

Modern Tragic Substance in O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*

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Abstract—The position Eugene O'Neill occupies in the history of American drama is undisputable. Critics have agreed that the American theatre was waiting for O'Neill to give it substance, character, and value. The American dramatist continues to be considered as a major influence on the body of dramatic repertoire across the globe. The American theatre before O'Neill knew playwrights who were mostly viewed as entertainers. The serious drama had to wait until O'Neill started his career with expressionistic and social drama. His breakthrough, however, came in 1925 when he published *Desire Under the Elms*, described as the first important tragedy to be written in America. *Mourning Becomes Electra*, published in 1931, further reinforced the reputation of Eugene O'Neill and was described as his 'magnum opus'. Aspiring to portray the essence of life and man's innermost conflicts, O'Neill turned to the classical model, rather than to social realistic drama, to create modern tragedies with the aid of the then-new science of psychology. The present paper aims to undertake an in-depth study of how overtones from classical tragedies by the classical masters Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides resonate through O'Neill's two plays. The paper shows how leaning on classical themes and concepts interpreted in terms of psychological forces have added depth and tragic substance to a modern milieu and produced masterpieces of dramaturgy.

Keywords—Classical, drama, O'Neill, modern, tragic.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE year 1914 marked the rise of a new movement in the theatre which was hailed by the renowned critic Sheldon Cheney in his book *The New Movement in the Theatre*. The book defined the aims and limits of the movement and identified new types of drama that were being written at the time. The "psychologic" drama was a new genre emerging into the dramatic scene "in order to touch the deeper cords of spirituality" [1]. The new science of Psychology and Psychoanalysis had opened a new realm for writers and dramatists to explore a new level of reality that lied at the innermost depths of the human psyche. This revelation coincided with O'Neill's quest to portray the sense of the tragic in a modern setting and through modern characters. In her article previewing the 2012 performance of *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, Sarah Churchwell quotes O'Neill as saying that he hoped to "convey the quality of understanding that is born only of pain and rises to perception to reach the truths of human passion. For life to be felt as noble, it must be seen as tragic" [2]. O'Neill's quest to create the tragic sense necessarily drove him back in time to the "Greek grandeur" that he admired. The desire to capture the tragic expression in a modern

environment posed many questions to the dramatist who contemplated the possibility of creating a modern equivalent to the Greek sense of fate as a crucial element in the tragic substance. The tragic conflict between what man cannot change and what lies within his control and power was essentially of a religious nature in a culture that believed in the multiplicity of the gods and their overpowering control over man's life. To O'Neill's 20th century audience, with the absence of the belief in the pagan gods, O'Neill returns to classical tragedy's plotlines to create "a theatre returned to its highest and sole significant function as a Temple where the religion of a poetical interpretation and symbolic celebration of life is communicated to human beings, starved in spirit by their soul-stifling daily struggle to exist as masks among masks of the living" [3].

In the spring of 1924, O'Neill started writing his first play based on a Greek theme: *Desire Under the Elms*. The play, which has been described as "the first important tragedy to be written in America" [4] shows the influence of Euripidean tragedy on O'Neill. Critics have agreed that "[T]he imaginative combination of Hippolytus, Oedipus, and Medea and their transposition to nineteenth-century New England" [5] has won the dramatist his unique place as the founder of serious American drama.

II. DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS

Set in New England in 1850, the play takes place in the house and farm of the old, hard and stony-hearted Ephraim Cabot who represents the limitations and repression of Puritanic life. The play starts with the three sons of Ephraim Cabot waiting for the arrival of their father who has been away for some time and who is now coming with his young wife, his third. Eben Cabot, the youngest son of Ephraim by his second wife, shows strong attachment to his dead mother and blames his father for her early death. Hating his father as much as he loves his mother, his whole being is absorbed by the desire to avenge his mother's wrongs at the hands of his father and to restore the farm which he thinks rightfully belongs to his mother. Eben removes his two brothers, who join the California gold rush, from the scene. The arrival of old Cabot with his young wife, Abbie, starts a conflict among the three of them: Eben who wants to avenge his mother's death and restore the farm, old Cabot who has worked hard to grow the farm out of a field of stone and does not want to leave it to Eben who is "soft and simple like his ma", and Abbie who is eager to ensure the property of the farm and house and all for herself. Abbie tries to assert her authority

