

DIAGNOSING THE HOME: GEOPATHOLOGY, MEDICAL HUMANISM, AND THE CRISIS OF PLACE IN LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

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Abstract:

This essay critically examines Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night, a semi-autobiographical play that was published in 1956 after his death. Long Day's Journey into Night is considered to be O'Neill's masterpiece, and his attempt at coming to terms with a traumatic past. The play offers not only an examination of O'Neill's life, but is also one of the earliest works to explore the important themes and dangers of substance abuse, addiction, and alcoholism when these matters were generally shunned from the public theater stage for fear of glamorizing them. O'Neill wanted the text to be published twenty-five years after his death; however, his widow decided to publish it just three years after he died.

In this essay Mary Tyrone, a character based on O'Neill's mother, will be analyzed from the perspective of Medical Humanism and Geopathology. Medical Humanism is an approach that seeks to develop a humanist understanding of characters in literature, and examine how illness affects them, while Geopathology (coined by Una Chaudhuri) is a term that stands for the analysis of locations and how they affect their residents in modern drama. Medical Humanism and Geopathology will be used in tandem to explore how the Tyrone summer house (Mary's residence) impacts Mary's addiction and illness in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the character.

Keywords: *Geopathology, Medical Humanism, Eugene O'Neill, Narratives of Illness and Sickness.*

Introduction:

“Long Day's Journey must be the best play in our more than two centuries as a nation.” (Bloom) Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night, which he called a play “of old sorrow, written in tears and blood,” (O'Neill) is considered to be semi-autobiographical in nature, and explores the dynamics of the Tyrones, a family dealing with illness, substance abuse, and alcoholism. Mary Tyrone, a character based on O'Neill's mother, struggles with morphine addiction and rheumatic arthritis, and is afflicted with a sense of effective homelessness despite having a summer home as a residence. However, she rejects the place, stating that “It was never a home.” (O'Neill 62).

This essay delves into this problem of home through the lens of Geopathology, a term coined by Una Chaudhuri. Geopathology seeks to examine the effect of locations upon residents, especially in modern drama, and Chaudhuri terms the Tyrone summer home as a “geopathic location”, establishing that there is a concrete “problem of place” (Chaudhuri 56) in the play- and this forms the basis of discussion for this essay. However, this essay also delves into the dynamics of Mary Tyrone's childhood home in order to achieve a holistic understanding of her concept of home, and thereby understand her rejection of the Tyrone summer house as a home.

The other part of the discussion is based on Medical Humanism, an approach which seeks to take a humanist approach to characters in literature and understand their physiological and mental ailments in order to better analyze them as characters, and gain insights into their decisions. The focus would be on Mary Tyrone's addiction and rheumatism. However, this approach would be enhanced through Geopathology, which would examine how the problem of place, and the problem of home (and its environment) plays a role in Mary's illness and morphine habit. Therefore, these two concepts will be used in tandem: Geopathology will explain the problem of place that Mary faces, as well as other factors associated with place (such as a stressful

environment), and Medical Humanism will allow for understanding how Mary's illness and morphine addiction are influenced by this problem of place that she faces.

Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical framework for this essay is comprised of an interdisciplinary approach, and utilizes two concepts, namely, Medical Humanism, and Geopathology.

Medical Humanism is an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to aid the development of understanding of individuality and medical treatment, and cultivate compassion. In *The Emergence of Medical Humanities*, Keith Wailoo notes that as the medical humanities have widened their reach, one theme has persisted from the early years: professional and human crisis has spawned the search for meaning and introspection about life, illness, recovery, human suffering, the care of the body and spirit, and death (Wailoo). In this essay, the focus would be on Mary Tyrone's morphine addiction as well as her experience as a patient of rheumatic arthritis, and an examination of her past life would be carried out to determine the cause of her ailments with a humanist view as well. In addition, the role of stress in Mary's life would come under discussion as well to gain a deeper understanding of her personal circumstances and her actions. This would not only offer a comprehensive analysis of Mary's character, but also offer an opportunity for the goal of medical humanities to be furthered by literature (Oyebode).

In *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, Una Chaudhuri states: "I wish to coin the term Geopathology. The problem of place and place as problem-informs realist drama deeply..." (Chaudhuri, 55). Geopathology is, simply put, the problem of place, and it seeks to examine the effect of a location and its environment on its residents. In this essay, the location primarily under discussion would be James Tyrone's summer home, where Mary Tyrone lives. This place will be treated as a geopathic location for Mary, and an examination of Mary's concept of home will also be made in order to gain an understanding of Mary's rejection of the summer house as a home. In addition, the summer house's effect upon Mary Tyrone's health will be discussed through the lens of Medical Humanism in order to provide a nuanced analysis of the performativity of the Tyrone summer house as a geopathic location.

