

Family Heritage and Identity Confusion: A Study on the Multifaceted Representation of Irish National Identity in Long Day's Journey Into Night

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Abstract

The Long Journey into Night is a classic play by Eugene O'Neill, which profoundly reflects clashes between cultures and struggles of self-identification in an Irish-American family. This study focuses on the themes of family inheritance and cultural transmission within the play, examining how their inheritance of Irish cultural traits shapes these dramatic roles' character and identity against a multicultural backdrop. The research reveals that differences in attitudes toward Irish culture and American society between generations of Irish Americans lead to conflicts between identities and intergenerational disparities in the course of their cultural assimilation. Differences in diction, accent, religious belief, and life style between the characters in the play showcase the complexity and diversity of Irish nationality. Through the analysis of the play's representation of these differences, this research conducts an in-depth exploration upon the roadmap an individual could adopt for his self-identification to be achieved in the process of cross-cultural integration.

Keywords

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill; Long Day's Journey Into Night; Irish national identity; identity confusion; family inheritance.

1. Introduction

Eugene O'Neill is the founder of American modern drama, hailed as the "Father of American Drama." He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize four times and received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1936, making him the only American playwright who has received such a topmost literary award. His works have exerted formative influence on a unique style of American national drama and also have had a profound impact on the development of modern drama by means of offering craved-for guidance to younger generations of playwrights. *Long Day's Journey into Night* is an autobiographical play by O'Neill, first published in 1956, though its creation can be traced back to the 1940s. This play is considered one of O'Neill's greatest works and a classic of the 20th-century American literature. *Long Day's Journey into Night* (hereafter referred to as *The Journey*) depicts the story that happens on a summer day to the Tyrone family in 1912. The family consists of four members: James Tyrone the father, Mary the mother, Jamie the elder son, and Edmund the younger son. As the day progresses and night falls, the complex relationships between family members are gradually revealed, along with their physical sufferings and emotional pains, which simmer beneath the surface of apparent peace.

The academic community has been exploring ways to keep its study on classic literary texts freshly innovative. For example, in recent years, focus of research on Eugene O'Neill's works has shifted towards real-world concerns in his plays such as race, women's rights, and political power. This shift aims to help critics and scholars to break away from the limitations of "research in the ivory tower" and make their researches more tightly connected with societal realities. At the 11th International Eugene O'Neill Symposium, held every three years, a Chinese scholar named Xu Shiyan summarized the key words of the conference as "Space,

interdisciplinary, Ideal” (164). These keywords reflect a multi-dimensional research on O’Neill’s works. They embody new trends in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary studies, which are conducive to breaking traditional research boundaries and revitalizing classic works in the modern context of literary studies. So it follows that researches on *The Journey* have been for sure extensively conducted. As for the existing domestic research results, the focus is mainly placed on the following four perspectives of research: character relationships, psychological and emotional studies, narrative and stylistic studies, and cultural studies. In terms of character relationships, researchers have analyzed the complex interactions between family members, paid attention to the living predicaments of female characters in the play, and explored the causes for their tragic lives. Wang Yanzhi used the Greimas semiotic square to explore changes in character relationships. Psychological and emotional studies focus on the inner beings of the characters by using critical theories of psychoanalysis proposed by Freud, Jung, and Lacan respectively, trauma theory, and theories on madness to study the psychological changes of the characters in the play. Narrative and stylistic studies pay attention to the narrative structure and language style of the work. They emphasize the role of non-linear narrative, temporal narrative, historical narrative, and inner monologue in enhancing O’Neill’s expression of his characters’ feelings. Additionally, they reveal the role of impolite discourse and discourse transformation in character portrayal. Cultural studies are an area of interest to both Chinese and foreign scholars. Zhang Wenyi and Tian Yuan have both conducted comparative studies on the religious views revealed in the work, especially Taoist thoughts. In addition, issues of ethnic groups’ survival in America, traits of Irish culture, and embodiment of the Greek tradition of tragedies in the work are also of great interest to scholars, both domestic and overseas.

