CHAPTER - IV
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PORTRAYAL OF WIFE AS A CONFLICTING FORCE AND DAUGHTER AS A REBEL INHIBITION

O’Neill, who was searching for a mother-figure for his wife, found one in Carlotta Montrey his third wife who was very passionate in nature and full of vitality. In a letter dated 1931, he wrote:

……. I have never known your love even when I have seemed not to know that I have seen it, even when I have appeared most blind, that I have felt it warmly around me always, ….. sustaining and comforting, a warm secure sanctuary for the man after the author’s despairing solitudes and inevitable defeats, a victory of love-in-love mother, and wife and mistress and friend(17).

The depiction of husbands in his plays shows that, when the husband seeks affirmation of life in his wife who is noted for her pagan joy of life, then the marriage is a success. But when one is for the denial of life and the other for the pagan side of life, then there arises a conflict between the two, resulting in the failure of the marriages.
O’Neill relates these conflicts to his two concepts of God the Father and God the Mother. As a young boy, O’Neill was sent to a Catholic Boarding School which inevitably became associated with his feelings of betrayal by his parents. And this natural association was not dispelled by the administration of the school. For Mount Saint Vincent emphasized formal discipline and regulation rather than the home-like warmth which the child needed. O’Neill progressively associated the lack of emotional warmth with the Catholic religion and he rebelled against his catholic heritage. His hatred for Catholicism and Puritanism equates the denial of the joys of life with God the Father, as opposed to God the Mother, the embodiment of the life-force.

Desire under the Elms, “the first important tragedy to be written in America, “It has the conflict between the husband and wife as its central theme. The wife, Abbie, seeks to achieve a Dionysian rapture, while to her husband, Ephraim Cabot, the Dionysian service seems immoral, easy and, in effect, anathema. Abbie’s god is closely associated with generative powers of nature and capable of desire which she herself embodies. Abbie marries Ephraim Cabot in pursuit of security. Her greed and possessiveness for the farm motivates all her actions in the beginning. Unlike her husband Cabot’s unflinching
self-denial and hardship of Appollonianism, she does not have a principle by which she can reconcile her practice with a fixed standard of conduct. Greed, ambition, power and carnal love are mixed in her nature.

In the constant harping of the seventy five years old Ephraim Cabot on a hard God and his rejection of an easy God, O’Neill has presented the scene of puritanical conservatism in conflict with a sort of romantic paganism represented by Abbie. Abbie represents the Dionysian aspect of life which according to Nietzsche is a kind of joyful forgetfulness of the highest order. O’Neill, on whom the influence of Nietzsche is very obvious, had little interest in the joy of Appollonianism and agreed that wherever the Dionysian aspect prevailed the Appollonian aspect is routed and annihilated.

O’Neill has made the anti-Dionysian force of Cabot approximate to Puritan Christianity, and tied it with the rigorous repression of the flesh and the subjugation of impulse to rock hard will as embodied in Cabot. Eben Cabot, the eon, belongs to the category of Abbie. The Dionysian God of Abbie demands surrender and the suppression of any act of conscious will. To her, God lies in the loss of consciousness, sexual rapture, and an unthinking response to the life-giving forces of the earth. Since Abbie is lost in the
calculated carnal desire, she cannot understand the hard-god of Cabot.

When Ephraim realizes that Abbie, like all his other wives, does not understand his vision of God, he leaves her in disgust to join the cows in the barn, because they are close to nature and have accepted God as a stone. His puritanic fanaticism has made him grim and hard-willed. For him the only good life is the life of hardship, self-denial and struggle. He abhors those who opt out for an easy living. He always talks about the ‘hard God’ and the ‘easy God’ in order to distinguish between his own way of life, and that of Abbie and his son Eben. He is convinced that his following a hard God has given him strength and lifted him above ordinary mortals.