The research relies on quotations from the primary text, scholarly articles and medical journals to serve as textual evidence.

Literature Review:

The problem of addiction and alcoholism in *Long Day's Journey into Night* has been discussed extensively in literature. Bloom's article on alcoholism in the play examines family dynamics, suggesting that alcoholism is a behavioral disorder, and that all characters and their dynamics suffer as a result. Hinden's study on the pharmacology in the play is critically important for providing new insights into Mary's morphine addiction, and Bennett's study focuses more on family dynamics, while Porter and Maley, in more recent studies, have taken the Tyrone summer house as a place where Mary faces oppression in not only the spatial sense, but also through language, while being forced to act as undervalued peacemaker between the male Tyrones. Also integral to the discussion is Una Chaudhuri's explication of Geopathology in *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, and the discussion of the Tyrone house as a geopathic location, especially for Mary, which serves as a core text for this essay.

While the problem of place- and the problems of substance abuse and addiction have been examined and discussed separately to a great extent, the problem of place has not been linked to Medical Humanism in order to examine the effect of location upon a resident's health in the form of, for instance, stress. This research combines the two concepts of Medical Humanism and Geopathology to offer a unique perspective on Mary Tyrone's health and character.

Analysis:

Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* features Mary Tyrone- the character that he famously modelled after his own mother, Mary Quinlan. Mary Tyrone, a morphine addict who suffers from rheumatic arthritis, appears on the stage in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, being described as: "What strikes one immediately is her extreme nervousness." (O'Neill 10).

Nervousness is one quality that Mary constantly displays throughout the play. She is never, at any point in the play, depicted as being at ease, alternating between the role of a peacemaker between the male Tyrones and her drug-induced state, and displaying her "detachment" and denying all accusations of having resumed her morphine habit. At the start of the play, Mary is implied to have returned recently from a sanatorium, and James Tyrone states that she is "fat and beautiful" and a "fine armful" with the "twenty pounds she's gained". However, Mary shows all signs of a person under extreme stress, displaying recognized symptoms, such as "Nervous mannerisms" (Anxiety-Stress). She is also said to have been "high strung" for the past few days, which she vehemently denies, and tries to pin on her husband:

"MARY (forcing a smile). I have? Nonsense, dear It's your imagination. (With sudden tenseness) You really must not watch me all the time, James." (O'Neill 14).

The second condition that Mary is shown to be suffering from is rheumatic arthritis in her hands, "rheumatism has knotted the joints and warped the fingers, so that now they have an ugly crippled look." (O'Neill 10). There are multiple references to her rheumatic hands throughout the play; she uses the condition as an excuse to get the prescription for morphine filled by Cathleen, and blames the condition for impairing her ability to play the piano.

Illness, of course, is a significant theme in O'Neill's play. However, the question arises: why is Mary Tyrone stressed? Is it because she has resumed her drug habit, or is there something deeper at play? What exactly is the source of the stress that Mary suffers from, and does it have to do something with where she is?

This is precisely the question that this essay seeks to answer- and in doing so, also to establish a link between Mary's "geopathic crisis" and her illness.

What exactly, does Mary's geopathic crisis entail? For Una Chaudhuri, it is the "problem of place". Geopathology, as discussed earlier, involves examining how environmental stressors in a specific place contribute to the residents' health issues. In Mary's case, Chaudhuri argues that "Instead of enjoying a sense of finally being at home, she finds herself more trapped than ever, in yet another shabby and lonely place that she haunts, in her drugged state, "like a mad ghost." (Chaudhuri 57). The house itself may not be shabby or lonely, but it appears as such to Mary owing to her comfortable and peaceful childhood. The situation in her childhood seems to be the complete opposite of what she experiences as an adult; for instance, while recalling her childhood, she mentions that she wanted to "be a nun". As part of a convent, she would have, of course, also grown up in a very intimate and tight-knit social cloister, which is also depicted by her as being a loving and supportive one: she mentions that she loved Mother Elizabeth "better than [her] own mother" (O'Neill 155), and is also proud of the fact that the others thought her capable of playing the piano "at a concert", suggesting a supportive and comfortable environment.

Even outside of the convent, Mary's father seems to have had given her a wonderful childhood, complete with "private lessons" for the piano, casting him in a favorable light as the doting father, which is further reinforced by her acquisition of her wedding dress:

“My father told me to buy anything I wanted and never mind what it cost. The best is none too good, he said. I’m afraid he spoiled me dreadfully.” (O’Neill 99).