Eugene O’Neill’s prime days of career coincided with the rapid development of industrialization and urbanization in the United States. What’s more, the status and experiences of Irish immigrants in American society had exercised a significant impact on his works. Researchers, up till now, have largely failed to conduct any detailed analysis of this historical period when discussing social and historical implications of the play, and therefore been unable to fully reveal the impact of societal changes on the characters in *The Journey*. How is Irish national identity manifested through interactions and conflicts between family members? How does the historical origin of the Tyrone family determine its members’ complex attitudes towards their Irish identity? What are the differences in understanding of and identification with Irish ethnicity between different generations? This study will delve into plots and dialogues of the play to reveal the complex emotions and self-identifying efforts of the family members with Irish national identity and so, expect to have all the aforementioned questions answered.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Family Heritage and Cultural Transmission

Immigration is one of the three major issues in Irish society that cannot be ignored. Most people emigrate abroad due to economic hardship. (Kubota 52). O’Neill’s father, James O’Neill, is an Irish immigrants, a fact that inclines O’Neill both emotionally and culturally to Ireland. O’Neill himself once said: “The most important thing that critics have overlooked about me and my work is—indeed, I am Irish” (Bowen 4). Symbols of Irish identity are ubiquitous in *The Journey*. For instance, the presence of “several histories of Ireland” that have a well-read look highlights the characters’ deep connection to their cultural heritage. This cultural awareness is further reflected in Mary’s voice, which carries an Irish lilt when she is merry and so, can work in subtly emphasizing her Irish roots. Similarly, the maid Cathleen is described as “a buxom Irish peasant” (O’Neill 59), which is to reinforce the permeation of an Irish identity into the fabric of the narrative. The transmission of cultural traits between generations within the family is prominently featured in the play. The relationship between the strict father James and his

opium-addicted wife Mary is filled with clashes and pains. Although they love and need each other, there seems to be no happiness or harmony in their marriage. Growing up in such a family environment, the eldest son Jamie is deeply influenced by his father, while the younger son Edmund shares many similar traits of personality with his mother. Similar to other Western European countries, Ireland has long practiced primogeniture. Although this system of inheritance rules began to disintegrate in the mid-19th century, the traditional custom of inheritance that favors the eldest son (or male) remains deeply rooted and moves on with little change (Kubota 53). For example, in the play, James the father is determined to have his eldest son Jamie carry on his acting career, believing that Jamie has the talent to establish himself as a fine actor and has inherited from his father the acting genes of “the greatest Shakespearean actor” (O’Neill 150). However, James never says such things to his younger son Edmund, which reflects the profound impact of the traditional Irish primogeniture system where the eldest son inherits the father’s legacy. James is a strict and pragmatic father with an Irish Catholic background, teaching Jamie to shoulder family responsibilities, pursue success of career, and adhere to social norms. Jamie’s character bears the imprints of that of his father’s, which can be manifested by the fact that he strives to achieve career success despite undesirable results. He also inherits his father’s selfishness and indifference, especially his “cynical” attitude when facing family conflicts (O’Neill 66).

Nonetheless, Edmund and his mother Mary share numerous similarities in character. Throughout Irish history, despite frequent changes in the country’s form of governance, the Irish people have always maintained a strong sense of national identity. Even during the most challenging times, they draw comfort from their ancient and glorious history and tenaciously preserve their national heritage. Over time, this consciousness has gradually settled down as a deep-seated collective unconscious of the Irish people featuring a unique blend of optimism and melancholy (Xue 12). For example, in the play, Mary is a sensitive and fragile woman with a fine taste for art. Her personality is filled with melancholy and fatalistic sentiments characteristic of Irish culture. She once said that she had two dreams when she was young: to become a nun or a concert pianist (O’Neill 108). Edmund inherits his mother’s sensitivity and artistic talent. He is passionate about poetry and the meaning of life, but this also leads to confusion and pain, which has been attested in the play by the line that reads “it is in the quality of extreme nervous sensibility that the likeness of Edmund to his mother is most marked”(O’Neill 27). His most famous poem is “it was a great mistake, my being born a man, I would have been much more successful as a sea gull or a fish”(O’Neill 161), based on which, his elder brother James thinks that his poetic writing is way too morbid. Mary’s detachment from other family members and her escape from reality are reflected in Edmund as his rebellion against traditional values. He pursues freedom and his greatest ambition is to be a sailor who can travel around in the world so as to stay away from realistic matters. Therefore, the undeniable Irish traits in James and Mary profoundly influence their offspring through coming to shape their identity, religious background, traditional values, and temperaments.

2.2. Cultural Identity and Identity Confusion

The term “identity” originates from the Latin word “idem,” which is equivalent to “the same” in English. Depending on the context, “identity” is translated into various Chinese terms, including “sameness,” “identification,” and “identity,” (Qian 6). The emergence of identity issues is largely related to changes in one’s location of residence. Location changes are common phenomena in modern society, involving not only physical movement but also transformations in individual identity and social role. These changes can be categorized into international migration, internal migration, intra-regional movement, temporary migration, virtual migration and so on. Each of these types could exert profound and complex impact on the later progress of an individual’s life, including cultural adaptation, social network rebuilding, career development, and

