



EUGENE O'NEILL: AN AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHT'S CONTRIBUTION TO FAMILY THERAPY

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A growing body of research has indicated that “family of origin” exploration as a curriculum and training tool is particularly useful in the affective realms specifically for those who plan to practice family therapy in a professional setting (Aponte, 1992; Braverman, 1994; Deveaux & Lubell, 1994; Kane, 1996; McDaniel & Stanton, 1991). To support this supposition, Aponte and Winter (1987), have argued that to ensure the optimal development of the new family therapist, the family therapist trainee needs both theory and skills training in family therapy, as well as attention to the development of the therapist as a “person.” Additionally, Papero (1990), has stated that the single most important task for the new family therapist in the training of the “person” is family of origin work.

Specifically, what is family of origin work? How is this training tool relevant to becoming a family therapist? Within a family schema, family of origin exploration specifically examines the structural, relational and functional psychodynamics of the therapist's own family. As this exploratory process begins, the overall process can be viewed from both a horizontal perspective, by examining one's own immediate family, as well as from a vertical perspective that examines the family generationally.

As the family therapist trainee explores his or her immediate nuclear family from a horizontal perspective, the trainee is asked to critically review the current level of anxieties perceived within one's immediate family. According to Bowen (1978), Kerr and Bowen (1988) and McGoldrick and Gerson (1985),

this horizontal evaluation allows the trainee the ability to measure “the flow of anxiety emanating from current stressors in his or her family as it moves forward through time, coping with the inevitable changes, misfortunes and transitions in the family life cycle” (p. 6). Conversely, within the vertical examination of one's family system, the trainee explores the perceived relational patterns and functioning levels of those family members from previous generations. These dynamics are explored and identified as the trainee investigates and measures any reciprocal patterns of relating and functioning that have potentially been transmitted historically down through generations (Bowen, 1976, 1978). By systematically exploring both the immediate family and the family intergenerationally, the beginning family therapist can personally evaluate: (a) overall family functioning, (b) relational patterns, (c) family structure, and (d) family equilibrium or imbalance. It is in the potential of this training tool that the family therapy trainee begins to identify and possible reframe emotional-laden issues within his or her family. It is crucial within the formative period of clinical training to be cognizant of one's own personal blindspots. Often, these blindspots can negatively affect the depth and quality of future work with families as clients. Moreover, by examining one's own family from a systemic process, the family therapy trainee is afforded a unique personal opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the family as a system, where the family can now be viewed from an intimate knowledge base

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as “profoundly interdependent with changes in one part of the system reverberating in other parts of the system” (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985, p. 5).

The Role of the Arts

What is unique and singular within the arts is its potential to communicate intergratively, the verisimilitudes of human experience. Often the arts can provide alternative and nondiscursive language and symbols systems that when experienced and felt, intuitively resonate within our deepest sensibilities. These are the potentials of all art forms and particularly true when considering the dramatic works of the playwright, Eugene O’Neill.

In his highly autobiographical play, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, O’Neill has skillfully, and with great artistic and technical awareness, allowed language and dramatic elaboration to bring us intrinsically into both the play’s life, as well as his own family of origin. In many ways, O’Neill has attempted a one-of-a-kind exorcism of the American family—his family. Noting that the family is the primary and except in rare instances, the most powerful system to which we all belong, O’Neill assaults this system in an effort to become a person by artistically exploring his own family of origin.

It is the potential of this powerful drama to become a case example of O’Neill’s struggle with his art and his family system. For the family therapist trainee and supervisor, it dramatically allows the reader the opportunity to analyze, interpret and enhance the educational dialogue.

The Playwright

Eugene O’Neill’s play, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, was completed in 1941. It was written just after *The Iceman Cometh* and just before *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, which is a sequel to *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. According to O’Neill’s wife and literary colleagues, the play was painfully autobiographical (Carpenter, 1964; Gelb & Gelb, 1962; Sheaffer, 1968, 1973). Although a few close friends were permitted to read the manuscript, the original draft, notes and all copies were placed in the restricted vault of his Random House publisher. According to Falk (1958), when reporters at *The Iceman Cometh* play interviewed O’Neill and asked him to explain the restriction, O’Neill answered, “there is still one person in

this play who is still alive” (p. 179). This statement was clearly a personal reference.

Consequently, O’Neill did not wish to have this particular play published or performed until 25 years after his death. According to his third wife, Carlotta, “After he finished, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, his physical condition became so poor and his hands shook so badly that he could do no work for the ten years before his death” (Cargill, Fagin, & Fisher, 1961, p. 93). Mrs. O’Neill stated that “He died spiritually after the play! God...it was a matter of dragging around a poor deceased body along for a few more years, until it too died” (Cargill et al., 1961, p. 93).

Mrs. O’Neill poignantly recorded what happened to her husband as he wrote this play. According to Cargill et al. (1961), she states,

His work day was a long one, five hours in the morning and additional hours in the afternoon. He was a man being tortured every day by his own writing. He would come out of his study at the end of the day, gaunt and sometimes weeping. His eyes would be all red and he looked ten years older than when he went in the morning. (p. 93)

O’Neill himself stated that not without irony, he was writing this play because “he knew he could finish it” (Carpenter, 1964, p. 92).

According to Bowen (1976), the longitudinal, multigenerational study of the family of origin is an essential therapeutic process. Not only is this process important in understanding and working through an individual’s current behavioral level of functioning, it is also substantive in elucidating possible effects of any multigenerational transmission of maladaptive functions and roles from one generation to the next.

Within the family of origin process, the way an individual emotionally develops within a family is intrinsically based on a multigenerational process (Bowen, 1976). Specifically, this process describes how individual family members differentiate from one another emotionally and, how the degree and level of differentiation is passed down from generation to generation. In this theoretical view of the family, families are tied in thinking, feeling and behavior to transactional sequences of family functioning. Often these transactional sequences spring from symptomatic thoughts and actions of the previous generations. According to Bowen (1976, 1978), individual

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