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**The influence of the Past and the Present in Eugene O'Neill's  
*Long Day's Journey Into Night* and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar  
Named Desire***

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**Abstract**

The most American writers who tackle the theme of past and present in their works are Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams. This paper attempts to analyze the theme of past and present in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and Williams' *A streetcar Named Desire*. They have presented their tragic theory of the relationship between the characters' tragic downfall and the power of the unconscious self or their psychological mental fate. They have used memory as a recurrent motif in their major plays. The aim of this paper is to analyze memory that symbolizes the past and its impact on the present in the two selected plays. The major characters are shown through memory as they feel haunted with the restraints of past, which casts shadow on their present condition. As the human archetypes live under unfavorable conditions whether they are political, social, or economic, they cover their harsh realities with memory of the beautiful past.

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**Key words:** past, present, liquid, memory, misery, reality.

تأثير الماضي والحاضر في "رحلة النهار الطويلة إلى الليل" ليوجين أونيل و"عربة اسمها الرغبة"

لتينييسي ويليامز

قصي جدوع احمد

مديرية تربية صلاح الدين

المستخلص

من اهم الكتاب الأمريكيين الذين تناولوا موضوع الماضي والحاضر في أعمالهم يوجين أونيل وتينييسي ويليامز. يحاول هذا البحث تحليل فكرة الماضي والحاضر في مسرحية رحلة طويلة في الليل ليوجين أونيل ومسرحية عربة تسمى الرغبة لتينييسي ويليامز. قدم الكاتبان نظريتهما المأساوية للعلاقة بين السقوط المأساوي لشخصياتهما وقوة النفس اللاواعية أو مصيرهما العقلي، والنفسي. لقد استخدمتا الذاكرة كعنصر متكرر في مسرحياتهما الرئيسية. يهدف هذه البحث الى تحليل الذاكرة التي ترمز إلى الماضي وتأثيره على الحاضر في المسرحيتين المختارتين. تظهر الشخصيات الرئيسية من خلال الذاكرة وهم يشعرون بأنهم مطاردين بقيود الماضي ، والتي تلقي بظلالها على حياتهم الحالية. نظرا لأن النماذج البشرية تعيش في ظل ظروف غير مناسبة سواء اكانت سياسية ام اجتماعية أم اقتصادية ، فإنها تغطي واقعها القاسي بذكرى الماضي الجميل.

**الكلمات الدالة:** الماضي، الحاضر، المشروب، الذاكرة، البؤس، الواقعية

### **The influence of the Past and the Present in Long Day's Journey Into Night and A Streetcar Named Desire**

The notion of time in *Long Day's Journey into Night* is generally moving backward in time to the past, but it is not a criminal or disgusting past as in O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. The past and the present control the action of the play. Four members of the Tyrone's family are concerned with their action in the past and its impact on the present. Tyrone is a poor worker in a shop, but through time, he becomes a famous businessman in the city. The years lived in the past are reflected in the present as parsimonious and materialistic. He reveals that it is not his fault, but it is suffering in the past that brings in his passion for property and wealth. It is the deprivation when he lived on fifty cents a week that made him aware of the value of each cent he spent. The past is conveyed through Tyrone in the play that arose from the poverty in the past to the wealth of the present. He is a blend of Irish roots and American experiences. He belongs to the working class, but through time and hard work, he turns to be the first class actor. O'Neill portrays Tyrone's materialism and parsimony at the present time and emphasizes the

inevitable forces of the past which brought out these defects in his character. In this play, this takes the form of a spatial temporal journey in time.

The journey is originally about the past of the Tyrones and its strong effect on their present. The Tyrones refer to their past at the beginning; each one talks about his/her past as an individual. No one of them gives a good analysis of the past and no one is conscious of the past of America as a nation. Historically, the past of the Tyrones fall in the economic and social forces that control the American life. Mary asserts this idea when she says to Edmund: "It is wrong to blame your brother. He can't help being what the past has made him any more than your father can. Or you. Or I" (*LDJIN* 55). The spectators know the events which have already happened on the stage with the complicated presentations of the past and the present. They realize at one time the physical and psychological effects of the action at the present. There is a charming two-ways vision: the spectators actually watch reasons and consequences at the same moment. The impact of the past upon the individual's personality is clearly displayed on the stage. Tyrone explains that he undergoes poverty in childhood. Mary uncovers that she gains the morphine by a conjurer doctor twenty three years before the play starts. The consequences of her drug's addiction are rudely displayed with severe immediacy before the audience. Mary says "Let me see. What did I come here to find? It's terrible, how absent-minded I've become. I'm always dreaming and forgetting" (*LDJIN* 152).

