

RONÁN NOONE | *Thirst* (2023):
My Journey into Eugene O’Neill’s
Long Day’s Journey into Night

WHEN I BEGAN WORKING ON MY PLAY *THIRST*—which tells the story of what happens in the kitchen to the servant staff while the classic American family theatrical tragedy *Long Day’s Journey into Night* plays out simultaneously in the living room—I had to find my way into Nobel laureate Eugene O’Neill’s work by locating common themes. It is not difficult to pinpoint the themes of immigration, deracination, an Irish background, and an American background, or the idea of always being considered the outsider. More challenging was connecting my own present-day immigrant journey to the O’Neill/Tyrone family and their life in that Monte Cristo cottage in 1912.

The first part of this article will look at the connections I have made between my experience as an immigrant from Ireland to America and how that relates to O’Neill’s theater and his family. The second part will discuss how I developed the character and voice of Cathleen, who also features in a minor role in O’Neill’s play, by looking at the first ten pages of act three of *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. The third part will illustrate how difficult it was to discover the tone of *Thirst* while under the often dark shadow of Eugene O’Neill. With these specific three elements in mind, I want to illustrate how I began exploring those connections and how I mined them to propel, both passionately and selfishly, my own creative impulse, borne by always reckoning with how major events in my life demand a particular scrutiny that leads to a spiritual purge in an attempt to make sense of the world. And how that journey begins with O’Neill’s father, James.

On the surface, I have more in common with James O’Neill than I do with his son. We were both born in Ireland. I understand the elder O’Neill’s ambition, the deracination, the miserly anxiety, and the desire to succeed. I understand

118 | the innate determination to prove it worthwhile when you leave behind your home, your culture, your accent, and the land of your birth for America. I recognized in *Long Day's Journey into Night* some of my own sacrifice, guilt, and desire to prosper, and I put that in *Thirst*. Both plays were created as a reflection of two worlds in conflict: the immigrant and the citizen, the employer and the employee, Ireland and America. (In the playwriting genre the best drama often occurs when two ideas are in conflict with each other.) On a deeper level, I have a connection to Eugene O'Neill because of a fierce understanding of what it means to fill the blank page using what Thomas Hardy might call "bag of bones" characters who can spout dialogue with a poetic lyricism, and then to illustrate ideas about what it means to be alive and to survive in the new world while wielding Aristotelian playwriting structures that platform and condense sixty years of hurt into one twenty-four-hour cycle.¹ I began my exploration by asking: What does it mean to leave your home? And what does it mean to think like an immigrant? One particular anecdote both offers insight into the role immigration plays in my world and also is essential to understanding immigration's impact on Eugene O'Neill and his theater.

The first thing my father said to me as I told him I was moving to Prague when I was twenty-two was "if you do that, you will come back in a brown box"—meaning a coffin. There are two things to think about this detail: One, that escaping from your home is something you should do when your father says a line like that to you. And two, that it also speaks to somebody who cares for you so much they refuse to accept that you are leaving and they are quite worried something terrible may happen. But to move forward in life you have to uproot in some way. When Eugene O'Neill at twenty-two faces his father and wonders what he should do to become his own person, James O'Neill does not say "you will come back in a brown box." He says, "Go before the mast."² These words are the inciting event that puts Eugene's life in focus. It is not the sanatorium where a young O'Neill diagnosed with tuberculosis spent time, often recognized as a major turning point in his creative life, but to my mind it is his early years working as a seaman on a miscellany of sailing ships.

As it turns out, Prague was just a stepping stone for me, a teaser. After three months there, I understood another people for a short time. I heard another language, ate different food. It was an eye-opener. But I always knew I would return home. It never felt inevitable that I would stay there. The stakes were

1. "Compared to the dullest human being actually walking about on the face of the earth and casting his shadow there, the most brilliantly drawn character in a novel is but a bag of bones": Thomas Hardy, quoted in Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "'Bag of Bones': Death, Terror and Writer's Block," *New York Times*, September 21, 1998.

2. Quoted in Mark W. Estrin, ed., *Conversations with Eugene O'Neill* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 207.

low; I hadn't committed. But it was a first step; it was preparation for the ultimate in uprooting, in leaving my home for good. It was a step in dislocating from everything I knew, and like a sponge soaking up the king's countenance, I was soaking up experiences and allowing them to sculpt the new, independent me.

During my time in Prague, I got a phone call from my father. He told me that St. Vincent de Paul, in Galway, in Ireland, was offering to send applications to America for a green card on an applicant's behalf, a Bruce Morrison visa (a lottery setup offering 16,000 visas to the United States from Ireland annually between 1992 and 1994), and for three pounds they would fill out the form and submit it for you. It sounds wonderfully innocent compared to what we see on the border at present. I told my father to sign me up immediately. And ironically my father was the one who set me up to move to America and go before the mast.

