet to fully understand and forgive his relatives in the play. Thus “a journey into light” and any “ultimate triumph” are not possible for Edmund for the time being. This point can be further proven even by Carpenter’s own statement:

The story of Edmund Tyrone and his family is essentially the story of the young O’Neill. But the illumination which flashes through it, like the beams from the lighthouse through the fog, is that [*sic*] achieved only by the mature playwright. (155)

But Carpenter may have overlooked the logic of his own statement, which can be conveniently applied to disprove his own argument. If “the illumination” is “achieved *only* [stress mine] by the mature playwright,” then logically it is not achieved by the young Edmund/O’Neil; however, without “the illumination,” how is it possible for the young Edmund to become triumphal in the play? The only possible answer is that Carpenter fails to justify such an argument, as even his own statement contradicts it. Tom F. Driver’s following statement can further disapprove Carpenter’s argument but

² Eugene O’Neill was born on October 16, 1888 in New York, and he completed the play in late 1940.

³ Requoted from the back cover of O’Neil’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1956).

⁴ Jamie is thirty-three, and “Edmund is ten years younger than his brother” (O’Neill 19).

strongly consolidates my argument that O'Neill's alter-ego Edmund's triumph cannot be achieved within the scope of the play:

We know, to be sure, that Edmund Tyrone is really Eugene O'Neill and that he will one day get out of the sanatorium and become a great playwright. **But this knowledge is not part of the play** [stress mine]. It is the basis of an irony the audience supplies, and so it flavors our experience of the play, but it could in no way be said to be more than a faint echo in the play itself. (113)

We may also ask: what exactly is Edmund's "ultimate triumph" (158) in the play anyway? Carpenter obviously fails to further elaborate on it in his study because there is no final triumph for Edmund offered in the play, or for any one of the Tyrones for that matter. Beside the stage directions mentioned above, the ending scene of the play shows nothing but hopelessness, desperation and misery for the Tyrones. It also strongly suggests that such hopelessness and misery for all "the four haunted Tyrones" will return again and again even after the final curtain is down. As Celia Wren states:

What O'Neill depicts in *Journey* is a family's homemade sacrament of refused absolution: because the Tyrones will not forgive each other, and will not even forgive themselves, for their past faults, they forge for themselves a miserable present. Because their torment is essentially cyclical, O'Neill leaves no doubt that the quarrels in *Journey* will erupt over and over again after Act 4 closes. (20)

Wren's last sentence firmly confirms that the Tyrones' quarrels and bitter complaints that lead to miserable suffering are cyclical; therefore, they will surely doom any possibilities for a peaceful life for them, let alone any final victory for them in life.

How can Edmund's limited understanding help to alter the family's miserable reality? Even Edmund's understanding and compassion cannot change much the reality of the family's bitter suffering. They cannot change Tyrone's miserly personality, and even Edmund himself knows it clearly. Tyrone agrees that Edmund can choose any place to treat his consumption, but "within reason" (148). "The glare from those extra lights [still] hurts [Tyrone's] eyes" (4. 151). When Tyrone comically suggests turning the lights off to save a little cost of electricity, Edmund cannot help "*controlling a wild impulse to laugh*" (151). When Tyrone actually starts turning them off, "*Edmund sud-*

denly cannot hold back a burst of strained, ironical laughter” (151). Edmund’s understanding and compassion for his father is comically revealed but also pitifully limited in this horrible and mischievous laughter.

We should remember that Edmund’s reactions to his father’s miserly behaviour come immediately after the moment when he tells his father, “I’m glad you’ve told me this, Papa. I know you a lot better now” (151). Clearly Edmund’s better but still limited understanding of and compassion for his father do not change much of his personality. Neither can they change the hopeless situation of Mary’s drug addiction even though he desperately tries to bring her back to her senses by telling her about his serious consumption, as the ending scene of the play obviously displays. They also cannot change Jamie’s helpless alcoholism, cynicism and jealousy even after Edmund violently slaps Jamie twice when Jamie sardonically and almost viciously sneers at his mother’s hopeless situation. All the above events are the true tragedies of the play that surely offer a catharsis to readers who can finally understand that “the family’s sufferings [are] not just weakness and folly but the universal condition of man,” in Charles Isherwood’s words (32). More precisely, it is the tragic side of the universal condition of man. What the reader can see from such tragedies is the preposterous situation, in which man is trapped, and Edmund is such a man who is forced to face a hopeless destiny in helpless desperation because he cannot escape from the absurd situation of life. O’Neill may suggest some kind of free choice for the Tyrones “on the far side of despair”⁵ in “the one eternal tragedy of Man”:

