

O'NEILL'S PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH OF THE GREEK SENSE OF FATE, *MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA*

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ABSTRACT

Eugene O'Neill is regarded as pioneer in updating ancient Greek dramatic techniques into modern analogues. He creatively manifested taboo subject matters on stage in a mythical way, which the Americans themselves were not allowed to speak, even to think about, at the dawn of the 20th century. O'Neill (1888-1953) is the kind of playwrights who was always interested in being in complete harmony with his audience. He wrote in a time when most of his fellows, whether in fiction or drama, were striving with the social and economic realities of the times doing their best to raise people's attention toward the coming destruction of 1929. In contrast, O'Neill rejected that flat study of man's condition and diverted his attention to explore the deep alienation and dark side of the human soul. The aim of the present paper is to examine O'Neill's psychological approach of the Greek myth through a modern context.

KEYWORDS: Fate, Mourning, Myth, Psychological Drama, Tragedy

INTRODUCTION

Waving between Freud's theory of psychoanalysis and ancient Greek myths, O'Neill created his play *mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). His interest in mythic plot, themes and characters paved him the way to reveal what was forbidden and hidden behind the puritanical mask of his society. Probably, the beauty and greatness of his characters lie in this very fact: they are too complex, too involved in the cross currents of life to be purely one person or the other. Their successive conflicts give them a quality, which inspires confidence in their humanity and provides the reader's sympathy and understanding in a way that more stable and unified personalities never could.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill undertook a huge risky project to transform three famous Greek myths Aeschylus' *Oresteia*¹ and Sophocles' *Electra* and *Oedipus the King*² into a modern psychological drama. He reworked the myths in a complete new way. He had not only changed the names of characters as well as the story, but also changed the old Greek belief that human actions and destiny are modeled by fate. Although there are similarities in both tragic

¹ Setting of the *Oresteia* resembles a lot America of the 30's. Aeschylus play is strongly anchored in the philosophical and political consciousness of his time. It was a time of transition when Greek civilization was moving towards a cultural cohesion after passing through a long period of wars and bloodshed. Athens was about to play a critical role in coming years. It had emerged successful in its struggle against tyrannical regimes of the past, and on the other hand, it had to consolidate the Greek city-states against the possible invasion of the Persian Empire. The rise of Democracy resulted in a man's attempt to apply rational order on his earthly existence.

² The myth says that Oedipus married Jocaste, unaware that she was his mother. At the end of the legend Jocasta hangs herself, and Oedipus stabs out his own eyes. The blind king then goes into exile with only his daughter, Antigone, to guide him, and eventually dies in the town of Colonus.

narratives, yet in O'Neill's play, there are points of departure, which essentially construct his unique tragic vision and provide parameters to differentiate between Greek and modern sensibilities.

Originally, ancient theatre emerged from myths, rituals, and ceremonies dedicated to the gods. Early societies perceived a direct connection between the actions of a group or its leaders and its impact on the whole society. In order to preserve the society, these same groups and leaders acted from habit to form a tradition that would cultivate unique ceremonies and rituals. The repetition of these ceremonies and rituals laid the groundwork for theater. Nevertheless, O'Neill, as a modern playwright, broke away from the conventions of this genre in order to create a genuine American tragedy. Through the interplay between memory and history, the dramatist shed light on a distinctive American sense of the tragic, which is based on the idea of loss and the celebration of this loss.

O'Neill's dramatic universe is peopled with characters who are disillusioned with the idea of

The Christian god but at the same time yearn for the presence of some spiritual reality that could give them a sense of release from an absurd mode of existence. In ancient Greek, the idea of such a duality did not exist. Gods represented both the divine and the physical universe. O'Neill did not see the individual to be blessed in the Greek sense. His tragic vision implied that the chaos is the inherent principle of the universe and no amount of human wisdom can stop it and restore the moral order.

Examining Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* from the perspective of the classical

Tradition allows us to discover the reason by which the American playwright based his trilogy³ to reveal the deep-seated motives that give rise to a hostile and tormented relationship between family members. In effect, the Mannon family saga in New England⁴ and the Greek architecture of its great mansions. In addition to the American Civil War⁵, this conveys the mid-19th century setting of the tragedy all presented the form of a psychological drama with characters locked by a family heritage as inescapable as destiny itself.

The American Civil War is over, and in their New England home Christine and Lavinia Mannon await the homecoming of Ezra Mannon and his son, Orin. Lavinia, who adores her father, detests Christine because of Ezra's love for his wife. For her part, Christine is jealous of Orin's love and hates her husband and daughter. In this house of hidden hatred, Seth, the watchful gardener of the old mansion, sees that Lavinia also despises Captain Brant, a regular caller at the Mannon home and the secret lover of Christine.