When I arrived in Washington, DC, I understood that I was in a strange and wonderful world. Even though everybody spoke English and quite a lot of people looked like me, the heat was different. The weather was different. The food was different. The way people conversed with each other was different. The smell in the air was a mixture of coffee and gas. The humor was different. And one clear example, a cultural marker I carried over from one world, Ireland, to my second world, America, involved clothing: the clothes were different. I wore corduroys during my first summer, in ninety-degree heat, because I couldn't accept wearing short pants yet. Short pants were for schoolboys. And I considered it an even greater humiliation to have anyone see my pasty white legs and then to comment on them. I couldn't wear white socks, which I associated with trouble, or at least at the time in Ireland they were recognized as a cultural marker for trouble. I wore black socks only. This is the Ireland I came from, where phrases such as "say nothing till you hear more" or "give nobody a reason to say anything bad about you" were part of my psyche.

Why is he wearing cords in summer? I think he's an immigrant, right? I can hear those words even now when I pull on my cords today.

Every movement, phrase, pronunciation of a word opened me toward judgment, comparison, and possible humiliation. So often I was asked to count to three—"one, two three"—just to hear the pronunciation of the "th" sound with my accent. I'm not being critical of this request; in fact, I found people were always interested in where I came from and how it differed from their world. My narrative opened them up to a particular point of view beyond the familiar Troubles in Northern Ireland. It offered them direct access to a feet-on-the-ground character who could give them an honest report of the day-to-day Irish lifestyle. It answered their questions. Here, in the early days, I was beginning to appreciate and understand the optimism and curiosity upon which the American ideal was built, the blending of cultures offering opportunity and hope.

In my experience it takes approximately five years of settling into America

120 | before you realize it's your home now and it's time to put down roots. In fact, you can't apply to be a citizen until you've stayed for at least four years and nine months.³ There's a wisdom in that time limit. I invite you to visualize this illustration of that time, however cheap you find it: imagine me as not unlike a plant that has been uprooted, with dangling roots, thin tendrils following me, trailing after me wherever I go, whether it was from Ireland to Prague or from Ireland to America and in America to Washington, DC, and from DC to Martha's Vineyard, where I decided to put down those roots and learn what it meant to be an American. Martha's Vineyard was where I finally grew to accept that the United States is my home now.

And one major reason to accept your new home is because you don't want to be a failure. The overwhelming sense of sacrificing one place, leaving behind your family, your culture, the land, the language, the humor, the clothes, the food, and moving to another country, with its brand-new culture and its brand-new everything, brings with it the idea that you cannot fail. You cannot go back to the poorhouse, the workhouse, the soup kitchen.

Of course I was never under threat of the poorhouse, but I reflect on my experience in terms of James Tyrone/James O'Neill and his relation to the poorhouse. How often it is mentioned in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and particularly in act four: The inevitable final abode. The place his mother feared. The place he feared most. An example of what James O'Neill's family may have witnessed before they left Ireland in 1851 comes from Kathleen Villiers-Tuthill's book *Patient Endurance*, which offers a history of the great Famine in Connemara. She describes a meeting of the Relief Committee taking place inside the courthouse in Clifden when Robert Barclay Fox reported his findings to the Society of Friends:

A crowd of emaciated and cadaverous beings followed us through the streets, crying for food. A widow crouched at the door of the courthouse, lifted an old piece of sacking which surrounded her group and said, pointing at them with a wild look, "There's my family, Gentlemen." Two young children were lying on each other, shrunk, almost to skeletons, and apparently unconscious. A girl of seven or eight was huddled over a piece of smoldering turf,

3. The requirement to reside in the United States in lawful permanent resident status for five years means the applicant must (1) have their principal dwelling place in the United States for four years and nine months immediately before applying for naturalization, and (2) be a lawful permanent resident during that entire period. Although Form N-400 states that the applicant must have at least five years of permanent resident status before applying, the law actually permits an applicant to file three months early. After applying, the applicant must then continue to reside in the United States until becoming a citizen (which will take at least three months, often longer). Law office of Scott A. Mossman, "Naturalization Requirements," <https://smossmanlaw.com/naturalization-requirements/>.

endeavoring to supply with warmth the absence of food. There was also a boy of ten or eleven, dying of hunger. He died an hour or two later.⁴

James O'Neill arrived in America at the age of five or six, those wildly influential early years, after a grueling transatlantic voyage. By the age of ten, he was working twelve-hour shifts in a machine shop, that "dirty barn of a place," to support the large family O'Neill/Tyrone.⁵ He had been uprooted from Ireland. He had that Irish accent that separated him from the citizen or the nativist. And I wonder what cords he wore that advertised his status as immigrant. And I wonder how long were the roots that dangled behind him. I imagine the weight, like a ghost he carried on his back: *I cannot fail*. In fact, I imagine he was determined to have his family succeed, to regain their pride. I imagine he believed his family didn't leave it all behind to live in the gutter. And the only thing that can help you avoid that misery is money. As James Tyrone states in act four: "It was in those days I learned to be a miser" (*LDJN* 148). And on the way to making money, you have to save using every possible means, including wearing the same clothes as often as you can, and turning off the light and sitting in the dark instead of giving money to the electric company, or pouring only the water that you need, or considering consumption a death sentence because that's how the immigrant thinks. This arrow is one among many used in *Long Day's Journey into Night* by Jamie, Edmund, and Mary Tyrone to pierce and undermine James's status as the head of the household. He is still just an immigrant, after all. Second to the native-born.