I’m always acutely conscious of the Force behind—(Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls—Mystery certainly)—and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him. (199)

Clearly whatever the Tyrones choose will be limited by “the Force behind,” by “the one eternal tragedy of Man” and by the absurd world of misery, suffering, alienation and loneliness. Their own existence is dread rather than hope, as despair is their “path to the minimal possibilities among the spectres of frustration, sickness, pain and death in God’s inscrutable world” (Frye 189). This point can be further strengthened by Doris Falk’s following statement:

⁵ The phrase is borrowed from Jean Paul Sartre’s play, *The Flies* (Sartre 311).

The driving force of the family fate hurtles each of the characters into his own night and causes him to take others with him. All the Tyrones are doomed to destroy and be destroyed, to be victimized not only by each other but by the dead, for the dead have willed them a heritage of disease, alcoholism, and drug addiction, and have cursed them with the deeper ills of alienation, conflict, and self-destructiveness. (182)

Thus, if we can identify any –isms in the play, tragic realism, pessimism and naturalist determinism⁶ are much more strongly displayed than Carpenter's "Transcendental idealism." "We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy" (Yeats 128). This quotation from William Butler Yeats can help us to understand why O'Neill has created the play as a true tragedy rather than an optimistic experiment in "Transcendental idealism."

The fact that like Mary, Edmund constantly refers to the "fog" is another indication that he consciously desires to escape from the chilling reality of life, and his habitual desire to be engulfed by the mysterious "fog" is a wish to hide his wounded soul from the miserable world. "It hides you from the world and the world from you. You feel that everything has changed, and nothing is what it seemed to be" (98). This is what Mary feels, and Edmund echoes the similar note, "Everything looked and sounded unreal. Nothing was what it is. That's what I wanted—to be alone with myself in another world where truth is untrue and life can hide from itself" (131). This perception of the fog that mysteriously veils the true face of life and mystifies reality itself is transcendental to a certain degree; however, immediately following his desire to be alone in a world of "fog," Edmund clearly says that through this transcendental experience, he escapes from being "turned into a stone" (131) by the reality of a terrible life. "To Edmund, it [the fog] works both as a loss of memory and as a memory of loss," as John Lahr puts it (Lahr 82); but Edmund's "loss of memory" is a deliberate one. Rather, it is his conscious wish to have the "loss of memory" that he can be free from the ugly world

⁶ For a brief discussion of tragic realism and pessimism see John Gassner, introduction, *O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964) 1-6, and also Gassner, "The Nature of O'Neill's Achievement: A Summery and Appraisal," *O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964) 165-71. For a discussion of pessimism, see also Joseph Wood Krutch's "Modernism" in *The Modern Drama* (New York: Cornell UP 1953) 117-20, 122-24. For a discussion of naturalist fatalism or determinism, see Xuding Wang's "The Destructive Forces of the Past in *Long Day's Journey into Night*," *TELL Journal: Teaching of Languages, Linguistics, and Literature* 3 (2006): 101-19.

without having to remember the painful reality of life. Edmund himself here gives a clear explanation:

Who wants to see life as it is, if they can help it? It's the three Gorgons in one. You look in their faces and turn to stone. Or it's Pan. You see him and you die—that is, inside you—and have to go on living as a ghost. (131)

This kind of talk cannot promise any hope, let alone any possibility “which would result in his ultimate triumph” (Carpenter 158). What Edmund says here shows his helpless anger at life itself, as it does not offer anything hopeful for his family. At the moment, what is left in him is nothing “bright” but a “ghost belonging to the fog . . . nothing more than a ghost within a ghost (131), as he himself bitterly complains. Obviously this points out that there is neither promising “idealism” nor foreseeing “triumph,” transcendental or not. On the contrary, for Edmund, as well as for Jamie and Tyrone, “In the fog of their past mistakes, they grope for themselves as Mary does, and they see dimly the Gorgon and the Pan—the opposite masks of death and life—which they must face in order to survive,” as Doris Falk puts it (185).

