

ANA MARIA DE MELO CARNEIRO

THE AMERICAN ELECTRA: O'NEILL'S MODERN
VERSION OF THE MYTH

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
of Mestre em Inglês.

Thesis Adviser
Dr. Ana Lúcia Almeida Gazolla

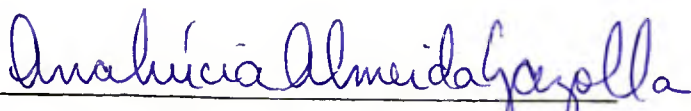
UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE MINAS GERAIS
Faculdade de Letras

Fevereiro, 1985

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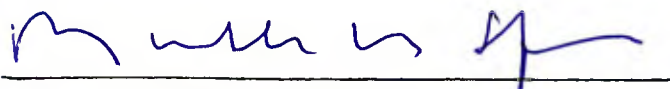
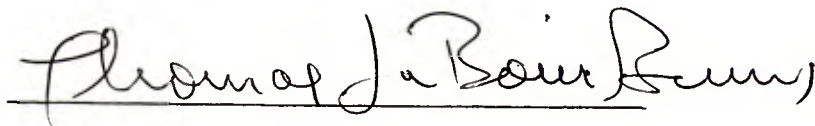
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Signed by the final examining committee:



DR. ANA LÚCIA ALMEIDA GAZOLLA

Thesis Adviser



PROF. RUTH SILVIANO BRANDÃO LOPES
Coordenadora dos Cursos de Pós-Graduação em Letras da FALE/UFMG

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to my adviser Dr. Ana Lúcia Almeida Gazolla, whose inspiring classes and lectures first made me conscious of how interesting the study of literature could be. Without her professional guidance and personal encouragement this dissertation would not have been written. I hope she will find here a proof of my sincere gratitude.

I am also grateful to Professor Maria Lúcia de Vasconcellos who read the manuscript and made valuable suggestions.

My special thanks to Professor Júlio César Jeha for his patient and detailed proof-reading, to Marilda Valéria Santos Azevedo for the final typing, to CAPES and to the Colegiado de Cursos de Pós-Graduação da Faculdade de Letras da UFMG, for a one year scholarship during my M.A. course.

I wish to extend my gratitude to all those people who have, in some way or other, contributed toward the completion of this study.

To my sister, who first aroused in me
the interest for learning English.

To Donato, my patient and faithful
companion throughout this journey.

A B S T R A C T

This study aims at analysing the elements by means of which Eugene O'Neill, in his trilogy Mourning Becomes Electra, departs from the classical versions of the Electra myth and presents a modern, original elaboration of that Stoff. Freud's theory of instincts and of the Oedipus complex, as well as specific ideological aspects of American culture, are also discussed, since they influence characterization and function as the base for the action. It is demonstrated how the play is structured on the principle of polarity, which underlies setting, imagery, and characters' portrayal. The role of psychological fate in the trilogy is examined, as it limits the individual freedom of the characters and leads to their alienation and self-destruction. Finally, taking as support Hegel's and Max Scheler's views on the tragic, the question of genre definition is focused on. It is concluded that O'Neill's characters are not tragic heroes, but rather embody traits of contemporary self-doubt, rebellion, and fragmentation. The dark view of life projected in the play is discussed, since the outcome reveals that on an individual or historical level, there is no solution for human conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Man is born broken. He lives
by mending. The grace of God
is glue.

Eugene O'Neill

The secret of artistic creation and of the effectiveness of art is to be found in a return to the state of "participation mystique" — to that level of experience at which it is man who lives and not the individual, and at which the weal or woe of the single human being does not count, but only human existence. That is why every great work of art is objective and impersonal, but no less profoundly moves us each and all. ¹

C.G. Jung

Jung's words acknowledge the fact that art transcends the individual level and attains a universal dimension as it allows for a reenactment of a transhistorical and transpersonal experience. His theory of the archetypal images buried in the unconscious mind and echoing the myths of our ancestors may account for the recurrence of certain symbols in literary discourse, and explain, at least in part, the impact of literature upon us.

This is, I believe, one of the reasons why Eugene O'Neill's trilogy, Mourning Becomes Electra, deserves critical attention. Through his characters O'Neill attempts to interpret the conflicting dilemmas within the suffering individual which are inherent in all men. Such conflict and suffering can be specifically traced to the fixations upon the powerful father and mother archetypal images, to the conscious mind struggling against the unconscious drives, to the tension between negative and positive poles, to the laceration of love and hate relationships within the family, to the dualistic forces of life and death, and to the desperate search to find the real self behind the mask.

What first strikes the reader of Mourning Becomes Electra is the title itself which immediately establishes an intertextual relation with the Greek myth of Electra. The tragedy of the House of Atreus, to which Electra belongs, has been the subject matter — the Stoff — of several literary works written by various Greek writers, among them Homer, Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripedes, as well as by modern writers such as Sartre and O'Neill. Many times the basic

Stoff has appeared not in its complete story structure but only as a constitutive motif in the plot of literary texts which portray the triangle of daughter, father, and mother relationships.

The myth begins with Atreus, king of Argos, defeating and banishing his brother, Thyestes, who has seduced his wife and disputed the throne. Since he wishes to guarantee the sovereignty over Argos for his own heirs, Atreus pretends reconciliation and prepares a royal banquet for Thyestes and his children. It is then that he slaughters his brother's children, with the exception of Aegisthus, and serves them as a special dish to their father. Upon discovering such a dreadful crime, Thyestes curses the descendants of Atreus and flees with his remaining son.

This crime and its attendant curse establish the family's fate. Atreus' son, Agamemnon, who inherited the kingdom of Argos and married Clytemnestra, has four children: Iphigeneia, Chrysothemis, Electra, and Orestes. While Agamemnon is away fighting at Troy, Aegisthus returns to avenge his father and becomes lover of Clytemnestra. After ten years of noble battling at Troy, Agamemnon returns home and is murdered by his wife and her lover. In the following years Electra, who has been banished from her mother's house and degraded to a much lower social rank, prays for the return of her brother Orestes, long before sent out of the country by his mother. Upon returning to Argos, Orestes revenges the death of his father by killing his mother and her lover, thus obeying Apollo's command. Orestes is then pursued by the Erinyes, the furies or spirits of retribution. He later appeals to the tribunal presided by Athena order to be freed of such persecution and is finally granted his wish.

Eugene O'Neill makes use of the basic structure of the myth as presented in Aeschylus' Oresteia. The fratricidal hatred of Atreus and Thyestes finds a correspondent in the relationship of Abe Mannon and his brother David. The latter has had a liaison with a low-born Canute nurse, Marie Brantôme, and they get married when she becomes

pregnant. Abe Mannon then expells his brother from home, tears down the house, and has a new one built. It is in this house that the action of Mourning Becomes Electra takes place.

The first play begins with Christine (Clytemnestra) waiting for her husband, Abe Mannon's son, General Ezra Mannon (Agamemnon), who is returning home from the Civil War (Trojan War). While he was away, she fell in love with Adam Brant (Aegisthus), the son of David Mannon, who came to avenge his father. The two lovers then plot Ezra's death. He is poisoned and dies on the night of his arrival. Christine hopes to be free to enjoy happiness with Adam, but her daughter Lavinia (Electra), who also loves him, discovers the crime and in her jealousy, plans vengeance. She succeeds in persuading her brother Orin (Orestes) to kill Adam for his part in the crime.

Orin, who adores his mother and cannot tolerate the idea of her having a lover, murders Adam in a jealous rage. He returns home to boast about his act to Christine who, in despair, commits suicide. Orin is then tormented by the psychological furies of his conscience for having unwittingly caused his mother's death. He decides to study the Mannon past and finds out that jealousy, hatred, and death have pervaded the family history. When he realizes that he and his sister are inexorably bound to this dreadful fate and that they are simply reliving the crimes of their parents, he shoots himself.

Only Lavinia remains. She attempts to escape the Mannon fate of unhappiness and death by asking Peter, her faithful childhood boyfriend, to marry her. But when, in a slip of the tongue, she calls him Adam, she fully understands the ineffectiveness of her struggle. She knows she has to live out the family curse and accept her fate. After ordering the shutters of the house to be nailed closed, she marches into the house and shuts the door behind her. Thus, the Mannon fate of hatred, frustration, incest, lust, murder, and suicide comes to an end. It is the fall of the house of Mannon.

In this version of the Oresteia O'Neill has made many

changes from the Greek model, especially in setting, time, character motivation, protagonist and denouement. Several original elements have also been introduced in the work of the American playwright, thus revealing his work as a modern American version of the myth.

The primary aim of this dissertation is to point out the differentiating traits found in O'Neill's text, in the attempt to foreground what the Brazilian critic Silviano Santiago has called the "visible work," that is, the distinguishing elements that the "derived" text has and which contrast with those of the original "model."² According to Santiago the originality of a work of art results not from its debts to the primary model, but rather from its distinguishing characteristics. It follows that what O'Neill has borrowed from Aeschylus will merit only minor attention in my study, whereas the visible work, will take on the greater part of my analysis.

The originality of Eugene O'Neill's work lies in its rupture from the Greek model, in the transgression of the Aeschylean pattern, and in the movement of perversion and aggression against such model. Mourning Becomes Electra does not reproduce the classical story, but rather distorts, violates, and subverts it, keeping only the plot components and changing situations, motivations, setting, and thematic implications.

My aim in the present study is to foreground differences rather than similarities, original contribution rather than reproduction, deviation rather than imitation, thus emphasizing the fact that O'Neill's text is a modern version of the Greek myth.

An additional purpose is to bring to view the fact that the modern elements introduced by O'Neill in his trilogy are intimately related to the insights into the complex workings of the human psyche formalized and systematized by psychology. Sigmund Freud's and Carl G. Jung's works have provided the theoretical support to my study, since echoes of their ideas pervade O'Neill's trilogy. I will also endeavor to demonstrate how the ideology of a given community is reflected in the

psychological make-up of its people.

This dissertation will be divided into four main parts. In the first, an attempt will be made to show that the main principle underlying O'Neill's text is that of polarity, and to present the playwright's indebtedness to the theories of Freud. Several pairs of oppositions and the most meaningful recurring symbols of Mourning Becomes Electra will then be discussed, with the purpose of foregrounding the way in which the principle of polarity operates in the play and projects the theme of life and death as inexorably connected aspects of human experience.

Part II deals with the Puritanical ideology underlying the characters' actions, which constitutes a destructive power depriving the Mannon household of love and pleasure, joy and beauty. The impact of historical events and processes upon the characters reveals to what extent the play also becomes O'Neill's American version of the Greek myth.

In Part III, I will try to demonstrate how the classical notion of fate finds a substitute in the modern patterns of psychology. The characters' actions are an expression of inward impulses of hate and love towards one another and a result of the Oedipus and Electra complexes. Such unresolved parent-child situations lead to the conclusion that the Mannons' fate lies in the structure of the family itself.

In the fourth part, the question of the tragic is discussed. Aristotle, Nietzsche, Hegel, and Scheler provide the theoretical support for this analysis. Characters' motivations will then be examined for the purpose of defining whether any of them attains tragic stature.

Finally in the conclusion of this study, a parallel is drawn between Aeschylus' classical Electra and Mourning Becomes Electra, in order to highlight other distinguishing original elements of O'Neill's text.

NOTES

¹Carl Gustav Jung, "Psychology and Literature," in Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1958), p. 70.

²Silviano Santiago, Uma literatura nos trópicos (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1978).

PART I

THE TENSION OF OPPOSITES: DUALITY AND POLARITY

Every process is a phenomenon of energy and all energy can proceed only from the tension of opposites.

Carl G. Jung

Underlying most of O' Neill's works, there is a cosmological principle - the principle of polarity. Human existence and the universe are made up of an endless series of polarities, oppositions, and antitheses. His works project a world view based on the concept of an everlasting alternation between opposites which are both separate and inseparable, a kind of perpetual dialectic without the Hegelian synthesis, which constitutes meaningless chaos.

Such a polar view of the cosmos could be seen as an analogue to the scientific phenomenon of electricity, a polar force which is at the same time dual, contrasting, and yet unified. Likewise, it could also be seen as a parallel to the principle of magnetism, where north and south are always distinct, opposed, and yet inseparable. In a broad sense, opposites such as unity and plurality, ideal and real, actual and possible, all involve and depend on each other and are inherent parts of any significant unity.

It is precisely this notion of polarity as the essential feature of the structure of the world that O'Neill transported to his literary works. One of the main themes revealed in his plays is that life consists of a series of alternations between opposites and of inescapable cyclical repetitions.

Such a play of oppositions recurs in the various contemporary theories that have contributed to and left visible marks on the world view of the twentieth century. Among them, special distinction should be given to the theories of Freud. It is undeniable that with some of his fundamental principles, the creator of psychoanalysis had a mighty effect on the general line of thought of his age. His discoveries of new depths and paths of the human mind changed and revolutionized man's way of thinking at the beginning of this century. His great influence can be felt not only in the specific field of psychology but also in literature, arts, and culture in a broad sense.

Echoes of Freudian theory in its numerous aspects may be

found in O'Neill's texts. Such is the case of the Freudian dualistic theory of instincts in which death instincts are found as opposing the life instincts. In order to facilitate the understanding of such a theory, it is necessary to make a detailed study of two other Freudian concepts, namely the reality principle and the compulsion to repetition, both inherent in every human being.

In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud affirms that there exists a strong tendency towards the pleasure principle in the human psyche, and yet other forces or conditions are opposed to it.¹ For instance, the pleasure principle may be inhibited under the influence of the instinct for self-preservation of the ego. The ego considers the present state of things, weighs earlier experiences and calculates the consequences of a proposed line of conduct. The decision is then as to whether the satisfaction be fulfilled or be suppressed as dangerous. That constitutes the reality principle which, without abandoning the intention of obtaining pleasure, nevertheless demands the postponement of satisfaction and tolerates temporary pain along the winding road to pleasure.

Freud adds that human beings have a compulsion for repetition which makes them relive past experiences, including those which were not pleasant. He states that:

We may venture to make the assumption that there really exists in psychic life a repetition-compulsion which goes beyond the pleasure-principle. (...) The repetition-compulsion and direct pleasurable satisfaction of impulse seem there to be inextricably intertwined. The transference phenomena obviously subserve the purpose of the resistance made by the ego persisting in its repression: the repetition-compulsion is, as it were, called to the aid of the ego, which₂ is resolved to hold fast to the pleasure-principle.²

Freud's definition of instinct is clarifying:

An instinct would be a tendency innate in living organic matter impelling it towards the reinstatement of an earlier condition, one which it had to abandon under the influence of external disturbing forces — a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the manifestation of inertia in organic life.³

Such a concept might seem contradictory since the instinct has been seen as a factor tending towards change and development. It takes on, however the form of the conservative nature of living beings.

If it is assumed that all organic instincts are conservative, historically acquired, and directed towards regression, it can be concluded that organic development is caused by external, disturbing influences. Had circumstances remained the same, the living creature would not have wanted to change, but would simply have repeated the same course of existence. But according to Freud, the earth and its relations to the sun must have influenced the development of organisms. The conservative instincts must have absorbed these enforced alterations and stored them for repetition. That would explain their resemblance to forces striving for change and progress, when they are merely aiming at an old goal. Freud states the final goal of all organic instinct:

It would be counter to the conservative nature of instinct if the goal of life were a state never hitherto reached. It must rather be as an ancient starting point, which the living being left long ago, and to which it harks back again by all the circuitous paths of development. If we may assume as an experience admitting of no exception that everything living dies from causes within itself, and returns to the inorganic, we can only say THE GOAL OF ALL LIFE IS DEATH and, casting back, THE INANIMATE WAS THERE BEFORE THE ANIMATE.⁴

According to the hypothesis above, it can be seen that the human being has a tendency to go back to his original inorganic state, to return to a simpler and more ancient condition which can only be achieved through death. The first instinct that appeared was to return to lifelessness. The living substance had probably a short course of life to go through and may have been constantly created anew again, and easily extinguished. But decisive external influences compelled the substance to ever greater deviations from the original path of life before it attained its end in death. These circuitous paths to death retained by the conservative instincts would be the phenomena of life.

Nevertheless, the notion that self-preservative instincts are inherent in every living being stands in contrast to the supposition that the end of life is death. Hence, the living organism resists with all its energy dangers which would help it reach more quickly its life-goal.

The group of instincts that cares for the survival of living beings are named the sexual instincts or the life instincts. They are conservative in that they reproduce earlier conditions of the living substance and preserve life for a longer time, but they show greater resistance to external influences. They run opposite the trend of the other instincts which lead towards death, which shows there is a contradiction between them and the rest. There is an oscillation in the life of organisms: whereas one group of instincts presses forwards to reach the final end of life as quickly as possible, the other goes back to a certain spot on the way in order to prolong the duration of the journey.