In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, there is not just a paired vision of the past and the present, but there is an accurate and designedly dominating development of the two-ways vision through the provisional progression of the play. O'Neill attempts to depict the fragmentary cumulative processes of the past as they are accumulated in the lives of the characters. He intensifies the years of experience into three or four hours of achieving time on the stage. Through this manner, he makes his viewers merge and live during the events of the play in an identically stimulating experience. The viewers' actual observation means to strive with a particular set of problems for a lifetime (Fish 123).

Although the perception of the idea of time is not related to a precise sensory system, psychologists suggest that humans do have a system, governing the comprehension of time (Rao et al. 317). It is noticed through the philosophical perspective that "the specious present is the time duration wherein a state of consciousness is experienced as being in the present" (Andersen & Grush 277). The characters' viewpoint jumps from the present to the past and then jumps back to the present and the actions move from one place to another without any restrictions. When several episodes with different historical backgrounds are juxtaposed in the same context, the particularity of individual episodes gives the way to the neutralized universality of the situation. Therefore, the whole action of the play turns into a historical miscellany of events, and a temporal overview of the human condition.

The concept of the past and the present is portrayed in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* as it's expressed by the major characters such as Tyrone, Mary, Jamie, and Edmund. They lead a wretched life trying to skip the present by addiction to alcohol and drug. Mary is a distinctive and special character and the most tragic personality in the play. As a girl, she was innocent and had beautiful dreams and a strong faith centered on Virgin Mary, but these dreams were demolished after her marriage, which weakened her

religious belief. Her husband fails to realize the promises he made her which make Mary lose her trust in the marriage. Morphine drags her down and makes her unconscious about her life. The title is a long journey where Mary keeps taking morphine and travels mentally back to the past that she prefers as a happier and more comfortable time than the present. The title also embodies symbolic statements of the dramatist's established standpoint that the final end of time leads to death. It exposes the meaninglessness of existence and the absurd reality of life that needs unusual strength and bravery .

In his masterpiece *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams continues to depict his characters in relation to the past and the present. Blanche is incapable or unwilling to defy and realize her present existence, searching for refuge in the beautiful past before her marriage. She rides on two streetcars, literally named "Desire" and "Cemeteries" to meet her tragic destiny in a clearly hostile place, ironically called "Elysian Fields!" (SND 5). Joseph K. Davis notes that Amanda and Blanche are conditioned by the lost time of the Antebellum South, and "the present exists only to the degree that it can be verified by constant references to the past" (171). She embraces extremely sentimental visions of the old South and her relationship with it.

Billy Mishoe notes that "the first aspect of the Old South that haunts Williams' characters is its romanticism, even though the recollections are sometimes as much imagination as reality" (26). Although the action of the play is located in the French Quarter of the New Orleans, Blanche remains transfixed at Belle Reve, and her lost Mississippi plantation. She is conditioned by "her southern upbringing to a way of life and thus to a kind of thinking which encourage unreality and ill-prepare her for what life in time actually brings her" (Davis 181). Blanche is trapped by her identification with the Antebellum South; her personal past contains tragic dimensions manifested as psychological loads to the present.

Blanche remembers her sad memories in *Belle Reve*. Although the plantation no longer belongs to the family, for Blanche, the palace represents prosperity and a cultivated style of life that actually went away long before her lifetime. When she is threatened, she reacts predictably by playing the fragile Southern belle. For instance, when Stella refuses to leave Stanley, Blanche replies: "I take it for granted that you still have sufficient memory of *Belle Reve* to find this place and these poker players impossible to live with" (SND 39). Her fabricated reminiscences of *Belle Reve* embody an impossible standard by which she judges everything around her. Unfortunately, for Blanche, not all her memories are as comforting as the images of *Belle Reve*. In her flight into the past, she is obliged to relive the darker moments as well. Blanche's mental case stems, in a large part, from guilt related to her past.