Moreover, Edmund is also cursed by the hereditary ills as he has caught consumption and has become a “moderate” alcoholic like his father. Like Jamie, Edmund also tries to escape from the ugly reality of life under alcoholism: “Well, what’s wrong with being drunk? It’s what we’re after, isn’t it?” [. . .] “Or be so drunk you can forget” (132). Again, such remarks effectively prove that Edmund is not “emotionally unwarped,” and such development of the play suggests neither “idealism” nor definite hope, let alone any “ultimate triumph” for Edmund.

The Natural World vs. the Human World

Edmund’s deliberate attempt to escape from the painful reality of life is his leaving home to be a sailor. He left home for the sea because he was bitterly fed up with a stifling life that offered neither hope nor “idealism.” Like Mary, he is spiritually alienated even in his own home where he fails to have a sense of belonging. Thus, he himself feels, “As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong . . .” (153-4). This does not mean

that he is not willing to feel at home, that he does not wish to belong anywhere. Of course he strongly wishes to belong to a happy family that can offer him a good life with a bright future, but the dreadful and dreary reality has completely denied him just that although Edmund “struggles with his fate” in “his attempt to belong.”⁷ Thus, what Edmund says reveals his strong feeling of tremendous frustration in an unsympathetic life. If he feels that he will “never belong” anywhere, how can he achieve “the birth of a soul,” that “would result in his ultimate triumph?” (Carpenter 155)

Is there anything “Transcendental” in the play? No doubt, a few so-called transcendental moments exist in the play if not “Transcendental idealism,” but to what degree and what effect they can be interpreted is a concern here. It is true that Edmund Tyrone is the alter-ego of Eugene O’Neill himself in the sense of the autobiographical nature of the play. Thus, Edmund’s poetic talent and interest in a literary career as a journalist in the play implies O’Neill’s own successful life as a dramatist. But, the play itself does not really focus on “the Transcendental idealism of Edmund Tyrone,” as Carpenter suggests, for this so-called “Transcendental idealism” is too brief and too fragile to survive in the cold reality of the long dark night of life described in the play. More importantly, it is during such transcendental moments that Edmund escapes from the misery and pain of life, as Charles Isherwood states: “His anguish comes from the knowledge that it can only be transcended in those moments of escape he describes, when, at sea on a ship . . . ” (32). According to Isherwood, the so-called transcendental moments appear to be negative rather than positive, as they cause “anguish” rather than to lead to “a journey into light” since they are really the “moments of escape” rather than the moments of “ultimate triumph.”

Perhaps the strongest evidence that Carpenter can use to support his argument is Edmund’s following elevated feelings in his life on the sea:

I lay on the bowsprit, facing astern, with the water foaming into spume under me, the masts with every sail white in the moonlight, towering high above me. I became drunk with the beauty and singing rhythm of it, and for a moment I lost myself—actually lost my life. I was set free! I dissolved in the sea, became white sails and flying spray, became beauty and rhythm, became moonlight and the ship and the high dim-

⁷ The phrases are O’Neill’s own, and they suggest O’Neill’s favourite themes. See Gassner, p. 170.

starred sky! I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself! To God, if you want put it that way. . . . And several other times in my life . . . I have had the same experience. Became the sun, the hot sand, green seaweed anchored to a rock, swaying in the tide. Like a saint's vision of beatitude. Like the veil of things as they seem drawn back by an unseen hand. For a second you see—and seeing the secret, are the secret. For a second there is meaning! Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone, lost in the fog again, and you stumble on toward nowhere, for no good reason! (153)

Indeed, this is exactly where Carpenter claims his “Transcendental idealism”:

But, philosophically, the play focuses on the Transcendental idealism of Edmund Tyrone. And his tragedy is not that of defeat, but of suffering which leads to illumination. Like the others, he also journeys through the fog and the night. But, unlike them, he has seen—and will again see—beyond the illusions which surround him. And ideally the play reaches its climax in his eloquent account of his own experiences of transcendence, ending with a metaphor of illumination not unlike that of Emerson's famous essay on “Illusions.” (158)