Being poles apart in their basic qualities, Cabot and Abbie cannot get along with each other. Moreover, he equates the possession of the farm with the knowledge of God and hence is reluctant to leave it to anyone. He becomes uneasy when he sees Abbie regarding the farm and home with possessiveness. His religious fervor has cut him off from the society as well as from his own family and paves the way for his break-up with Abbie, who seeks satisfaction in her abnormal union with Eben.

The unceasing conflict between Cabot and Abbie nurtures in her a desire for the husband’s death. This element is found in Strange
Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra also. As in Desire under the Elms the psychological complications of each character with their repression, frustrations or fixations are motivated in Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra.

While in Desire under the Elms, the conflict takes place between the hard and easy Gods Strange Interlude has two other conflicting principles – God the Mother, whose life rhythms enable one to desire for a fruitful fertility and God the Father a possessive deity, indifferent to feelings and denying desire.

**Marriage: a need for emotional fulfillment**

Nina, the heroine of Strange Interlude, wife of Sam Evans, is a fascinating and least credible of O’Neill’s women, endowed with an inordinate thirst for life. Brought up in the strict puritanical code by her father, she could now give herself to her fiancé Gordon Shaw, who might have satisfied her whole nature. Gordon’s death makes her a neurotic, frustrated being and when she knows her father’s possessiveness to be the underlying reason for his strictness, she feels that she is left all alone. At such a time, she feels the ruling force of life as God the Father, Sam, her husband with his inability to give her a healthy child can be compared to his God the Father which is always at war with Nina’s image of God the Mother. She marries
Sam Evans hoping to win back a measure of contentment in life through motherhood. She is sick of being what she is:

I want children. I must become a mother so I can give myself. I am sick of sickness.

As Doctor Darrell Sam’s friend says, “she needs normal love objects for the emotional life Gordon’s death blocked up in her.” But when she knows that Sam’s family is tainted with insanity, she seeks Darrell, the “healthy male” to give her a healthy baby. Though God the Father may consider it a sin, that cannot be so to her, as long as she makes others happy. She considers herself as God the Mother:

…… the mistake began when God was created in a male image. Of course, women would see him that way, but men should have been gentlemen enough, remembering their mothers to make God a woman! …..

As Eleanor Flexner explains, “Because of her biological function, O’Neill conceives of woman as being at the very heart of the cosmic process. God the Father to him is a meaningless concept, a contradiction of the role of woman in furthering life and making it possible.

It takes a husband (sam) a lover (Darrell), a family friend (Marsden) to fulfill Nina’s womanly life at full tide. She feels all embracive then:
My three men! ............ I feel their desires converge in me!

...... to form one complete beautiful male desire which I absorb ....

And am whole .... They dissolve in me, their life is my life .... I am

pregnant with the three! ..... husband! ...... lover! ....... Father!

...... [Then remembering her little] and the fourth man! ....littleman!

........ little Gordon! ........ he is mine too! ..... that makes it

perfect! ..... 


When ruled by passion, she longs to go away with Darrell or

wishes Sam to be dead. But such thoughts are only momentary and

knowing what a strong man her love has made of Sam ..... into an

ambitious and healthy man – she remains his dutiful though not

loving wife till his death. During his illness before his death she

says, “I will never leave his side. I will never tell him anything that

might disturb his peace.”


After Sam’s death, when all her passion is spent and suffering

gone, she hopes to have a peaceful, sexless life with Marsden because

she is “contentedly weary with life.” Thus by coming to the restful

Charlie in the end, she accepts the fact that “her incarnation can exist

only in the strange dark interlude in the electrical display of God the

Father.”


The puritan psychological disposition is more powerful in

Mourning Becomes Electra. Turning to the Orestean theme treated
by Aeschylus and his successors, O’Neill localized it in New England immediately after the conclusion of the Civil war in 1865 and translated and paralleled it in terms of the American environment of that period.