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and her possession over everything even over Eben himself, to whom she is attracted for his good looks. Trying to resist his own attraction to Abbie, he resists her furiously and decides to fight her as well as fight his own attraction to her. Their first meeting in the kitchen reveals their characters and the inevitable conflict that ensues. Abbie is possessive and tries to assert her rights:

“This be my farm-this be my hum- this be my kitchen-
!” (Part I, S. 4) [6].

Eben resists his attraction and curses her threatening that he will fight for his “Maw’s rights”.

Gradually, Abbie feels the need to have a son who will inherit the farm. Driven by this need, she tries to seduce Eben, who rejects her coldly, but who later yields to her temptation when she identifies herself with his dead mother. At first, their relationship is not pure; both are motivated by materialistic reasons. Abbie wants to have a son to secure the inheritance of the farm, and Eben thinks of their relationship as his vengeance on his father. However, their feelings develop and Abbie falls in love with Eben so sincerely that when Ephraim persuades Eben that Abbie has used him to swallow everything through the baby, she does not hesitate to kill the baby as proof of her true love to Eben. When he knows about the murder, Eben rushes furiously to report the murder to the sheriff. When he calms down, however, he repents his act and tries to persuade Abbie to escape before the arrival of the police. At last, he willingly shares the punishment with her.

Traces of two Euripidean characters appear in the character of Abbie as well as hints of Oedipus in the character of Eben. Abbie is a combination of the character of Medea, the woman who kills her children, and the character of Phaedra in *The Hippolytus*, the woman who is consumed by her love to her step son. Affinity to the character of Medea is only manifest in the adoption of the theme of infanticide. However, the act of infanticide is differently driven: whereas Medea in Euripides’ play of that name is driven by the cruel and uncontrollable desire to hurt her husband and avenge her wounded pride, Abbie’s act is driven by love as she tries to prove her love to Eben. In the same way, O’Neill handles the affinity to Phaedra’s character differently to suit her own vision. Phaedra’s passion for her step son is inspired by Aphrodite, the Goddess of love, and is much against her will. She is ashamed of it and considers it a curse. She is further tormented by Hippolytus’ rejection of her passion. Eventually, when she decides to end her own life, she is determined to destroy him.

As Engel rightly points out, in the character of Abbie “the two powerful forces of possessiveness and sexual desire merged into a single force which integrated her personality” [7]. Whereas Phaedra is tormented by her passion to her stepson, Abbie, viewing it as the law of nature, accepts it and responds to it naturally. She tells Eben that it is foolish to fight nature:

“Nature’ll beat ye, Eben. Ye might’s well own up to’t
fust’s last”. (Part II, S I)

There is no room for guilt and moral scruples about their love, and their “sin” remains unrepented until the end.

“Abbie (lifting her head as if defying God): I don’t
repent

that sin! I hain’t askin even God t’ forgive that.

Eben: Nor me”. (Part II, S IV)

Unashamed of her love, Abbie’s imagery reveals that her love is identified with the sun as a life-giving force in nature. Speaking to Eben, she says:

Hain’t the sun strong an hot? Ye ken feel it burning
into the earth Nature makin’t thin’s grow -bigger
m bigger- burnin inside ye- makin ye want to grow
into something’ else- till ye rejined with it...makes ye
grow bigger like a tree- like them elums. (Part II, S I)

This passion is also the force that frees Eben of his Oedipus complex. Though O’Neill refused that his plays be interpreted in terms of Freudian concepts and theories, there are traces of these in the psychological drives that motivate the main characters. Traces of Oedipus complex are manifest in his childish obsession with his dead mother. His hatred of his own father is revealed when he thinks of his relationship with Abbie as his vengeance on him:

“It’s her vengeance on him- so’s she can rest in peace
in her grave”. (Part II, S III)

Eben’s childish obsession with his mother hinders his intellectual and emotional development and his ability to face the realities of life. He is always yearning to the protecting motherly arms and yields to Abbie’s temptation when she is identified with his mother. However, it is Abbie’s love that develops the character of Eben until he is capable of accepting responsibility and taking his” one and only act of true manliness” [7] as he shares Abbie’s punishment for infanticide.