There is beauty and poetry in such moments offered to Edmund by nature, and such romantic epiphanies and spiritual catharsis by nature are indeed moving. One might find such spiritually transcendental emancipation by nature in the works of Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, or Whitman. In his momentary spiritual ecstasies, Edmund reaches a transcendental epiphany of being united with “the sun, the hot sand, green seaweed” in “a wild joy” that strikingly echoes Chuang Tzu's Taoist philosophy of the ideal harmony and unity between man and nature. Chuang Tzu's dream of becoming a butterfly in natural ecstasy may be a good example in comparison here. We can imagine that like Edmund, in his dream Chuang Tzu experiences thrilling ecstasy, flying freely, embracing nature and immersing himself with nature.⁸ This Taoist philosophical fable not only emphasises ideal harmony and unity between man and nature, but more importantly

⁸ For a vivid description of the significant meanings of Chuang Tzu's dream, see Hsi-Feng Chang's *Chuang Tzu's Wisdom* (Yunghe: Han Yi SeYan Publishing Company, 1994) 178-182.

stresses spiritual freedom, and such a harmony, unity and freedom are quite similar to what Edmund experiences in his brief epiphany. True, Edmund longs for freedom as Chuang Tzu does, but Chuang Tzu can always transcend his reality to the spiritual world and feel free all the time, while Edmund can transcend his reality and feel free only in his brief epiphany for a moment. The play clearly and unmistakably tells us that Edmund cannot be free at all in the cold ruthless reality unless he escapes from and completely forgets about his family. But that can never happen, as the play offers nothing at all to suggest that. Thus, we can't help but ask: According to what can he free himself from all the personal sufferings and all the miseries of/in his family in reality? Anyone can tell that the answer must be negative.

Thus, if Carpenter has made his claim only according to the above-quoted passage from the play, maintaining that “[Edmund] achieves what O'Neill had prophesied for his autobiographical hero: ‘the birth of a soul,’” (155) “which would result in his ultimate triumph” (158), such a birth and triumph are very short-lived. When Carpenter claims that “ideally the play reaches its climax in his eloquent account of his own experiences of transcendence, ending with a metaphor of illumination not unlike that of Emerson's famous essay on ‘Illusions’” (158), he deliberately ignores Edmund's last sentence: “Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone, lost in the fog again, and you stumble on toward nowhere, for no good reason!” Obviously Edmund's last sentence shows nothing of any so-called “metaphor of illumination” like “that of Emerson's famous essay on ‘Illusion.’” Edmund's coming back to reality from his momentary spiritual reverie is absolutely different from that of Chuang Tzu's, as when Chuang Tzu woke up from his dream, “he didn't know he was Chuang Chou [himself] who had dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou.”⁹ Thus the harmonious unity between man and nature becomes reality even in Chuang Tzu's awakening world; therefore, there is not much difference between the dreaming world and the physical world in Chuang Tzu's case. Such harmonious unity reflects the transcendental metaphysical reality by which man can unite the internal world with the external world to achieve the Way in Taoist philosophy. Chuang Tzu's dream is a brilliant example to demonstrate Taoist essential metaphysical philosophy of man uniting with nature to

⁹ Chuang Tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia UP, 1970) 49.

achieve the Way even in the physical world. But to Edmund, the reality of the physical world out of his momentary epiphany is “the three Gorgons in one. You look into their faces and turn to stone” (131); therefore, there is simply no way that he can achieve any durable “Transcendental idealism.” Edmund’s habit to walk in fog is obviously another example to indicate his desire to escape from the ugly reality of the external world.

Anyone can ask: if “you stumble on toward nowhere, for no good reason,” as Edmund clearly says right after he comes back to reality from his ideal reverie, how can you still find any “metaphor of illumination” in your life? This very last sentence in the above quoted passage clearly tells us that Edmund has neither permanently transcended nor spiritually been freed from the ugliness of life by those very brief transcendental moments, for his transcendental but transient experiences are nothing more than brief sparking flashes of the spirit in the endless darkness of life. Moreover, if Edmund’s recall of his short moments of spiritual epiphany catalyzed by nature were the climax of the play as Carpenter claims, anyone would have to agree that Edmund’s last sentence must have been the anticlimax of the play and anything else afterwards would be entirely unnecessary. If that were the case, there would never be “the soul-chilling climax of the greatest tragedy in the history of the American theater and of the great tragedies of the Western theater” “[w]hen the drugged Mary Tyrone moves to the center of the stage at the end of *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*,” as John Henry Raleigh clearly points out (199). Furthermore, anyone can see that it is **NOT** in the human world, but rather in the natural world that Edmund has achieved his brief spiritual epiphany, as demonstrated in the Chuang Tzu comparison above, and this natural world is purposely used to contrast the ugly meaningless human world that is like “the three Gorgons in one” (131). We should also remember that right after the above-mentioned last sentence, Edmund says, “It was a great mistake, my being born as a man, I would have been much more successful as a sea gull or a fish” (154). Here we have Edmund’s real metaphor that effectively suggests that it is the natural world that can offer him spiritual freedom and release him from miserable sufferings from the human world only in brief moments. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that Edmund’s spiritual transcendence in the natural world is too fragile to survive in the chilling and ruthless reality of the miserable human world. Logically and textually it cannot support Carpenter’s glamorous “Transcendental idealism” according to which Carpenter lays the foundation of his argument. “For a second”