In addition to relegating her activities at the Flamingo Hotel and her discharge from the Laurel school system, Blanche attempts in vain to eliminate the death of her husband, for which she feels responsible. In Scene Six, she refers to the suicide of her husband (Allen) and says: "the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that's stronger than this kitchen candle" (SND 57). Blanche looks incapable to accept, escape, face, or exceed the collapsed world and its inherent corruption. She is destined to repeat her past transgressions that lead finally to destroying the instruction of her life

*A Streetcar Named Desire* dramatizes family pressures and the influence of the past on both the present and the future. The past chases Blanche who seeks for a fresh life that has beauty and adventure. Gilbert Debuscher argues that: "the break with the past is always painful for the sensitive man; and there is health in this drive to preserve one's integrity and develop maturity"(148). Blanche leaves the beautiful vision of the past, *Belle Reve*, and begins a new life in Elysian Fields, where life follows a primitive level beyond or before good and evil. Adler indicates that nowhere in Williams' plays is the experience of contradictions more clear than in *Streetcar*; "Themes are polarized, with past as opposed to present, desire against death, brutal animal sexuality versus spiritual beauty, jazz as against cathedral bells, garish, brightly colored shirts versus a light shaded by a paper lantern" (143).

Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is chased by the feeling of guilt as she has failed as a human being in her spirit. She is a victim of her husband who does not respect her emotion since she has discovered his sexual relation with his friend. As a result of his embarrassment, he commits suicide to run away from his scandal. Blanche says, "He'd stuck the revolver into his mouth, and fired—so that the back of his head had been—blown away!" (*SND* 57). She later claims that "deliberate cruelty is not forgivable. It is the one unforgivable thing in my opinion and it is the one thing of which I have never, never been guilty" (*SND* 78). Yet, she herself is victimized by the deliberate cruelty. Stanley discloses in Scene Seven that the army camp describes Blanche "out-of-Bounds" (*SND* 60). Because of her allurements of the seventeen year school teenager, the school's manager sacks her from her teaching career. Stanley, as Blanche's antagonist, uncovers her ugly past to Mitch who plans to marry her. Finally, Blanche attempts to hold Mitch, and admits her guilt by illustrating that her deed results from her need to flee from her husband's death which surrounds her.

At the beginning of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the thirty-years old Blanche having lost everything important in her life such as her youth, her shelter, her husband, her legacy, and almost all her family members, and for that reason she looks for relief from her loneliness in Stella's house. Reared in an aristocratic family till her marriage, Blanche is surprised by the weakness of her sister's life with Stanley. Stella looks more realistic than Blanche as she wants by all means to spend her life happily with her husband. So, time is Blanche's opponent as it pursues her; everything she does is colored by this necessity. According to Kazan, "Blanche's memories and inner life emotions are a real factor. We cannot understand her behavior unless we see the effects of her past on her present behavior" (342). Time destroys her present life as it devastates her past life. The cycle of time in Blanche's life passes through difficult stages: as a beautiful girl, a school teacher, a whore, and finally as an insane. These different stages in Blanche's life display how time plays the role of the antagonist in her case.

In Williams' essay "The Timeless World of the Play", he explains that time "deprives our actual lives of so much dignity and meaning" (VI). Thus, time is an enemy threatening O'Neill's and Williams' characters either in the guise of the haunting past or in that of the ineluctable future. The past action, as it influences the lives of their characters, is a diverse power containing the ugly and criminal past, past guilts, family olden times, and national and historical progresses.

The theme of reality and illusion is documented by dramatists since the classical Greek drama. The clash between illusion and reality occupies a great place in O'Neill's and Williams' plays. Illusion stands for the past, while reality stands for the present. For O'Neill, "illusion is an essential part of life's struggle and in real tragic spirit, he imagines the conflict against illusion as a criterion of spiritual nobility" (Choudhuri 12). He employs the theme of illusion to give shelter from the harsh present. Like O'Neill's, the plays of Williams are full of illusions which are represented by many characters such as Blanche and Stanley. Williams confesses in his private words that "All my great characters are larger than life, not realistic" (Williams 240).

In *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, O'Neill depicts the theme of illusion and reality clearly. Time draws fluctuating characters who are hesitating between reality and illusion so as to escape from tensions and worries. Edmund is not alone in his trying to make modifications with time and history or with fact and reality. O'Neill concentrates on Mary's plight more than other characters in using the fog; as she uses it as a means of forgetting the dreadful situations at the present. Clearly, time portrays a way of cleaning memory from terrible experiences to pave the way for a bright and promising future. At the outset of the play, she: "wasn't also able to get much sleep with that awful foghorn going all night long" (*LDJIN* 14). The foghorn stands for reality, that's why she dislikes it as it awakens her from her dreams. She uses drugs in an attempt to change her self-consciousness of the past and to forget her suffering of the present. Mary says "I really love fog ... it hides you from the world and the world from you. You feel that everything has changed, and nothing is what it seemed to be. No one can find or touch you any more" (*LDJIN* 84). For Mary, the fog is the best way to rely on at the current time to forget the suffering of bitter reality.