The result is an antithesis between the ego-instincts and the sexual instincts. The former spring from the vitalizing of inanimate matter and tend towards the reinstatement of lifelessness and ultimately towards death. The latter in spite of reproducing primitive states of the living being, aim at the union of two germ cells, which are specifically differentiated in order to preserve and renew life.

Freud summarizes his findings as follows:

With the discovery of narcissistic libido, and the extension of the libido-concept to the individual cells, the sexual instinct became for us transformed into the Eros that endeavours to impel the separate parts of living matter to one another and to hold them together; what is commonly called the sexual instinct appears as that part of the Eros that is turned towards the object. Our speculation then supposes that this Eros is at work from the beginnings of life, manifesting itself as the life-instinct in contradistinction to the death-instinct which developed through the animation of the inorganic. It endeavours to solve the riddle of life by the hypothesis of these two instincts striving with each other from the very beginning.⁵

Psychoanalysis then considers that there are two basic

types of instincts fundamentally different from each other. First, the sexual instinct Eros - whose goal is to establish great unities and to bind and preserve them. Secondly, the aggressive instincts whose objective is to destroy, to undo connection, and to reduce living things to an inorganic state. Transformed into death instincts their final aim is destruction directed towards the external world and other living organisms and many times towards the internal world of the individual.

These two kinds of instincts are simultaneously present in every living substance. They are mixed, blended, and fused in each other.

According to Freud, it is precisely the association and the opposition of these two primal forces that gives rise to the diverse phenomena of life. Life then exists in a perpetual tension between opposites, each of which owes its existence to the presence of the other. Such tension is the source of all change and growth, just as night and dark exist only in contrast to day and light, one blending eternally into the other.

Echoes of Freud's theory can be found in Eugene O'Neill's plays. To the American playwright, as to the Austrian psychologist, human existence is an alternation between opposites and manifests itself in a cyclical repetitive process, life being basically a sum of dialectical and repetitive movements.

In the case of Mourning Becomes Electra, it can be seen that the play is structured on pairs of oppositions, many of them fundamental in traditional symbolism, which convey the universal duality inherent in the process of life. Such dualism is so essential to the construction of O'Neill's text that it is the core of characterization, motivation, conflict, creation of setting and mood, imagery and theme.

One of the main pairs of opposites found in Mourning Becomes Electra is the motif of life and death as complementary facets of human existence. Such a motif is developed so as to become essential to the elaboration of the discourse in the trilogy. It appears as one of the most frequent subjects discussed and referred to by the main characters, who are always meditating upon death and who convey a general feeling of being trapped by

their own dead. This will become evident, for example, in act III of "Homecoming," when Ezra Mannon, who has just returned home from the war, reveals that his most constant preoccupation is the life/death relationship:

It was seeing death all the time in this war got me to thinking these things. Death was so common, it didn't mean anything. That freed me to think of life. Queer, isn't it? Death made me think of life. Before that life had only made me think of death!

Christine: (without opening her eyes): Why are you talking of death?

Mannon: That's always been the Mannons' way of thinking. They went to the white meeting-house on Sabbaths and meditated on death. Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born.⁶

In delivering this speech Ezra expresses his belief that life is nothing but a journey to death or even that the ultimate objective of life is death. Even their tradition of going to church on the Sabbath had the sole aim of meditating about it. During the war, however, he saw so much blood and destruction that now he realizes the meaninglessness of all this solemn commotion over death. These are his words to Christine:

How in hell people ever got such notions! That white-meeting house. It stuck in my mind — clean-scrubbed and whitewashed — a temple of death! But in this war I've seen too many white walls splattered with blood that counted no more than dirty water. I've seen dead men scattered about, no more important than rubbish to be got rid of. That made the white meeting-house seem meaningless — making so much solemn fuss over death! (p. 269)

It seems then that real death taught Ezra the purposelessness of imagined death which was the Mannons' persistent thought. Notwithstanding this new insight, by dawn he himself will become a victim of death, as he will be murdered by his wife. This reveals the irony contained in his previous affirmation that "all victory ends

in the defeat of death," and that he did not know if "defeat ends in the victory of death" (p. 264).

Orin also voices the awareness of the death fate which links the Mannon family. When looking at his father's corpse he says: "Death sits so naturally on you! Death becomes the Mannons" (p. 303). He too knows that the Mannons are haunted and tortured by death as revealed when he addresses the dead Mannons in the portraits on the wall of Ezra's study: "You hear her? You'll find Lavinia Mannon harder to break than me. You'll have to haunt and hound her for a lifetime" (p.365).

Orin understands he has indirectly driven his mother to kill herself. At the end of act III of "The Haunted" he realizes death is again hovering over the Mannon household with Lavinia desiring and suggesting his suicide: "Another act of justice, eh? You want to drive me to suicide as I drove Mother" (p. 365).

The chain of murders and suicides taking place in the play leads to the conclusion that the Mannons' destructive instincts have taken over their souls and allow nothing but negative deeds culminating in ruin, devastation, and death.

The case of the last Mannon, Lavinia, is even more adequate to convey the role of death in the family's fate. Not blessed with the relief of death, she is instead doomed to a continued death-in-life existence. She also knows the dead are too strong and will not cease from interfering. She then states her fate as follows:

... I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself!
Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of
justice than death or prison! I'll never go out or
see anyone! I'll have the shutters nailed closed

so no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die! (With a strange cruel smile of gloating over the years of self-torture.) I know they will see to it I live for a long time! It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born! (p.376)

With these lugubrious and mournful words, Lavinia closes the circle upon its own beginning. She, the last of the Mannons, makes real her father's assertion concerning the family's doom. For the Mannons, the battle between the life instinct and the death instinct can have no other victor but the prevailing impetus towards destruction and final annihilation. The Mannons know too well that death is inexorably devouring their power, their selves, their souls, and their would-be aspiring balance.

Nevertheless, it is not only through the references mentioned above that O'Neill projects the basic pair of opposites, Life versus Death, showing the latter as the final triumphant force. The setting of the play is also constructed on pairs of opposites and in such a way so as to reinforce the prevailing motif of death.

The play opens with a description of the exterior of the Mannon house on a late afternoon:

It is shortly before sunset and the soft light of the declining sun shines directly on the front of the house, shimmering in a luminous mist on the white portico and the gray stone wall behind, intensifying the whiteness of the columns, the somber grayness of the wall, the green of the open shutters, the green of the lawn and shrubbery, the black and green of the pine tree. The white columns cast black bars of shadow on the gray wall behind them. The windows of the lower floor reflect the sun's rays in a resentful glare. The temple portico is like an incongruous white mask fixed on the house to hide its somber gray ugliness. (p. 227)

This passage presents and establishes the time in which the action is to occur: a sinister sunset steadily deepening into night. Throughout the trilogy most of the scenes take place at night: acts III and IV of "Homecoming," all five acts of "The

Hunted," and acts I, II and III of "The Haunted." The other few remaining scenes take place either on late afternoons or shortly before sunset. Such choice of phases of the day impregnated with somber, dim colors and with an ubiquitous "crimson " light, helps create a type of atmosphere which works to enhance the gloomy and destructive incidents that are to unfold in the play. Dusk helps reinforce the negative mood prevailing in the trilogy, since it carries the meaning of end and consummation, as well as of disruption, destruction, and annihilation.

The above passage also presents one of the basic pairs of opposites recurring throughout the trilogy, namely that of black versus white. The white portico of the Mannon temple is described as being bathed in the "soft light of the declining sun" which shines on the front of the house. Such whiteness is contrasted with the grayness of the stone wall behind on which the white columns make black shadows. It can be readily seen that black and gray stand out as the dominating colors in the trilogy and that white is presented in so far as it contrasts with and thus reinforces the symbolic meaning of the dark colors.

The opposition of black and white is a recurring pattern of imagery in the trilogy and is restated in the stage directions with the opening of each scene. To mention just one among many instances, there is the beginning of Act 5 of "The Haunted" in which the exterior of the Mannon house is described once again in a very similar way:

It is the following night. The moon has just risen. The right half of the house is in the black shadow cast by the pine trees but the moonlight falls full on the part to the left of the doorway... Christine is discovered walking back and forth on the drive before the portico, passing from moonlight into the shadow of the pines and back again. (p. 326)

Inside the house, the same atmosphere of shadows and grimness is maintained. In act 2 of "The Haunted," Orin is found seated in his father's study, writing by the light of a lamp with candles on the mantel above the fireplace lighting up the portrait of Ezra Mannon. In the sitting room the lamp on the table is lighted but turned low and again there are candles burning on the mantel over the fireplace.

Paralleling so much darkeness there appears the white color conveying the idea of coldness, frigidity, sorrow, burial, mourning, and death. Such notion is voiced by Christine Mannon when looking at the family mansion:

Each time I come back after being away it appears more like a sepulchre. The "whited" one of the Bible-pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray ugliness. (p. 237)

It can be seen that the house, with its white porticos constantly dimming into darkness, itself described as a sepulchre, epitomizes the idea of death.

And yet it is not only the physical environment that is contrasted by means of opposing colors; the characters themselves are many times described in a similar antithetical way with their white, lifeless, mask-like faces being set off by their black clothing. Such is the case of Orin when he is seen arriving at home after the voyage to the islands:

The Mannon semblance of his face in repose to a mask is more pronounced than ever. He has grown dreadfully thin and his black suit hangs loosely on his body. His haggard swarthy face is set in a blank lifeless expression. (p.340)

The side text of the last act of "The Haunted" provides a description of Lavinia which resembles that of Orin:

Her body, dressed in deep mourning, again appears flat-chested and thin. The Mannon mask-semblance of her face appears intensified now. It is deeply lined haggard with sleeplessness and strain congealed into a story emotionless expression. Her lips are bloodless, drawn taut in a grim line. (p.369)

The house and the people living in it are described in such a similar mode that a ready identification can be made between setting and characters, both fused into the same dialectical pattern.

In a broader sense, the concept of black and white, light and darkness, as symbols which are diametrically opposed, illustrates

the cosmic duel between the positive and negative principles. As one of the basic patterns in traditional symbolism, this inversion symbol helps to explain the ceaseless alternations of life and death, which make possible the continued existence of phenomena.

To continue this line of analysis, one can examine the symbolism of black and white which conveys the idea of dualism, since several examples of such an antithetical principle are to be found in both Eastern and Western traditions. Cirlot mentions the Ouroboros, which is depicted as a dragon or a snake biting its own tail and whose body is divided in two parts: the top half in black and the lower half in white.⁷ The contrasting colors suggest the successive counterbalance existing between the two opposing principles. Its biting its tail is symbolic of self-fecundation, of the primitive idea of nature as self-sufficient, continually returning within a cyclic pattern to its own beginning.

Another symbol of the dual distribution of forces is the Chinese Circle bisected by a line forming one light half representing the Yang force which is the positive active or masculine principle, and one dark half representing Yin which is the negative, passive or feminine principle. The Yang-Yin is a helicoidal symbol which brings opposites together and engenders perpetual motion, metamorphosis, and continuity in situations characterized by contradiction.⁸ Such oppositions represent the necessity of nature to transmute itself into binary and contradictory aspects, a necessity that also finds expression in the dual nature of the human being. Nevertheless, each half contains within itself an arc cut out of the middle of the opposing half. These two spots symbolize the fact that every mode includes in itself the seed of its opposite, the germ of its antithesis. The interaction between these two polar forces results in movement and transformation.

Such is the view exploited in O'Neill's text: the action, unfolded by means of contradictions and reversals, carries the theme of perpetual tension between opposites, a tension that engenders change and metamorphosis. Throughout the play, the characters reveal a continuing dialectical relation between the conscious and unconscious, as well as ambivalent relationships

among themselves. Furthermore, they are frequently obliged to undergo deep transmutations, which reinforces the theme of change. Such is the case of Lavinia who is described in the first play as thin, flat-breasted and unattractive, dressed usually in black and moving about "with a wooden square-shouldered, military bearing" (p. 231). Her voice also resembles that of an officer like her father's. After the voyage to the South Sea islands, she is described as having undergone an extraordinary transformation: she has become feminine and her body

formerly so thin and undeveloped, has filled out. Her movements have lost their square-shouldered stiffness. She now bears a striking resemblance to her mother in every respect, even to being dressed in the green her mother had affected. (p. 340)

Another element used in the play to indicate that human action and human life are inevitably marked by conflict and tension is imagery. One very clear instance is the image of the moon, which appears with its pale light falling down, only half-illuminating the characters and objects. As a universal symbol, the moon is symbolic of the rhythm of life which is cyclical: the birth, death, and resurrection phases of the moon symbolize immortality and eternity through perpetual renewal.

The anthropologist Mircea Eliade points out the connection between the moon and cosmic events, such as spring following upon winter, flowers appearing after the frost, and the sun rising after the gloom of night.⁹ There is a connection between these cosmic events and the myth of the periodic creation and recreation of the universe. The moon suffers abrupt, violent modifications in its shape, and its different phases are analogous to the seasons of the year and also to the ages in the span of man's life. Because it is subject to the laws of change, in the forms of growth from youth to maturity, and of decline from maturity to old age, the moon is seen as obeying the biological order of the cosmos. It can therefore be affirmed that the lunar condition is equivalent to the human condition: mutable, transitory, and ambivalent. For as night exists only in contrast to day and flows eternally into day and then into night again, human life flows perpetually from birth

to death and back to birth, again. Death is seen, then, not as extinction, but rather as a temporal modification in the process of life.

It seems correct to assert that the presence of the moon in Mourning Becomes Electra also projects the notion that a force feeds on its opposite in order to exist, i.e., that each self-conception depends upon its opposite for existence. It also denotes that the primary forces at work in human experience are the instincts of Death and Life, apparently contradictory, but that nonetheless feed each other in a constant process of complementation.

Also worth mentioning is the symbol of flowers, as it further reveals the thematic importance of the notion of Death in the play. According to traditional symbolism, the flower is by its very nature symbolic of transitoriness, of spring, and of beauty.¹⁰ It is also many times used in rites of the dead. The Greeks and Romans, besides wearing crowns of flowers at their feasts, would also scatter flowers over their corpses and graves. In this case, flowers would be an antithetical symbol like the skeleton, which would be taken by the Egyptians to their banquets as a reminder of the reality of death and a stimulus towards the enjoyment of life. Therefore, as an antithetical symbol, the flower would refer to the brevity of life, to the ephemeral nature of pleasure, and to the inevitability of death. The Christian practice of sending flowers for the funeral and grave symbolize an attempt to guarantee continuing life in the next world or, in other words, to reach immortality and spiritual rebirth. Likewise, in Buddhism, flowers are offered in worship and symbolize the transitoriness of the body.

In Mourning Becomes Electra, flowers constitute a leit-motif and are associated with several characters. The first time Christine is described, she is walking toward a flower garden, passing behind a clump of lilacs. Soon afterwards she comes into the scene again, now carrying a big bunch of flowers which she intends to put in the house as she says their "tomb" needs a little brightening. The description of the scenes taking place in the exterior of the Mannon mansion usually includes this clump of lilacs, a type of flower that with its purple color already suggests the idea of mourning.

Characters are repeatedly described as passing by this lilac clump. Such is the case of Seth, holding his liquor bottle, and "walking up by the lilacs," (p. 260) as indicated in Act III of "Homecoming." Lavinia, in act I of "The Haunted," is also seen walking "slowly and woodenly off left, between the lilac clump and the house" (p. 290). In the last act of the third play, Lavinia who has had every room filled with flowers, is found carrying a large bunch of them because she wants everything to be pretty and cheerful when Peter comes, thus reinforcing the positive meaning of flowers and their connection with love, beauty, youth, and happiness. After realizing the hopelessness of her plans with the childhood boyfriend, she asks Seth to throw out all the flowers. In fact, this is her last statement in the play, and its symbolic weight cannot be overlooked. Stressing the ironic reversals, which constitute essential components of the trilogy, what remains as a final image is the house — the Mannons' tomb — filled with flowers. Ironically enough, the flowers, first meant to denote happiness, end up by being related only to death.

In addition to characterization, setting, and imagery, the motif of death is also conveyed through historical events. Certain episodes of American history play a major role in helping generate an aura of death in O'Neill's trilogy. One of them is the assassination of the president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, which was lamented by the drunken chantyman when talking to Adam Brant. The overall mood is that many things are dying, even some beautiful rhythmic ways of life symbolized by the clipper being replaced by the steamer. Here the association between the historical event and the replacement of one type of ship by another can be seen as implying the inexorable decay of social and economic systems and thus of culture and communication. The drunken chantyman's lugubrious laments can be seen as projecting this anguished feeling of transitoriness and disruption:

Aye, but it ain't fur long, steam is coming in,
the sea is full of smoky tea-kettles, the old
days is dying. Abe Lincoln is dead. (p. 314)

But of all historical events mentioned in the text, none is as powerful as the Civil War, the greatest experience of bloodshed on American soil. From it some of the most important constitutive elements of the plot are drawn. In fact, it is due to the Civil War that Ezra and Orin are absent from home, thus creating the necessary conditions for the conflict to emerge. It must be noticed that here lies another pair of opposites in which mankind seems to be permanently involved: war and peace.