And in terms of the many arrows flung, consider James's relationship to property. Because of centuries of oppression, because of colonialism, because of landlord and tenant conflicts, because of boycotting, eviction, humiliation, and poverty, because of famine—the Irish have a particular attention to the property they own and the property they buy. And they accumulate that property as a measure of defense and a symbol of strength. It is not just a home. We may say, as James Tyrone does, "land is land, and it's safer than the stocks and bonds of Wall Street swindlers" (*LDJN* 15), but what we truly mean is *you will never take this from us again*.

It goes back to an inherited trauma that carries from one generation to the next, so that property becomes the essential element in defining, "on marble stone there as black as ink," who you are.⁶ We see this in *Long Day's Journey into*

4. Kathleen Villiers-Tuthill, *Patient Endurance: The Great Famine in Connemara* (Dublin: Connemara Girl Publications, 1997), 59.

5. Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 148, hereafter cited parenthetically thus: (*LDJN* 148).

6. Van Morrison and the Chieftains, "Carrickfergus," *Irish Heartbeat*, Windmill Lane Studios, Dublin, 1988.

122 | *Night*: property is mentioned on the second page, in a critical comment by Mary, and continues to be criticized by Edmund and Jamie throughout the play (*LDJN* 15). It is another arrow in undermining James's status. It is another distinction between the one-world born and bred in America, land of milk and honey, thinking of the Tyrone family, and the two-world, Irish-born, famine-traumatized, grasping at what it means to think like an American James Tyrone. I exaggerate somewhat, but these examples limn where I was coming from when I was thinking about creating a play in conversation with *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

My ideas are illustrated by how James O'Neill/Tyrone is made to feel like an outsider in his own home. "I'm so sick and tired of presenting this is a home! You won't help me! You won't put yourself out the least bit! You don't know how to act in a home!" Mary states in act two, scene one (*LDJN* 67). When you've been traumatized because of poverty, lack of money, hunger, or crossing the Atlantic on a coffin ship, at a particular level failure is going to follow you around. And what is the immigrant to do but stay ahead of it at all times?

As Mary says in act three, scene one: "And Mr. Tyrone never is worried about anything except money and property and the fear he'll end his days in poverty. I mean deeply worried. Because he cannot really understand anything else" (*LDJN* 101). Again, home and what makes a home is sacrificed. James O'Neill/Tyrone chose to take the money from touring the play he bought, *Monte Cristo*. He may have become one of the greatest actors of his generation, but when offered a choice, he, the immigrant actor, understood that earning guaranteed money will hold the poorhouse at bay. It's the better deal. Ironically, as Tyrone accumulated money that finally, in his eyes, took him, the Irish-born immigrant, from the gutter and offered him a sense of legitimacy and dignity, the sacrifice he made prevented him from putting down his roots with confidence and creating a home for his American-born family.

I posit that James O'Neill would have challenged himself with becoming the greatest actor of his generation if he was born in the United States or if he had not carried as much inherited trauma, because the very essence of the American dream is opportunity: to become what you want to be. But his choice was informed by his immigrant status and this uprooting. He admits as much in act four: "I'd be willing to have no home but the poorhouse in my old age if I could look back now on having been the fine artist I might have been" (*LDJN* 151). The wish for that noble look back, albeit an illusion, arises because the deracination in his early life left him desperately seeking a place to end the chase, to plant the foot, to offer dignity to the pursuit—to put down those dangling roots. *Monte Cristo*, the play, was an opportunity to do that, and he took it. And now "It's a late day for regrets" (*LDJN* 150), because the option he chose determined that he had to move all the time. Movement is a form of escape: he is staying ahead of the poorhouse. But it only creates the illusion of advancement. He is always

immigrating from town to town, city to city, hotel room to hotel room—and it is difficult to upset the routine once trained in this itinerant lifestyle. He hands this legacy to Eugene, who said “the time I spent at sea on a sailing ship was the only time I ever felt I had roots in any place.”⁷ A moving home. A mobile home. The home of the itinerant.

The journey of Eugene's life illustrates the theme of uprooting. He begins in a hotel in New York, travels with his father's productions, moves to New London, works on the ships from Buenos Aires through the Caribbean, lives in Bermuda, Spain, and France, moves to Georgia, to Tao House outside San Francisco, back to New York, and to Marblehead in Massachusetts, and spends his final days in a hotel in Boston. It's constant movement for O'Neill, an inability to find a home, which is easily connected to his father's deracination.

James Tyrone became a journeyman actor. And acting, the craft, the profession, is closely related to this idea of uprooting: always moving to maintain your career while the craft is asking you to become someone else. Inspiring a suspension of disbelief in the audience is nothing less than creating an illusion. And James Tyrone/O'Neill carries that illusion with him wherever he goes. He is acting in his world, and he maintains the mask so he can avoid the brutal realization of what he sacrificed. To actually think about his sacrifice, to let it out loud—as he does in the fourth act of the play: “What the hell was it I wanted to buy, I wonder, that was worth” (*LDJN* 150)—is an unbearable weight to accept; it's easier to live with the illusion. And these illusions course through the rest of the play, more hand-me-downs from James to his family, pinpointing how *illusions*, the word and the noun, became the theme and the foundation of O'Neill's final masterpieces. The illusions of the drunks in the bar in *The Iceman Cometh*. The noble illusions of Con Melody in *A Touch of the Poet*. Josie Hogan bolstering promiscuous illusions in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, or Erie Smith championing himself through illusions in *Hughie*. And the illusions in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Mary is not on drugs until she is; Edmund is not sick until he is—and yet wrapped around all of that is the itinerant lifestyle connecting to the immigrant fear of failure. And if we push that idea to an inevitable, tragic conclusion, illusion is instrumental in contributing to the death of the baby Edmund in James and Ella O'Neill's real world or the death of the baby Eugene in James and Mary Tyrone's theater world in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Ella/Mary, on the road, touring “season after season” (*LDJN* 87) with James, went home to her dying child when she heard he was sick; James stayed to finish the run of the production.⁸ Imagine the grief, the resentment, the heartbreak between them. The