Mary knows that her true self is lost, but she must recuperate if she is to have peace. She travels back in her memories, to her days in the convent school, secured in her belief, emboldened by the nuns playing about her piano. She has two visions to be a nun and to become a concert pianist, but she has left her dreams when she married Tyrone. Here, Mary tells her maid Cathleen about her memories:

I haven't touched a piano in so many years. I couldn't play with such crippled fingers, even if I wanted to. For a time after my marriage I tried to keep up my music, but it was hopeless. One night stands, cheap hotels dirty trains, bearing children, never having a home – (she stares at her hands with fascinated disgust) See, Cathleen, how ugly they are! So maimed and crippled! You would think they'd been through some horrible accident! (She gives a strange little laugh). So they have, come to think of it. (*LDJIN* 89)

After the agonies of the present time, Mary goes back in her memories repeatedly to the days before marriage when she had a wish to become a concert pianist. So, the blue piano here is the symbol of the spirit of life. The rheumatism in Mary's hands is considered as reminder of her missed dream. The past of Mary is beautiful compared to her present which is harsh and insufferable. O'Neill establishes for his spectators a severe awareness of the changes of time which happens since Mary was physically ruined.

Mary's catastrophe lies in her isolation from a tradition which leads her to be a morphine addict. Her bourgeois past prevents her from striving for a difficult life. She suffers from the misdeeds of her family such as Tyrone's drunkenness and his former forbidden relation, Jamie's prostitution and Edmund's disease. The harsh realities at the current time force her to addict to morphine to forget the tragedies of life. Geraldine Fitzgerald gives answers to Mary's addiction to morphine that "if Mary Tyrone had never had a drug in her life, she would have been more or less the same. She is what she is because of her sense of guilt" (292). She moves to her idealized past under the effect of morphine cutting her off from the ache of her present life. Actually, she utilizes dissimilar types of defense mechanism to evade confronting any of her difficulties. She flashes back to her past time so as to evade the present nasty realities of her current life. She does not just have a flashback to earlier times to avoid the present realities, but she relives the actions in her mind.

Addicting on alcohol and whores, Jamie misleads himself in his search for individual recovery at the present time. His sexual relationships with whores follow a form of psychological disorder that stems from Oedipal complexes. Repeatedly, he argues with his father as he accuses him of the agonies of his mother. Seemingly, time embodies the element of shaping the psychological and behavioral traits of the parental life of the individual. These feelings "manifest themselves in a pattern called the good girl/bad girl attitude, which places women into two groups in the mind of the man affected. They are either good girls like Mom or bad girls and thus disposable" (Tyson 19). Seeming an oedipal complex, it is not all of Jamie's intrinsic inspiration for having careless relationships. He also possibly relieves the worry he has over the likelihood of his family's calamity. The harsh reality makes the main character busy with drugs, whores, alcohol, and memories. O'Neill wants to picture the hard time of the American families at that period. In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett uses Vladimir and Estragon as a means of unknown time. They occupy their time while waiting by engaging in amusement(Sameen 3).

The theme of illusion and reality is so clear in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It is presented by Blanche and Stanley. They represent two realms: Stanley stands for the world of harsh reality while Blanche stands for the world of illusion. Blanche tells Mitch in Scene Nine "I don't want realism. . . I'll tell you what I want. Magic! . . . I misrepresent things. . . I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth . . . Don't turn the light on" (SND 72). The dim light stands for Blanche's illusion in her dreams and memories. She tries to avert the future, lies about her age and rejects to be seen in any revealing light. Bigsby states that "the distinguishing character of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is its essential conflict between illusion and reality"(53) , a theme that displays itself in the hostile relationship between the characters of Blanche and her sister' husband Stanley" (53). Blanche's temporal dilemma, even tragedy is the fact that time is on Stanley's side, and is against Blanche

Stanley and Blanche embody two different worlds. Each one tries to declare his/her superiority over the other. Stanley is a realist man, while Blanche is full of fantasies and illusions. Stanley's brutality is seen as he is attempting hard to wake Blanche up to the ugly realities of her life, and this harsh situation makes her fight him with the only means she has which is illusion. Thus, *A Streetcar Named Desire* represents

the clash between Stanley and Blanche for dominance. According to F. H Londré, "Tennessee Williams intended a balance of power between Blanche and Stanley, to show that both are complex figures whose wants and behaviors must be understood in the context of what is at stake for them" (50). Stanley could dominate Blanche through violence and sexual desire. He interjects her world of secrets when he discovers her letter of love, her paper lantern, and her sexual past. He is callous; as he prepares Blanche's back ticket on her birthday, and destroys any hope of future or reconciliation between her and Mitch. Furthermore, he attacks her tenderness and shows his filthy claws, in the last scene, to send her to the mental hospital.