Orin, who has personally experienced the horrors of war, is the spokesman for its absurdity and monstrosity. These are his words as he surveys his father's dead body:

Who are you? Another corpse! You and I have seen fields and hillsides sown with them - and they meant nothing! - Nothing but a dirty joke life plays on life! (p.303)

War has wounded Orin's feelings so profoundly that, to alleviate such injuries, he talks of it in a tone of mockery which lays bare a sense of the grotesque and absurd aspects of human experience:

You folks at home take death so solemnly. You would have soon learned at the front that it's only a joke! You don't understand, Vinnie. You have to learn to mock or go crazy, can't you see? (p. 304)

He proceeds by showing the huge irony that lies behind it all. He explains that he had been in the trenches, had not been able to sleep and felt "queer" in his head. He then thought what a joke it would be on the generals like his father if the soldiers on both sides saw what a joke war was and suddenly threw away their weapons, shook hands and laughed. And soon he began to laugh and walk toward the Southern lines. When he got wounded in the head he ran on yelling, wanting to kill someone. This excited the soldiers who followed him and then captured a part of the Southern line which they had not dared seize before. Of course, he acted without orders but his father, the General, decided to overlook this aspect and let his son be a hero. Such heroism only shows how ridiculous and senseless war is. It also

reveals how far social hypocrisy can go. It is no wonder that Orin should laugh at the farse and irony of war.

But, on the whole, war is not a joke and it is never over, at least, not over inside those who killed. That is why Orin cannot stop remembering war scenes, his war memories being naturally another aspect of his obsession with death. He even says he had the queer feeling that he was murdering the same man over and over again and that he would discover in the end that the man was really himself. He would then think that maybe he had committed suicide, a reflection that reveals he is undergoing a process of identification with men and mankind in general. Thus, the killing of others was in reality a form of self-destruction or, in other words, war is an act of mankind against itself. Despite the important role given to war in the plot, it is interesting to notice that it is during the period of peace, after the war is over, that the most destructive episodes and incidents take place in Mourning Becomes Electra. This reinforces again, by means of irony, the theme of the absurdity of life, and constitutes another example of the principle of reversal, which is at the core of the structural organization of the play.

Another point to be remembered is that such a concrete, historical and external war dividing one country into two halves, North and South, is in direct juxtaposition to the internal war going on inside the characters' mind causing the split of the self. It is not only America which is at war but also the main characters in the play, all of whom are undergoing a process of internal conflict.

On the basis of the discussion above, it can be concluded that in Mourning Becomes Electra everything contributes to convey the theme of duality inherent in human existence and of life as a cyclical phenomenon with continuous renewal — the characters with their conflicts and dualism, the setting with its opposing colors, the recurring use of symbols denoting mutability and transitoriness, plus the images that contradict and yet complement each other. By means of these devices and themes, O' Neill's trilogy projects the concept of the tension of opposites. The

trilogy is related to the Hegelian doctrine of thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis. The first play "Homecoming," which includes General Mannon's return and his murder, represents the offense. The second play, "The Haunted," which covers Christine's suicide after the murder of her lover, Captain Brant, stands for the counter offense. The third and last play, "The Haunted," which includes Orin's suicide and Lavinia's punishment, seems to present the reconciliation or, in other words, the fusion of opposites. Very clearly, the second play is a consequence of the first and the third of the second. It would seem then that the basic principle of the trilogy is to reveal the ideal adjustment between opposing principles and forces, mainly between conscious and unconscious, joy and grief, life and death, in a quest for self-knowledge, survival, and even happiness.

Yet, the Mannons are so heavily charged with negative elements of decay, self-destructiveness, and morbidity that for them there remains no other path but that of total disruption and final annihilation. In spite of the dialectical movement, there is no ideal harmony reestablished at the end of the conflict, but rather a reassertion of Death. With the last Mannon, the cycle closes upon itself bringing about the end of the dynasty. The negative forces prevail and triumph over the positive ones, and the pattern of destruction is completed. No synthesis is achieved, no reconciliation attained. Death becomes the Mannons...

N O T E S

¹Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978).

²Freud, pp. 645-46.

³Freud, p. 651.

⁴Freud, p. 652.

⁵Freud, p. 662.

⁶Eugene O'Neill, Mourning Becomes Electra, in Three Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1959), p. 269, italics mine. All further quotations from the play are taken from this edition and are indicated by page number in the text.

⁷J.E. Cirlot, "Ouroboros," A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).

⁸Tom Chetwynd, "The I Ching," A Dictionary of Symbols (London: Granada, 1982).

⁹Mircea Eliade, as quoted in J.E. Cirlot, "Moon," A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).

¹⁰J.C. Cooper, "Flowers," An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978).

PART II

THE IMPACT OF THE ZEITGEIST: PURITANISM AND REPRESSION

Too much of the animal distorts
the civilized man, too much
civilization makes sick animals.

Carl G. Jung

In the previous chapter the opposition death/life as polar forces inherent in all living phenomena was discussed in its structural function as it underlies characterization, setting and imagery in O' Neill's trilogy. It has been discussed with the twofold aim of recognizing both the impact of psychoanalysis in this contemporary version of the myth and the fact that these ideas are imbued in the symbolic tradition of both Western and Eastern cultures.

The objective of the present chapter is to point out and analyse the more specific traits of the trilogy that reveal to what extent it is a product of a definite society: America. Inasmuch as marks of history pervade the play with cultural and sociological phenomena directly related to historical experiences indicating the underlying presence of American ideology, the trilogy is a unique portrait of American society. Likewise, the universally recurrent symbols of black and white, the moon, the flowers, and the predominance of death over life can also be read in such a way so as to corroborate Roland Barthes's affirmation that myth is "a social determinant, a reflex, a collective representation of the ideological parameters of a given society."¹

The historical events already discussed in the previous chapter such as the Civil War or Lincoln's assassination do not suffice to justify such an affirmation. More than mere historical references, the text unfolds, as the conflict develops, the ideology underlying characters' actions, beliefs, and thoughts: the pervading and restraining power of Puritanism in their lives and their fruitless attempt to break loose from it.

Mourning Becomes Electra presents a portrait of New England at the turn of the century, with its moral preoccupations, moral struggles, and the rise and decline of the Protestant-Puritan aristocracy. The trilogy demonstrates the effects of the deterioration of the original ideals of seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay colonists, the disintegration of the once-

vibrant faith of American Puritanism, and the effects of such disintegration on New Englanders of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It is widely known that the early history of Massachusetts is the story of men who shared an ideal of a community founded on love, humility, cooperation and absolute fidelity and devotion to God. However, the colony's leaders repeatedly expressed a warning to their peers, in relation to the danger of their aiming at carnal satisfaction and seeking physical pleasures and material rewards. That would enrage God, who would then surely break out in wrath against the people with ruin and destruction as a result.

By as early as 1679, it was evident that the original intent and ideals of the Puritan leaders were in decline. Such a denunciation can be seen as evident in the published conclusions of a synod of clergy and lay elders of Boston. Their document, entitled The Necessity of Reformation provides an extensive list of iniquities taking place in that city: ungodliness, heresy, business immorality, and the sins of sex and drunkenness.²

As the original spirit evaporated, in contrast, matter accumulated and materialism grew, the latter being replaced by a frigid and rigid code of standardized repressive behavior. The distortion of such ideals led to the evolution of materialism and of a cold business mentality. In other words, Puritanism, with its conviction that man is born to sin, and its denial of love and beauty, was a force of corrosion, destroying the lives of the powerful ruling families, especially those of the rising American industrial society. Nevertheless it was precisely this denial of love and life that brought leadership and mastery to some individuals and families, since a natural need for compensation and sublimation of repressed pleasure may result — and has in many cases resulted — in an exaggerated search for wealth and power.

In Mourning Becomes Electra, O' Neill makes plain his distaste for such heritage in New England — a dying love-denying, icy, hard legacy. What the playwright attacks is not the 1630 ideals of love, humility, cooperation and selflessness

of Puritanism. It is rather the distorted moral and social rules that replaced such ideals when Puritan theology was largely abandoned and the Protestant ethic of work turned away from its original goal of glorifying God to a new goal: that of increasing man's material prosperity.

The Mannon dynasty — the rich, exclusive descendants of Anglo-Protestant ascendancy — is representative of this distorted view of Puritanism in America. They are wealthy, powerful, unyielding; yet, grim, hypocritical, humorless, puritanical, and repressed. No longer capable of loving, the Mannons are obsessed with death and doomed as if they had been chosen by their merciless and enraged God to eradicate the element of freedom and joy in human life.

Again, the connection between the socio-historical marks and the psycho-analytical interpretation of human action will be seen as an important element in the text. Interestingly enough, the notion of prosperity, development, and eventual perfection and its relation to the repression of sentiments was also a subject studied by Sigmund Freud. He affirms that the inner impulse impelling man towards perfection is nothing but the result of the repression of an instinct, which is then substituted or sublimated. What takes place is then a movement in the unobstructed direction towards development:

Many of us will also find it hard to abandon our belief that in man himself there dwells an impulse towards perfection, which has brought him to his present heights of intellectual process and ethical sublimation, and from which it might be expected that his development into superman will be ensured. But I do not believe in the existence of such an inner impulse and I see no way of preserving this pleasing illusion. The development of man up to now does not seem to me to need any explanation different from that of animal development, and the restless striving towards further perfection which may be observed in a minority of human beings is easily explicable as the result of that repression of instinct upon which what is most valuable in human culture is built. The repressed instinct never ceases to strive after its complete satisfaction, which would consist in the repetition of a primary experience of satisfaction: all substitution — or reaction — formations and sublimations avail nothing towards relaxing the continual tension. (...) The

path in the other direction, back to complete satisfaction, is as a rule barred by the resistances that maintain the repressions, and thus there remains nothing for it but to proceed in the other, unobstructed direction, that of development, without however, any prospect of being able to bring the process to a conclusion or to attain the goal.³

What can be inferred is that the natural impulse inherent in man is towards satisfaction and not towards perfection. Nevertheless, such an instinct towards satisfaction is barred by resistances and is then inhibited, repressed, and finally substituted or sublimated. There remains no other path to proceed except striving towards perfection and development.

This same notion is further analysed by the French anthropologist Georges Bataille who actually states that work introduces a pause, an interval in man's irrational drives, and constitutes a means of preventing man from giving rise to those immediate impulses that correspond to the violence of desire.⁴ Work then is essential to the collectivity, since it is during the time reserved for work that it manages to guard itself against these excessive and contagious movements towards violence and desire. According to Bataille, that is why human collectivity, partly dedicated to work, defines itself through prohibitions.

Both Freud and Bataille seem to believe that, due to the repression of the natural impulses towards pleasure and desire, man is driven in the other direction, more specifically towards work, development, and perfection.

Such is the case of the Mannons, whose natural instincts and desires have clearly been repressed. Ezra's life, in particular, illustrates such an idea. He attempted to sublimate his difficulty in dealing with pleasure and love by seeking military power, wealth, and political leadership. Just before his death, Ezra realizes the reasons for some of his most relevant actions: he had gone to the Mexican War to escape his personal failure to love, and the same desire led him to concentrate on the shipping business and to enter politics to become a capable judge and mayor. These are his remarks in the third act of "Homecoming:"

Then I made up my mind I'd do my work in the world
and leave you alone in your life and not care.
That's why the shipping wasn't enough - why I became
a judge and a mayor and such vain truck, and why
folks in town look on me as so able! Ha! Able for
what? Not for what I wanted most in life!
Not for your love! No! Able only to keep my mind
from thinking of what I'd lost! (p. 270)

With their Puritan tradition, the Mannons have equated wealth with virtue and have inhibited their emotions and instincts of love. They lack love, humility, understanding, and self-awareness, which were all the ideals of the first Massachusetts Bay Puritans. Destituted of any feeling of love, happiness, and joy of life, the Mannons remain a group of meager and pitiful human beings.

If the Mannon stock as a whole represents this negative trend of Puritanism, it is revealed that the trilogy foregrounds another pair of opposites — which are part of the historical process undergone by Americans — the two main racial cultural polarities in New England, namely the Irish versus the Yankee. In Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill seems to favor the Catholic anti-Puritan trend, which opposes the Anglo-Saxon racial and religious heritage. Camillo Pellizi has pointed out, in his essay "The Irish-Catholic Anti-Puritan," that

The terrible Mannons, whom such a pitiless nemesis seems to overshadow, are really representative of the oldest race of English Nonconformist settlers, transplanted centuries ago into New England, and uncompromising in their religious, social and economic dogmas; they are the "man-eaters" of the New America, the tyrants who are always thinking of death and pray to God according to Calvin.⁵

What O'Neill most probably sought to show was that one of the fiercest battles to be fought by the characters in Mourning Becomes Electra is that between puritanical negativism — a death force — and the life-force embedded in nature and natural instincts. If there was any hope, it lay in the rejection of Puritanism. But for the Mannons there is no escape. They are fated to be destroyed since the seeds of

their destruction are in themselves; they have inherited a true family curse. Their fate is not limited to one generation, it is rather ancestral. It was established by Ezra's father, Abe Mannon, who expelled his younger brother with the pregnant nurse out of the house, tore it down and had a new one built so that he would not have to live where his brother had disgraced the family. Such a moral condemnation was nothing but a cover for Abe's jealousy, since he also loved Marie Brantôme.

The building of the Mannon house is therefore not a constructive effort towards a new beginning. On the contrary, it is charged with negative forces resulting from moral hypocrisy, pride, and hatred. As just shown above, the destructive pattern of behavior of the Mannon family is triggered in the act of building the house. The mansion becomes the image of the clan, the place of birth and death, of love and hatred, the sepulchre of the family. The construction of the house carries the idea that in its very beginning lies the seed of its end.

Besides the house, the patriarchal figure Ezra Mannon also embodies the characteristics of the family which constitute their fate: pride, Puritanism, and a strong sense of vindictive justice. It is no coincidence that he had two professions — first a judge, then a general. In addition, because of his egotism and his guilty attitude toward sex, Ezra does not know how to love; desire for his wife takes the form of clumsy lust. Only after he has fought in the war and seen death does he become aware of the meaning of life and love:

I thought about my life — lying awake nights — and about your life. In the middle of battle I'd think maybe in a minute I'll be dead. But my life as just me ending, that didn't appear worth a thought one way or another. But listen, me as your husband being killed, that seemed queer and wrong — like something dying that had never lived ... there'd always been some barrier between us — a wall hiding us from each other! (p. 269)

Ezra makes a mighty effort to talk about his inner feelings, about his newly acquired insight into the sinless meaning of love. He wants to confess and to make up for his inability to love:

Ezra - All right, then. I came home to surrender to you — what's inside me. I love you. I loved you then, and all the years between, and I love you now.

Christine (distractedly) - Ezra! Please!

Ezra - I want that said! Maybe you have forgotten it. I wouldn't blame you. I guess I haven't said it or showed it much — ever. Something queer in me keeps me mum about the things I'd like most to say. (p. 270)

This "something queer" which withholds him from talking is his puritanical attitude toward sex which makes him feel guilty and unable to love. He makes a final desperate plea for love as if it were his last chance to attain it, as if he could forecast his own death by the hands of his wife:

I've a notion if we'd leave the children and go off on a voyage together - to the other side of the world - find some island where we could be alone a while. You'll find I have changed, Christine. I'm sick of death! I want life! Maybe you could love me now! I've got to make you love me! (p. 270)

Ezra has come to realize that his has been a life-in-death existence from which all love has been expelled. Here again he reinforces his wish for change and for a new life. But his awareness has come too late. His wife's former love has turned into hatred. She justifies her hatred for her husband when telling Lavinia:

No. I loved him once - before I married him - incredible as that seems now! He was handsome in his lieutenant's uniform! He was silent and mysterious and romantic! But marriage soon turned his romance into — disgust! (p. 249)

Her hatred becomes even clearer when she goes on and explains to Lavinia why she hasn't been able to love her daughter: "You were always my wedding night to me - and my honeymoon" (p. 250). One perceives that the cause of her hatred for Ezra is to be found in the first sexual experiences with him. Thus, Christine Mannon murders her husband because

she hates him, and she hates him basically because of his Puritan upbringing.

Puritanism seems to have driven not only Ezra and Christine, but also the other main characters, into their mode of action. Lavinia's Puritan inhibition and condemnation of love are responsible for her role in the first two plays of the trilogy. In the last play, the impact of ideology is even more evident as Lavinia herself becomes the victim of the Puritan negative death force as opposed to the positive force of desire or love. As she tries to find happiness through love, Lavinia is defeated by her family's Puritan conscience which is an inherent part of her psychological make-up.

Along the same line of thought, we can see that Orin is tormented by the "furies," which are nothing more than the true expressions of his guilt feelings and of his Puritan conscience. Adam Brant, Marie Brantôme's son, is also ready to avenge his mother due to his hatred for the Puritan Mannons who have destroyed her.