In his attempt to jazz up a Greek tragedy, O’Neill has achieved a grave, dignified and successful attempt by “motivating the action with psychological complications and endowing each character with repression or frustrations or fixations, until the dramatic struggle becomes a conflict between Puritanism and healthy love.”

**Paganism vs. Puritanism**

In Mourning Becomes Electra, the conflict between the husband and wife arises because Christine wants to live life in all its aspects whereas Ezra Mannon retains his puritan heritage. As Eleanor Flexner says:

The two strongest characteristics of the Mannons are their religion and their family feeling. Their Puritanism is stark and loveless, a composite of inflexible moral rectitude, callous self-interest, the stern inhibition of emotion and a religious instinct, which has hardened into a fear of life and a brooding over the thought of death.

Ezra being supplied with Marie Brantome as the mother image is drawn to Christine because of her resemblance to Marie. But his
puritanic inhibition prevents him from responding to her love in her way because the puritan part of his being reprimands his passion for her as low and sinful. Hence even the beginning of their sexual relationship breeds disgust and contempt in both of them. Christine says:

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!

Christine, therefore turns to Orin, her son who grows emotionally dependent on her. In Orin’s absence she falls in love with Adam Brant, who has a striking resemblance to Orin. Adam suits her nature because he is gentle and tender and he is what Christine has longed for all the years of her married life with Ezra. The war has changed Ezra, for only then he comes to know what life is. He says, “Death was so common, it didn’t mean anything. That freed me to think of life……. Death made me to think of life. Before that life had only made me think of death”.

Ezra has an unconscious desire to come out of the puritan repression which according to O’Neill has been a sort of spiritual death. To escape this death, he seeks the help of Christine, who moves with an animal grace – symbolic of the affirmative pagan aspect of life. But Ezra’s realization is too late because she has found life in Adam. In his frustration, Ezra’s puritan nature comes up
again. He says, “What are bodies to me? … you make me appear a lustful beast in my own eyes.” For the Mannons, dirt, animality and abomination spell out the implication of sex. The puritan repression which has made him live partially once, is responsible for his being deprived of the Pagan joys of life, when he wishes them.

Christine’s hatred for Ezra comes to such an extent, that she is prepared to murder him. She not only brings on one of his heart-attacks by naming her lover to him, but also poisons him with the drug Brant has sent her. Thus when Christine Mannon betrays and murders her husband, there is both mental and physical horror; Mourning Becomes Electra demonstrates the effects of Puritanism on love, leading to marital complications.

Wife: not the consuming end of the husband’s desires

The conflict between the husband and wife is of a different sort in The Great God Brown. Margaret, the wife of Dion Anthony is “the eternal girl woman with a virtuous simplicity of instinct, properly oblivious to everything but the means to her end of maintaining the race,” whereby she represents an aspect of the life Force. Dion, her husband has got both the Dionysiac, the creative pagan acceptance of life, end the saintly St.Anthony’s masochistic life-denying spirit of Christianity. These two opposing forces when
embodied in one person could result only in mutual exhaustion of the man who is torn between the two forces.

The source of Dion’s conflict is his Oedipal attachment to his mother, whose influence on him is reflected in his shrinking, shy and gentle soul. He feels that only the mother’s hands comfort one without clawing. During his search for a woman in his mother’s image, he married Margaret hoping to return to the prenatal harmony, the oneness with something outside himself. Dion, finds protection in Margaret at first for he says, “she protects me! Her arms are softly around me! She is warmly around me! She is my skin! She is my armour!

Protected by her love, Dion hopes to discard the mask he has so long been wearing which has the expression of a mocking reckless or defiant, gaily scoffing and sensual young pan. With his spiritual poetic passion, he hopes to lead a truly creative and affirmative life through his marriage with Margaret.