7. Robert M. Dowling, *Eugene O'Neill: A Life in Four Acts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 59.

8. Dowling, *Eugene O'Neill*, 34.

124 | legacy of this moment is the heaviest weight carried through the generations of the O'Neills and by the Tyrones: "The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us" (*LDJN* 87).

Long Day's Journey into Night has a foundation built on that grief, and through the play run the five aspects of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. From the start there is the denial of the difficulties each character is unwilling to accept: primarily, the denial of Mary's morphine addiction and the denial of Edmund's consumption diagnosis. The only character who seems able to cut through that denial is the lost soul Jamie, because he's accepted that he'll never let his roots take hold in any ground. He is always chasing or being chased; that's all he knows. There is no illusion for him. The great silver lining of being a failure is you can call out what you see for what it is because you have nothing left to lose. Throughout the play Jamie honestly and consistently delivers the lines that hold up the mirror to nature and reveal the truth behind the illusions the family is trying to avoid.

The anger and the way the characters attack each other is so visceral that the only way to identify a return to some sense of normalcy is through bargaining. That bargaining feels like uneven tone shifts; the swings can pull you out of the play as you read the work or imagine it as a directed melodramatic production. They are like the mercurial swings of a jittery "dope fiend"—or, in more quaint terms, like the weather in Ireland: one minute there are hailstones; the next there is sunshine. This shifting appears in act one, scene one, where Jamie and Tyrone are almost always at each other's throats:

JAMIE: All right papa. I'm a bum. Anything you like, so long as it stops the argument.

TYRONE: If you'd get ambition in your head instead of folly! You're young yet. You could still make your mark. You had the talent to become a fine actor. You have it still. You're my son—!

JAMIE: Let's forget me. I'm not interested in the subject. Neither are you.

Tyrone gives up. Jamie goes on casually.

JAMIE: What started you on this. Oh, Doc Hardy. When is he going to call you up about Edmund?" (*LDJN* 33)

This modulation of tone has to be expertly navigated within the idea of bargaining. It's obvious throughout the play. The characters bargain with Mary to eat something, bargain when Jamie seeks money from his father for working at the hedge, bargain in determining the truth behind Edmund's sickness or visits to the doctor. They bargain with the doctor and about which sanatorium Edmund requires. They bargain (Tyrone's implied negotiations with McGuire) about buying land. This constant bargaining we recognize in ourselves, in our own families.

In *Long Day's Journey into Night* we see the denials, the anger, the bargaining, and the depression that take hold in addictions, be it through alcohol or morphine. But the final idea of acceptance is unavailable to these characters. There is no acceptance because O'Neill does not believe in catharsis in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, if he believes in catharsis at all. The play has captured our imaginations because we have to finish it. We have to find acceptance when we go home to our families. We, the audience and the close reader, are tasked with finishing *Long Day's Journey into Night* by holding up the mirror to our families and asking them to find acceptance for their denials and anger. Otherwise, we are forced to maintain the illusions.

This idea affects the kitchen as well. Mary fears that the servants, Bridget and Cathleen, won't stay: "And I'm the housekeeper, I have to keep them from leaving," she states (*LDJN* 116). And why would they stay? That's the question I asked too.

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The bridging of two worlds, Ireland and America, was something I had been trying to construct creatively for quite a while. But I was unable to find a way to bring them together cohesively until I picked up *Long Day's Journey into Night*. I heard the laughter from the Tyrone boys at breakfast and then those long arias of melancholy, and I wondered how the servants related to it all. I wondered what they were doing while Mary Tyrone was in the spare room. I wondered how it informed their day, what their worries and concerns were, where they were from, and what their story was. And this is why writers write: they need to know the answers to slake their thirst. I mined the opening of act three of *Long Day's Journey into Night* for clues on which to build the three characters in *Thirst*: Bridget, Cathleen, and Jack Smythe. All three are named in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, but only Cathleen actually makes an appearance. The other two I built from anecdotes, mentions, and "stupid, lazy greenhorns" (*LDJN* 61) criticisms of their good selves in O'Neill's play.

At the opening of act three, Cathleen has returned to the house with Mary Tyrone ahead of James and Edmund, who will enter later. Dinner is to be served, Bridget is in the kitchen asleep on a chair, and Cathleen has been asked to stay in the living room by Mary, who offers her a whiskey. But Cathleen has something on her mind: she believes she was considered a thief at the local drugstore, where she was sent to fill Mary's prescription earlier. In *Thirst* we have discovered that Cathleen received a letter from her fiancé, who has called off the engagement and has taken up with Margaret Flaherty instead. Cathleen is brokenhearted in *Thirst*, but we can measure her motivation in *Long Day's Journey into Night* without that sense of loss and consider her as a young immigrant,

126 | uprooted, trying each day to understand where she is and where she is going. There is a lot of anxiety in that idea alone.