Thus, the destructive effects of Puritanism on love and marriage are demonstrated: the Puritan heritage of the Mannons and the curse proceeding from the love of two Puritan brothers for the same girl; the Puritan sense of shame which made David become an alcoholic and commit suicide; Ezra's inability to love and Christine's hatred for her husband, as well as the different fates of the Mannon children. The Mannons strive against the repetition of the cycle of this Puritan pattern of behavior, but theirs is an ineffective struggle which inevitably leads on to the preordained triumph of their fate in death.

It is interesting to observe that the traits common to the Mannons are also shared by the chorus of townspeople which appears in the opening of the trilogy and later on at Ezra's funeral. This chorus is made up of hired simple workers such as a gardener (Seth) and a carpenter (Amos Ames) and his relatives ; of businessmen such as the "shrewd and competent" manager of the Mannons' shipping company (Mr. Borden); of a "stout and self-important" physician (Dr. Blake) and also of

a "well-fed" congregational minister (Everest Hills) who is described as "stout and unctuous, snobbish and ingratiating, conscious of godliness, but timid and always feeling his way" (p. 281). His few speeches reveal his caution and smugness. As it can be seen, the chorus includes types of townfolk from different walks of society, from hired hand to businessman and minister, thus representing the whole town as a human background for the drama of the Mannons.

If the Mannon pattern of behavior has the force of the community behind it, it can be inferred that, in a microcosmic view, the town itself is representative of American Society. One thus concludes that the play projects the view that America as a whole is also tainted with this evil stain of the Mannons: the Puritan pressure characterized by hatred and death.

But not all the characters in Mourning Becomes Electra must necessarily follow the Mannon pattern of behavior. Hazel and Peter Niles, for instance, represent the kind of American characters that the non-Puritan pattern can develop, thus establishing another pair of opposites in the play. Hazel is described as pretty and healthy, "frank, innocent, amiable and good - not in a negative but in a positive, self-possessed way" (p.233). Peter, her brother, has a very similar character, and is described as "straightforward, guileless, and good-natured" (p.233). They both embody the figure of the simple, healthy, normal American — the "all-American boy and girl." In this respect, characterization seems too strongly Manichean thus revealing O'Neill's ideological standpoint inasmuch as he denies ambivalence and creates characters who are either very bad or else very good people. This is another instance in which the playwright's concern with polarity becomes evident but here it constitutes a flaw. The Manichean view on which the construction of characters is based results in superficiality of characterization, a subject which will be further discussed in chapter III.

Two other characters seem to oppose the Puritan pattern of behavior: Marie Brantôme and Christine. The former is described by Seth as a woman full of life, free and wild

like an animal, who was always laughing and singing, and who was well-liked by most people. She represents the image of uncorrupted love and beauty. Christine, a Mannon only by marriage and not by heritage, has all the qualities of natural beauty and freedom. She moves with "a flowing animal grace" and her mouth is "large and sensual" (p.230). Moreover, Marie Brantôme and Christine share a physical trait which is often mentioned in the text — the same copper-brown, bronze, gold shade of hair. In this respect, they resemble those pagan goddesses with their hair flowing loose, who represent freedom, the life-force, energy, and fertility.

Marie's and Christine's resemblance is not only physical but psychological as well. They both enter the Mannon orbit bringing a sense of natural freedom and love of life and they both refuse to believe that love is a sin. They symbolize spontaneous love, vitality, life, fertility, beauty, freedom, and everything that is opposed to Puritan behavior characterized by hate, death, sterility, ugliness, dependence, and suppressed instincts of love and freedom.

It is also interesting to notice another point of similarity: they are both of foreign, non-English descent, one French and Dutch and the other French-Canadian. They both have a strongly feminine attractiveness which is contrasted with the depiction of a typical New England woman, Mrs. Borden, of "pure English ancestry," with a "horse face, buck teeth and big feet" (p.281). In a broader sense it could be said that they are the foreign forces trying to free America from this evil trait of the Mannons: the evil of Puritanism with its corrosive power. But strong and vigorous as these females might be, they are not strong enough to overcome such an evil trait, to break the Puritan pattern and deny the importance of the past.

In the same way that the characters form pairs of opposites such as Irish versus Yankee, American versus Foreign, and Good versus Bad, the geographical setting also is used to reveal similar ideological opposition. After all, the dualistic principle operates as the core of the

worldview projected in the text. It is interesting to notice that a series of geographical counterpoints can be found in the trilogy. One of them is that of New England versus New York. New England, where most of the action occurs, is Puritan religious, and moralistic. It is where the inner conflicts resulting from the Puritan ideology fight a battle with the natural instincts. New York, where Christine Mannon regularly meets her lover is a place of less rigidity and more freedom. It is generally accepted that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries New York city was pagan while New England was Puritan.⁶ New York is then associated to several motifs which carry the theme of freedom and is contrasted with New England and its moral conscience eventually leading to hypocrisy.

Another geographical contrast is that between land and sea. Even though action most frequently takes place on land, sailing and sea life form an integral part of the setting and symbolism of the play. As a traditional symbol the sea is regarded as the source of generation of all life. Cirlot observes that science has confirmed the fact that life began in the ocean and that all life comes from water.⁷ Being the fons et origo, which precedes all form and all creation, water is also connected to female symbolism and to the mother-*imago*. In fact, throughout O'Neill's trilogy the sea is presented as the place of fertility, beauty, freedom, and happiness. It is where generation of life has become possible as opposed to the mournful, grim, ugly, dry, and sterile existence of New England Puritanism in land. The genuine beauty of the sea is embodied in the sailing ships, especially the clippers, "tall, white, like beautiful, pale women" (p.292) and in the beauties of the lands where only the clippers can go: the islands in the South Seas.

In their interrelation, the symbolic elements of the sea and the islands are seen as the ideal shelter, the fitting refuge for the Mannons in their yearning to escape the ugly reality in the continent. In this way, the sea, the waters, and the islands are fused into one whole and become the representation of earthly paradise.

It is not startling then that the Mannons should long for these islands with their utmost energy. As O'Neill himself stated, the islands represent "release, peace, security, beauty, freedom of conscience, sinlessness, etc."⁸ Quite understandably, the main characters do hope to reach such a paradise and, one at a time, they describe their dreams of peace and happiness in some ideal island of the South Seas.

Ezra, for instance, suggests to his wife that they should forget the barrier existing between them and start a new life in some island. Also, after murdering Ezra Mannon, Brant and Christine plan their escape to the Blessed Isles as a place where they may still find happiness and forget their deed.

Adam Brant, who has actually been to the isles, gives this account of them in a conversation with Lavinia:

Lavinia - I remember your admiration for the naked native women. You said they had found the secret of happiness because they had never heard that love can be sin.

Brant - Aye! And they live in as near the Garden of Paradise before sin was discovered as you'll find on this earth! (p.242)

One other element that reinforces the symbology is Brant's Christian name, Adam. This immediately refers us to the biblical figure of Adam before the Fall. What the Mannons long for is to obliterate original sin and return to the Garden of Eden. They all feel a nostalgia for a pre-Adamic purity. They all dream of these islands where men can live in a natural state of sexuality, sinlessness, and freedom. In the "Blessed Isles" the Mannons would be able to forget about sinful sex, men's dirty dreams of power and greed and think of true happiness, sinless sex, and love. To confirm this line of thought it is on the South Sea that Lavinia releases her Puritan inhibitions and allows her instincts to run freely. Upon returning from the voyage, she comments on the purifying effect of the islands:

I loved those islands: They finished setting me free. There was something there mysterious and beautiful ... the natives dancing naked and innocent - without knowledge of sin! (p.348)

Unlike New Englanders, who are usually possessed by feelings of guilt, hate, and death, the islanders abound in joy of life based on guiltless and unrepressed sex and love.

So, after visiting these isles, Lavinia realizes she can still find happiness and love, as if through her immersion in the waters she had undergone rebirth and had now attained new life. This is why taking up the image of the idyllic island, she makes a proposition to Peter:

We'll make an island for ourselves on land, and we'll have children and love them and teach them to love life so that they can never be possessed by hate and death! (349)

Likewise, Orin, who learned about the islands by reading Melville's Typee, is also fascinated by them:

I read it and reread it until finally those Islands came to mean everything that wasn't war, everything that was peace and warmth and security. I used to dream I was there. And later on all the time I was out of my head I seemed really to be there. There was no one there but you and me. And yet I never saw you, that's the funny part. I only felt you all around me. The breaking of the waves was your voice. The sky was the same color as your eyes. The warm sand was like your skin. The whole island was you. (He smiles with a dreamy tenderness) A strange notion, wasn't it? But you needn't be provoked at being an island because this was the most beautiful island in the world - as beautiful as you, Mother! (p.300)

Orin also craves for the warmth and peace of the South Sea islands. When he is ready to commit suicide, he recalls the islands again but now as a final place for peace. He assures himself:

It's the way to peace — to find her again — my lost island — Death is an island of peace too —
 Mother will be waiting for me there — (pp. 365-6)

His desire for happiness and love has turned into a desire for death as the only way to attain peace. He yearns for a return to the maternal womb. At this point, it is easy to perceive that the images of the island, the womb, and the grave have merged into a whole. Such imagery can perfectly fit into Cirlot's observation that "to return to the sea is to 'return to the mother', that is to die."⁹

The Spanish anthropologist also states that the sea symbolizes the mysterious immensity from which everything comes and to which everything returns thus corroborating the notion of the sea as the beginning and the end of all life. He adds that because of "its ceaseless movement and of the formlessness of its waters," the ocean becomes a symbol of "dynamic forces and of transitional states between the stable or solid (earth) and the formless air (gas)." By analogy, it can be inferred that the ocean is then a mediating agent between life and death, its waters being not only the source of life but its goal as well.

We can conclude that the Sea/Island motifs recur in O'Neill's trilogy as symbols of a pre-Adamic world, a pre-moral world, a world of pre-natal freedom. Deprived of pride, hatred, pain, and sin, it is a place in which the pleasure principle prevails, a place where peace, security, beauty, freedom, warmth, and love triumph. In opposition to Puritan America, sea life represents a completely unconventional existence, free of social hypocrisy where fulfillment can be attained.

Nevertheless, what remains at the end of Mourning Becomes Electra is that the negative repressive forces will predominate, finally leading to the total destruction of the family. The fact that the conflict results either in a symbolic death, in negation of love and life or in actual death reveals the destructive impact of culture upon the individual, more specifically of Puritanism as an active

force behind the actions of the main characters and Lavinia's final decision.

Thus, in Eugene O'Neill's trilogy, Puritanism may be regarded as one of the primary elements enhancing tension and conflict, strongly pervading the action and defining the dreadful outcome.

NOTES

- ¹Roland Barthes, "Mudar o próprio objeto," in Atualidade do Mito, Gennie Luccioni et al. (São Paulo: Livraria Duas Cidades, 1977), p. 11.
- ²Frederick Wilkins, "The Pressure of Puritanism in New England Plays," in Eugene O'Neill: A World View, ed. Virginia Floyd (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1979), p. 239.
- ³Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 654.
- ⁴Georges Bataille, O Erotismo, trans. João Bernardo da Costa (Lisboa: Moraes Editores, 1980).
- ⁵Camillo Pellizzi, "The Irish Catholic Anti-Puritan," in O'Neill and his Plays, eds. Oscar Cargill et al. (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1961), p. 356.
- ⁶See John Henry Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, ed. Harry T. Moore (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1920), p. 50. He quotes A. Oabey Hall, mayor of New York, in the late 1860's, who responded to a toast to "The City of New York" at a New York dinner for the New England Society with a speech whose chief point was: "And especially do we admire the taste you have displayed in quitting that part of the U.S., where, as we knickerbockers believe, New Englanders continue to persecute each other for opinions' sake. Here you enjoy extensive freedom — freedom in newspaper abuse; freedom to gamble in Wall Street, freedom in marriage; freedom in divorce; free lager; free fights; free voting; free love!"

⁷J. E. Cirlot, "Ocean," A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).

⁸Eugene O'Neill, as quoted in Doris Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick, N.J.; Rutgers Univ. Press, 1958), p. 131.

⁹Cirlot, "Sea," A Dictionary of Symbols.

¹⁰Cirlot, "Ocean," A Dictionary of Symbols.

PART III

THE UNMASKING OF THE SELF: FAMILY IMAGES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FATE

One's outer life passes in a solitude haunted by the masks of others; one's inner life passes in a solitude hounded by the masks of oneself.

Eugene O'Neill

One of the problems related to the writing of this trilogy, according to the author, was the way of focusing the determining role of fate in such a way that it would be fitting for the worldview of a twentieth-century audience. Eugene O'Neill realized that whereas the characters of Greek tragedy acted within a known framework of values and order, modern literature depicts the loss of values and the need to search for new ones. Thus, characters of twentieth-century literature strive to find an ideal order for the universe. Particularly during the late twenties and early thirties, the period in which, among other influential theories, Freud's discoveries became more known, the notion of man's fate and destiny had to be reshaped and reevaluated in the context of this new knowledge.

In the first note for the play dated "Spring - 1926," O'Neill poses a question:

Is it possible to get modern psychological approximation of Greek sense of fate into such a play, which an intelligent audience of today, possessed of no belief in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by?¹

The American playwright understood that his immediate problem was to create a modern interpretation of the Greek concept of fate without the benefit of the audience's belief in gods like the Greeks. The choice of an appropriate setting was among his initial preoccupations. He first stated it in the sketch for the plot dated April, 1929:

New England background best possible dramatically for Greek plot of crime and retribution, chain of fate — Puritan conviction of man born to sin and punishment — Orestes's furies within him, his conscience — etc.²

New England, impregnated with the strong influence of Puritanism and its belief in the need for punishment due to man's sinful nature would be the most convenient setting for O'Neill's version of the Greek plot of crime and vengeance. It becomes clear that underlying the notion of fate there lie the effects of Puritanism, specifically the Puritan conscience upon the mind of the characters.

According to Doris Alexander, a student of the play, the nature of fate in the trilogy is strikingly similar to the ideals developed by G.S. Hamilton and Kenneth Macgowan in What is Wrong with Marriage. The book is based on Dr. Hamilton's psychological investigation into the love and sex behavior of two hundred married couples. To his scientific accumulation of data, Macgowan added some popular ideas adapted from Freud. Both authors are convinced that one of the main problems in marriage is the Puritan attitude toward love. At his point it is worth quoting Professor Alexander, restating one of the authors' conclusions:

The natures of these fourteen women had been so warped in early childhood by the false Puritanism of their parents that they were now incapable of living a full and normal married life. How far does all America's womanhood suffer from the pious sins of the fathers and mothers?³

It seems only natural that O'Neill, who had been acquainted with both authors and had even worked with Macgowan at the Greenwich Village Theatre, should be greatly interested in such a book. It is also interesting to notice that the book was published in February, 1929, and that O'Neill's first note on fate appeared in his sketch dated April of the same year.

Nevertheless, whether O'Neill actually read such a book and was influenced by it or not, is beyond the point. What is really relevant, what cannot be denied, is the fact that O'Neill does attribute to Puritanism the role of affecting and poisoning his characters' minds. It is

unquestionable that his awareness of the evil effects of the Puritan conscience upon the American mind was vital to the engendering of the plot of Mourning Becomes Electra.

O'Neill was aware of the fact that it would not be sufficient merely to shift the values of the Greek tradition to the American scene, but rather that it would be necessary to recreate these values in modern designs. It was in psychology that he found the modern design most likely to embody the values he desired. His private notes on the writing of the trilogy are particularly valuable inasmuch as they present his views explicitly: "If we have no Gods (sic) or heroes to portray we have the subconscious, the mother of all gods and heroes."⁴

The conflict undergone by the characters in Mourning Becomes Electra is not between them and God but rather within themselves and in the kernel of the family. It lies in the interrelation between parent and child, conscious and unconscious.

In the same "Working Notes," there follows a second statement which is essential to a full understanding of the plot design and characterization in the trilogy:

Aegisthus bears strong facial resemblance to Agamemnon and Orestes — his resemblance to Orestes attracts Clytemnestra — his resemblance to her father attracts Electra — Electra adores father, devoted to brother (who resembles father), hates mother — Orestes adores mother, devoted to sister (whose face resembles mother's) so hates his father — Agamemnon, frustrated in love for Clytemnestra, adores daughter, Electra, who resembles her, hates and is jealous of his son Orestes — etc — work out this symbol of family resemblances and identification (as visible sign of the family fate) still further...⁵

By developing a chain of resemblances among relatives, O'Neill places fate in the determinants of the parent-child relationship and in the strong compulsion of passions existing within the family circle.

It can thus be inferred that his notion of psychological fate was not only based on the effects of Puritanism but on the conflicting power of the father and mother images, that is, the Oedipus and Electra complexes inherent in the structure of the family. Such concepts are the determining forces behind the loves and hates of the main characters, all of whom love the parent of the opposite sex, hate the parent of the same sex, or, in the case of parents, love the child of the opposite sex and hate the child of the same sex.