The use of masks in this play is very important for it throws light on the dual personality of the characters. Nietzsche’s claim that the mask is a way of expressing the inexpressive essence of nature, is explicit. Dion wearing the mask and in effect a cynic is really a life-loving, creative person. Once the mask is removed, the essence and the true nature of the character is projected.
Dion’s marriage with Margaret does not lead him to fulfillment. She is not the woman as the consuming end of Dion’s desires. Like his mother she too becomes a terrible mother in the sense she overprotects Dion while failing to nourish him, thus she stifles his creativity.

Margaret does not help Dion to enjoy life. Though a lover of life, he cannot commit himself fully to the worship of Pan. At times he talks to Margaret with a language that suggests the Dionysian ecstasy:

I love, you love, and we love! Rest! Relax! Let go your clutch on the world! Dim and Dimmer! …… Gone! Death! Now Be born! Awake! Live! Dissolve with dew – into earth – into space – into the peace – into meaning – into joy – into God……

But it would seem to be only a moment when Dion accepts life fully, without hesitation or restraint. Dion’s irony becomes explicit as he cries:

Wake up! Time to get up! Pretend! Go – cover your nakedness! Learn to lie! Learn to keep step! Join the procession! Great Pan is dead! Be ashamed!

In cue Margaret cries, “Oh! I am ashamed” Her failure to understand her husband leads her to lead an unhappy life. When he
comes out with his Dionysian ecstasy, by not accepting his real self, she hinders his spiritual growth.

Margaret’s conformity and adaptation to an established social pattern deranges her understanding of the real Dion behind the mask. She wears a mask which gives her a lifeless, anonymous, stereotyped appearance and holds that only his gaining a profession will make them lead a happy life, a sort of materialistic attitude. Dion cries angrily, “…. So my wife thinks it behooves me to settle down and support my family in the meager style which that they’ll have to become accustomed?” Their unhappy married life is described by Dion: “This domestic diplomacy. We communicate in code – when neither has the other’s key.” Hence he seeks Cybel who to him is the good mother who nurtures him without any demand in return. Margaret who believes herself in love with her husband, actually does not know his real self.

Since Margaret does not love the real Dion but only his mask, she loves it even when it is shifted on to the face of Billy Brown, Dion’s friend, without ever knowing about the transference that has taken place. As blind to the real Brown as she is to the real Dion, she is happy with Brown who now partakes both Dion’s and Brown’s characteristics. Thus Margaret, properly oblivious of everything,
does only those duties that are outwardly known as that of a wife’s, that of perpetuating the race.

Like Margaret, Mary Tyrone in the Lond Day’s Journey into Night is also a failure. The marriage of Tyrone and Mary is one of love; their mutual attraction serves as a strong force. Each has influence on the other. But because of his profession as an actor Tyrone could not provide her with a proper home that she badly needs. His possessiveness makes him take her wherever he went, without any consideration for the children. Added to these is his miserliness which is an indirect cause for her addiction. She is first given morphine by a cheap doctor whom Tyrone had called in when she was in pain after Edmund’s birth. But Tyrone is also not to be blamed, for he himself is not less a victim of his own family past. He is a victim both in his personal life and in his career as a serious actor, when he sacrificed to a compulsive need for security.

As long says, O’Neill in this delineation of character, Mary, uses the possibility of psychological violence. Tyrone’s greed causes him to usurp her role of the wife as a distributor of goods. But Mary herself lacks sufficient moral fibre to regain the role of a distributor in the family. Because of her infatuation with Tyrone, whom she has loved romantically and unquestioningly in the beginning, she could not exert sufficient force against him to correct his usurpation of her
role. It is her very innocence, her sweetness of temper, her long suffering qualities that further contribute to the gradual disintegration added to which are her addiction and her loss of faith.

The addiction is caused by the death of the old God and the failure of the new. Tyrone tells Edmund:

If your mother had prayed, too – she hasn’t denied her faith, but she’s forgotten it until now there’s no strength of the spirit left in her to fight against her curse.