Mary’s concept of “home”, then, may be logically concluded to have been a safe space where her wishes were attended to; a place where there would be comfort and no stress. It is no wonder that James Tyrone recalls that: “She was bursting with health and high spirits and the love of loving.” (O’Neill 120). Nurtured by a safe space, support, and a loving circle, Mary seems to have been in great health, and with no addiction or illness.

The inversion in living circumstances- and life circumstances, as well- comes with Mary’s marriage to James Tyrone:

“I remember the first night your bar-room friends had to help you up to the door of our hotel room, and knocked and then ran away before I came to the door. We were still on our honeymoon, do you remember?” She also recalls that : ”I had waited in that ugly hotel room hour after hour.” (O’Neill 98).

Thus began a series of waiting in hotel rooms, until Mary became “quite used to it”. Bereft of the safe space of a home, the problem of place began to take its toll on Mary, and the downward spiral continued until a “cheap hotel doctor”, prescribed her morphine, signaling the start of her exposure to the drug.

One may assume that Mary’s addiction started at that point, but according to Hinden, “representatives of American medical practice at the turn of the century may have acted in a competent manner. Mary's response to morphine was unusual: many were given morphine for pain but few became addicted.” (Hinden). In addition, Hinden, quoting Melzack, states that those who became addicted sought the drug for “its mood altering effects” (Melzack qtd in Hinden). Melzack’s findings are corroborated by recent research; Psychology Today notes that individuals with deficits in skills relevant for modifying emotional reactions and tolerance for negative emotions use drugs in an attempt to manage negative or distressing states. (Heshmat). However, this hardly absolves the hotel doctor of all blame: as Stephen Black notes, one may readily understand “Mary's rage at the medical profession which gave her a drug it did not understand” (Black). In Mary’s mind, the addiction is a result of the problem of place- had she been in a comfortable home in a good locality with adequate medical facilities, she may not have encountered the drug at all- perhaps she would be correct about her beliefs.

By associating herself with Tyrone through marriage, Mary also started to experience stress- caused by the loss of a home, and exacerbated by the death of her father. This is also precisely why throughout the play, Mary constantly compares the summer-house with her “father’s home”, and with people who had “decent, presentable homes”. One would think that she was effectively homeless; and that stipulation would be true. The status of “geopathic” becomes associated with the Tyrone summer house because Mary’s idea of home, tied to comfort and health- the direct antithesis of the Tyrone summer house- would be part of a past that she could not go back to. After losing her home, Mary also starts to lose her health.

In addition, there is a host of other factors that make the Tyrone summer house a party in worsening Mary’s health. As Grene notes, “In the play, the house is a home to Tyrone, not to the others” (Grene). This appears obvious by the description of the residence in the play: it is “James Tyrone’s Summer House”, and not the “Tyrone Residence”. Mary rightfully states that “I’ve never felt it was my home. It was wrong from the start.” (O’Neill 38).

Mary is right about her view since she is relegated to several roles- and spaces that she does not want. Porter notes that even within the “home”, “Those spaces dominated by the men in the family are public, communal, and visible to the audience; those associated with Mary are private, isolated, and invisible” (Porter). An instance of this is Mary being forced to wait at home whilst the Tyrone men go out drinking; and her usage of the spare room seems a normal habit instead of something odd. Although Edmund raises suspicion at her usage of the spare room, she is able to mollify him easily:

“For heaven’s sake, haven’t I often used the spare room as my bedroom?” (O’Neill 41).

In addition, Mary does not go out much, simply because she does not have friends. When she does- once in the play- it is within the privacy of her automobile, which she does not even exit for a visit to the pharmacist, instead sending Cathleen to get her “medicine”.

The Tyrone home- and automobile, therefore, are not comfortable spaces for Mary, making them stressful places for her to be in.

Another factor to consider is the constant bickering that occurs between James Tyrone and his sons: there is always a verbal battle between James Tyrone, who insists that his sons “don’t know the value of a dollar” (O’Neill 111). Without fail, his sons retort back every time. Friedman and Jones note that “The pattern of character interaction is one of alternately reproaching and forgiving, only to be followed by another volley of accusation and apology.” (Friedman and Jones). In these violent rows, Mary is always forced to play the role of a peacemaker. Patrick Maley notes that “The most strenuous efforts to preserve Tyrone family happiness come from Mary” (Maley), who utilizes language in order to bring peace- or at least a temporary ceasefire. She is forced to be the mediator within her own home, tackling situation after yet another stressful situation.

