

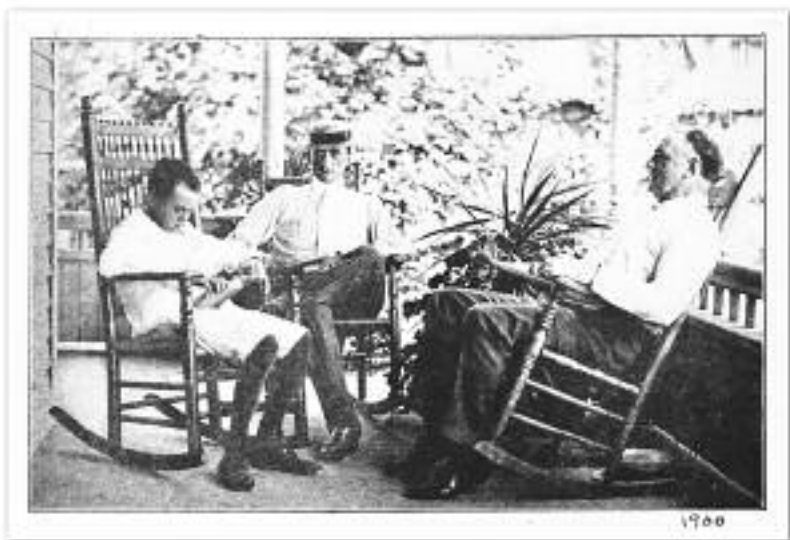
A SECOND LOOK, AND A SECOND CHANCE TO FORGIVE

Barbara Gelb draws a parallel between Eugene O'Neill's brother Jamie and his fictional counterpart Jim Tyrone in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*.

Struggling to complete *A Moon for the Misbegotten* before illness permanently silenced his writing in 1943, Eugene O'Neill fancifully described the character based on his older brother, James O'Neill, Jr., as an "alien." "When Jim was born," wrote O'Neill in an early attempt to bring the character into focus, the first thing he did was "look around at the earth and realize he had been sent to the wrong planet." "God had double-crossed him," O'Neill elaborated in his scenario for the play, "and so he began to curse... and he reached for a bottle of whiskey and said to himself, By God, I'll show you! Try and catch me now. And so he lived on cursing and drinking, being slapped on the back and no one ever caught him..."

The idea for *A Moon for the Misbegotten* struck O'Neill almost immediately after he completed *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, his autobiographical masterpiece, which takes place in New London in 1912. On Oct. 29, 1941, he noted in his work diary: "This can be strange combination comic-tragic – am enthused about it." The play afforded O'Neill a second look at his brother, depicted in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* as a 33-year-old, cynical, second-rate actor, alcoholic but still functional. Set 11 years later, *A Moon for the Misbegotten* portrays the brother (called James Tyrone, Jr., in both plays) as a considerably more depressed, guilt-ridden and alcohol-sodden failure. He is now in his early 40s and on the brink of death. At the time and place we meet this older Jim – "early September, 1923," on a farm in Connecticut – the real Jim was in a New Jersey sanitarium, nearly blind and in the terminal stage of alcoholism.

A Moon for the Misbegotten was, it seems, a wish fulfillment on O'Neill's part. He had been unable to forgive his brother's outrageous behavior during the months before his death and would not visit him at the sanitarium. The play in one sense was a belated offering, two decades later, of redemption for his brother and expiation for O'Neill's



Eugene O'Neill sitting on porch with James O'Neill, Jr. and James O'Neill, 1898

own guilty lack of compassion at the time. The "Moon" O'Neill conjured was a Mass for the long-dead brother he had once dearly loved but had come to resent.

The true story that drives the play is that of the final illness, in 1922, of Jim's (and Eugene's) mother, Ella. After their father's death in 1920, Jim had at last given up drinking for his mother's sake. Sober for a year and a half, he accompanied her to California to look into one of his father's real estate investments, and there she fell ill with an incurable brain tumor. Awaiting her death in terror, Jim began drinking again as she lay in a coma. He became convinced that she awakened long enough to be aware of his condition and to die in despair. All this soon became known to his appalled brother.

