

Family Conflict Theory in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*

Majed S Al-Lehaibi¹

Abstract

Although Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* may be depressing and emotionally draining, it demonstrates a number of important elements of family relationship theory, including the interactions between siblings, spouses and their lives over time; combined, these interactions draw a picture of the family as the container and sustainer of life. The play advances the theme that, within the context of the family, the ghost of the past plays itself out in the present. The play also demonstrates that families are often centers of conflict and contradiction.

Conflict Theory

Conflict is a basic fact of social life. Competing sets of interests contribute to the dynamic nature of social life, which, in turn, causes conflict and induces social interaction. In any given society, each person pursues his or her individual social interests. The family, much like any other social unit, demonstrates among its members the same competing interests observed in other social groups in society. Interaction in daily life is cast in conflicting desires and wants. Conflict theory was first clearly conceptualized in the political philosophy of Karl Marx. Marx determined that conflict was the most fundamental principle of social life in human history and argued that social life passes through stages that lead to revolution. According to Marx, revolution occurs because we all have a need for material goods, a need that is driven by competition for resources. This competition, or conflict, ultimately divides people into two groups: the rich (who have power and access to resources) and the poor (who lack power and access to resources). Conflict in society generally occurs between those who own the means of production and those who have only their labor to sell. Those who control the means of communication perpetuate ideologies that serve their own purposes and hold the position that "We are rich because we deserve it, we worked hard for it, and those who are below us are in that position because they have not worked hard enough." Seeking to avoid a revolt, the rich attempt to create an ideological framework (or an ideological cast) to maintain the status quo and prevent workers from realizing that they are being exploited.

In *Sociology: Understanding a Diverse Society*, Andersen and Taylor examine the family unit from the perspective of family conflict theory. They view the family as an institution governed by power relationships that ultimately reflect social inequalities within the society as a whole. Klien and White see conflict as a dialectic. The outcome of conflict is growth and nourishment, and in the family, as in society, growth leads to cooperation. Therefore, cooperation is ultimately another form of conflict. When we negotiate after a conflict, our interests temporarily coincide. Eventually, however, conflict reoccurs, and constant negotiation is thus required to achieve growth and mutual understanding. Conflict theory offers the idea that, rather than order, conflict and friction strengthen relationships between family members by creating opportunities for communication and negotiation. This dialectic may eventually lead to harmony, wherein the members of a family or couple may attain deeper understandings of each other. This dialectic is demonstrated in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

¹ PhD, Assistant Prof. of English, Jazan University, Jazan, Saudi Arabia.

The family members' interactions with each other in the play involve relentless and wearisome emotional battles that prove that simply living with others can require acts of endurance. All of the family's members are enmeshed with one another and share a long, bitter history. Indeed, O'Neill shows us how living together as a family can often be a very complex existence. The characters' reactions are influenced by their pasts, with their every glance or remark representing an act of abstention that is drenched in the history of their family unit. For example, when Edmund, the youngest son, coughs, the mother is reminded of her father who died of consumption. She tells Edmund, "I hate you when you become gloomy and morbid! I forbid you to remind me of my father's death" (124). As this ghost from her past haunts her, she tries to delude herself that it is just a summer cold. Edmund tries to make his mother understand that he has been diagnosed with TB and that "summer cold" is therefore an inaccurate description, but his mother simply chooses not to listen to his explanation.

Family Conflict

The play is founded upon endless conflict. The father, James Tyrone, is a miserly man who seems to have failed everyone in the family, including his wife, Mary. After giving birth to their son, Edmund, Mary is in great pain, and James sends her to "an ignorant quack of a cheap hotel doctor" because he is inexpensive (89). The doctor prescribes Mary morphine, and she ultimately becomes addicted to it. James also fails in his marriage to Mary because he is always away from home and drinks too much. In addition, James fails his younger son, Edmund, in sending him to a cheap, second-rate sanatorium rather than to a more expensive venue when he is diagnosed with TB. Edmund rails against his father, "But to think when it's a question of your son having consumption, you can show yourself before the whole town as such a stinking old tightwad" (148). He also fails his older son, Jamie, by turning him into a drunkard. This becomes obvious when Mary tells him "Since he first opened his eyes, he's seen you drinking, always a bottle on the bureau in the cheap hotel rooms. And if he had a nightmare when he was little or a stomachache, your remedy was to give him a teaspoonful of whisky to quiet him" (113).

Conflict Caused by Jealousy between Siblings

From a different perspective, James faults Jamie for corrupting Edmund in being "the worst influence on him" (35). Jamie admits to Edmund, "Mom and Pop are right. I've been a rotten influence. And the worst of it is, I did it on purpose...to make a bum of you.... Never wanted you to succeed and make me look even worse by comparison. Wanted you to fail. Always jealous of you" (169).