O'Neill's influence in this play is purely Freud's theory of Oedipal/Electra Complexes⁶. Sigmund Freud⁷ explored

³ O'Neill uses the Oresteia trilogy of Aeschylus as a basis to his drama, which depicts the post-Civil War period. The trilogy includes three plays (Homecoming, The Hunted, and The Haunted)

⁴ New England is the site of the first European settlements in America. According to O'Neill, it is a bloodstained land of lost grace and Puritan sin, a sin revived in his plays by vigorous opposition to his parents' Catholic faith. Probably, New England may be as likely a place as any other in America, but for O'Neill, it seems the only place to turn when contemplating the meaning of origin.

⁵ A civil war in the United States fought from 1861 to 1865. The war had its origin in the factious extension of slavery into the western territories. Four years of intense combat left 620,000 to 750,000 soldiers dead, a higher number than the American casualties of World War I and World War II combined

⁶ Oedipus complex concerns a male child's excessive love for his mother; the same case of Orin and Christine, while the Electra complex is the exact sexual opposite. Throughout the play, Lavinia exhibits a strange attraction to her father; more emotionally involved than most father-daughter relationships.

the human mind more thoroughly than any other one in his time. The aim of his psychoanalytic method was the control of the irrational, nonlogical, dark side of man's life. The measures he, therefore, proposed were all aimed at the strengthening of the Ego at the expense of the Id (pleasure principle as opposed to reality principle)⁸. Certainly, during the late twenties and thirties, incorporating Freud's theory of psychoanalysis into literature was a kind of fashionable in the western world. American writers such as William Faulkner (1897-1962) in prose and Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) in theatre are probably the most important. The best examples are, perhaps, Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury* (1929) and O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*⁹ (1924) and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931).

Actually, Freud inspired his theory of the Oedipal Complex from the myth of *King Oedipus* by Sophocles. The myth says that Oedipus married Jocasta unaware that, she was his mother. For Freud, however, this is what he calls unconscious motivation actions (Olsen & Koppe, 1988), which though not intended consciously, they come out as a result of the inner wishes. In fact, this psychological and mental disorder is highly viewed in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Ezra married Christine because she resembles his first love, Marie Brantome, maybe it was Christine's likeness to Marie that determined Ezra's falling in love with her. He loves his daughter because she resembles Marie, and Christine. Adam Brant unconsciously loves Christine and Lavinia, because they resemble his mother Marie Brantome. "You're so like your mother," Brant says to Lavinia. "Your face is the dead image of hers. And look at your hair... I only know of one other woman who had... It was my mother." (Homecoming, Act1)

Lavinia as the key element in the story is unconsciously in love with her father. When Peter asks indirectly to Lavinia for marriage, she says, "I can't marry anyone, Peter... Father needs me." "He's got your mother," Peter says. "He needs me more", Lavinia answers (Ibid) "You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin!" Christine tells her. When Ezra comes home, Lavinia says to him, "You're the only man I'll ever love!" Lavinia is also unconsciously in love with her brother Orin, because he resembles her father. "I love [Orin] better than you!" Lavinia tells Christine. She is also in love with Brant because, he resembles her father and her brother. "You wanted Adam Brant for yourself!" Christine yells at Lavinia. (Ibid, Act2)

Christine, on the other hand, unconsciously obstinately loves her son Orin, while Ezra unconsciously hated him, Christine tells her son, "Because he knew I loved you better than anything in the world!" She had loved Orin, she admits to Lavinia, "Until he let you and your father nag him into the war, in spite of my begging him not leave me alone". (Ibid, Act 2) Christine falls in love with Brant, because he resembles her son Orin. "I never would have fallen in love with Adam,"

⁷ Sigmund Freud was the founding father of psychoanalysis, a method for treating mental illness and a theory which explains human behaviour. Freud contributions to psychology are vast; he was one of the most influential people of the twentieth century. His enduring legacy had influenced not only psychology, but also art, literature, and even the way people lived.

⁸ According to Freud's psychoanalysis, the ego and the id are two opposing components of the human psyche. The ego's goal is to satisfy the demands of the id in a safe and socially acceptable way. In contrast to the id, the ego follows the reality principle as it operates in both the conscious and unconscious mind.

⁹ It is another exemplary of his desire to unite the modern and the ancient Greek. It is based on Euripides' Greek tragedy, *Hippolytus*. A handsome but angry and grim young man, Eben desires nothing else than the farmland that his beloved Maw worked so hard and died upon. He pays off his half-brothers but is threatened by his father's new wife Abbie. They fall in love and have a son, but he comes to think she tricked him and wants the land for herself.

After she kills their son as an act of love, Eben cannot deny his passion for her anymore and proclaims he will go to prison with her or for her.