Adam Brant, for instance, loves his mother and hates his father. His hatred of the Mannons is a reflex of his attitude toward his Mannon father. Lavinia loves her father and hates her mother. Her jealous hatred of her mother motivates her to plan Brant's murder. Orin murders Brant as a result of his jealousy of his mother's lover, from his Oedipal attachment to her and not his desire to avenge his father's death. His suicide comes not only as a consequence of his Puritan need for punishment, but also of his guilt and anguish at the death of his mother.

Considering that part of the Mannon fate is developed out of loves and hates engendered by the parent-child relationships it is enlightening to quote Freud as he refers to the Oedipus complex in An Outline of Psychoanalysis:

When a boy, from about the age of two or three, enters upon the phallic phase of his libidinal development, feels pleasurable sensations in his sexual organ and learns to procure these at will by manual stimulation, he becomes his mother's lover. He desires to possess her physically in the ways which he has divined from his observations and intuitive surmises of sexual life and tries to seduce her by showing her the male organ of which he is the proud owner. In a word, his early awakened masculinity makes him seek to assume, in relation to her, the place belonging to his father, who has hitherto been an envied model on account of the physical strength which he displays and of the authority in which he is clothed. His father now becomes a rival who stands in his way and whom he would like to push aside. If when his father is absent he is able to share his mother's bed and if

when his father returns he is once more banished from it, his gratification when his father vanishes and his disappointment when he reappears are deeply felt experiences. This is the subject of the Oedipus complex, which Greek legend translated from the world of childhood fantasy into a pretended reality.⁶

and

I am thinking of the Oedipus complex, so named because its essential substance is found in the Greek myth of King Oedipus, which has luckily been preserved for us in a version from the hand of a great dramatist. The Greek hero killed his father and married his mother. That he did so unknowingly, since he did not recognize them as his parents, constitutes a deviation from the analytical, subject matter which is easily intelligible and indeed inevitable.⁷

As Freud observes, the very ignorance of Oedipus as to whom his real parents are is the legitimate representation of unconsciousness into which adults have fallen, hence the inevitability of the fate which has condemned every son to live through the Oedipus complex. The whole story is not merely a chance event or a piece of bad luck for Oedipus; on the contrary, it describes man's predicament and represents a typical and fundamental human dilemma.

It is necessary to point out that the term Electra complex was not used by Freud, but by Carl Jung. The main lines of the Electra's story were presented in the introduction to this dissertation, since that myth is one other embodiment of the same impulse Freud chose to call the "Oedipus complex." For the purpose of this study however, what interests us is the impulse itself and O'Neill's rendering of such a force in his version of the Electra story. For this reason both labels will be used in our discussion, since one objective is to analyse the American playwright's treatment of the question.

O'Neill's use of the Oedipus and Electra complexes as compelling forces of his characters' actions does not

include the element of unconsciousness stressed by Freud. On the contrary, his characters are presented quite conscious of their desires. Lavinia, for instance, repeatedly states her love and affection for her father:

Lavinia (slowly): - I can't marry anyone, Peter.
I've got to stay home. Father
needs me.

Peter - He's got your mother.

Lavinia (sharply): - He needs me more! (p. 235)

Or:

Brant - Yes, you must be very happy at the prospect of seeing your father again. Your mother has told me how close you've always been to him.

Lavinia - Did she? (Then with intensity)—I love Father better than anyone in the world. There is nothing I wouldn't do — to protect him from hurt! (p. 241)

One more instance in which this awareness is revealed can be found in the following statements:

Lavinia - Yes, Father. (She comes and kisses him excitedly) Oh, I'm so happy you're here! Don't let Mother make you believe I — You're the only man I'll ever love! I'm going to stay with you! (p.266)

In the same way she makes explicit her hatred for her mother:

Lavinia - (wincing again — stammers harshly) So I was born of your disgust! I've always guessed that, Mother — ever since I was little — when I used to come to you — with love — but you would always push me away! I've felt it ever since I can remember — your disgust! (Then with a flare-up of bitter hatred) Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate you! (p. 249)

When Ezra bids good night and follows his wife to their bedroom, Lavinia pursues them with her eyes until she sees the light appear between the shutters in the bedroom on the second floor:

I hate you! You steal even Father's love from me again! You stole all love from me when I was born!
(p. 271)

The other characters also seem to be aware of such complexes. When Brant is talking to Lavinia he describes the Oedipus pattern:

Well, I suppose that's the usual way of it. A daughter feels closer to her father and a son to his mother. (p. 241)

Likewise, Christine realizes Lavinia is in competition with her:

I know you, Vinnie! I've watched you ever since you were little, trying to do exactly what you're doing now! You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin! You've always schemed to steal my place! (p. 251)

These examples should suffice to prove that whereas Freud considers the Oedipus impulse as unconscious, O'Neill has a tendency to make it over-explicit, thus unmasking the deep-seated human compulsions which are normally hidden from man's consciousness and seldom perceived or declared.

There is still another aspect in which O'Neill departs from Freud's analysis of the Oedipus complex. The playwright neglects the fact that instincts are ambivalent comprising positive and affectionate as well as negative and hostile feelings towards the determined object. Love is ambivalent, since it is often accompanied by feelings of hate against the same object. This mixture of hate and love is so real that it is not uncommon to see a love-

relationship break off and be succeeded by a feeling of hate, so that there remains the impression of a transformation of one feeling to the other. In many cases, too, the feeling of hate acquires an erotic character which ensures the continuity of the love-relation.

Therefore, if man's feelings normally oscillate between love and hate, it would be only natural that O'Neill's characters should show such an oscillation. Yet O'Neill's over simplification of Freud's scheme results in his characters' lack of psychological depth. Taken at each separate moment of their trajectory, they either love or hate one another. On a paradigmatic axis, the characters' emotions are clear-cut and unilateral. It is only on a syntagmatic axis that there is an alternation of feelings. In other words, it is only on the temporal plane that the reader has a wider view of the characters. Any change that occurs depends on the temporal succession since at each particular moment of the characters' lives their feelings are not ambivalent.

Interestingly enough O'Neill, who has dealt mainly with ambivalence in human beings, does not seem to have captured its essence, which lies precisely in its verticality and simultaneity. This might be viewed as a flaw in his characterization, since the play as already demonstrated is totally structured in terms of oppositions. Ambivalence, had it been developed, would perfectly fit and reinforce the general pattern of the work.

There remains a last characteristic of the Oedipus complex that must be taken into consideration for an analysis of O'Neill's *Electra*. It is the fact that, for the child, the mother is the first object of love. By feeding and looking after him, she arouses in him many physical sensations both pleasant and unpleasant. It is based on this first original love-object that the child will select the other objects of love throughout his life.

In An Outline of Psychoanalysis, Freud stresses the

importance of the mother figure for the child:

By her care of the child's body she becomes his first seducer. In these two relations lies the root of a mother's importance, unique, without parallel, laid down unalterably for a whole lifetime, as the first and strongest love-object and as the prototype of all later love relations — for both sexes.⁸

So, in the case of the male child, when he grows up, he inevitably chooses a mate on the basis of his mother's appearance or resemblance. In other words, a man's mother determines the choice of his mate. In the case of the girl, the original love-object, the mother, is eventually abandoned and replaced by the father figure.

This may be seen as the basis of the psychological conception of fate which underlies the pattern of human relations developed by O'Neill in Mourning Becomes Electra. Such is the case of the model of female beauty determined by a primal mother image which all the masculine characters desire. The other is a pattern of masculine resemblance based on the original father image which the women characters long for. These patterns help explain the reasons why both Ezra Mannon and Adam Brant love Christine and why both Christine and Lavinia love Adam Brant.

The female pattern was established with the love of Abe and David Mannon for Marie Brantôme. Marie's beauty sets the pattern for all the Mannon loves thereafter. Her eyes, "blue as the Caribbean Sea," and her beautiful hair with its rich sexual connotations, and its pretty color, "partly a copper brown, partly a bronze gold" determined the ideal of feminine beauty for all the Mannon men through three generations. Christine's resemblance to Marie Brantôme makes both Adam Brant and Ezra Mannon love her. Adam, for example, recognizes Christine's resemblance to his mother. When talking to Lavinia he says that Vinnie's hair is first like Christine's and that he knew only one other woman who had it too: his mother. It is quite probable that Adam Brant has fallen in love with Christine because she

reproduces his mother image. Ezra is also fascinated by Christine's hair. Returning from the war, he confesses his love for her, touches her hair with an awkward caress and finds her younger and more beautiful than ever and exclaims "only your hair is the same — your strange beautiful hair I always —" (p. 268). Ezra's love for Christine also originates from the same model of female beauty, Marie Brantôme. The family servant, Seth, says how much Ezra liked Marie:

Even your Paw. He was only a boy then, but he was crazy about her too, like a youngster would be. His mother was stern with him, while Marie, she made a fuss over him and petted him. (p. 261)

In other words, for Ezra, Marie had a more profound appeal than his own mother. Hence his love for Christine, who resembles her — the primordial mother figure — so much.

Like Adam and his father, Orin admires his mother's beautiful hair. Returning from the war, he tells her:

You've still got the same beautiful hair, Mother. That hasn't changed. (He reaches up and touches her hair caressingly.) (p. 301)

It is also his sister's resemblance to his mother, especially her beautiful hair, which impels him to make an incestuous advance to her:

There are times now when you don't seem to be my sister, nor mother but some stranger with the same beautiful hair — (He touches her hair caressingly. She pulls violently away. He laughs wildly) Perhaps you're Marie Brantôme, eh? (p. 364)

We may conclude that Marie Brantôme is the primal mother image and establishes a matrix for the loves of all the Mannon men.

The other side of this configuration reveals that women choose their mates based on their father image. And so it happens in Mourning Becomes Electra: the physical resemblance

of the Mannon men determines the women's love.

Seth warns Lavinia that Adam Brant is David Mannon's son by pointing out his resemblance to her father and to all the Mannons: "He ain't only like your Paw. He's like Orin, too — and all the Mannons I've known" (p. 239).

Brant himself refers to such resemblance and tells Christine: "It would be damned queer if you fell in love with me because I recalled Ezra Mannon to you" (p.254). Even though Christine denies it, soon afterwards she is stunned by Adam's resemblance to Ezra when he sits in her husband's chair. She is so astonished she urges him to move to another chair. A relationship is therefore implied between Christine's love for Brant and his resemblance to her husband whom she loved before her marriage. Also, one reason why Lavinia loves Brant could be the fact that he is the image of her father.

All of these instances are thus worked into a pattern which reveals the determining power of the psychological fate from which none of the characters can escape.

In the same way that the characters are fated to love a counterpart of their parent of the opposite sex, they are also fated to resemble their parent of the same sex. Such resemblances are not only physical but psychological as well. Orin's homecoming, for instance, is a repetition of his father's homecoming and duplicates the same pattern of yearning and jealousy: yearning for an island as a place for refuge where they could live happily ever after, and jealousy of the same man, Adam, whom they both suspect of having an affair with the woman they love. When Orin returns from the voyage to the islands, he has taken on all the attributes of his father. He looks like his father and acts like he used to. In the stage directions, Orin is described as follows:

He carries himself woodenly erect now like a soldier. His movements and attitudes have the statue-like quality that was so marked in his

father. He now wears a close-cropped beard in addition to his mustache , and this accentuates his resemblance to his father. The Mannon semblance of his face in repose to a mask is more pronounced than ever. (p. 340)

In a similar way Lavinia takes after her mother. When first described, Lavinia resembles her mother physically. They both have the same "coppergold hair," the same "dark violet-blue eyes," the same "sensual mouth" and the same "heavy jaw." But it is after she returns from the islands that she especially looks like her mother: she arranges her hair in the same way as her mother used to and wears colorful clothes like Christine did instead of her usual black. Her attitudes are also a reproduction of her mother's. In the scene in which she has a discussion with Orin over her behavior with natives in the islands, the stage directions provide the reader with a clear reference to their identification with their parents:

Lavinia (with a sudden flare of deliberately evil taunting that recalls her mother in the last act of "Homecoming," when she was goading Ezra Mannon to fury just before his murder) And what if it wasn't? I'm not your property! I have a right to love!

Orin (reacting as his father had — his face grown livid — with a hoarse cry of fury grabs her by the throat) — You — you whore! I'll kill you! (pp.355-56. italics mine)

As it can be seen, both Lavinia and Orin have actually become duplicates of their parents. In Act II of "The Haunted," Orin himself states the situation explicitly and implies an incestuous proposal to his sister:

Orin (with a quiet mad insistence) — Can't you see I'm now in father's place and you're Mother? That's the evil destiny out of the past I haven't dared predict. I'm the Mannon you're chained to! So isn't it plain — (p.356)

With these words, Orin shows that he realizes that he and his sister have taken over the roles of their parents in appearance, mannerisms, and basic conflict. They have been trapped by the Mannons' curse in that they are, willingly or not, repeating their ancestors' experiences.

The resemblances of the characters with their parents and the direct transfer of attitudes from one generation to another are worked out in such a way so to establish the idea of the family fate. Ezra and consequently Christine are victims of his family background. Ezra had to love a lively, passionate woman like Christine because his family supplied him with Marie Brantôme as a mother image. But his family also supplied him with a set of Puritan inhibitions that did not allow him his love for such a woman to be fulfilled. Both Lavinia and Orin repeat their parents' attitudes, desires, and needs, a matrix that will not allow them to reach a normal adjustment in their emotional lives. Orin is too bound to the Oedipus complex and Puritanism to love Hazel. Lavinia, too, is so haunted by Puritan restraints and her father image that she is unable to love Peter. The curse is so present that neither of them is capable of breaking the pattern of the original objects of desire. The conflict the Mannons have to face is therefore between the need for love aroused by the family and the attitudes toward love also created by the family.

It is revealed, then, that the cause of the Mannons' fate lies in the structure of the family itself. The family is the original cause of all causes, for the sins of the fathers fall upon their children who, after growing up, will inevitably repeat the process in a vicious circle. This straight line of descent from parent to child will recur endlessly, like a strong force determining man's destiny.

Besides physical and psychic resemblances, O'Neill has made use of one more element to help link all the Mannons as a stock and indicate their inevitable similarity, thus reinforcing his notion of family fate. It is the old

theatrical device of masks, which is carried out in a peculiar manner, since the author does not actually employ real masks but rather suggests that his characters have a mask-like appearance. All the Mannons are described in the stage-directions as having strange mask-like looks on their faces in repose. In addition, their faces also have the distinctive quality of being a life-like mask rather than living flesh. All the Mannons look alike, not only the living but also the dead, who are seen in the portraits hanging on the walls of Ezra's study. They all resemble masks: from the bleak visaged minister of the witchburning era to the cold eyes of Lavinia in the last generation. It is interesting to notice that the mask-like face is more pronounced in Ezra than in the other characters since he is the patriarchal figure, the embodiment of the Mannon traits. Even Seth, who does not belong to the Mannon stock but has been working for them for sixty years, is described as having the same look on his face. It is as if after the life-long contact with the Mannons he had to some extent absorbed the gloomy atmosphere hovering over the family and been incorporated into it.

To develop this element further, the Mannon house is also described in the same way. Its "temple portico" is shown as "an incongruous white mask fixed on the house to hide its somber gray ugliness" (p.227). It is as if the mansion itself embodied the malevolent spell of the Mannons and irradiated such spell upon the characters, binding them together. The house and the people who have come under its influence are isolated from the town and from society. The characters are locked up behind their own deterministic masks. The notion of the mask sets up a dualism of external appearance contrasted to internal reality, of false surface against true depth. This pattern is not only reflected in the stage setting of the description of the house, but in the formal structure of the play as well. There is an alternation of scenes taking place inside the house and those occurring outside it. It can also be noticed that in

certain scenes the external world tries to penetrate the world of the Mannons in persons such as Peter, Hazel, and sometimes the townspeople. On the other hand, there are scenes in which that exterior world is entirely absent and only the Mannon world remains. It can be supposed that the life-like masks symbolize the fated separateness and isolation of the Mannon family from other people.

Just as the mask stands as a barrier between the Mannons and other people, it also stands as a barrier between the Mannons and life. The family has inherited a fate of self-destruction and is unable to break free from such fate and strive for happiness. Theirs is a world drained of life and vitality. The masks show the Mannons' physical resemblance, link them together, and suggest a closed world which feeds off itself. Such desire to embrace one's own image, such psychological reflexiveness, can only breed death. And so the Mannons are bound together in their own denial of change, and in their obsession with the past and with death.

Nevertheless, if the Mannons' world is death-oriented, so is the world which they inhabit. The town's white church according to Ezra a "temple of death," is similar to the white Mannon house. If the Mannons smear blood on that whiteness, so does the world beyond their estate. So does America with its bloodiest conflict, the Civil War, and Lincoln's murder, and, in the same way, the Puritanical repression of the life force and of the impulse towards pleasure. In general, the whole world envisaged in the trilogy lacks life and meaning.