Realising her failure, she seeks to escape the harsh realities through illusions. She believes that the addiction.

.......... kills the pain. You go back until at last you are beyond its reach. Only the past when you were happy is real.

Tyrone’s dependence on her in a way leads to his failure also. In the words of Chawbrow:

The disintegrating effect her [Mary’s] failure [has] on Tyrone is no less profound, though it isn’t the basis of his own failure in life. When the still hearty Tyrone realizes Mary has gone back to taking morphine, he immediately gives way to sad and bitter weariness. From that point on his mood varies between dull anger, grief stricken pleading and hopeless resignation.

And by the end of the day it is apparent that the pain of Mary’s failure is paralysing. Her final defeat is his.
O’Neill, While searching for a woman with the image of his mother found a compassionate friend and lover in his wife Carlotta Montrey, who has helped a great deal in his understanding of the women. When a men and woman of two opposing natures are united by the bond of marriage, the marriage becomes a failure. The wives life Abbie, Nina and Christine, long for life and love but their husbands like Cabot, Sam and Ezra Mannon are ruled by the life-denying spirit of Puritanism. O’Neill attributes the life-denying spirit of Puritanism to God the Father, and the life-loving force to God the Mother. Hence there is always a conflict between the husband and wife. But the treatment of Margaret is different because she is presented as an ordinary woman and the conflict outright is very slight in Long Day’s Journey into Night. O’Neill through the presentation of the evil effects of Puritanism drives home his point that life if should be enjoyed, must be lived in all its aspects.

**DAUGHTER – A REBEL AGAINST INHIBITION**

O’Neill holds that Puritanism is the embodiment of all that is evil and degenerated in the life of man. Under the guise of its pretended ideals, man is being led to destruction. To him, Puritanism in its emphasis upon the life hereafter has destroyed life here; and hence it is not a religion of salvation but a religion of death. He shows his hatred towards these pretences and its destructive force
upon the people through the depiction of the daughter figures. O’Neill’s portrayal of the women characters as daughters in his plays includes not only their vigorous attitude towards life, by trying to break the barriers but also the psychological complexity with which they strive to attain their fulfillment.

Nine Leeds in Strange Interlude and Lavinia in Mourning Becomes Electra turn towards their fathers being denied of maternal love and affection. Incapable of escaping what they had inherited from their mothers in the subconscious level, they undergo a psychic conflict between the open, naïve, romantic, and pagan aspect of their mothers which affirm life as desirable, and the rational, hard willed part of their father, which tries to conceal natural instincts and denies life. At times, one side or the other becomes so predominant that the total character is nearly fused with it.

Puritanism: a bond to break

Strange Interlude, the finished, biggest work gave tremendous pleasure to the author because nothing like it has been done before. Here O’Neill attempts the depiction of a modern, vital woman, Nina Leeds. In Nina Leeds, the daughter of professor Leeds, the pagan side of life becomes dominant. Losing her mother even as an infant, she becomes attached to her father. She has always idolized him, and speaks of it herself:
…. Since I was born I have been in his class, loving – attentive, pupil – daughter Nina …. Listening because he is my cultured father …. A little more inclined to deafness than the rest (let me be just) because he is my father …..

Nina’s father, who feels a sense of relief at his wife’s death, turns to Nina for love and affection. As a puritan he cannot make allowances to get her love consummated before marriage with Gordon Shaw, her lover. Nina, endowed with an inordinate passion longs for sexual gratification. As Schopenhauer says: “the sexual impulse …. Proves itself the decided and strongest assertion of life …. It is the final end, the highest goal of life …..” Since Nina represents this assertion of life, she considers her father as an equivalent to God the Father who is possessive and indifferent to the life-rhythm of God the Mother in her. So she considers him as the destroyer of her happiness.

As it is, Nina is not herself, because with dreams that can never quite be fulfilled, held in check by inhibitions, forced onward by appetites, she is the incarnation of vitality, a creature that is driven meddle in the lives of others in order that her own life may be filled to overflowing.