The tragedy began in the winter of 1885, when Jim, known in the family bosom as Jamie, was 7. His mother left him and his brother, Edmund, not quite 2, in their grandmother's care in New York while she went off to join her husband, the matinee idol James O'Neill, on his western theatrical tour. Up to then, Jamie had often traveled with his parents, living in the closest intimacy with them in hotel rooms across the country. Deprived of companions his own age, he was preternaturally attached to and dependent on his mother and was acutely jealous and resentful of his baby brother's intrusion into their lives. During his mother's absence, Jamie contracted measles and, despite warnings to stay away from the baby, went into Edmund's room and infected him. Before his mother could return, Edmund died. This became the defining event of the O'Neill family tragedy, brooded upon and ever present to all the O'Neills, even to Eugene, who was not born until three years later. The circumstance of the baby's death was of particularly excruciating pain to Jamie because his beloved mother, in her grief and shock, accused him of having deliberately transmitted the illness to the baby. Jamie, though he repressed his misery for a time, was ultimately destroyed by



Photo by T. Charles Erickson

Ellen Burstyn as Mary Tyrone in the Alley's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. The character was based on O'Neill's mother.

the guilty conviction that the mother he worshiped believed he had killed his baby brother and could not forgive him.

Jamie's misery was compounded when, shortly after his brother's death, he was banished to a Roman Catholic boarding school in Indiana, where he was to spend the next nine years. Jamie at first strove to be an exemplary student, earning high grades and winning one award after another in such subjects as rhetoric, elocution, oratory and Christian doctrine. At 10, he appeared to accept with good grace the arrival of another brother, Eugene. In this instance it was easier to suppress his jealousy, for he now had a life and friends apart from his parents and no longer felt compelled to vie for his mother's daily attention, although he did yearn for her visits at school. If O'Neill's early scenario for *A Moon for the Misbegotten* may be taken literally, Jamie drew profound solace from the religious belief in which he had been brought up. "There was once a boy who loved... purity and God with a great quiet passion inside him," reads a line in the scenario describing Jim Tyrone. Popular with his fellow students, as well as something of a teacher's pet, Jamie appeared in dramatic productions and played shortstop on the baseball team. No one who knew this bright, ingratiating, high-achieving boy would have predicted anything but the rosiest of futures for him.

His behavior turned erratic in his early teens when, during a school vacation, he stumbled on his mother giving herself a morphine injection. "Christ, I'd never dreamed before that any women but whores took dope!" Jim tells his younger brother in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Beginning with his return to school in 1892, he began his spiral downward. Although still capable of bursts of exemplary scholarship and literary achievement, he appears from that point on to have lost heart. He began to blame his father for his mother's condition and, for the first time, displayed an open disrespect that was to ripen into ever-increasing nastiness.

Even when inebriated, Jamie took pains to dress impeccably. Friends found it difficult to reconcile the raging-drunk, furniture-smashing, obscenity-shouting Jamie with the partially-drunk, stiffly-polite, grandly-alooof Jamie. He was actually both men, and the change from one to another was merely a question of a little more or a little less whiskey. His casual acquaintances retained an image of Jamie in a derby hat, spotless white shirt, brightly shined shoes and, on occasion, yellow spats.

From: Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill: Life with Monte Cristo*, Applause Books/Penguin, Putnam, Inc.

Less than two months into his senior year at St. John's College, Jamie was already in the decline from which he never sprang back. On a bet, six months before graduation, Jamie brought a prostitute to the campus and tried to pass her off to the Jesuit faculty as his sister. He was promptly expelled.

He halfheartedly tried various occupations and at last, grudgingly, allowed his father to start him on an acting career. And since he was good-looking, with his father's voice

and his Irish wit and charm, the stage did, at first, seem to suit him. But Jamie made little effort to grow as an actor. He was often drunk on stage, justifying his behavior by insisting his father had "forced" him into the theater. On tour, Jamie would invite the town prostitutes to sit in the boxes and cheer him on. Dressed in buckskin tights, he struck lascivious poses at the stage apron, flagrant enough to elicit the critics' ridicule. Jamie's drinking finally put an end to his career at 38.



Telegram from Eugene O'Neill to Hadlai Hull about his brother Jim, February 17, 1923

With no occupation, he devoted himself to his mother. "Jim hasn't had a drink in almost a year and a half now!" O'Neill wrote to a friend in January 1923. "Fact, I swear to you! My mother got him to go on the wagon and stick – and he *has* stuck."

O'Neill was in the midst of rehearsals for *The Hairy Ape* later that year when Jamie wired from California that their mother was dying. Drinking without stop after her death on Feb. 28, Jamie was forcibly removed to the New Jersey sanitarium in May. On July 18, a friend of Jamie's who visited him regularly wrote to Eugene: "He is very thin, pale, trembles a great deal and of course very weak. He cannot read or write so he asked me to write for him... He expressed a great desire to see you." By the end of October 1923, (a month after the time of the play's action) a cousin of the O'Neills who had kept in touch with the sanitarium reported to his wife, "Jim was out of his mind and getting weaker every day." He died on Nov. 8, his life without doubt the most cruelly blighted of the four tragic O'Neills.

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