Author and O'Neill scholar Robert Dowling has suggested that to maintain the conflict and heighten the tension in the scene we use dramatic irony based on O'Neill's stage description for Cathleen, where she is said to be "possessed by a dense, well-meaning stupidity" (*LDJN* 51) and so is unable to deduce what is right in front of her: Mary's morphine addiction.⁹ This idea allows for a strong contrast with the family Tyrone, who are, of course, very much aware of the drug abuse.

In this interpretation, we add into the crisis the theatrical trope of Cathleen as the fool to heighten the drama. But I suggest that Cathleen is no fool and knows quite well what's going on in that house. That idea of minding your own business or saying nothing till you hear more is very much on display. Cathleen has entered the room with her own difficulties. She will allow those difficulties to determine the mood of the scene for her; otherwise her part is redundant. It's easy to play Cathleen as the fool (she is a secondary character, after all, who can easily get lost in a room of sometime bombasts) and not as somebody who has been very hurt by being thought of as a thief. And certainly O'Neill has offered this option as an easy play, describing her thus: "Her stupid and good-humored face wears a pleased and flattered simper" (*LDJN* 97). Taking the stage directions at face value begs for the leprechaun to turn up or maybe for some lucky charms on the side. You have to fight that. And the idea that Cathleen is oblivious is not easily argued when we discover that Mary wears her dress as "careless" and "slovenly" (*LDJN* 97). Cathleen, as a maid, would notice this dishevelment unless she was blind. And she'd know "full well," as my grandmother would say, that there is something amiss.

In the kitchen in *Thirst* Bridget and Cathleen are very aware that Mary is taking morphine. But the immigrant knows their station and their duty: do nothing to humiliate. The immigrant is protective of saying anything that can provide their employers with access to their true selves on which they can be judged. They are alone. They are away from home. They are rootless, floundering, and every immigrant knows it is better to project confidence than to display nerve-rattling insecurity. They offer strength and support. Of course Cathleen wants out of the room. The idea of sitting and talking with one's employer is difficult enough without adding the fact that Mary is under the influence. This demolition of the soul in front of Cathleen is frightening and even heartbreaking. But it is not her place to say anything, yet. And it is not a weight she wants

9. Robert M. Dowling, "A New Insight into Edmund Tyrone by way of *The Second Girl*," *Eugene O'Neill Review* 37, no. 2 (2016): 173.

to carry on top of everything else. This psychology lay behind the characters as I built the foundation for my play.

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Cathleen modulates the mood in the scene so we have two people talking past each other. One world is American. One world is Irish. We have to discover where they bridge. As the scene opens Mary is complaining about the foghorn, which connects to her loneliness and the ever-present anxiety that her son is sick, which we can link to her memories of the pain from giving birth to him, mentioned earlier. Inevitably, this melancholy continues to transport her in time to the great loss of her baby, Eugene. It is not baldly stated, but the cumulative effect of related histories in *Long Day's Journey into Night* up to this point weighs on Mary's disposition. That accumulation is all here at the top of the scene. No servant wants to confront any of that. And for every anxiety Mary offers, Cathleen makes less of it. That annoying fog and the foghorn become a type of poetry to Cathleen. The sound is like "a banshee" (*LDJN* 98); the fog can be linked to aesthetics, as "it's good for the complexion" (*LDJN* 98). Cathleen continues to distract Mary's frustrations by discussing the "monkey" Jack Smythe and his rambling hands, and we can consider this comedy, an attempt at lightening the mood. "Give him half a chance and he's pinching me on the leg or you-know-where—asking your pardon, Ma'am, but it's true" (*LDJN* 98): Cathleen is attempting to change the tone of the conversation.

But Mary is not done with her yet. She offers Cathleen more drink. She doesn't want Cathleen to leave. During this moment in *Thirst*, which I have measured in time to be sequential with *Long Day's Journey into Night*, is the idea that Cathleen has lost her fiancé. She would never share this information with Mary because it would be a terrible intrusion on Cathleen's privacy and offer room for judgment. But the two worlds bridge when Cathleen suggests that James Tyrone is drinking so much because of Edmund's recent consumption diagnosis. Cathleen can only stay in the scene so long without bringing up what is visible to everybody. And as the drink is added to the conversation and Cathleen's inhibitions are lowered, she feels determined enough to say, "I can tell the master is worried about him" (*LDJN* 101).