It seems clear that the mask conveys a sense of separateness, of division not only in the setting and structure of the play, but mainly in the characters themselves. O'Neill was convinced that the use of masks could be the best way for the modern dramatist to express the profound hidden conflicts of the mind taking place inside the characters' souls. According to him, the new psychological insight into the human mind is nothing but a study in masks, an exercise in unmasking. It is

precisely this insight that uncovers the disguises one uses and reveals the truth of inner reality. In his "Memoranda on Masks" he states:

I hold more and more surely to the conviction that the use of masks will be discovered eventually to be the freest solution of the modern dramatist's problem as to how — with the greatest possible dramatic clarity and economy of means — he can express those profound hidden conflicts of the mind which the probings of psychology continue to disclose to us. (...) For what, at bottom, is the new psychological insight into human cause and effect but a study in masks, an exercise in unmasking? Whether we think the attempted unmasking has been successful, or has only created for itself new masks, is of no importance here. What is valid, what is unquestionable, is that this insight has uncovered the mask, has impressed the idea of mask as a symbol of inner reality upon all intelligent people of today; and I know they would welcome the use of masks in the theatre as a necessary, dramatically revealing new convention, and not regard them as any "stunty" resurrection of archaic props.⁹

The mask would be a means of conveying the inner drama of the characters. It could further suggest that beyond and beneath the surface of the character there lies another self, another personality, another inner reality.

Concerning the notion and the use of masks, O'Neill seems to be echoing Jung, who states that masks were used among primitives in totem ceremonies as a means of enhancing or of changing the personality. He also observes that every individual wears a mask which is a segment of the collective psyche. It serves the purpose of hiding the individual's true being, making him play a role which represents not his real self but the collective spirit. Jung calls this mask the persona:

This arbitrary segment of collective psyche — often fashioned with considerable pains — I have called the persona. The term persona is really a very appropriate expression for this, for originally it meant the mask once worn by actors to indicate

the role they played. (...) It is, as its name implies, only a mask of the collective psyche, a mask that feigns individuality, making other and others and oneself believe that one is individual, whereas one is simply acting a role through which the collective psyche speaks.¹⁰

The persona is then a complex system of relations between the individual consciousness and society and resembles a mask which is designed to make a definite impression upon others and to conceal the true nature of the individual. In other words, the persona is a compromise between individual and society concerning what a man should appear to be: his titles and his profession are not necessarily concerned with his essential reality but may be in many cases the result of group expectations and imposed social roles. The mask then reinforces the idea of fragmentation and duality inherent in human beings.

In conclusion, in Mourning Becomes Electra, the suggestion of masks not only emphasizes the inevitable similarity of the Mannon family binding them together and yet separating them from the world outside, but it further discloses the dualism of exterior and interior, of surface and depth, of appearance and reality, and of conscious and unconscious. Thus, the "life mask" appearance of the characters conveys the duality of their natures, the split of their consciousness, and the division of their selves — traits which constitute essential characteristics of the modern hero.

It could also be said that the whole conflict in the trilogy is really an exercise in self-unmasking of the Mannons. This starts with Ezra, who realizes his shortcomings as a husband and as a human being; it is experienced by Orin, in his gradual process of becoming aware of his family evil deeds and consequent doom; it includes Brant's decision of putting into practice his much desired revenge; and it reaches its climax with Lavinia in her search for fulfillment. The Mannons have indeed been able to attain the apparent superficial pleasure of wealth, prestige, and social status but not any real sense of life which could have

led them to reach any possible degree of peace or fulfillment.

Nevertheless, the notion of a psychological fate operating in the characters' lives does not entirely eliminate from the trilogy references to a belief in an external fate, although the play does not convey a traditional religious view. The characters of Mourning Becomes Electra are at one time or another trapped by mysterious forces working from the outside which they call either "God" or "something" or "a feeling." As Christine puts it, "God won't leave us alone. He twists and wrings and tortures our lives with other's lives until we poison each other to death " (p. 286). The use of the word God, which might suggest the presence of religion, is neutralized when she tells Adam what took place immediately after Ezra's death: "I'd planned it so carefully but something made things happen" (p. 318 , italics mine). To this Brant adds: "I knew it! I've had a feeling in my bones."

Lavinia also uses words devoid of religious meaning when she complains that evil instincts uncontrollably come over her and set her mode of action: "Oh, Orin, something made me say that to you — against my will — something rose up in me like an evil spirit" (p. 356, italics mine).

What can be inferred is that these characters feel they are impelled by mysterious forces which work upon them from the outside as well as from the inside and determine the course of their action. They also believe that they have inherited, from their Mannon ancestors, the burden of original errors. It is then no wonder that Orin should try to trace the past evil destiny behind the Mannons' lives by writing a history of all the family crimes, beginning with his grandfather's and including his sister's as well as his own crime. He most probably intended to depict the chain of evil deeds performed by the Mannon stock.

Seth, an outsider in spite of his incorporation of some of the Mannons' traits, restates that such a unique

evil and mysterious force is ancestral in the Mannon family: "There has been evil in that house since it was first built in hate — and it's kept growing there ever since " (p.338).His function as a witness of the family story is so revealed in stressing the power of the past over the present.

If the conflict in Mourning Becomes Electra has taken the form of a struggle between good and evil forces, the outcome demonstrates that the negative forces win over the positive. When, at the end of the trilogy, Lavinia, the last of the Mannons, abnegates love and returns to a life of perpetual mourning within the walls of the house — the concrete representation of the family — the idea of psychological fate is completed. She has finally realized that the Mannons are inexorably bound together in the same doom. She then yields to the ghosts and returns to her past. In the final "decisive bang" with which Seth closes the windows, the circle of family fate is also closed. The house becomes a sepulchre. Death and destruction prevail. Mourning indeed becomes Electra...

NOTES

¹Eugene O'Neill, as quoted in Doris M. Alexander, "Psychological Fate in Mourning Becomes Electra," PMLA (Dec. 1953), LXXVIII, No. 5, p. 923.

²O'Neill, as quoted in Alexander, p. 923.

³Alexander, p. 925.

⁴Doris V. Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1958), p. 26.

⁵O'Neill, as quoted in Alexander, pp. 923-24.

⁶Sigmund Freud, As Outline of Psychoanalysis (New York: W.W. Norton, 1949), pp. 90-91.

⁷Freud, Outline, p. 88.

⁸Freud, Outline, p. 90.

⁹Eugene O'Neill, "Memoranda on Masks," in O'Neill and His Plays, eds. Oscar Cargill et al. (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1961), p. 116.

¹⁰Carl G. Jung, Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), p. 157.

PART IV

THE QUESTION OF THE TRAGIC: MOTIVATION AND GUILT

The genuine content of tragic action subject to the aims which arrest tragic characters is supplied by the world of those forces which carry in themselves their own justification and are realized substantively in the volitional activity of mankind.

Hegel

The fact that Mourning Becomes Electra is a modern version of a Greek myth as presented in Aeschylus's trilogy, which is considered a tragedy, required the following question: Does O'Neill's trilogy fit into the configuration of the Tragic as Aeschylus' Oresteia does? Much has been written on this subject and a great controversy remains.

It is of certain interest to mention some of these viewpoints. Doris Falk, for example, places Lavinia in the same rank of predestined Oedipus, who at the moment of self-knowledge, "blinds himself in symbol of his lifelong blindness."¹ Based on the notion that revelation is essential to the depth and significance of real tragedy, Professor Falk declares that in O'Neill's trilogy this self-revelation is the aim of the action. When Lavinia acquires self-knowledge, she accepts responsibility for her deed, and guilt leads her to the conclusion that punishment is inevitable. Doris Falk then raises the following question:

Is not this principle at the very heart of the paradox posed by classic tragedy, that although the hero's destruction seems to be determined by fate (here by hereditary neurosis) he still takes responsibility for that destruction? Even though he may have had no control over that self which with its flaw determined his destiny, he still considers that self free; he still assumes responsibility for his actions and accepts their consequences.²

Falk concludes that Lavinia, by assuming responsibility for her actions, even if it means total destruction, resembles the Greek and Elizabethan tragic heroes. The critic then compares O'Neill's heroine to Orestes who "welcomes the persecution of the Furies, although he was fated to murder his mother."³ She also compares Lavinia to Lear, who "beats at the gates that led his folly in and his dear judgement out," and finally to Othello, who "smites the poor, deluded Moor of Venice, never questioning the drives within himself that

created his delusion."⁴ Doris Falk concludes her study by stating that "Lavinia's struggle has been translated into the universal symbols of tragedy" and that "O'Neill has fulfilled the requirements of drama by symbolizing in literal action the significance and dignity of Lavinia's tragic downfall."⁵ She finally affirms that "Mourning Becomes Electra demonstrates that in this inner world, true tragic drama may be acted."⁶

In Roger Asselineau's analysis of O'Neill's trilogy, it is affirmed that "the substance of Mourning Becomes Electra is essentially tragic and meets all the requirements formulated by Aristotle in his Poetics."⁷ He maintains that "she has the monolithic quality of an archetypal tragic character."⁸ Soon afterwards he states that "like a true tragic hero she is unable to forget or forgive."⁹ By establishing that the impossibility to ascribe guilt to anyone in particular is an essential characteristic of a tragic situation, and that no one can be found guilty in Mourning Becomes Electra, the critic confirms his claim of O'Neill's trilogy as a tragedy stating that

The reader is unable to lay the blame on anyone in particular and we are finally brought to ask ourselves as in any true tragedy: are these calamities the work of men or of God?¹⁰

He also notes that Greek tragic heroes are guided in their actions by the gods or by Fate. They are not free. Neither are the characters of O'Neill's trilogy since they obey an internal fate of heredity and psychological determinism. Nevertheless the critic contradicts his previous statement when he says:

Mourning Becomes Electra would seem to be a great tragedy, one of the greatest tragedies of the 20th Century and certainly the greatest tragedy ever written by an American author. But it has one failing: language.¹¹

So Asselineau interprets the trilogy as real tragedy, even though it does not achieve perfection due to a language which lacks the high tone of tragedy. He continues:

Nevertheless, his [O'Neill's] failure to achieve a distinctive style detracts from the merit of an otherwise perfect tragedy worthy of ranking with Aeschylus's Oresteia and even in some respects superior to it.¹²

Another scholar, Joseph Wood Krutch shares Professor Asselineau's viewpoint. He states that the language in the trilogy lacks magnificence, eloquence, and poetic quality. According to him that is precisely why Mourning Becomes Electra remains "only the best tragedy in English which the present century has produced."¹³ He further states that O'Neill is not the only playwright to attempt to express tragedy or near-tragedy but "he is, however, the only one who has devoted himself consistently to the single task and hence the only one whom one thinks of as primarily a tragic writer."¹⁴

An opposite view supported by various other critics refuses to grant the trilogy the status of tragedy. Such is the case of Joseph P. O'Neill S.J., who studied O'Neill's tragic theory and developed a modern conception of tragedy based on Mourning Becomes Electra. To him the trilogy represents a translation of ancient values into modern terms and expresses an entirely different concept of tragedy. The critic emphasizes especially the notion of fate and human responsibility since in his opinion these are essential elements for a conceptualization of the tragic. Thus he points out that in the final scene of "The Haunted" Lavinia achieves enlightenment, recognizing and accepting her fate, her guilt, and her own responsibility for that fate including the ultimate justice of her punishment. The critic then raises a question and answers it:

However, even when human responsibility is accepted as an essential element in the tragic expression of Mourning Becomes Electra, what is its ultimate significance in O'Neill's tragic concept? Does the mere presence of this responsibility place O'Neill's play among the greatest tragedies? The answer must be that it does not. ¹⁵

Joseph O'Neill adds that human freedom is essential to true tragic expression, because it is the basis of the human

potential destroyed in the tragic fall. He says that "in so far as O'Neill's dramatic expression embodies human responsibility, it at least moves into the realm of the tragic," but that is not enough:¹⁶

O'Neill's concept of tragedy is still very limited. For though he develops a tragic fall through fate and responsibility, he makes the fall itself the end of the tragic action. His play lacks a final redemptive resolution that is found in the greatest tragedies.¹⁷

The British scholar C.W. Bigsby also identifies O'Neill's trilogy as failing "to produce an adequate modern equivalent for a classic resonance."¹⁸ According to Professor Bigsby, the tragic impulse has been neutralized by rational psychology:

Indeed the very supposed rationality of the psychological analysis on which the play rests neutralizes the tragic impulse. The inscrutable forces behind life which he [O'Neill] had set himself to expose at the beginning of his career have become all too scrutable. Psychopathology is finally no substitute for the tragic imagination.¹⁹

Another student who criticizes O'Neill's tragic concept is William Peery. It is his opinion that Lavinia, in spite of being so closely modeled on Electra, is not a noble protagonist. She shows admirable devotion to the Mannon name, but nevertheless refuses to prevent her brother's suicide. In addition, the critic observes that the conflicting feelings which pervade all the relationships of the family members bear a similarity to descriptions of neurotic behavior found in psychiatric treatises. To use Peery's own words:

Lavinia's unwholesome love for her father, her jealousy of her mother, her mother's jealousy of her, Orin's love for her, combine to give O'Neill's most Greek tragedy too close a resemblance to a psychiatric case book.²⁰

Though Mr. Peery agrees that O'Neill makes a "considerable effort toward tragic nobility through acknowledgment of guilt," he nevertheless believes that O'Neill's main

protagonist lacks nobility, and evidently such a character cannot be admired by the reader.²¹ On the whole Lavinia's suffering does not reveal Greek grandeur. The critic also emphasizes that

The dramatist's attempt to employ the techniques of traditional tragedy is clearly apparent in his endings and might have been cited as corroborative evidence that O'Neill accepts traditional tragic theory. But for one reason or another the effect at which he aimed is generally not achieved.²²

In conclusion, he states that "despite persistent efforts O'Neill has not been able to fill the tragic buskin," his main flaw being the lack of necessary nobility on the part of his characters.²³

Many other critics and their viewpoints could be included here but I believe the ones given suffice to show the controversy concerning the genre classification of the play.

As a preliminary to any assertion of whether O'Neill's trilogy can be considered true tragedy or not, it is important to define the term itself. The theoretical support for my analysis of such a concept is grounded on the notions developed by Aristotle, Nietzsche, Hegel and Max Scheler. They have been selected primarily because, to my view, their reflections on the subject provide us with the most relevant considerations in determining the constituents of this genre. Aristotle, in the "Poetics" defines tragedy as

The imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude (length, size) in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play in the form of action, not of narrative through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.²⁴

Tragedy portrays human suffering through mimesis (imitation) and produces in the spectator or reader an emotional response which includes pity and fear. So by causing the emotions of eleos (pity) and phobos (fear), katharsis (purgation) is effected. Tragedy presents an admirable character ruined by

frailty, misfortune, or a tragic flaw (hamartia), thus arousing pity and a sympathetic sharing in his lot. The tragic hero changes from ignorance to knowledge (anagnorisis) and recognises his flaw. A reversal (peripeteia) from good to bad fortune takes place and the hero accepts his fate as necessary. Such acceptance arouses in the reader the feeling that higher forces have triumphed over the character. Catharsis then follows, bringing about release from tension and restoration of order and serenity.

Friedrich Nietzsche, in The Birth of Tragedy, illuminates the notion of suffering implied in tragedy. He points out that the tragic hero is in dialectical opposition to what is called "Greek cheerfulness." Despite all his misery, the tragic hero still "spreads a magical power of blessing that remains effective even beyond his decease."²⁵ Nietzsche further clarifies the idea of Greek cheerfulness by taking Sophocles' Oedipus as the prototype of the noble human being who despite his wisdom is doomed to wretchedness and disgrace. But as the knot of the story is untangled a deep human joy overcomes the audience and irradiates a ubiquitous feeling of utter calm and peace:

The genuinely Hellenic delight at this dialectical solution is so great that it introduces a trait of superior cheerfulness into the whole work everywhere softening the sharp points of the gruesome presuppositions of this process.²⁶

What the philosopher means by "Greek cheerfulness" is the willingness of the tragic hero to face hardships and endure suffering since he envisages strife as the natural law of life.

Nietzsche was convinced that the creation of tragedy results from the Greek awareness of the terror of existence. Attic tragedy was the great life-affirming alternative, the solution to help man endure life. To him, the origin of tragedy can be traced to the tragic chorus made up of Dionysian satyrs. Because of the terraced structure of concentric arcs in Greek theaters, the spectator could overlook the social world around

him and imagine that he himself was a chorist. The chorus then worked as "the mirror image in which the Dionysian man contemplates himself."²⁷ The process of the tragic chorus was to see oneself transformed before one's own eyes and to act as if one had entered into another body. In this way there was a surrender of individuality and the spectators experienced this magic transformation.²⁸

Another philosopher who greatly contributed to a clearer elaboration of the concept of the tragic was Hegel.²⁹ His theory includes some innovations and elucidates important aspects necessary to a clarification of the nature of tragedy. He points out that mere suffering is not tragic, but only the suffering that comes from a special kind of action. Pity for mere misfortune or fear of misfortune is not tragic. In addition, tragic pity or fear does not appeal simply to our sensibilities but to the spirit, since the tragic conflict is a conflict of the spirit. According to Hegel, tragedy presents a clash, a conflict not between good and evil but between good and good. It is a war of one positive value against another positive value. It follows then that there are two competing forces — both right in themselves and equally justified. Since each one of the characters embodying the values makes a claim for exclusiveness, accepting no compromise, and since they cannot coexist peacefully, harmony is broken and destruction becomes inevitable.