(153) is Edmund's own expression about his transient transcendental experiences, which are indeed too brief for Edmund to achieve anything like a final victory.

No doubt, the brief experiences of spiritual epiphany catalyzed by nature are the highest and best moments in Edmund's life, and the recall of them is romantically nostalgic. Edmund's recall of such moments comes right after his father's nostalgic recall of his lost golden opportunity of becoming a true actor in a serious acting career. The exchange and share of the secrets of their lives are surely positive because through such exchange, they understand each other better, and understanding itself is the first step to compassion. But understanding and compassion neither equal, nor necessarily result in hope and "ultimate triumph" in life, as the disastrous ending scene of the play strongly suggests.

The Focus on Mary—the Center of True Tragedy

Clearly, "the Transcendentalist idealism of Edmund" is not the focus of this tragic family saga; one can easily tell that literally the focus of the play is on the tragic effects of the complex and complicated family relationship centered on Mary, whose behavior and action powerfully affect the three Tyrone men. As Robert Brustein states, "Mary is isolated from her family in drugs and dreams, but she is the focus of all their anxieties, uniting father and sons in bonds of love and concern [. . . which] keeps all four characters locked in each other's fate" (30). A similar point is also suggested by Tom F. Driver: "Since she dominates the play, she carries the others with her . . ." (113). As the whole development of Mary's behaviour and conduct that are greatly affected and controlled by her morphine addiction leads to the true tragic ending of the play, it explicitly becomes the guiding line and the central focus of the inevitable family tragedy. The tone of the play changes according to the situation of Mary's changing behavior caused by her morphine addiction. Indeed, the harmonious atmosphere in the family at the beginning of the play starts fading away, as soon as the three men anxiously anticipate the return of Mary's drug addiction, which is the central focus of the play's development. All the present troubles caused by Mary's drug addiction are traced back to other troubles rooted in the past. The three Tyrone men desperately cling to "Hope" because "it remains to this day mankind's sole comfort in misfortune" (Hamilton 74).

Yet, their hope is finally wiped out even after they have tried every possible means to stop Mary, but have failed. The strong fibers of their troubles weave the invisible but unbreakable net of miseries clearly shown in their bitter complaints, accusations and blame, while they are pointing fingers at each other.

Speaking of hope, which is the concern for some critics, we should say that the main hope for the happiness of the whole family is centered on Mary's hopes for recovery from her morphine addiction. Her physical and mental conditions are the most important concern of the three Tyrone men. James Tyrone affectionately confesses to Jamie: "It's been heaven to me. This home has been a home again" (36) since Mary came back from her treatment. Even the sinister Jamie says in a similar tone: "We're all so proud of you, Mama, so darned happy" (41). Edmund also affectionately tells Mary: "You take care of yourself. That's all that counts" (43); "it's so wonderful having you home the way you've been" (45). But Mary's drug addiction returns. Although they have sensed it and suspected it, they would rather still wish that it were not true; even the cynical Jamie tells Edmund, "I hope as much as you do I'm crazy. I've been as happy as hell because I'd really begun to believe that this time—" (58).