Conflict Caused by Jealousy between Parents

Finally, this conflict develops into a jealous rivalry between Mary and James with regard to their children. Mary says "I know why he wants to send you to a sanatorium...to take you away from me! He's always tried to do that. He's been jealous of every one of my babies! He kept finding ways to make me leave them. That's what caused Eugene's death. He's been jealous of you most of all. He knew I loved you best" (121).

Conflict within the Mother (Interior Monologue)

The conflicting nature of the family members is also evident in the mother's self-monologue and resignation to her drug addiction. When James and her sons leave the house, she calls out, "Goodbye. ... [She thinks] it's so lonely here.... You're lying to yourself again [in a bitter soft contempt]. You wanted to get rid of them. Their contempt and disgust aren't pleasant company. You're glad they're gone. [She laughs] Then, Mother of God, why do I feel so lonely?" (95). In a sense, this is characteristic of family life, but it is hidden. A motif of fog persists throughout the play and functions as a hiding place for Mary that represents an internal rather than external condition. Mary says that she loves the fog: "it hides [her] from the world and the world from [her]. [She] feel[s] that everything has changed and nothing is what it seemed to be. No one can find or touch [her] anymore" (100). Drugs allow Mary to make her irrevocable exit into the fog, a state of dazed nothingness. She tells James, "Don't leave me now, at least until one of the boys comes down. They'll all be leaving me so soon." To this, James replies, "It's you who are leaving us, Mary" (86).

Conflict Caused by the Lack of a Home

Home is the center of family life, but James has failed to secure such a center for his family. Edmund blames his father, Tyrone, for his mother's addiction to dope. He says to his father: I know damn well she's not to blame!

And I know who is! You are! Your damn stinginess! If you'd spent money for a decent doctor when she was so sick after I was born, she'd never have known morphine existed! Instead you put her in the hands of a hotel quack who wouldn't admit his ignorance and took the easiest way out, not giving a damn what happened to her afterwards! (142) Although the father protests that it took years before he knew what was wrong with Mary, Edmund perseveres in his blame: "you've never given her anything that would help her want to stay off it! You've dragged her around on the road, season after season, on one-night stands, with no one she could talk to, waiting night after night in dirty hotel rooms for you to come back."

Mary complains that, if she had had a home, none of the disasters they had faced in life would have happened: If there is only some place I could go to get away for a day or even an afternoon, some woman friend I could talk to—not about anything serious, simply laugh and gossip and forget for a while—someone besides the servants.... If there was a friend's where I could drop in and laugh and gossip a while. But, of course, there isn't. There never has been.... In a real home one is never lonely. (74) If they had a "real home," maybe Mary would not have been lonely and a dope addict, perhaps Jamie would not have been a drunkard and a wastrel, perhaps Edmund would not have been tubercular. With regard to Jaime's behavior, Mary blames Tyrone: "[Jamie] is not to blame. If he'd been brought up in a real home, I'm sure he would have been different" (84). However, Mary then shows a sense of understanding and sympathy for Tyrone: "I suppose life has made him like that and he can't help it. None of us can help the things that life has done to us" (63).

Conflict between the Past and the Present (Life over Time)

There is an overwhelming sense of the passage of life and the relationship between the past and the present in the play. This becomes clear in the "re-memory" of experiences Mary and James negotiate as they go back and forth discussing innocent childhood dreams of the past and shared nightmares of the present. In what follows, the two characters suddenly return to their past in sharing a kiss. James kisses Mary and immediately recognizes her as the innocent young girl he married. Mary looks at her hands and notices how they have become disfigured by rheumatism (which necessitated the drugs). She sees her fatigued, worn-out body and begins to long for the impossible, a return to the innocence that life caused her to lose over time. She reminisces about her wedding gown, which, to her, signifies the youth, beauty, innocence, and life she had before her incessant pain.

Conclusion

The play ultimately alludes to the idea that we have to accept the things in our lives that we cannot change. Regardless of the bitterness and blame that permeates the family's dialogue, each of the family members is emotionally invested in and dependent on one another. Mary says, "James, we've loved each other. We always will. Let's remember only that and not try to understand what we cannot understand, or help things that cannot be helped. The things life has done to us we cannot excuse or explain" (p. 88). This statement illustrates the sense of maturity (rather than evasion) that life offers the couple over time. Life bruises them, yet they continue to love and accept each other. In his 1972 review of the play, William C. Young wrote, "the Tyron family's tragedy is undergirded by love." Despite the conflicts in their relationships, "there is genuine love in the midst of the apparent hate" (323).

Works Cited

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