To sell this impertinence, O'Neill writes the stage direction for this line as "Then, stupidly puzzled" (*LDJN* 101). In fact, in the opening ten pages of act three he uses this stage direction three times for Cathleen, and the word "stupid" or "silly" appears eight times in reference to her. But "stupidly puzzled" works on the veneer. It can be mistakenly measured as a one-world point of view from an employer who is American born and bred, instead of taking in the two-world point of view that combines the concerned employee with an Irish-immigrant understanding as we find in *Thirst*. Cathleen is being purposely empathetic without drawing too much attention to the hurt. She is offering Mary an opening to talk about what is making her lonely. But Mary deflects

128 | again and critiques her husband's miserliness instead, and here Cathleen plays the politician and compliments James Tyrone for his kindness. Cathleen is also deflecting, as she purposely finds the positive and avoids the negative of being pulled into publicly criticizing her employers. James Tyrone's kindness is obvious to Cathleen. She doesn't just say it: she means it. This compliment offers me, the playwright, an opportunity to develop Cathleen's character for *Thirst*. She can relate to James. He comes from her land. He understands what it means to immigrate. He was born in Ireland. He has a connection that the others do not.

I link James and Cathleen in *Thirst* because here Cathleen, seemingly out of nowhere, says to Mary, "Speaking of acting, Ma'am, how is it you never went on the stage?" (*LDJN* 101). O'Neill's stage direction states that Cathleen is "Fighting the effect of her last drink and trying to be soberly conversational" (*LDJN* 101). But there is a motivation behind what Cathleen has said. Every actor has to find it. And it cannot be taken for granted. If you want to be "stupid" through the whole scene, play drunk and mystified by the world, that is one-world thinking. But Cathleen is working in two worlds. She is offering, in her Irish world, empathy toward Mary as a way to distract her from thinking about her sick son or her addiction. But in Cathleen's American world she sees opportunity. And as any decent playwright knows, a character may not say what they mean, but they are always working toward what they want. Cathleen may ask this question because she wants to be an actress and she knows James might mentor her. Why else quiz Mary with such a loaded question? This possibility is one I develop in *Thirst*. In fact, in act four of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Edmund talks about the five dollars his father offered him for learning a lead in *Macbeth* (*LDJN* 136). This clue allows for a plot point early on in *Thirst*, when Cathleen states she has been offered money by James Tyrone to learn a character in *The Tempest*.

But as the scene continues, the weight of being called a thief, "the vilest weed" of an insult for an immigrant, remains with Cathleen. She's trying to avoid mentioning it until she finds the strength to criticize Mary without sounding rude or out of rank. But then Mary suggests she had once dreamt of becoming a nun. "Sure, you never darken the door of a church. God forgive you," says Cathleen (*LDJN* 102). It's the only time she can declare her allegiance to God and place her employer second and not be denounced for it. It's a point of order, and she finds strength in the declaration. But it also illustrates Cathleen's growing frustration in the scene and allows her to finally take a stance in conflict with Mary's dope-inclined actions. Now Cathleen can't help but tell Mary how indignant and wronged she feels about the latent accusation at the drugstore, where she felt she was being treated like a thief: "It mattered to me, then! I'm not used to being treated like a thief. He gave me a long look and says insultingly, 'Where did you get hold of this?' and I says, 'It's none of your damned business, but if you must know, it's for the lady I work for, Mrs. Tyrone, who's sitting out in the

automobile.' That shut him up quick. He gave a look out at you and said, 'Oh,' and went to get the medicine" (*LDJN* 103).

I read these lines as Cathleen telling her employer it isn't just Mary being affected by the drug she is taking; it can cause grave damage to others' reputations. And might Cathleen be encouraging Mary to stop taking the drug? Mary excuses it away until Cathleen ("Stupidly puzzled"—or is she playing it that way to take the full sting out it?) finally says in the near climax of the duologue and with full impertinence: "You've taken some of the medicine? It made you act funny, Ma'am. If I didn't know better, I'd think you'd a drop taken" (*LDJN* 104).

I read these lines as Cathleen finally saying: *I am not stupid, and I will not judge you like the others. In fact, I will stay and help you if you want. But I am aware of what you are doing.* As the scene closes, she expresses with a deft solicitude, "You ought to eat something, Ma'am. It's a queer medicine if it takes away your appetite" (*LDJN* 106). Then Cathleen returns to the kitchen, the place where she can finally be herself without the servant mask.

The way I read this scene through Cathleen's eyes helped me to develop a clear voice for *Thirst*. I began to find where the two plays could converse with each other in terms of plot. And in terms of the characters, including Jack and Bridget, I was able to use the two-world perspective, influenced by personal immigrant experiences and a close reading of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, for the connections and clues that illuminated their world in the kitchen.



I wrote the first draft of *Thirst* in 2012. Initially the play was called *The Second Girl*, after the character Cathleen in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. The structure, often the hardest outline for a playwright to map out, was defined by the built-in arc of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, which began one morning and ended that night. I would begin my play in the hours before the original opened and end it the morning after it concluded. In the early drafts, I could sense a competitive idea generating inside, that maybe, just maybe I could outdo *Long Day's Journey into Night*. I imagined I could write a tragedy as good, if not better. It would be easy to laugh away this naivete, except that every writer has an internal sense of competition, whether measured toward another writer or a theme they feel hasn't been adequately exposed, a plot twist that leaves an audience agape, or a line or monologue that will live beyond them. I measured myself against O'Neill like a runner waiting on the mark for the gun to go off. But I understood the competitive spirit was for no other reason than to keep me focused on the craft, to set a ruler that kept me on task and humbled me as I sought the finish line. In hindsight, it was a great motivator. I was able to pinpoint the main ideas I wanted to express: that this play was not a tragedy, but it should evoke the spirit

130 | of the tragedy going on in the living room. And it should be a separate, unique play, yet one in conversation with O'Neill's as the servants, Bridget, Cathleen, and Jack, working their daily grind, explore the cultural and economic aspects of what it means to thrive in America.

