

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

**Authors :** Azza Taha Zaki

**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

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