psychological health. One of the most common location changes is immigration, which brings with it issues of identity confusion. In *The Journey*, James is born in Ireland and immigrated to the United States with his father in his childhood, and Mary is also the daughter of an Irish immigrant. As they have been living in the United States for years, Ireland is reduced to their “home country” or their motherland. Their feeling towards Ireland may be a mixture of nostalgia, alienation, and even self-contradictions, which is reflective of the complexity of cultural identification in immigrants’ communities. Their identity confusion largely stems from their ambivalent attitude towards Irish culture. On the one hand, they feel shamed about and are scornful of Ireland due to its backwardness, and so make hard attempts to integrate themselves into mainstream American society. On the other hand, they find it difficult to shed their deeply ingrained Irish characteristics and get rid of feelings of nostalgia, and as a result, make this cultural trace a shackle in their identification with a new culture. James, in particular, exhibits a quaint symptom of both missing Irish culture while not wanting to openly admit it. He does not allow others to slander Ireland, yet he desperately tries to remove his Irish accent. This self-contradictory makeup of his psychological being reflects the common dilemma faced by Irish immigrants in the process of cultural assimilation. They long for recognition in their new society but cannot completely sever the ties with their original culture. This sense of their cultural identity being torn apart lies at the core of the psychological conflict in the characters in the play. Eugene O’Neill describes the family’s inescapable Irish identity from various angles such as appearance, voice, dietary customs, and emotional memories. However, these characters also deride their homeland as both foolish and poor from the depth of their hearts. The attachment to the homeland is loosened as older generations of immigrants age away. For James’s father, memory about living in Ireland occupies most of his emotional life. And his immigration to America is an unavoidable act of leaving his roots behind. After arriving in America, he endures the greatest hardships in adapting to the harsh and unfriendly new environment, and thus has to trouble himself with the strongest sense of homesickness. Just one year after his arrival in America, he “deserted his wife and six children” to return to Ireland (O’Neill 120). The return reveals his inability to find a sense of belonging and fulfill his re-identification in America. James and Mary, on the other hand, have a lesser emotional connection to Ireland, but because they spent their childhood there, they still harbor a slight determination to at least verbally defend Ireland. This protective sentiment stems not only from their fond memories of childhood but also from their awareness that Ireland is part of their identity and a link to their parents. Although they are more integrated into American society in their daily lives, they still show respect and recognition for Irish culture at some crucial moments of their lives. James, for example, scolds his eldest son Jamie for disparaging Ireland as a place of “peasants and bogs and hovels” (O’Neill 42). The two sons, as second-generation immigrants, identify themselves as Americans despite their Irish appearance. They often denigrate Ireland, referring to it as a land of “Irish bumpkins”. Sometimes, they mock at many Irish practices such as using whiskey as medicine. This denigration is both a sign of their cultural adaptation and a way chosen to gain their admission into the mainstream American society. By negating their Irish background, they reinforce their American identity to avoid being marginalized or discriminated against. However, this denial also brings internal conflicts and self-contradictions that they have to live on with. In other words, while pursuing the American Dream, they inevitably feel a sense of cultural emptiness and loss.

2.3. Diverse Representations of Irish Cultural Characteristics

In the play, the characteristics of the Irish ethnicity are mainly manifested in three forms: the unique Irish accent and pronunciation, the influence of Catholic faith, and habits such as drinking and speaking loudly. The childhood stage of one’s life is a “critical period” for language acquisition, during which English-speaking children learn their native language easily, quickly,

and memorably (Tang 80). In Irish English is retained many ancient pronunciation habits, such as the rolled “r” and elongated vowels, which make it distinct from other varieties of English. The mix of Irish and English in the play, along with the unconscious display of a unique Irish accent, is an important marker of an Irish immigrant’s national identity. In daily conversations, the male and female protagonists often have presented in their spoken English an Irish accent, which becomes more pronounced when they discuss the landscapes, traditional festivals, or family stories of their hometowns in Ireland. These topics seem to touch the softest parts of their hearts, and Mary often unconsciously adopts an Irish accent when she feels proud or happy. Accent and intonation represent not only linguistic features but also emotional expressions, reflecting their nostalgia for their childhood in Ireland and frustration about the passage of time. Language is not just a tool for communication but also a metaphor for social identity. This social function makes the Irish accent a tool for social stratification. In the play, characters from different social classes distinguish themselves through their accents. James, while engaged in performing art in the United States, strives to change his Irish accent to adopt a standard American one to cater to the need of American middle class. The efforts help him avoid being scorned as one who is from the countryside and the potential misjudgment from others. In stark contrast, Kathleen, the maid and a representative of the lower class, no longer cares about the identity symbolized by her accent. Even when there are guests in the house, she calls out to James in her distinct Irish accent without hesitation. Jamie finds this extremely shameful and does not hide his contempt for Kathleen, calling her a “wild Irish lark” who ought to be a train announcer (O’Neill 65).