Christine says to Lavinia, "if I'd had Orin with me... When he had gone there was nothing left...? [But] a longing for love!" (Ibid). When Brant sees the resemblance between him and Ezra, he says to Christine, "It would be damned queer if you fell in love with me because I recalled Ezra Mannon to you." "No, no, I tell you!" says Christine. "It was Orin you made me think of! It was Orin!" (Ibid)

Orin also unconsciously hates his father. "We had a secret little world of our own in the old days, didn't we?" Christine asks Orin. "Which no one but we knew about". "I'll tell you the truth, Mother!" Orin says to Christine, "I won't pretend to you I'm sorry [Ezra] is dead!" "There was no one there but you and me," Orin says to her. (The Hunted, Act 2) At last, Orin kills Brant because, his mother loves him, and he resembles his father. When he kills Brant, he says "By God, he does look like Father." "I've killed him before [in my dream] —over Andover". (Ibid, Act 5)

Finally, Orin falls unconsciously in love with Lavinia because, she resembles his mother. In the last part, Lavinia has "become" Christine. "She now bears a striking resemblance to her mother in every respect". "You don't know how like Mother you've become, Vinnie," Orin says to Lavinia. "I don't mean only how pretty you've gotten" (The Haunted, Act 1, Scene 2).

Later, When Lavinia promises Orin, she will do anything he wants her to, she discovers he has been wanting to sleep with her. "I love you now with all the guilt on me," he says. "Perhaps I love you too much, Vinnie!" (Ibid, Act3)

Basically, Christine is the only responsible person for the Oedipus complex of her children and the ruin of her family. She has a loathsome feeling for her husband. Therefore, she keeps a sexual relationship with Adam, a cousin of Ezra. Christine tells her husband clearly that, "You want the truth? You've guessed it! You've used me, you've given me children, but I've never once been yours! I never could be! And whose fault is it? I loved you when I married you! I wanted to give myself! But you made me so I couldn't give! You filled me with disgust!" (Homecoming, Act 4)

However, it may be admitted that Christine appears in constant opposition to her daughter Lavinia, whereas she seems to like and overcare about Orin. Despite her feelings of antagonism for Lavinia, she wants Orin to settle down and marry his cousin Hazel. "I was selfish then. I was jealous, too, I'll confess. But all I want now is your happiness, dear. I know how much you used to like Hazel" (The Hunted, Act 2) Indeed, there are other arguments, may be Christine has said that to get free and marry Adam when there is no one to disturb the peace of her life. She is the extremely unfaithful and remains disloyal to her husband and even to herself as a mother.

She poisons her husband, when he returns from war. When Lavinia doubts her and accuses her of the murder she even tries to prove that, her daughter has gone out of her senses. But, we may feel, during the course of the play that, she is in deep love with Adam. She really wishes to settle down with him: "I am glad, too!that he has left us alone! Oh, how happy we'll be together," (Ibid) But, Lavinia is always there to spoil all her plans. Christine at the end has to commit suicide when Orin kills Brant.

Lavinia's character in *Mourning Becomes Electra* represents, in a higher rank, a victim of Oedipus complex. She is the protagonist of the play and remains the center of attention as she is always relevant to the characters and the story as a whole. The chorus¹⁰ describes her and say, "She is twentythree but looks considerably older. Tall like her mother, her

¹⁰ The chorus was one of the main dramatic conventions of the Greek theatre. It was used by the Greek playwrights to explain the action and interpret it in relation to the law of the state and the law of the Olympian gods. It also serves as an

body is thin, flatbreasted and angular, and its unattractiveness is accentuated by her plain black dress... She has a flat dry voice and a habit of snapping out her words like an officer giving orders. But in spite of these dissimilarities, one is immediately struck by her facial resemblance to her mother. She has the same peculiar shade of coppergold hair, the same pallor and dark violetblue eyes, the black eyebrows meeting in a straight line above her nose, the same sensual mouth, the same heavy jaw". The chorus also says, "Lavinia is cold and calm as an icicle" (Homecoming, Act1).

The tragedy of the Mannons' family may well be related, as the tragedy of Lavinia because, she has been assigned such an overwhelming role in the play and her point of view is, monopolizing the three parts of the trilogy. Probably, what Lavinia has experienced is the result of the maltreatment and reluctance, on the part of her mother. Lavinia was born of her mother's disgust of her father, the man she hated. "... 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! Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate you!" Christine replies, "I tried to love you. I told myself it wasn't human not to love my own child, born of my body. But I never could make myself feel you were born of anybody but his! You were always my wedding night to me and my honeymoon! (Homecoming, Act 2)

On the other hand, Lavinia is in strange love with her father, "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! (Ibid, Act 3) Lavinia has been always jealous of her mother, since in her presence she cannot enjoy the undivided love of her father and the one of Adam as well. "For a moment, mother and daughter stare into each other's eyes. In their whole tense attitudes is clearly revealed the bitter antagonism between them" (Ibid, Act 2). Nevertheless, Lavinia's half-tolerant attitude converts to full hatred, when Christine, her mother, has poisoned her father. Lavinia takes revenge and destroys her mother, as well as her lover, Adam.