In spite of her love for her father, her need for sexual gratification is too great that she gives up her father to get that
satisfaction. Her father’s house is not a place to realise the affirmation of life and to get her lost happiness compensated. The Father stands for the denial of life. Equating her passion with animal nature, he would not allow her to enjoy, life in its entirety. She says “I’ve been becoming myself. And I must finish.” To accomplish this, to realise how to start as she says “in living my own life,” she comes not only out of the house but also breaks the puritanical bondage. Like Nora Helmer, the emancipated modern wife in Ibsen’s Doll’s House who comes out of her house to realise herself, Nina, the emancipated modern daughter, quits the house to get her emotional life fulfilled. She is not more ‘Daddy’s girl,’ but a passionate, devouring “human being consisted of disparate chronological bumps” who needs many men to gratify her whole nature. Because, none of them fully understands her as a woman or arouses all the love she is capable of. O’Neill’s feeling that “woman stands near the philosophical centre of life and that men circle around the force she radiates” finds its best expression in this play. Nina is meant to typify in herself the passive and absorbing type of woman who draws to herself, and involves in her own neurotic cravings, the lives of all she touches. It is not until the very end of her days that she fully relinquishes the desire to gather to herself every form of male love and because of such deep probing and as a work of intuitive
psychology Strange Interlude is undoubtedly a monumental achievement.

O’Neill, with the expertness and daring of a technician allowed his characters to express their conscious thoughts verbally. He found conventional dramatic techniques inadequate to deal with so complex a character as Nina. In Nietzsche’s view, when the individual is of a Dionysian nature, “the individual soul appears and is purified of the guilt of being an individual. The individual knows he asserts his will at the expense of someone else.” Nina’s quest to assert her will and to attain fulfillment is revealed through the asides, where her longing for emotional fulfillment is revealed.

**Puritanism: Denial of the joys of life**

Unlike Nina whose desire to love is greater than the puritan repression, Lavinia, the daughter of Ezra Mannon in Mourning Becomes Electra, finds it too hard to shake off the puritanic bond and hence becomes a victim of it. O’Neill in his adaptation of the Greek play, Oresteia which he found having greater possibilities of revealing all the deep, hidden relationships in the family than any other of the Attic tragedies, focused his attention on Lavinia. Instead of the fate of the gods and goddesses of the Greek play he brings in psychological fate of the characters which is responsible for their tragic end.
In Lavinia, born to the puritanic Mannon and the life-loving Christine, the conflict between the stern, life-denying Father God, Jehovah and the soft, life-affirming Earth Mother is obvious. Her puritanical religion keeps the sexual instinct in close confinement which accounts for her fixation – the Electra complex. As the fixation intensifies, both her father and herself turn to each other for the love they have failed to get from Christine, Lavinia talks about the behavior of her mother when she was a small child:

I was little – when I used to come to you Mother – with – love – but you would always push me away! I’ve felt it ever since I can remember – you disgust! (Then with a flare – up of bitter hatred) O! I hate you! It’s only right I should hate you!

Lavinia’s attachment to her father, from whom she has inherited the puritan attitude towards life, is very strong. Because of her fixation, she cannot think of marrying anybody. She says:

………. I love Father better than anyone in the world. There is nothing I wouldn’t do – to protect him from hurt!

Possessive like the life-denying Father-God, she tries to steal Christine’s place as Ezra’s wife and Orin’s mother. When Ezra confesses his love to Christine, she cannot bear it and says to Christine, “I hate you. You steal even Father’s love from me!” Driven by her jealousy and possessiveness, she who has a remarkable
resemblance to her mother, does all in her power to emphasise the dissimilarity between her mother and herself.