Secondly, the religious issue is one of the most important, pervasive, and urgent problems caused by Irish traditions (Hao 72). The strict doctrines of Catholicism, such as abstinence, the prohibition of abortion, frequent Mass rituals, and self-confession, have created a repressive and conservative cultural atmosphere for the Irish. In *The Journey*, James embodies an almost fanatical Catholic character. He believes that Catholicism is a “true faith” (85). In his eyes, the poet “Shakespeare was an Irish Catholic,” and “the Duke of Wellington was another good Irish Catholic,” and “no one but an Irish Catholic general could beat Napoleon” (128). The renowned scholar Ania Loomba has pointed out that religious differences are often intricate, serving as annotations and metaphors for racial, cultural, and national distinctions (106). James’s frugality is closely tied to his Catholic identity since Catholicism teaches its followers to avoid luxury and waste and advocate for the moderation of desires to achieve spiritual satisfaction and inner peace. This doctrine largely contributes to the characterization of James as a miser in the play. Mary frequently complains that he is overly stingy as he is unwilling to spend money to handle matters properly, and even chooses a “Hilltown sanatorium” akin to a “state farm” for their sick youngest son Edmund. His frugality is embodied in his management of the family’s everyday life. For example, lights in the hallway must be turned off when nobody is found there. When interacting with his children, he criticizes his eldest son Jamie for indulging himself in revelry and debauchery that severely violate the Catholic principles he adheres to. He also dismisses with scorn the literary figures admired by his youngest son Edmund—Flaubert, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche—as “fools” because they are “atheists,” or as a bunch of “Whoremongers and degenerates” (O’Neill 136). James’s Catholic faith profoundly informs his values and behaviors, exacerbating the conflicts and tensions within the family to some extent. According to popular folktales, the most prominent characteristic of the Irish is their drunkenness (Barrett 115). The word “whiskey” in Irish means “water of life” and is widely consumed across all the country’s social strata. The extensive use of alcohol is closely related to Ireland’s natural environment, religious factors, and economic conditions (Chen 8). As a traditionally Irish way of raising children, if a child is crying uncontrollably or frightened by nightmares, parents would give them a sip of whiskey to calm them down. When a child behaves well, they are also rewarded with a spoonful of whiskey or beer as a treat. This tradition is

mentioned several times by Mary when complaining to James. He gives Edmund alcohol when he is but a very young boy, which Mary thinks may lead to Edmund's poor health when he crosses the threshold of adulthood. When treating illnesses, the Irish typically rely on alcohol. In *The Journey*, Mary's father, like James, always regards whiskey as a "tonic" and firmly believes that "whiskey is the healthiest medicine for a child who is sick" (O'Neill 115). Although many Irish traits have faded in Jamie and Edmund who live their lives out in America as second-generation immigrants, their penchant for drinking will stay in them as a solid inheritance from their father, James. All three men are heavy drinkers, and despite Edmund's severe illness, his father and brother still invite him into their bouts of drinking. Additionally, the habit of speaking loudly and shouting in the play is also worth exploring. Almost all characters in the text exhibit behaviors such as "shouting," "laughing loudly," "speaking loudly" and "yelling." This characteristic of loud speech is closely tied to Ireland's history and natural environment. The vast rural areas of Ireland require its people to shout loudly to make their voices heard over the hills. What's more, Irish social culture emphasizes warmth and directness, and speaking loudly is seen as a sign of sincerity, openness and frankness. Habits of both heavy drinking and loud speech have been preserved in most of Irish immigrant families as distinctive markers of Irish identity.

3. Conclusion

The Long Journey into Night is of high research value for exploring Irish nationality and identity through its vivid portrayal of an Irish immigrant family. This study analyzes the characters' confusion about their identities under the influence of familial heritage, the conflict between Irish culture and American social values, and the tension between individuals and their families. Such an analysis helps to better understand the complexity of Irish nationality in a global context, and the challenges individuals face in seeking self-identification when placed in a cross-cultural context. The play presents both the unconscious expression of and conscious adherence to Irish traditions, as well as the characters' adaptation to a new mode of life, which is to reflect the intricate balance between cultural assimilation and conflicts. In the meantime, the play showcases the evolution and ongoing impact of Irish nationality in a society as modern as America. Future researches could continue to explore the interaction between Irish nationality depicted in *The Long Journey into Night* and other elements of a globalized culture so as to investigate how different cultures find common ground for peaceful coexistence a human community of shared future. Such future explorations seem to have the potential to provide more insights about and solutions to problems of cross-cultural communication and cooperation.

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