The tragic dimension that the character of Abbie acquires partly stem from the evocation of the tragic figures of Medea and Phaedra. Critics have recognized that *Desire Under the Elms* combines

...the crude elemental passions of people who harbor
the seeds of their own destruction; the brilliant
psychological insight into the love-hate relationship
of father and son, husband and wife, brother and
brother,
the cosmic loneliness of man; the hardness of God and
the final acceptance of an inescapable fate [8].

The characters in the *Hippolytus* reflect the Greek culture and religion; we are told in the Prologue that Aphrodite plans to punish Hippolytus for scorning her as the Goddess of Love and in doing so she will also destroy the chaste and honorable Phaedra. It is all the work of the gods. On the contrary, characters in *Desire Under the Elms* follow a course of action by which they meet their destiny. Abbie and Eben are fated in the sense that they are victims of forces within themselves that shape their minds and affect their actions. Barrett Clark calls *Desire Under the Elms* “a tragedy of futility” that represents the “the heartbreaking failure of man under the pressure of inexplicable forces, yet triumphing not in spite of but because of the obstacles that seem to be but are not really tragic in a conventional and material sense” [9].

Like a true tragedy, the play does not end in utter hopelessness; the ending is loaded with an expression of hope, even if it is just a “hopeless hope” [9]. Though Abbie and Eben are taken to prison by the end of the play, they are not entirely

defeated. They have triumphed in the sense that they have been ennobled by their love. Abbie is cleansed of her possessiveness and Eben is freed from his Oedipus complex and is able to assume responsibility. Thus, the protagonists follow a course of sin and find redemption in the recognition of error and the assumption of responsibility" [4].

This redeeming aspect with which *Desire Under the Elms* ends is absent from Euripides' *Hippolytus* where both Phaedra and Hippolytus are destroyed for nothing that they do of their own free will and nothing that their characters suggest. Yet, there is no sign of redemption. On the contrary, there is a suggestion of the continuity of the struggle between the gods, the result of which is other innocent human victims like Phaedra and Hippolytus. The concept of fate for the Greeks is a supernatural power which works arbitrarily regardless of man's character and what he is. In Greek tragedy, "the characters make their decisions for the best of reasons. But such is the frailty of human nature or the malignancy of the gods...they choose wrong and they corrupt and destroy themselves" [10].

Convinced that this supernatural power shaping man's life will not satisfy 20th century audiences, O'Neill turns to the Deterministic philosophy in his quest to recuperate tragic stature in the context of a modern environment and to find an equivalent force to create a modern sense of doom.

According to Determinism, man's fate is determined not by the will of some prejudiced god but by forces inside him; his social, biological and psychological state makes up his character and determines his own way of thinking and behavior, which eventually lead him to his fate.

III. MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA

With this in mind, O'Neill started to think of his second play based on a Greek theme in 1926; he chose the form of the trilogy to deal with the classical theme of revenge. The story of Electra and the house of Atreus as shown in *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus, *Electra* by Sophocles and Euripides, stands as the backbone of O'Neill's great project in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). The story of Electra was first introduced by Homer. Coming back after the Trojan war, Agamemnon is killed by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus to avenge the killing of her daughter, Iphigenia, as sacrifice to the gods. Electra, Agamemnon's daughter, sends her brother Orestes away for fear of being killed by Aegisthus. For years, she waits for her brother's return to avenge the murder of their father. Orestes comes and kills Aegisthus. Dissatisfied with this alone, she pushes him to kill their mother as well. Guilty of matricide, Orestes is haunted by the Furies, the avenging spirits, and is nearly driven mad.