Later in the play, instead of recovering from the pains and mental stresses, Lavinia collapses into an abyss of mental torture and self-confinement from which even the love of Peter fails to bring her out. Lavinia says, (in a dead voice), "I can't marry you, Peter. You mustn't ever see me again... Love isn't permitted to me. The dead are too strong! (The Haunted, Act 4) At the end, she decides to leave all and remain within the bounds of the hellish Mannon building, in a soliloquy she says, "... 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! I'll never go out or see anyone!" (Ibid)

Orin, another subject of the Oedipus complex, is the only male heir of the Mannon family. He is on the front fighting for the country. Before his return back home, his father has been poisoned and murdered by his mother Christine. Instead of showing deep concerns and gloom over the murder of his father, he is quite relaxed and internally satisfied. He ignores Hazel, his cousin, and her love. Orin tells his mother that he likes and loves her.

He has never been in love with Hazel or another woman.

After his mother has died, Lavinia is left with Orin. In a short while, Orin has been taking the fullest interest in her. Why? Simply because she resembles her mother and this has directed attention of Orin from a brotherly love to something much more than that. He even proposes her to stay with him and ignore Peter. He demands incestuous love from

actor in the play; to sing and/or dance and give the author's views just as a narrator does in a modern context. In an original manner of reviving the Greek theater, O'Neill opens his play *Mourning Becomes Electra* with a chorus (town's people) as a way of condensing some of his wordiness by relating events through the gossip of the town's citizens rather than the straight dramatic storytelling.

his sister. She screams and shouts back on him. Orin, out of a feeling of defeat and jealousy from Peter, commits suicide.

O'Neill's making Lavinia the central character in the play is itself an interesting fact. What he wanted to create is a modern psychological drama rooted in Greek legend, exploring the advantages of updating the Electra tragedy. Yet, he creates a more interesting and expressive end to the fate of Lavinia, if compared with one of the original Electra. Although, Sophocles makes Electra as the central persona in his legend, but at the end, Electra's fate remains ambiguous in accordance with the great role she plays in the tragedy. Lavinia's mourning in the last play of the trilogy is the central theme in O'Neill's story. Her gloom and sadness, her loneliness and retribution is exactly what O'Neill wanted to convey. Therefore, he wondered if it were possible to achieve any modern approximation of the Greek sense of fate into such a play in a time when an audience did not believe in divine retribution or gods. He attempted to write a play that would be real and acceptable to a modern audience and at the same time permit him to combine reality with his dark symbolic tone in both his structuring of the play and in the creation of his characters. One may confess that O'Neill adds a touch of his own creativity to modernize this ancient Greek tragedy, and make it enjoyable for a new crowd of readers.

Moreover, the play exhibits raw reality, tragic in form, behind the façade of a great family. Hate and revenge mix with love and affection to lead to trouble and ruin in the Mannon family. O'Neill once gave a comment that "behind an inner turmoil inside a mask of human nature is a tragic reality which someday will come out to the surface." (Cited in Bogard & Bryer, 1988, p 11). The members of the Mannon family have their own turmoil, which later comes out to be destructive behavior against others or themselves. Just like the great heroes of all tragedies, they are destroyed by their own virtues. Not only the ruin of characters, which is interesting, but also the life are they emotionally experiencing.

The struggle of modern man is in fact identical with the struggle of the tragic hero, who seeks for a happy life by his destruction, not by his victories. The fact that arouses tragic pity, and makes us understand more clearly than we ever understood before. What it means to be human. Throughout the whole of O'Neill's works, men and women characters are brought to a tragic end because, they ask more from life than life can offer them. They are incapable of responding to the limitations of the world in which they live.

CONCLUSIONS

According to O'Neill's characters, it is both the sense of disillusionment and betrayal that set up the tragedy of the individual. Characteristically, in *mourning Becomes Electra* the impulse toward the ideal, frustrated by life often brings despair. They are two angles of the same coin, usually exist together, struggling with each other tearing the individual into pieces in their mortal eternal opposition. It is here where we can find beauty, sadness and the power of life. Consequently, this provides the central tensions of almost all of O'Neill's plays. The history of his development as a genius in dramatic techniques is the history of his efforts to objectify this conflict which is full of aesthetic and beautiful items that are bound together to form an enchanting piece of art.

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