Stanley and Blanche also represent the conflict between the North and the South. Blanche represents the traditionalist South while Stanley represents the modern and industrialized North with which Blanche cannot deal. He seems to have no past, and he is plain, while Blanche is a "result of a process" (Bigsby 50). As a result, she tries to freeze time by living in the past and transforming her experience into myth to avoid the painful idea of death. She is used to living in *Belle Reve*, witnessing all the deaths of her beloved ones. The passage of time shatters Blanche physically and mentally. She could not find a partner after her husband's death except Mitch who rejects her because of her disgusting past.

Blanche's collapse is also representative of the South's devastation. The plantation in the South is lost because of her "improvident grandfathers and fathers and uncles and brothers who exchanged the land for their epic fornication" (43). Blanche's reference to the loss of *Belle Reve* is a clear indication to the decay of the traditional South, whereas Stanley embodies the brutal North. He is ready to take revenge upon anyone who stands in his way. Therefore, Blanche and Stanley's clash of forces represents the smashing of an old refined culture and the emergence of a brutalizing new one. Blanche stands for the lost glory of the romantic South in the past, whereas Stanley represents the hostile vulgar materialistic North at the present. Bigsby sheds light on Williams' memories in the South:

The South had a way of life that I am just old enough to remember – a culture, that had grace, elegance .... an inbred culture .... not a society based on money as in the North. I write out of regret for that .... I write about the South because I think the war between romanticism and the hostility to it is very sharp there. (49)

It appears that Williams takes Blanche's side in her battle with the brute and vulgar Stanley. He lets Blanche describe Stanley in many situations in the play as "ape-like", "subhuman condition", a "survivor of the stone age", and her final appeal to Stella "Don't—don't hang back with the brutes!" (*SND* 40-41). The materialistic and mechanized North cracks the mythic and lyric world of the traditional South. This means that the destruction of the South destroys the fruitful world of art and illusion.

Blanche is a "desperate fantasist" (Rooney 74), and "a faded beauty" who "incarnates the pretensions of the old South" (Hayman 101). Another critic says that

Blanche is "the old, decadent way of life" (Holland 20). She covers herself with the memories of the past and predictions of best future. Williams might possibly want the audience as well as the readers to read Blanche's figure from a spiritual side. So, Williams' characters "having run out of time and space. . . seek to shore up their lives with fragments of the past, invented or recalled and elaborate fictions which confer on them a significance they could otherwise never aspire to" (Biggsby 43). Williams' protagonists search endlessly for the age of innocence, a time in the past when they were not corrupted; here Blanche's clash is with a modern world which she cannot cope with. Her reinforcement of traditional values represents her attempt to turn back the clock and grasp the past. It is an expressionist search for the primitive, the inner truth, and the ancient world of traditions, which can only be achieved by the role Blanche.

Blanche, who led a paradise life in *Belle Reve* before her marriage, is so different in comparison with her stay in her sister's house in Elysian Fields. Her life has changed to the opposite time. Stella tells her husband about Blanche's early life: "You didn't know Blanche as a girl. Nobody, nobody, was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change" (*SND* 68). The outer world affects her inner soul and she becomes helpless at the present time to encounter reality with no clear future. So, she wishes to marry Mitch to save her future. In addition, she wants a shelter that could protect her from the dehumanizing impact of time. She alludes to the past time, telling Mitch about her husband who committed suicide when she found him in a disgraceful position with another man. Therefore, she criticizes her husband painfully, and ruthlessly, which leads him to shoot himself dead.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of past and present is transferred through the theme of reality and illusion. O'Neill and Williams represent reality which stands for the present, while illusion symbolizes the past in their major plays. O'Neill introduces his masterpiece *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in two times that turn Mary and her husband Tyron in opposite showing. Mary spent her past days in luxury and happiness, contrary to the days of the present that turns her as a morphine woman, while Tyron turns from a poor simple worker to a stingy man at the present. Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* shows reality and illusion through two opposite characters: Stanley and Blanche. Stanley represents the world of reality which awakes Blanche from her illusions. Blanche stands for the world of illusion that she prefers. Her past sins make her aware of the clash with reality. She prefers darkness and dislikes reality. So, the past has a very actual existence in the actions of the present that seem so clear in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

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