The story has interested many Greek dramatists, and versions by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides have survived. Of the three dramatic treatments, that of Sophocles stands closest to the Homeric account of Electra as a revenge theme with no interest in the "divine or other sanctions involved against the murderers" [11]. Unlike Aeschylus whose interest is so much in the religious implications of the murders that he removes Electra from the stage to focus on a dialectic of the gods, Sophocles stresses the human side of the story. His main

interest is on the character of Electra who occupies the center of his attention. She exists "as a combination of reactions to others' deeds and actions" [11]. The character of Sophocles' Electra centers round her father's death, her mother's guilt and wickedness and her brother's delay. Her only obsession is to punish the murderers, and her only solace is to wait for her brother's return:

I have waited him always
Sadly, unweariedly,
Till I am past childbearing,
Till I am past marriage,
Always to my ruin. [12]

Even after hearing news of her brother's supposed death, her desire for vengeance does not cease.

The deed must be done by my own hand alone,
For I will not leave it unfulfilled.

The inescapable tragedy stems from the insoluble situation in which the tragic character finds himself. Orestes finds himself in a situation where whatever he chooses is wrong: he has either to disobey the oracle of Apollo or be guilty of matricide. The same is true about Electra. After the murders have been accomplished, Electra is desolate; "she has won her deliverance, but the result is complete desolation" [13]. Both characters show the tragic substance of the tragic hero who "suffers because he has come into collision, not with other individuals but with the universal law of righteousness" [14]. In general, suffering in Greek tragedy took the form of external punishment imposed upon the hero from without. Then, the hero has "to undergo a process of expiation through enduring the punishment. It is up to the gods, though, to decide when his expiation is complete" [15].

Suffering of this kind is very difficult to create in modern drama. Hence, O'Neill's quest to find an approximation of the Greek sense of fate leading to such suffering is evident in his own concept of tragedy. In an interview, O'Neill is quoted to have said that,

Tragedy has the meaning the Greeks gave it. To them it brought exaltation, an urge towards life and ever more life. It roused them to deeper spiritual understanding and released them from the petty greeds of everyday existence. When they saw a tragedy on the stage, they felt their own hopeless hopes ennobled into art [8].

O'Neill's purpose to develop a tragic expression in terms of modern values and symbols and his attempt to combine the traditional with the contemporary show clearly in *Mourning Becomes Electra* where he uses the tragic story of Electra to write a modern psychological play that resonates the classic sense of fate. The broad lines of action in the play are analogous to the story of the classical myth. O'Neill's Clytemnestra (Christine) kills her husband Ezra Mannon (Agamemnon) to marry Brant (Aegisthus). Lavinia (Electra) accuses her mother of murder and convinces her brother Orin (Orestes) of their mother's guilt in order to use him to murder their mother and her lover. Orin kills Brant and Christine kills herself when she knows of the murder. Lavinia and Orin make a long journey to the South Islands, a symbol of escape. Though Orin has never laid a hand on Christine, he breaks down under the burden of

guilt. Lavinia struggles against her fate and tries to find peace and happiness in love and marriage until she realizes that with her heritage of hate and guilt, she cannot find either.

The play follows the Greek story up to the point where Christine kills herself, but O'Neill departs from the classical treatment from that point onwards. Like Sophocles, O'Neill makes Lavinia the center of his attention and study. Her relationship with her mother is marked by hatred and jealousy. It is made clear from the beginning in Part I of the trilogy, *The Homecoming*, that she accuses her mother of depriving her of her father's love: "It's you who have stolen all love from me since the time I was born" (*Homecoming*, II) [16]. This is not only true of her father's love but also of Captain Brant for whom she had felt some affection before she realized he was her mother's lover. Lavinia boasts of her hatred of her mother:

You're shameless and evil! Even if you are my mother
I say it.

And later

Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate you.

The hate is mutual. Christine's hatred of her daughter is due to her disgust of her husband:

I never could make myself feel you were born of
anybody but his---(*Homecoming*, II).

Lavinia's real motive in killing Brant is her jealous hatred. Orin points out to her later "you wanted Brant for yourself" When Brant is dead, she stands over his dead body and speaks to it.