In other words, the tragic appears only where the strength to destroy a positive value proceeds from an object also possessing a positive value. Consequently each person or power in the struggle represents an equally superior right or fulfills an equally superior duty. The end of the tragic conflict lies in the denial of exclusiveness claimed by both parties. Nevertheless, tragedy does not necessarily require an unhappy ending. Sometimes the conflict closes with some solution or external intervention. Since both combatants were ethically correct and only their claim for exclusiveness had to be denied, a reconciliation usually takes place. It follows that tragic grief does not arouse indignation, anger or reproach, but rather calm and peace.

Max Scheler's discussion of the tragic is also very helpful for a better comprehension of its essential elements.³⁰ According to the German philosopher, the tragic always implies that the tragic hero shows what he calls a determined effectiveness in doing and in suffering. The tragic character must therefore be willing to act and to suffer. Tragedy asks for the characters in the story to attend to the demands of their duty to the utmost of their capabilities. The tragic hero is determined to act for the values he espouses and is willing to endure all the consequences of his action. He avoids destruction but does not give up his values; he identifies himself wholly with the power that moves him, and will allow the justification of no other power. Tragedy also implies freedom of action. Says Scheler:

Whenever men are presented as "milieu-defined," as completely determined by "relationships" as in the naturalist drama, we have a much less likely source of the tragic than in the drama which gives us the impression that consciously free choices are clearly and conclusively driving the events of the play to its catastrophe.³¹

What is implied is that the tragic hero must choose his action freely. Therefore it is very unlikely that tragedy will occur within a naturalistic framework since naturalism and determinism preclude man's free choice. It is true that the tragic hero is aware of the existence of unfree causes which have their roots in the make-up of the universe itself, but he does not act determined by them. On the contrary, he assumes a certain high value which transcends the unfree causes so that the course of his actions will be directed by his own free choice.

Another point reinforced by Scheler is that real tragedy consists in the absence of guilt, so that the question of who is guilty does not have an answer. Because the hero has espoused a high value, he is devoid of any sense of culpability in terms of moral guilt.

In other words, in tragedy no one can be blamed, no judge can be found, no guilt can be localized. Consequently,

the essence of the tragic conflict is that it must be at the same time devoid of guilt and yet unavoidable.

Having traced the main features of the tragic according to the philosophers whose theories I have chosen as points of reference, it is now possible to examine the specific case of O'Neill's trilogy.

It is well-known that O'Neill was deeply conscious of the tragic configuration of the universe and that was the sole subject he was concerned with. To him the most appropriate form to express this tragic make-up was the Greek model. His commitment to the great tradition in tragedy can be ascertained in a letter dated 1925 and addressed to Arthur Hobson Quinn:

I am always acutely conscious of the Force behind (Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it — Mystery certainly) — and of the one eternal tragedy on Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and that it is possible — or can be — to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage. Of course, this is very much of a dream, but where the theatre is concerned, one must have a dream, and the Greek dream is the noblest ever! ³²

The above quotation indicates O'Neill's great interest in and respect for Greek drama. It further reveals his conviction that the modern dramatist should be able to express tragedy based on modern values and symbols.

It can be seen that one of O'Neill's purposes with Mourning Becomes Electra was to create a tragedy with Greek grandeur. Whether he has actually achieved his goal is a question which deserves further investigation and whose answer, I believe, lies in the careful and detailed study of the configuration of the characters' motivations.

As already discussed in part III of this dissertation, before writing the trilogy O'Neill realized that his

immediate problem was to create a modern tragic interpretation of the gods. It was in psychology that he found the modern design most likely to embody the values he desired. He replaced the traditional Greek gods by the human unconscious, so that the conflict O'Neill's characters attempt to resolve is not between the human and the divine but rather within themselves. It is the conflict in the conscious mind that ultimately makes them victims of destiny. It follows that action in the play moves further and further inwards until it is entirely submerged in the characters' psyche and consequently in their portrayal.

The internal fate the Mannons have to obey has been denominated psychological fate, as already discussed in Chapter III of this study. I will recall only the most relevant points already made.

It must be kept in mind that the Mannons are caught in a web of inherited complexes and neuroses from which they cannot escape. Their fate is the physical and psychological heritage of their Puritan past and of their family conflicts. Their life-like masks bind them together and as a whole they remain bound to the Oedipus complex. To elucidate the question of the tragic in the play two characters have been selected as material for analysis: Lavinia and Orin, who at least by means of identification with their classic counterparts, seem to fit the accepted pattern of tragic grandeur.

According to Hegel and Scheler, the tragic hero is the one who embraces a high positive value which is ethically justified. After espousing such value, he is effectively determined to fight for it even if it means his or somebody else's destruction. At first glance, such seems to be the case of Lavinia, who engenders murders impelled by a relentless passion which leaves her no rest until she has killed. Once she discovers her mother is guilty of her father's death, she sees no way out but revenge. She will accept no compromise. And yet a closer and deeper investigation leads to the conclusion that her real motive is not revenge for the death of her father. It is rather envy, jealousy, and hatred for her mother who has had both the men she loves: her father and Adam

Brant. Since she cannot have Adam for herself, she persuades Orin to kill him for his participation in the murder of their father. What lies hidden behind her actions and which she covers up, pretending it is an act of justice, is her wish to punish Christine by taking from her not life itself, but the love which is the source of her life.

It is through Orin that the reader is informed of Lavinia's true intentions. Towards the end of the play he realizes his sister's real purposes and then accuses her:

You're doing the lying! You know damned well that behind all your pretense about Mother's murder being an act of justice was your jealous hatred!... You wanted Brant for yourself! (p. 355)

Lavinia denies the charge, fiercely refusing to believe it herself. Her stubbornness will not allow her to perceive her misdeeds or her true motives. Gradually, however, a process of self-discovery takes place in her mind. Further on, when she tells Orin that if he were not such a coward he would kill himself and when she lets him go away alone in such a dreadful and despairing state of mind, she knows she has committed another murder. She could have prevented his death and she is aware of it. That is why after hearing the sound of the fatal shot she exclaims:

Orin! Forgive me! (She controls herself with a terrible effort of will. Her mouth congeals into a frozen line...) (p. 367)

By now she is half-conscious of her actions and has glimpses of enlightenment but still she cannot comprehend and accept the cruel reality of her guilt. Bravely enough, she makes her final attempt to escape from the Puritan hate of the Mannon past and to reach her island of pure and sinless love by asking Peter to marry her. However, when she refers to Peter as Adam, she recognizes the absolute futility of her struggle against the forces of the unconscious and against the Mannon dead. Lavinia is then forced to acknowledge defeat and give up the fight. She has her moment of

psychological insight and of recognition. She realizes that the dead have not forgotten and will not rest until justice has been made. She then yields to her Puritan sense of guilt and to the bondage with her past and family heritage.

It is perhaps at this point, in accepting her guilt, that Lavinia comes closest to tragic grandeur. However, the fact that her intentions and acts are impregnated with sin and guilt of which she finally becomes aware leads to her need for punishment, thus precluding any claim to tragic nobility. She realizes she must pay for her crimes not with ordinary death but with a return to the living death which is the Mannon fate. As Seth, the gardener, sings the refrain, she states her doom:

- L - I'm not bound away — not now, Seth. I'm bound here — to the Mannon dead! (She gives a dry little cackle of laughter and turns as if to enter the house).
- S - (frightened by the look on her face, grabs her by the arm) Don't go in there, Vinnie!
- L - (grimly). Don't be afraid. I'm not going the way Mother and Orin went. That's escaping punishment. And there's no one left to punish me. I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison! (pp.375-76, italics mine)

It seems then that O'Neill strives for tragic grandeur in the depiction of Lavinia's suffering. It is in the force of her personality and in the acceptance of her fate that her triumph is implied. Even though her destruction seems to have been determined by fate, i.e., by hereditary neurosis and psychological determinism, she still takes responsibility for that destruction. Although she may have had no control over herself and the flaw which determined her destiny, she still considered herself free to assume responsibility for her actions and their consequences.

Such a denouement might seem to indicate that Lavinia attains tragic nobility, but this effect is invalidated since Lavinia lacks the self-transcendence of an authentic

tragic heroine. The cause she espouses is vengeance — not as an act of justice but as a very personal need based on hatred and jealousy. Her motivation is not noble and cannot be ethically sustained. Hers is not a guiltless guilt but a real guilt, since it is a result of personal desire.

The other character who might embody the traits of a tragic hero is Orin. Examining his make-up in the trilogy, it will be seen that he too falls short of tragic characteristics. Most obviously, he was modeled on Orestes, the tragic Greek hero who killed his mother and her lover to revenge his father's murder and was persecuted by the Furies. Nevertheless, as he acted under the order of Apollo, it follows that Orestes incurred pollution only by the external act and was free of any personal guilt. His was a guiltless guilt.

A subtle recreation of Orestes's ambiguous guilt is instilled in Orin when he drives Christine to suicide rather than actually kills her. Since it is his boasting about having killed Adam, her lover, that leads her to suicide, Orin feels responsible for her death. It is precisely the weight of such responsibility that brings on the furies of his conscience and engenders the tortures of his psychological guilt:

I hate the daylight. It's like an accusing eye!
No, we've renounced the day, in which normal people
live — or rather it has renounced us. Perpetual
night — darkness of death in life — that's the
fitting habitat for guilt! You believe you can
escape that, but I'm not so foolish! (p. 352)

Orin's haunting sense of guilt is the natural counterpart of the Greek Furies. The fundamental divergence between the two heroes lies in their basic motivations. Whereas Orestes is impelled to action by a sense of justice and duty which is part of the ethical code of his society, Orin is propelled by a desire to eliminate a rival in love, a feeling stemming from jealousy of his mother. Whereas Orestes espouses a highly sustained ethical cause, Orin is motivated by a personal negative impulse derived from a neurotic Oedipal attachment. It follows that both Orin and Lavinia lack sufficient tragic

nobility and magnitude.

It is undeniable that there is a fate hovering over the Mannon family: the physical and psychological heritage of their New England past, of their Puritan frustration in expressing their feelings, and the tendency to destroy themselves and others. Yet a cluster of questions arises. Are Lavinia and Orin inevitable victims of forces utterly beyond their control, or are they partially responsible for their own destiny? Is Lavinia's act of shutting herself inside the Mannon house — a symbolic sepulchre — an instance of stoic acceptance of suffering, or a fatalistic submission to the family fate? Is it an act of liberation or merely the yielding to psychological determinism? Is it an act of courage or an act of cowardice? The process of assuming one's own guilt and of facing punishment may apparently seem an instance of greatness and, to a certain extent, it is. Unquestionably, Lavinia's cries of defiance at the portraits of her ancestors — "I'm through with you forever, now, do you hear? I'm Mother's daughter — not one of you! I'll live in spite of you!" (p. 367) — together with her insistent attempts to escape the Mannon past confer on her some degree of courage especially when contrasted to the weakness of Orin's suicide. Such is the case, for example of her violent responses and statements like "I'm not asking God or anybody for forgiveness. I forgive myself " (p. 372). However, the question of free will and choice remains open, for man is neither totally free nor purely determined. Fate for the individual human being is the concrete physical and psychological circumstances that condition his life. His life fulfillment depends on his free responsible reaction to these circumstances, on the calm acceptance of conditions he cannot alter, and on the energetic struggle to change what he can. In the balance between the acceptance and the struggle lies the success of the full development of his human potential. With the advent of Existentialism, it has become accepted that, regardless of how strong the forces of the universe may be, they are not totally coercive, so that man remains ultimately responsible for his own destiny. In the specific case of Lavinia, despite all her efforts, she has not been capable

of transcending her destiny and affirming her individuality. It may be concluded then that the question of human freedom and responsibility is implied in the text but it has not been convincingly developed, so that what is finally emphasized is the conditioning power of the psychological fate of the Mannon heritage. Furthermore, in spite of having included a partial acceptance of responsibility in some characters of Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill has not succeeded in making of his text what he explicitly intended, since their motivations fall short of providing the necessary constitutive elements of the tragic. Although the author aimed at creating a character similar to the classical tragic Electra, who defends the values of her community and integrates herself in a cosmic order, he has created an Electra who is a victim of the destructive values of a family and social environment.

The pathetic element in Electra's figure becomes evident when the morbidity of the last scene reveals that she reproduces the negative values without managing to transcend them, for ironically enough she punishes herself in such a way so that she reasserts the instinct of death as the fundamental and prevailing force in her society. Nevertheless, Mourning Becomes Electra is a well constructed play. What seems to be flaw in characterization since there is an inversion of the intention to create a tragic heroine, curiously and paradoxically becomes one more vehicle to project the theme of contradiction, frailty and duality, inherent in human beings.

Finally, it must be mentioned that the classification of genre of a text does not in itself constitute the most relevant aim of literary analysis, since it might lead us into making value judgements on the basis of criteria of generic nobility. O'Neill's play is not better or worse due to any mechanical genre classification. On the other hand, however, the process undergone to classify O'Neill's play acquires great significance in that it provides a deeper and clearer understanding of the configuration unfolded in the play. It has certainly helped elucidate several aspects of the trilogy such as characters' make-up and motivation.

In conclusion, it can be said that O'Neill's play presents an adequate integration of the system of forms and of meaning for all the structural elements converge in the projection of the dominant themes. And this is what remains pertinent for a literary evaluation of the play.

NOTES

¹Doris Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1958), p. 141.

²Falk, p. 141.

³Falk, p. 142.

⁴Falk, p. 142.

⁵Falk, p. 142.

⁶Falk p. 142.

⁷Roger Asselineau, "Mourning Becomes Electra as a Tragedy," Modern Drama, 1 (1958), p. 143.

⁸Asselineau, p. 144, italics mine.

⁹Asselineau, p. 144, italics mine.

¹⁰Asselineau, p. 146.

¹¹Asselineau, p. 149.

¹²Asselineau, pp. 149-50.

¹³Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918. An Informal History (New York: George Braziller, 1957), p. 120.

¹⁴Krutch, p. 120.

¹⁵Joseph P. O'Neill, S.J., "The Tragic Theory of Eugene O'Neill," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, No. 4, 1963, p. 498.

¹⁶Jospeh P. O'Neill, p. 498.

¹⁷Joseph P. O'Neill, p. 498.

¹⁸C.W. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama 1900-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), p. 86.

¹⁹Bigsby, p. 87.

²⁰William Peery, "Does the Buskin fit O'Neill?" University of Kansas City Review, 15 (1949), p. 284.

²¹Peery, p. 285.

²²Peery, p. 286.

²³Peery, p. 287.

²⁴Aristotle, "Poetics," in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Brace and Jovanovitch, 1971), pp. 47-66.

²⁵Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 67.

²⁶Nietzsche, p. 68.

²⁷Nietzsche, p. 63.

²⁸It may be relevant to point out that in Mourning Becomes Electra, the chorus is made up of the townspeople, as already mentioned in Part II of this dissertation; Seth, the gardener of the Mannon house, functions as its leader. Interestingly enough, as one compares Greek and Egyptian symbolism, an association may be established between Dionysus and Seth. In Egyptian mythology, Seth is the personification of darkness, the "Great Magician," a dark trickster figure, who cut his brother Osiris, the light of the world, into fourteen pieces. Osiris' body was later found and pieced together. There followed a reconciliation between the two brothers and Seth became the guardian of the sun boat, the light to ward off evil. Therefore two parallels can be drawn: one between the gods of light — Apollo and Osiris — and the other between Dionysus and Seth — the gods of darkness. In O'Neill's trilogy the presence of Seth, constantly drunk and always singing a nostalgic song, refers us to Dionysus, the Greek god of drinks and songs, the opposite of Apollo, god of the sun. As the head of the chorus, he functions as an element of mediation in that he measures and evaluates characters and their acts. He takes on the attributes of the coryphaeus in Greek tragedies — old age, common sense, wisdom, objective evaluation, and perception of the meaning behind the events. He is a witness of the family saga and of the unfolding of their destiny. He wisely perceives and accepts, with a simple repetitive "Ayeh," the antagonistic forces of life and death, joy and path, inherent in human experience. In fact, the first and last speeches in the trilogy are Seth's. This reinforces the point that this character constitutes a structural and symbolic component which connects O'Neill's play to the classical tradition.

²⁹A.C. Bradley, "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy," in Hegel on Tragedy, eds. Anna and Henry Paolucci (New York : Harper

and Row, 1975), pp. 367-88.