Its first production was in 2015 at the Huntington Theatre in Boston with Campbell Scott directing. In the 1988 Broadway production of *Long Day's Journey into Night* he played Edmund, and his mother, Colleen Dewhurst, played Mary Cavan Tyrone. His family was closely associated with works by O'Neill—particularly his mother after her wonderful Josie Hogan performance in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. But the production of *The Second Girl* did not work for me. No fault of the artists, but I was unsatisfied with the lugubrious tone of the production. In the meantime, the script had won an Edgerton New Play Award and the Excellent Playwright Award from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. It was read at the association's conference in Montreal in 2015. But still, the tone was off. I reworked the play again, and it was performed at the Contemporary American Theater Festival in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, in 2016, offering an emotional grade above the Boston production with a subtle optimistic through line. Readings happened in Galway, Ireland, at the Eugene O'Neill International Conference in 2017 and elsewhere up until 2022. But I continued to struggle with the harmonious tonality the play desired. And I could not locate the cause.

The problem was I had fallen in love with the source material. I became aware of this affliction after Vincent Murphy, author of *Page to Stage: The Craft of Adaptation*, taught a workshop in my adaptation class at Boston University.¹⁰ When he delivered this rule to my students—"Don't fall in love with the source material"—it resonated with me.

I had committed to *Thirst* with some rules and convictions. One: I would learn from a master. Two: I would give voice and dignity to the women in the kitchen who had been referred to as ignorant and stupid. Three: I would do no harm. Four: I would step into this world with admiration and devotion. Five: I needed to write this play. I did my research. I read John Millington Synge's wonderful travel memoir *Aran Islands and Connemara*, where the use of written letters that always seem to carry a heavy weight and a tinge of melodrama inspired the letter Cathleen receives in *Thirst*, which ends with the fateful line, "Yours till death."¹¹ And I read *Connemara* by Tim Robinson, because Connemara is where I came from and where I decided Cathleen and Bridget were born. I read Maureen Dezell's *Coming into Clover*, William Shannon's *The American*

10. Vincent Murphy, *Page to Stage: The Craft of Adaptation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

11. J. M. Synge, *Aran Islands and Connemara* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2008), 93.

Irish, and Mark W. Estrin's *Conversations with Eugene O'Neill*. I read plays by O'Neill and studied his constant reinvention of structure. I watched various productions of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, including Sidney Lumet's striking film adaptation. I was inspired by the almost plotless late plays of Anton Chekhov, which are full of minor events with major consequences that illustrate the depths of the human soul. Finally, in a spirit of reverence and respect, I visited O'Neill's grave at Forest Hills Cemetery, not far from my own house, and I explained to him my motivations. And let me suggest that all that reading might have actually damaged my persistent reckoning with the blank page because it set me up to write a play that was full of respect and duty and replaced my own treasured fierce guttural response connected to personal catharsis. | 131

I was too influenced by O'Neill and the work; I was too enamored and afraid to tread roughly across those pages. The many drafts of *The Second Girl* illustrated this morass. The endings were many, and they were another playwright's ending—Chekhov or O'Neill or August Strindberg. And unlike O'Neill, I believed in the American dream; if it's possible to claim it, then I own a piece of it.¹² But I leaned on my very Irish nature and a one-world perspective. I was aware that Irish plays and O'Neill plays as a whole had been tagged with the despair motif. If you ask anyone about an Irish play or story, they will often speak of the gloominess therein, not unlike what old man Tyrone saw in Edmund's poetry, "You have a poet in you but it's a damned morbid one!" (*LDJN* 131). My Irish plays often found a way into the pits of despair, and this lugubriousness occurred with all my early drafts of *Thirst*. But the American me, the one who gathered the tendrils dangling behind me and planted the roots and called it home, now found that American optimism was beginning to take hold. So when I talk about a marriage between two worlds, I am also talking about a marriage between two tones.

Playwright Theresa Rebeck directed the world premiere production of the rewrite of *The Second Girl*, now called *Thirst*, at Dorset Theatre Festival, Vermont, in the fall of 2022.¹³ Finally, this production gave me closure on the script. Theresa mentioned that if I wanted the play in conversation with *Long Day's Journey into Night* I should consider the play in direct conflict with it. This suggestion opened my eyes. Suddenly I understood that if we find despair in the living room, we should find hope in the kitchen. And as far as Theresa was concerned, *Thirst* was full of joy. A joy in the struggle, as W. B. Yeats might say. And so, if you want joy, you should declare it from the top.

In *The Eugene O'Neill Review*—published edition in the fall of 2016, I open the

12. "I feel in that sense, that America is the greatest failure in history," O'Neill quoted in Estrin, *Conversations with Eugene O'Neill*, 186.

13. Ronán Noone, *Thirst*, directed by Theresa Rebeck, world premiere, Dorset Theatre Festival, August 18–September 3, 2022, <https://dorsettheatrefestival.org/thirst>.