How could you love that vile old woman so?
(she throws off this thought--harshly) But you're dead.
It's ended! (*The Haunted*, IV)

Like Electra, Lavinia devotes her life to avenge the murder of her father. When she is sure of her mother's guilt of the murder, she swears to punish her:

You think you'll be free to marry Adam now!
But you won't! Not while I'm alive!
I'll make you pay for your crime!
I'll find a way to punish you.

And Lavinia does find the way to punish her, not by killing her but by killing her lover. Christine is destroyed by the death of her lover, and she refuses to live the life bestowed on her by her daughter. Early in the "*Homecoming*", she promises Lavinia that she "will never have a chance to gloat". So, Christine kills herself "triumphing over the insult of the pardon her daughter has offered her" [17]. Lavinia regards her suicide as an act of justice. When she hears the shot she says "It is justice! It is your justice, Father!" (*The Hunted*, V).

Engel believes that Lavinia and Christine show "an obstinate strength, a calculating intelligence, and a streak of wantonness suggestive not only of Clytemnestra, but of other female characters in O'Neill" [7]. Lavinia succeeds in arousing Orin's jealousy and suspicions so he gets into a jealous fury to kill his mother's lover. She also arranges everything in such a way so as it seems Brant has been murdered by robbers. She wants to have the act accomplished without being suspected. It would not be just if they were arrested for murder.

...and then I'd have to tell the truth in order to save
us. She'd be hanged, and even if we managed to get

off, our lives would be ruined! The only person to come
off lucky would be Brant! He could die happy, knowing
h'd revenged himself on us more than he ever dared
hope. (*The Hunted*, IV)

O'Neill makes Lavinia the victim of sinister circumstances and the natural product of the hatred and disgust of her parents' relationship. Still, she is not presented as a weak and impotent figure in the face of these circumstances. Lavinia rebels against the world in which she lives and is characterized, like Electra, by a strong will to live and get what she wants of life. She travels to the South Islands with Orin in the hope of freeing themselves of their sense of guilt. She comes back determined to find happiness with Peter in love and married life. Lavinia, who has come to resemble her mother, is finally giving way to all her natural instincts that were "thwarted by a maniacal desire for vengeance" [10]. Having done her duty of vengeance to the dead Mannons, she feels free to start a new life. Dreamily, she says:

I loved those islands. They finished setting me free.
There was something there mysterious and beautiful
a good spirit-of-love- coming out of the land and sea.
It made me forget death. (*The Haunted*, V)

Lavinia does not recognize that with all her heritage of guilt she has no chance for happiness, and, consequently, she is involved in a struggle against her fate. She is trying to get what she is denied. Moving towards an inevitable end which she obstinately and defiantly resists, Lavinia's struggle gives her grandeur and makes her significant and tragic. She faces the insoluble solution from which there is no way out. When she finally realizes this, Lavinia turns her back on the world and goes into the Mannon house that was built on hate and death, decided never to come out again.

Fate in O'Neill's modern sense stems from the character's hereditary influences and social and psychological surroundings. O'Neill shows immense interest in the conflict between the conscious and unconscious forces in man's character. He believed that the struggle between the conscious will trying to assert itself against an unconscious one is tragic because the complete dominance of one over the other results in "death or insanity" [18]. The conflict between the two opposites results in the failure of man to know himself, and this failure, according to Falk, leads to self-destruction. Sometimes self-recognition comes too late, like in the case of Ezra Mannon. The stern Brigadier-General whose character is invested in the stiff and grim house and most particularly in his study comes back from the war eager to have a new beginning with his wife and with life. In a moment of intense recognition, he realizes he was raised with a belief in death more than life.

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. (*The Homecoming*, Act
III)

He regrets his past denial of love and life, and, having seen too much of death, he is now determined to find love and peace. He tells his wife in the same scene:

You'll find I have changed, Christine. I'm sick of death!

I want life! Maybe you could love me now! (in a note of final desperate pleading) I've got to make you love me!