³⁰Max Scheler, "On the Tragic," in Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism, eds. Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963), pp. 27-44.

³¹Scheler, p. 37.

³²Eugene O'Neill, "Neglected Poet - A Letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn," in O'Neill and his Plays, eds. Oscar Cargill et al. (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1961), p. 125.

CONCLUSION

Truly the blessed gods have proclaimed a most beautiful secret: Death comes not as a curse, but as a blessing to men.

An Eleusinian epitaph

Throughout this study it has been seen that the main principle underlying O'Neill's text is that of polarity, since it embodies and projects the author's worldview and indicates the presence of the contemporary Zeitgeist as well as the recurrence of traditional symbols. This notion of the universe as an everlasting alternation between opposites, that is, as a kind of perpetual dialectic with inescapable circular repetitions found a support in the Freudian dualistic theory of instincts. Such dual forces and the way they acted as determinants in the motivations of the characters were also discussed.

It was then demonstrated how Mourning Becomes Electra has been structured on pairs of oppositions: from the creation of setting and imagery to the building of characterization, motivation, conflict, and mood. The main pair of opposites presented in the trilogy is that of the life instinct versus the death instinct, Eros versus Thanatos. This is reinforced by other oppositions such as the black and white colors creating dark and light atmospheres, the moon symbolizing the cyclic rhythm of life from birth to death and into birth again, and the twofold meaning of the flowers in their positive connection with love, beauty, and in their opposed relation to transitoriness and death. Based on Eastern and Western traditional symbolism, two other antithetical symbols were discussed: the Ouroboros and the Yang-Yin since they demonstrate the universal design of opposites contradicting and yet complementing one another.

Symbols and images suggesting mutability, and projecting the notion of the cyclic nature of life contributed to convey the theme of duality as constituting an inherent characteristic of human existence. Nevertheless, for the characters of Mourning Becomes Electra no ideal harmony was found at the end of the conflict, no synthesis was attained, on the contrary, destruction and death prevailed.

Having presented the universal features of the trilogy, I have then attempted to determine specific social and cultural traits which connect the trilogy to American society. That's the reason why Part II of this dissertation dealt with the ideology underlying the characters' actions,

beliefs, and thoughts: Puritanism, with its conviction that man is born in sin and its denial of love and beauty.

Such ideology was seen as a force of corrosion destroying the lives of the rich and powerful Mannon whose repression of the natural need for pleasure had been compensated for and sublimated thus resulting in an exaggerated search for wealth and power. In this respect, references have been made to Sigmund Freud and George Bataille who interpreted the notion of work and development as connected with repressed feelings.

It was then shown that one of the fiercest battles fought by characters in Mourning Becomes Electra was that between puritanical negativism — a death force — and the instinct of life. Nevertheless this struggle is not limited to the Mannons' circle as the chorus of townspeople share many of the family traits, showing that the community, also tinted with the Evil stain of distorted Puritan beliefs, is a microcosmic representation of American Society.

In order to reinforce the notion of Puritanism as constituting a destructive force, characterization and geographical setting were elaborated on the basis of dualistic and Manichean patterns. Irish and Foreign characters, New York and the sea with its islands are all good, positive forces which contrast with the bad, negative Yankee American characters, New England, and Land where Puritanism prevails. The symbology of the sea, the waters, and the blessed islands was analysed to reveal the parallel between them and earthly paradise, a place of refuge against the evil effects of Puritanism.

In Part III of this dissertation, I focused on O'Neill's attempt to find a substitute for classic fate in the modern pattern of psychology. I have endeavored to demonstrate how the characters' actions are an expression of inward impulses resulting from unresolved parent-child relationships known today as the Oedipus and Electra complexes. By creating patterns of masculine and feminine beauty based on the primal mother and father images, O'Neill established the characters' fate of loving a counterpart of their parent of the opposite sex. Likewise, his characters are fated to hate the parent

of the same sex and still to resemble them physically and psychologically. They become duplicates of their parents and are thus bound to repeat their ancestors' experiences. The cause of the Mannon doom lies not only in the effects of Puritanism but also and mainly in the structure of the family itself. To further reinforce this notion of family fate, O'Neill in the stage directions, describes his characters as bearing strange mask-like faces. Such a suggestion of masks emphasizes the inevitable similarity of the Mannon family, which at the same time binds them together and separates them from the outside world. It further discloses the dualism of exterior versus interior, of surface versus depth, and of conscious versus unconscious.

The fourth part of my study dealt with the question of the tragic. Since this is a subject which has aroused great controversy, the most relevant critical opinions have been presented. A definition of the concept of tragedy based on the theories of Aristotle, Hegel, Scheler, and Nietzsche was given. The two characters most likely to embody traits of tragic heroes — Lavinia and Orin — were then examined. The motivations which propelled them to action led me to the conclusion that they are not moved by a sense of justice and duty but only by personal drives such as jealousy and hatred. They are guilty and acknowledge responsibility for their crimes, thus facing self-punishment. If theirs was not a guiltless guilt, not an ethically justified cause, and not a noble value, it was concluded that they fall short of fitting the pattern of tragedy. This did not, however, invalidate O'Neill's text in any way, since generic considerations do not constitute an adequate criterion for literary evaluation.

One last element to be discussed in the conclusion to my study in relation to the modernity of O'Neill's version of Aeschylus' Oresteia is the radical change presented in the last play which constitutes a great divergence from the model with respect to the kind of denouement and its final implications.

In the Eumenides Aeschylus makes a political defense

of the Athenian court portraying the essential relation of man to the gods and to the state, with Orestes' purification being subordinated to a legal trial and to the powers of divine justice. Orestes' involuntary but inevitable guilt is resolved with the divine intervention of Apollo and Athene who appease the Furies, thus harmonizing the old and the new order of divine justice. Moreover, the play shows the state as the protector of individual freedom and security.

As it can be seen, what becomes evident is that the Oresteia presents a unified solution to the central conflict of how to reconcile the suffering of man with divine providence. It further depicts the reconciliation of conflicting principles such as fate and freedom, justice and mercy, the individual and the universal order, suffering and happiness. Summing up, it illustrates the dramatic fusion of the religious, political, and individual aspects of society.

Aeschylus wrote for a society in which drama was closely connected with the social, political and religious life in the community. Relevant information concerning the function of the state in the background of Aeschylus' dramas is supplied by Werner Jaeger, who affirms that it was not a chance detail, but constituted the spiritual stage on which the drama was enacted. The influence of Attic Theater upon social life cannot be overlooked. According to Jaeger, the tragic festival was the climax of the city's life:

The men of that age never felt that the nature and influence of tragedy were purely and simply aesthetic. Its power over them was so vast that they held it responsible for the spirit of the whole state; and although as historians we may believe that even the greatest poets were the representatives, not the creators, of national spirit. Our belief cannot alter the fact that the Athenians held them to be their spiritual leaders, with a responsibility far greater and graver than the constitutional authority of successive political leaders.¹

Eugene O'Neill, as he was addressing the twentieth

century American audience, knew he could not take advantage of the intimate relation between drama and life existing in Greece at the time of Aeschylus. He realized that modern drama was not closely linked with the social, religious, and political life of the American society. The awareness of such a disunion aroused in him the wish to create a modern duplicate of the Greek theater in order to reaffirm the socio-religious function of drama. As stated in his "Memoranda on Masks," O'Neill hoped for a type of theater that would feed an audience "hungry in its spiritual need to participate in imaginative interpretations of life rather than merely identify itself with faithful surface resemblances of living."²

What the American playwright longed for was a return to true theater, the theater of the Greeks and Elizabethans:

... a theater that could dare to boast — without committing a farcical sacrilege — that it is a legitimate descendant of the first theater that sprang by virtue of man's imaginative interpretation of life, out of his worship of Dionysus. I mean a theater returned to its highest and sole significant function as a temple where the religion of a poetical interpretation and symbolical celebration of life is communicated to human beings starved in spirit by their soul-stifling daily struggle to exist as masks among the masks of living!³

O'Neill better expresses his viewpoint when he states that the theater "should give us a meaning. In brief, it should return to the spirit of Greek grandeur."⁴ In order to accomplish his ideal, he felt that the values of the Greek tradition would have to be recreated anew in modern designs.

His modern rendering of the myth would then necessarily carry the weight of the twentieth century Zeitgeist. So, his version of the story unfolds in a nearly godless universe in which life is no longer interpreted in terms of theology. It follows then that the questions raised by the struggles of the House of Atreus cannot be resolved by gods or any higher law, but rather by mortals, so that what is emphasized is not the coming to maturity of the gods but rather the struggle of the suffering human being. It is

not in the realm of the gods that the conflict must be disentangled but rather in that of human individuals.

It is well-known that one of the greatest achievements of twentieth century literature was its depiction of internal and subjective action, partly due to the advancement of Psychoanalysis. Eugene O'Neill, himself a product of such Zeitgeist, explores well-concealed areas of social-behavior and inner workings of the human mind. Thus, in Mourning Becomes Electra, the external Greek fate of the gods finds a substitute in an inner fate. As discussed in Part II of this dissertation, such a determining factor derives, first from the effects of a regional constituent — New England Puritanism and its distorted view of man as a sinful being deserving punishment; second and principally, from the discoveries of psychology and psychoanalysis with their insight into the human psyche and into the complex relationships within the family. As pointed out by O'Neill in his "Working Notes," "fate from within the family is modern psychological approximation of the Greek conception of fate from without, from the supernatural."⁵

It becomes evident that O'Neill is chiefly concerned with the resolution of inner conflicts taking place in the mind of the protagonists — the autonomous force of the unconscious wrestling with those of the conscious ego in an attempt to satisfy their demands.

Another deviation from the Greek model is revealed in what concerns the shift of the focus upon characters. Whereas Orestes dominates Aeschylus' trilogy, Lavinia undertakes most of the dramatic function in Mourning Becomes Electra. This character, deviated from the conflict of moral obligation and reconciliation of divine powers, seems to be more fitting to convey the idea of personal conflicts taking place within the suffering individual.

Considering the divergence between the classical hero and the modern hero, it would seem only natural that O'Neill should reveal a radical departure from the classical versions of the Electra Stoff, mainly in terms of characterization. For while the classical hero was at one

with the cosmic order, never doubting the beliefs and institutions of his world, the modern hero, on the contrary, is usually a rebel whose doubts about himself and reality around him are projected on his constant struggle to survive amid numerous uncertainties. What is exposed in Mourning Becomes Electra is the philosophical incertitude of the modern rebel, his pain, his doubts, and his complexity. O'Neill himself declared loss of faith to be the primary subject of modern dramatic art:

the playwright today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it — the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning of life in, and to comfort his fears of death with.⁶

From the above quotation one concludes that O'Neill's problem was that of modern drama as a whole: how to make a religious vision have an effect on a totally secular world. His characters suffer from spiritual and psychological ailments and are seeking to understand themselves. They are alienated from the social group and separated from one another.

The concept of alienation implies that communication and mutual understanding are replaced by estrangement and hostility. As the bonds become tighter, estrangement is intensified, so that the individual becomes alienated not only from the others but from himself, from his real self. Because it is a psychological phenomenon, an internal conflict, a subjective distortion of external reality, a kind of hostility felt toward something outside oneself and still linked to oneself, alienation erects a barrier that denies the individual the possibility of growing and attaining self-knowledge.

In Mourning Becomes Electra, Eugene O'Neill makes a profound study of alienation as he depicts the estrangement of son and daughter from the parents, and the isolation of the family from the community. He probes into the complex tensions and resentments among the family members

and shows the repercussions of such negative forces. Here lies, I believe, the chief divergence of O'Neill from Aeschylus, for the characters of the American playwright embody the essential traits of the modern hero — alienation, fragmentation, anguish, revolt, and despair. They are presented in their dualism and ambiguity striving to reconcile conscious with unconscious needs in a perpetual process of tension between opposites, in a restless quest for new absolutes. In a world devoid of definite values and meaning, where man has lost his true identity in a situation of incongruency, dissatisfaction, duality, and neurosis, O'Neill's contemporary *Electra* is likely to evoke a tremendous impact on its twentieth century audience.

One concludes, on basis of the above, that O'Neill's chief concern is the presentation of inner conflicts and the unfolding of the antithetical patterns which constitutes the inevitable dilemma of existence. Mourning Becomes Electra is his attempt at interpreting the dualistic aspects of the human experience inasmuch as it necessarily involves good and evil, joy and gloom, beauty and ugliness, love and hatred, life and death. Still, no harmony, no order, no unity is attained at the end of the conflict. O'Neill finds no answer to obliterate his profound disenchantment with the nature of existence and the chaos of time eroding man's life. The total descent into night, into darkness associated with annihilation and death, reinforces his sense of the absurdity and meaninglessness of life. O'Neill's final statement, as the play reaches its end, could have been that of Silenus to King Midas in Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus. When questioned by the king about the best and most desirable of all things for man, the companion of Dionysus hesitated to speak but finally broke out in a loud laugh and pronounced the following words:

Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misfortune, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is — to die soon. 7

It is interesting to point out that Sophocles' quotation, which embodies one aspect of the worldview of the Greeks, has also been discussed by Nietzsche. It is exactly such a vision of human existence added to the dualistic theory of the Apollinian and Dionysian forces inherent in the universe that indicate the identity of Nietzsche's thought with that of O'Neill. Nietzsche presented his sense of dualism taking as reference the two types of artistic approaches found in classical Greece. The Apollinian derived from Apollo — the god of light, "the shining one," the ruler over beauty, the image of the "principium individuationis," the embodiment of the precepts "know thyself" and "nothing in excess," through whom the joy and wisdom of illusion are transmitted — and the Dionysian, named after Dionysus — the "intoxicated" reality, the dark god of wine, love and sexuality, the embodiment of uncontrollable passion, the epitome of the emotional and instinctual side of the human being.⁸

According to Nietzsche, these two different tendencies "run parallel to each other and continually incite each other to new and more powerful births which perpetuate an antagonism."⁹ The German philosopher further points out his belief that these opposing forces can be reconciled, but only superficially and at intervals through art:

the continuous development of art is bound up with the Apollinian and the Dionysian duality just as procreation depends on the duality of the sexes involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations.¹⁰

Here we can detect a similarity with Freud's dualistic theory which also underlies O'Neill's own perception of life. Undeniably, Mourning Becomes Electra, a play organized in terms of principles of polarities concretized in countless recurring oppositions already discussed in the previous chapters, fits this line of thought.

Nevertheless, whereas the struggle between opposing forces alternating in a balanced way is usually taken as

beneficial, both for Nietzsche and O'Neill, on the level of human experience itself, the strife remains worthless and fruitless. Only through art will a synthesis be attained. If there is no solution within the world portrayed in the work of art, what remains is the creation of the work of art in itself, which constitutes a response to the longing of human beings to surpass the transitoriness and mutability of their condition.

On a historical level no answer can be found, thus the negative outcome of the play. But inasmuch as the fragility and temporality which characterize the historical and the individual are overcome, inasmuch as the work of art allows for a return to the mythical or to what Jung has called the state of "participation mystique," a transhistorical level is reached and integration in the collective experience is attained.

As Nietzsche realizes, Art is the only path to transcendence:

We may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art — for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified.¹¹

NOTES

¹Werner Jaeger, as quoted in Joseph P. O'Neill S.J., "The Tragic Theory of Eugene O'Neill," Texas Studies in Literature and Language,⁴ (1963), p. 487.

²Eugene O'Neill, "Memoranda on Masks," in O'Neill and His Plays, eds. Oscar Cargill et al. (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1970). p. 121.

³O'Neill, "Memoranda on Masks," pp. 121-22.

⁴O'Neill as quoted by Doris Falk in Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1958), p. 26.

⁵O'Neill, as quoted by Doris M. Alexander in "Psychological Fate in Mourning Becomes Electra," PMLA, (Dec. 1953), LXVIII, No.5, p. 933.

⁶O'Neill as quoted by Falk, p. 128.

⁷Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 42.

⁸Nietzsche, p. 46.

⁹Nietzsche, p. 33.

¹⁰Nietzsche, p.33.

¹¹Nietzsche, p. 52.

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E R R A T A

PAGE	LINE	WHERE IT READS:	IT SHOULD READ:
Acknowledgements	8	greatful	grateful
3	30	Athena	Athena in
16	6	longe	long
16	17	Life	life
16	18	Death	death
17	24	Act 5	act V
17	36	act 2	act II
21	8	Death	death
21	24	symbolize	symbolizes
22	4	Act III	act III
25	21	Death	death
30	20	drunkenness	drunkenness
31	15	psycho-analytical	psychoanalytical
38	35	also is used	is also used
54	9	over simplification	oversimplification
58	30	Act II	act II
61	20	church	church,
61	11	do break	to break
66	10	As Outline	An Outline
67	10	manking	mankind
87	8	his	His
92	35	spirit.Our belief	Spirit,our belief
96	16	constitutes	constitute
102	7-8	Becomes	Becomes
105	3-4 and 5-6	invert order of entries	