The house, therefore, is justified as a geopathic location- and Chaudhuri is correct in identifying Mary’s “geopathic” crisis. On one hand, the Tyrone house is the antithesis of what Mary had in life- instead of a warm, welcoming house filled with love and support and a doting father, she had to, after marriage, live through a long and exhausting period of having to call “second-rate hotels and trains” (62) her home, and deal with bickering, anguish and stress- and when she finally got a summer house- her husband refused to spend any money on it:

“He thinks money spent on a home is money wasted. He’s lived too much in hotels. Never the best hotels, of course. Second-rate hotels. He doesn’t understand a home. He doesn’t feel at home in it. And yet, he wants a home. He’s even proud of having this shabby place. (O’Neill 53).

The stress of the geopathic location has an adverse impact on Mary’s health in different ways. According to Everyday Health, several things need to be avoided in order to deal with rheumatism. These include investing in quack cures, inconsistent treatment, focusing on negativity and pessimism, and stressing out- it is also stated that stress or a traumatic event is usually the main element that triggers rheumatism flare-ups. Unfortunately for Mary, she suffers in every aspect and fails to avoid any of the abovementioned to deal effectively with her rheumatism. James Tyrone does not stay in one place long, making for inconsistent treatment; he prefers saving money over the well-being of his family, and he is one of the greatest sources of negativity in the household along with his sons- and creates a pessimistic, stressful environment for Mary Tyrone. The house is, as a result, rendered an unwholesome place for Mary. Arguably the worst element that Mary has to face is stress.

It is generally considered that stress has a negative impact upon the human body (NHS). Dr. Griffin categorically states that “Stress can make rheumatoid arthritis (RA) symptoms worse. (Griffin, WebMD). For Mary, the rheumatism is a multifaceted problem: the stress in the Tyrone house makes it worse, and importantly, her damaged hands also remind her of a past with a comfortable home. Bennett notes that “The rheumatism in her hands reminds Mary how far behind her the past is.” (Bennett). Rheumatism does not only stand for present, bad circumstances filled with stress in Mary’s case- but also brings into greater focus for her a past that would have had better opportunities and a better quality of life. To make matters even worse, Mary stresses about the condition of her hands as well, making the worst case for her health as a result.

As discussed already, people who take drugs often take them to avoid dealing with negative feelings. Mary, due to the stress in the house, in addition to prior personal tragedies such as the loss of her father, and then her infant, has ample cause- if not justification- for her use of morphine. She states that “I have to take it because there is no other that can stop the pain — all the pain” (O’Neill 89). The phrase “all the pain”, of course, implies her emotional pain. Her emotional pain, once again, results not only from the condition of the Tyrone men, but also from simply being in a location that means nothing to her except the reminisces of past and better days. It is no wonder that she relapses back into her childhood days in the final act- it is perhaps her attempt at escaping not only reality, but also the cursed Tyrone home with all its unwholesomeness and stress.

Mary Tyrone is, therefore, not a figure that can be blamed for her substance abuse. To treat her as a narcissistic person, only concerned with escapism would not be correct. She is unwell- in many senses of the word, afflicted with a past that haunts her, in a house that she cannot call home, and in a situation that she cannot help- and cannot help fighting against.

Conclusion:

This research utilized Medical Humanism and Geopathology concurrently in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of Mary Tyrone’s character. Mary Tyrone’s personal concept of home at her father’s house was explored as being a safe, comfortable, and healthy environment, and the inversion of her living circumstances after her marriage to James Tyrone and the subsequent forced “homelessness” and then being relegated to live in a comfortless, shabby house, was determined as the reason for her rejection of the geopathic space as her home. The stressful environment of the Tyrone summer home and James Tyrone’s rejection of comforts were determined as proponents exacerbating the problem of place. Medical Humanism was then applied in order to determine the impact of such a location and environment on Mary Tyrone’s health, and it was concluded that the stressful environment, and geopathic nature of the Tyrone home, coupled with its male occupants’ oppression of Mary Tyrone spatially and emotionally, resulted in an exacerbation of Mary’s health condition, and may also have contributed not only to her repeated relapses into morphine addiction, but also to her flare-ups of rheumatic arthritis. To state that Mary Tyrone’s addiction and perhaps her illness as well, were products of her environment, then, would not be an illogical assumption. Mary’s usage of morphine is perhaps not justified- but she is not to blame solely for her environment and experience. She cannot help but fight to maintain peace- but loses her own peace as a result.

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