The tragedy of Ezra Mannon is that he realizes only too late that his own upbringing and character have distanced him from the woman he loved and from life itself. He discovers the worth and beauty of life after his experience with death and on the very night his wife is planning to murder him. O'Neill's use of the modern science of Psychology has enabled him to find an "approximation" of the Greek sense of fate and to write a modern psychological play endowed with the classical sense of inevitability and grandeur.

In a letter to John Nathan, O'Neill states that writing *Mourning Becomes Electra* has given him "a sense of having had a valid dramatic experience with intense tortured passions beyond the ambition and scope of other modern plays" [9]. Though tragic in its own modern way, O'Neill's trilogy aspires to the grandeur and sublimity of action and character familiar to the tragic drama of the Greeks. Affinity to the *Oresteia* is not limited to the events and the course of the story, but extends to the general framework in which the action develops. Whitman recognizes this affinity in terms of the link between the O'Neill trilogy and the *Oresteia* with "its brooding atmosphere of self-destruction" [19]. He argues that the natural instincts of the characters in the trilogy are thwarted by fear and puritanic repressions until the inner demands break through the shell with all the violence of long repression and until these natural instincts "become suspicion and hate, that is, destructive" [19].

Furthermore, O'Neill's claim for a grand tragedy that aspires to the grand level of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* rests on the interaction between action and symbolism in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, with the symbol of the house as part of the masterly characterization for which O'Neill has been praised. Of the numerous symbols in the play, the Mannon house is the most prominent. Built in the style of an ancient Greek temple, the house is associated with repression and death. Even Lavinia realizes that "there's no rest in this house which Grandfather built as a temple of Hate and Death!" Her plan is to,

"...close it up and leave it in the sun and rain to die.

The portraits of the Mannons will rot on the walls and the ghosts will fade back into death. And the Mannons will be forgotten. I'm the last and I won't be one long. I'll be Mrs. Peter Niles. Then they're finished! Thank God! (She leans back in the sunlight and closes her eyes. Seth stares at her worriedly, shakes his head and spits...). (The Haunted, IV)

As such, the Mannon house evokes the hereditary curse of the house of Atreus which is at the heart of the different dramatic treatments of the stories of Agamemnon, Orestes and Electra by different classical tragedians. The house's beautiful white portico hides the ugly grey walls of the house like a "pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray ugliness!" as Christine describes it (The Homecoming, I). The symbol of the Mannon house is one of the ways the classical myth of resonates in O'Neill's modern play about modern characters in search for a happiness that they are denied.

IV. MODERN APPROXIMATION OF THE CLASSICAL CONCEPT OF FATE

Greek tragedy, the most ancient and most sublime form of art, has been regarded as the model of that genre for generations. As an expression of their own time and culture, the works of the great classical tragedians show varying images of man and the forces that affect and control his life. The concept of fate as a supernatural power that shapes man's life runs through all the great classical tragedies. The Greeks believed that the numerous gods and goddesses influenced man's life and predetermined his fortune. Thus, the relationship between man and the gods is the basic component in Greek tragedies. However, the concept of fate and the relationship between man and the gods evolved through the different times at the hands of different Greek dramatists. Though it took different forms at the hands of the different dramatists, fate generally worked through the gods. Whether completely imposed on the character from without, as in the example of Hippolytus and Phaedra, or being partly the work of the gods with the inevitable consequence of the character's hamartia, the gods are always there.

Aeschylus, the father of Greek tragedy, portrays characters that show great respect and piety towards the gods; they believe in the power of the gods to restore harmony and order to the universe. This is best illustrated in ending of *The Oresteia* where Orestes is absolved from the sin of matricide by the wisdom and justice of the goddess Athena, which restores peace and order to the disturbed harmony both on the individual and societal levels. Aeschylus' focus is on the gods rather than the characters themselves. At the end of his play, Orestes is removed from the stage to give way to the gods debating his guilt. In his introduction to *The Greeks*, John Barton states that this respectful attitude towards the gods reveals the nature of the civilization that produced it. He suggests that "when a civilization is young and confident it believes in its gods and trusts them" [11]. This is the same spirit conveyed in Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*. With the younger Greek dramatists, however, there is a gradual shift from that attitude of faith in the wisdom and justice of the gods to a more dubious and skeptical one.