Indeed Mary's status is so important and influential that even the heavily alcoholic Jamie has begun to hope to beat his alcoholism if Mary could succeed in beating her drug addiction: "It meant so much. I'd begun to hope, if she'd beaten the game, I could, too" (163). But cynical and sharp-minded as Jamie is, he is the first one to suspect his mother and to realize the hopeless reality of Mary's morphine addiction while both Tyrone and Edmund still self-deceptively refuse to acknowledge it. Both Tyrone and Edmund would accuse Jamie of cynicism rather than to face the terrible and helpless reality. But this also suggests that both of them have not yet given up hope until it is too obvious to be hopeless. Even in such a bad situation, both Tyrone and Edmund still try to appeal to Mary to stop her drug addiction even after they have angrily announced their resignation a couple of times: "Dear Mary! For the love of God, for my sake and the boys' sake and your own, won't you stop?" (85)

Yet, it is Edmund who tenaciously hangs on to hope even after both Jamie and Tyrone have realized that there is indeed no hope for Mary to recover. Edmund's desperate and fierce appeal to his mother in the final scene creates the most powerful tragic effect of the play, which purifies the reader's soul by the catharsis. When he "turns im-

pulsively and grabs her arm” and pleads, “Mama! It isn’t a summer cold! I’ve got consumption!” the reader is undoubtedly touched by Edmund’s wild desperation, as his hope is finally shattered into pieces that piercingly deeply sink into his bleeding heart. Jamie’s cynical quotation from Swinburne’s lines are sarcastically bitter but ironically true, “There is no help, for all these things are so / And all the world is bitter as a tear” (173). Here there is indeed no hope at all for Mary to recover from her addiction, and there is no hope at all for the family to expect any “ultimate triumph,” as they know it well enough by the end of the play. “What’s the use coming home to get the blues over what can’t be helped. All over—finished now—not a hope!” (161) Indeed, Jamie’s sinister remark has some truth here. All the mentioned facts clearly show that there is no hope for the Tyrone family unless Mary recovers from her drug addiction, but the ending scene completely rules that possibility out; as John Henry Raleigh says, “The dope addict mother can’t be cured—they all know this” (133). Indeed, they have hoped eagerly and they have tried to hang on to hope desperately, but they have finally failed bitterly, as their hope is nothing more than “*hopeless hope*” (91) as once the stage instruction ironically points out with the oxymoron. But all the above textual references strongly and undeniably prove that the central focus of the play is on Mary because she is the center of the true tragedy of the Tyrone family as well as the true tragedy of the whole play itself.

Conclusion: Journey into Dark Night

Again, I point out the ending scene of Sydney Lumet’s 1962 movie not only because it is so artistically powerful, so emotionally moving, and so “soul chilling” but also because it is so faithful to the original meaning of O’Neill’s play in which the Tyrones are helplessly journeying into the endless dark night at the very end. Moreover, O’Neill’s own comment, noted by John Lahr, on the ending of the play can certainly serve as a clinch to finally disprove Carpenter’s claim that Edmund will “journey into light”:

“At the final curtain,” O’Neill wrote to George Jean Nathan in 1940, the year he completed the play (it was first produced three years after his death, in 1956), “there they still are, trapped within each other by

the past, each guilty and at the same time innocent, scorning, loving, pitying each other, understanding and yet not understanding at all, forgiving, but still doomed never to be able to forget.” (81)

Surely, if they are still “trapped within each other by the past,” “understanding and yet not understanding at all,” “forgiving, but still doomed never to be able to forget,” Edmund certainly cannot be considered as “wholly clear headed, emotionally unwarped.” In such a hopeless situation at the very end of the play, clearly explained by O’Neill himself, any “journey into light” and any “ultimate triumph” for Edmund are simply out of the question.

Thus, we have every reason to believe that Carpenter has exaggerated the “Transcendental idealism of Edmund Tyrone” out of a proper proportion and that “some possible hope” will never come to the haunted hopeless Tyrones. O’Neill has created the play as an outstanding tragedy which is a superb work of art, not a melodrama for the reader to look for future hope for the haunted Tyrones. As Gassner notes: “[O’Neill’s] chief attitude was a determined reaction against optimism of shallow people breezily at ease in Zion” (168). The play does not really focus on any “idealism,” transcendental or not. Rather, as one of the most powerful modern tragedies, it focuses on the tragic condition of human anxiety and suffering and on the human self-destructive struggle against desperation, alienation and loneliness in the modern world. More precisely, the play demonstrates the tragic side of the universal condition of man through the tragic effects of the miserable and desperate Tyrone family.

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