

41 of 42 people found the following review helpful:

★★★★★ **Pain of Humanity: Perhaps the Best 20th Century Drama**, March 19, 2004

Reviewer: [Gary F. Taylor "GFT"](#) (Biloxi, MS USA) - [See all my reviews](#)

[TOP 50 REVIEWER](#) [REAL NAME](#)

The great bulk of Eugene O'Neill's work was done between about 1914 and 1933, a period which saw him win Pulitzer Prizes for *Beyond The Horizon*, *Anna Christie*, and *Strange Interlude* as well as create *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Great God Brown*, and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. But around 1933 O'Neill-- who struggled against physical ailments, alcoholism, and a host of personal demons--fell silent.

Although O'Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936, he would remain silent for some ten years, leaving most to believe he had written himself out, was burned out, that his career was over. But in spite of tremendous personal issues, O'Neill continued to write in private, and during this period he would generate a string of powerful plays, many of which would not be released for performance until after his death in 1953. The legendary *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, closely based on his own family life, was written in the early 1940s. It was first performed in 1956--some three years after his death--at which time it too won the Pulitzer Prize.

The play presents the story of the Tyrone family. James Tyrone is a famous stage actor, now aging; his wife Mary is a delicately beautiful but sadly worn woman named Mary. Their two sons are studies in contrast: Jamie, in his late 30s, is wild--fond of wine, women, and song--and seen as a bad influence on younger Edmund, who is physically frail but intellectually sharp. The action takes place at their summer home, and begins in the morning; the family seems happy enough--but clearly there is something we do not know, something working under the surface that gives an unnatural quality to their interaction.

Over the four acts and next four hours the morning passes into afternoon, the afternoon into night. And we will learn the truth: the history of money grubbing, the alcoholism, the drugs, the personal failures, the seemingly endless cycle of self-defeating, self-destructive behavior in which the four are locked beyond hope of redemption. And as it progresses the play gathers itself into an almost unendurable scream of agony, a scream of truly cosmic proportions.

Why, you might ask, would someone wish to read--much less sit through--such a play? A work so painful that it often becomes difficult to continue reading or to look at the stage? I myself asked this question when I first encountered it. Over the years I have done quite a bit of theatre. In the early 1980s I played the role of Edmund; in the late 1990s I played the role of Jamie. On both occasions I found the play horrifically painful to perform. On both occasions I wondered if such a painful play could find an audience in small-town America. On both occasions *Long Day's Journey Into Night* sold out and not a person left the theatre before each performance ended.

Because, I think, the play taps into something that is universal but which is extremely difficult to express in simple terms. As O'Neill might say himself, it has a touch of the poet--but of a failed poet. Somehow, in some unique way, it speaks to the self-knowledge we all have of the hidden dreams that never came true, the little accommodations, the big and small failures that have stung us and changed us and over time made us--for

better or worse--the beings that we are. It has humanity. It makes us see our own humanity. It makes us acknowledge the humanity of those around us.

Many, myself among them, regard this as O'Neill's finest play--and considering the great power that many of his works have, that is saying a great deal. It is also in some respects one of his most accessible plays: shorn of the experimentalism to which O'Neill was frequently drawn and beautifully simple, beautifully direct, even those unaccustomed to reading playscripts will find it a rapid and powerful read. For this reason it is really the only O'Neill script I recommend to casual readers. And I recommend it very, very strongly indeed. A great drama, both on the page and on the stage.

GFT, Amazon Reviewer