Sophocles' treatment of the story of Electra shows a different vision. His interest is not so much in the gods as in the character of Electra herself and what happens to her after the murder. Unlike Aeschylus whose main interest is in theological problems and the religious implications of matricide, Sophocles stresses the human side of the story. His interest is on man: his passions, struggles and spiritual strength. Fate is conceived in a set of cause and effect where Clytemnestra's murder of her husband is "bound, in the natural order of things, to provoke an equivalent reaction" [20] With Euripides, the youngest of the three most famous Greek tragedians, the gods appear as warring against each other, indifferent to the resulting suffering and destruction of man. The image of the gods in the *Hippolytus* is far from the just and wise image in Aeschylus. Hippolytus and Phaedra are destroyed for no fault of their own; they are victims of the malicious competition between Artemis and Aphrodite. The difference between the three dramatists is mainly due to the backgrounds and spirits they are reflecting. The change in

environment and “the shift from a believing age to a doubting age” [20] dictated a change in the vision of tragedy.

It seems natural then that, centuries after Euripides, when a modern dramatist handles myths from the classical tradition that he is expected to do so in the context of his own culture and to add his own vision to his plays. O’Neill’s vision starts with the selection of an appropriate setting and time for his two plays: *Desire under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* so that both are set in the near past of the New England plantation life and the American civil war. O’Neill’s interest in the conflict between conscious and subconscious emotions made him turn to the Puritanic period which offered him a mass of repressed desires under the firm austerity of the Puritanic moral code. The Puritanic spirit of denial of love and life broods over the action in the two plays and appropriately reflects the force against which the main characters struggle.

O’Neill’s concept of fate takes the form of “an all-pervading condition, a disease whose advance manifests itself in the actions of the characters” [21]. O’Neill’s belief in the continuity of human history and the past exerting an influence on the present manifests itself in the kind of “fate” that he works out for the characters in *Desire under the Elms* where the wrongs of the past continue to show their deterministic influence on the present. The same permeates the trilogy of *Mourning Becomes Electra* with a hereditary curse that works on three generations of the Mannon family. A chain of fated events starts with Abe Mannon bringing Marie Brantomé to the house. When he discovers that she is having a love affair with his brother David, he drives both away. He cuts his brother off all his money under the pretense of puritanic morals, leaving them to die of poverty and need. He pulls down the house and builds another that becomes a symbol of the puritanic denial of love. Many years later, Ezra’s falling in love with Christine who has the same “flowing animal grace” of Marie Brantomé leads to similar death and destruction. Unconsciously, Ezra’s first love determines the kind of woman he falls in love with. In much the same way, O’Neill brings about the fate of Adam Brant who turns against the Mannon family to avenge the death of his father and mother, David Mannon and Marie Brantomé.

The Freudian formula which O’Neill uses to weave the fate of Eben in *Desire Under the Elms* is used once again with Adam Brant who experiences a mother fixation that leads him to fall in love with the image of Marie Brantomé, Christine. The idea may be stretched further to imply that Christine falls in love with Adam Brant because of his resemblance to Ezra whom she once loved. Similarly, Lavinia falls in love with Adam Brant who resembles her father. These characters’ fates are the inevitable consequences of their past feelings and experiences and are worked out from the point of view of fate springing out of the family, which is reinforced by the idea of a strong family resemblance.

Viewed from a deterministic standpoint, Orin’s suicide is not dictated by some supernatural power that has no consideration of his character and experiences. His strong attachment to his mother and his sense of guilt resulting from her suicide make him unable to go on living. He is haunted by his own internal torment and by his own realization of the reality of his feelings

towards his mother, father, sister and Adam Brant as a rival in the life of his mother. The modern equivalent of the haunting spirits is his own recognition of his obsession. Critics have argued that “in this detail alone might rest the argument that Eugene O’Neill, placing a Greek theme in the middle of the last century, has written the most modern of all his plays” [22].