132 | play in the morning of that day in 1912, but not with joy.¹⁴ Bridget is dragging herself into the kitchen hungover and praying to the Virgin Mary on her knees: “Hail, holy Queen, Mother of mercy! Hail her life, her sweetness and her hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve, to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning, weeping in this vale of tears.” You can hear, not just see, the despair ready to course through this play. There is no wit here. In fact, it feels anachronistic. It imitates O’Neill. But in the recent published edition by TRW Plays and the production in Dorset, I begin the play the night before. Bridget is drunk and having great fun flirting with a sober Jack Smythe. You can see the bounce in her character. Her vibrancy. You can see the servant mask is off. You can see the authentic woman. Her true self. This is the opening to *Thirst*:

AFTER MIDNIGHT—12.25am

We come up on the kitchen of the New England summer home of the Tyrones of a night in August, 1912. It’s as quiet as a night should be. And we hear the clock ticking. The ship bells clanking in the distance. A fog horn blows and then: Suddenly Bridget SMASHES through the door because she’s smashed, drunk, loud. She stumbles into the kitchen. She looks around and now, standing in the doorway, is Jack. Alert and patient. She turns and sees him, points at him.

BRIDGET

You make fun of my words.

JACK (*Quiet*)

I don’t. Sssssh.

BRIDGET

Yes, you do.

JACK

What words?

She stumbles and she notices her dress is stuck to her.

BRIDGET

My dress is stuck with the wet of the fog.

He helps her unstuck her dress, which is not stuck.

JACK

It’s fine.

BRIDGET

It’s stuck.

She stumbles on him

JACK

I have you. Easy. C’mon. Hold on to me.

14. Ronán Noone, “*The Second Girl*,” *Eugene O’Neill Review* 37, no. 2 (2016): 195.

BRIDGET

I am holding you to on. On you to. On (*Laughs*) to you. On to you. Holding.

JACK

Sssshshshshs.

BRIDGET (*Laughing*)

Cook the eggs. The Seagulls eggs.

She holds up her fingers in the air. He pulls her hand down.

BRIDGET

We should go down the beach and get some eggs now. Let's go.

She goes to exit.

JACK

No, Bridget!

He stops her. And then

BRIDGET

Say it.

She stops. She's pulled away from him. Swaying back and forth.

Say Cooooook.

JACK

It's cuck. You are a cuck, not a cooooook.

She laughs. She finds his pronunciation very funny.

BRIDGET

It's cooook. Cooooook. Say it again.¹⁵

I bridge the two worlds from the top of the play using a comparison between an American accent and an Irish accent, and both their distinct pronunciations. Jack refers to Bridget as a cook, pronounced in America as “cuck,” and she says it is cook, pronounced in my part of Ireland “cuuuk.” She is a cook. She flirts with him, knocks over some pots, declares she saw his face in the springtime, and then falls into his arms as he brings her, with care, to her bed.

In this case, the tone has wit, is consistent, and propels the action forward using a depth in character working on different levels simultaneously. And here is what the play was trying to do all along: connect the characters of Jack and Bridget. I just didn't see it until another playwright pointed it out. The play wasn't about a second girl. It was an ensemble. So although I understood that for *Thirst* to have a conversation with *Long Day's Journey into Night* my play had to be in conflict with O'Neill's, it took me a long time to understand what that meant. It meant *Thirst* had to be its own play with its own story ready to stand alone, while still available to engage with *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

15. Ronán Noone, *Thirst*, TRW Plays, a division of Theatrical Rights Worldwide, New York, 2023.

134 | And to do that I had to escape my original idea, reevaluate my love for O'Neill's masterpiece, change the name of the play (*Thirst* captures the theme, fully; it represents an ensemble now and harkens back to O'Neill's first play, adding a simple nod to legacy), and begin again with a new tone and point of view, while brightly illustrating that bridge between the two worlds.

I read O'Neill through my two-world idea while not forgetting to add the image of the roots still caked in clay from the "old country" trailing behind all the characters. The psychology behind the movement, dress, and words of the immigrant, the outsider, illustrates a different way of thinking from the native-born. And the two ways to read *Long Day's Journey into Night* are from the immigrant perspective and from the native-born perspective at once, which then sets up a natural drama in the involved conversation because, as mentioned, two ideas in conflict can produce an extraordinary debate and great theater. *Thirst* offers heft to that immigrant perspective. Whether we are looking at Driscoll in *The Moon of the Caribbees* or *Bound East for Cardiff*, Mat Burke in *Anna Christie*, Paddy in *The Hairy Ape*, the Hogans in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, the Tyrones in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Larry Slade, our Irish American anarchist in *The Iceman Cometh*, or Con Melody, the Galway tribesman in *A Touch of the Poet*—O'Neill's ideas about dispossession, itinerant characters, heartbreaking plots, and experimental structure designs come from a family well acquainted with deracination and immigration. A family that survived through a fierce dedication to avoid failure by demanding endurance, whatever the sacrifice, as long as it kept them from the poorhouse. This essential element runs parallel and in contrast to the optimism often found in the expedition and exploration of the American dream. It was what inspired *Thirst*. It underlines the greatness of Eugene O'Neill and is the impulse behind his creativity and enduring works of art.

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