The idea of the past influencing, and even repeating itself, in the present is elaborated further when both Orin and Lavinia take on the images of their father and mother. Orin who has always hated and rejected his father has come to resemble him and to identify himself with his image. In his stage directions for *The Haunted*, O’Neill describes Orin’s appearance:

“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 moustache, and this accentuates his resemblance to the judge...”

In the same way, Lavinia takes on the image of her sensual mother whom she has rejected before. On another level, the taking on of the image of the dead mother reveals Lavinia’s suppressed jealousy of her mother, which is frequently suggested in the play. Having wished for her mother’s place in her father’s life, in Brant’s life and in the trip to the South Islands, Lavinia gives vent to all her subconscious desires when her mother is dead. She changes into “her mother’s colors” and even Peter is identified with Brant, her mother’s lover. Lavinia takes up her mother’s feelings and opinions about life, about the Mannon house and about the Mannon family.

She experiences towards Orin the same feelings her mother had towards Ezra, and the end which Ezra meets on the hands of Christine is repeated with Lavinia with the same intention: to free herself from the Mannon she is chained to. Therefore, Patrick Robert is correct in suggesting that in both Orin and Lavinia “the unconsciously rejected and denied parent asserts himself to control the child from within” [23]. This repeated pattern is one of the ways O’Neill creates a foreboding sense of “fate” in the form of a family curse in the Mannon family that repeats itself in a way similar to the House of Atreus in the Classical heritage.

Bentley accuses O’Neill of bestowing on his characters “an artificial prestige” [24] by linking them to their classic counterparts, and that Orin and Lavinia are important only as versions of Orestes and Electra. He blames O’Neill for not letting his characters have their own identities, for making them act in a certain way just because their counterparts did so. However, it is easy to see that O’Neill has succeeded in making his characters logically modern in the sense that everything they do is accounted for by what they are. They stand in their own right as “victims of the disastrous personal compulsions that rule our lives” [23]. O’Neill’s characters are rendered convincingly modern in a manner that is at once moving and comprehensible to modern audience of the 20th century who tend to view “human motivation as guided by impulses as imperative as divine commands” [25].

V. CONCLUSION

Eugene O’Neill’s dissatisfaction with the romantic and melodramatic tradition of the American theatre of his time, and

the limitation of realism lead him to a series of experiments of which a return to ancient Greek tragedies is a part. Seeking to establish links with a rich dramatic heritage, O'Neill's return to the ancient Greeks who produced the model of tragedy helped him produce tragic characters in the sense that the Greeks understood. The characters of this new type are not just ordinary people of the general average. In accordance with Aristotle's theory, they are given greater dimensions which set them above the level of the average man. The sense of superiority essential to the tragic hero as understood by the Greeks took different forms in the modern dramas of Eugene O'Neill.

The tragic substance of modern man in these two plays stems from the inside, from man's will to fight and survive the obstacles that seem to block his way and to be outside the range of his control. The fact that man is finally actually crushed by these forces does not underrate his heroic struggle which links him with such great tragic characters from classical tragedy. Though defeated, man's greatness is underscored by the heroism he shows in an obstinate struggle against the forces that threaten his happiness, and in the essential futility of such a struggle.

O'Neill's two plays have sought to create characters endowed with a modern tragic substance through a return to the old and true themes of tragedy, namely, the problem of existence, man's relationship with the universe, with God and with himself. Man's attempt to explain and justify the meaning of his existence which formed the basic themes in Greek tragedy has come to light again with O'Neill's brilliant treatment of the classical myths which provided him with a set of dilemmas and situations of profound emotional significance.

Leaning back on the rich classical heritage of Greek tragedy, O'Neill has been able to reach behind the surface of the human experience to the deeper cords of humanity and the universal human traits. His ability to do this while at the same time preserving a sense of the contemporary concrete world of his own time has led to the creation of modern characters who aspire to the tragic substance and grand dimensions of the classical model.

These characters remain modern by virtue of the dramatist's capacity to explain their heroism in terms conceivable to the intellect of his own audience. While hoping to enrich his vision and dramas through allusions to classical themes and characters, O'Neill has achieved a universal image which can assume a symbolic significance valid for all times with which to suggest the continuity of history and of human experience.

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