The physical appearance of Lavinia is symbolic of her conflict within. She bears a striking resemblance to her mother, Christine, who longs for the pagan side of life. Like her mother Lavinia has—“partly a copper brown, and partly a bronze gold, each shade distinct and yet blending with the other.” This kind of unusual hair points to the primitive, vigorous, sensual aspect of life, the strength of which is further indicated by the metallic refineness. The two colours of the women’s hair, distinct from each other yet, harmoniously blending, suggest the warm sun, earth—in other words, life. Their deep blue eyes remind one of the South Sea Islands, where the good spirit of love reigns. The island is a superb symbol to denote the yearning of the characters for life, for whenever anyone finds the puritanic grip as a bondage denying them their life, they long to go to the island hoping to find a meaning for their lives and happiness. Christine’s voluptuous figure, flowing animal grace and her green dress are symbolic of the beating rhythm of life, whereas Lavinia carries herself with a wooden stiffness and military bearing. Her plain black dress is symbolic of her negative attitude towards life. Her manner of wearing her hair pulled tightly back, as if to conceal its natural curliness, shows how hard she tries to control her natural self, in turn
the maternal influence on her. There is not a touch of feminine allurement in her severely plain get up. The maternal nature representing God the mother, is repressed by the putitanic Mannon rigidity in her.

The Mannons are identified with the ‘mask’ because they are afraid of life. Life is hard for them to bear without this protective armour. Lavinia’s face has the same impression life that of her mother – “not living flesh but a wonderful life – like pale mask,” establishing the male tradition. The puritan inhibition inherited from her father is responsible for the grisly role Lavinia plays in the first two parts of the play. Asserting herself as a puritan, she says to Peter, “I hate love!” When he confesses his love to her. She is so much drawn towards her father that she cannot accept Peter who is very much unlike Ezra Mannon.

Lavinia develops an unconscious desire for Adam Brant, her mother’s lover, for in him is reflected the image of her father. When she knows that he is born to Marie Brantome, a low-canuck – nurse and her father’s uncle, David Mannon, she represses her feelings. As Egil Tornguist says:

For all her Puritanism, she is not insensitive to the ‘pagan’ values. Her negative reaction towards Adam reveal most of all her jealousy of the woman Brant truly loves, [Brant has fallen in love
with the mother image of Christine] who partook of the affirmative qualities Lavinia secretly longs for …..

The scene where Christine poisons Ezra Mannon, is surcharged with “a mystical transference of thought.” When Christine has given him poison, Ezra cries out, “Help! Vinnie!” As if in answer to his call, Lavinia appears in the doorway explaining her presence “I had a horrible dream – I thought I heard father calling me – it woke me up –“ It is reasonable from the psychological point of view. Only on Lavinia’s discovery of the adultery do all the actions depend, for, it becomes an indirect agent in the murder of Ezra. O’Neill makes it clear that were Lavinia not such a thoroughgoing Puritan maiden, she would have married her suitor Peter Niles, and thus would not have been at home to become entangled with her mother’s lover, in case of which the murder would not have taken place.

On the murder of Adam and the suicide of Christine, she proclaims, “justice! It’s your justice, Father!” She refers here not only to Ezra’s justice, but of God the Father as well for, it becomes her puritan heritage. Accordingly, in the last play when she wishes Orin’s death, her eyes are drawn to the Mannon portraits on the wall as if they were the visible symbol of her God. The Mannons from within threaten her with an inexorable retribution. Till then, the Mannon’s part of her nature has over-ruled her.
Lavinia’s trip to the South Sea Islands – symbolic of the pagan joy of life – shakes her puritanic moral rigidity. She says, “I’m only half Mannon. I’ve done my duty to them.” Since the psychological world of the mother exists in the unconscious along with that of the father, she cannot escape it. Her passion so long repressed wells up and from now on the pagan, joyous nature starts over-powering her. Moreover, as Frenz says, her “incestuous love for her father is gradually transferred to her brother, so that she comes to assume her mother’s place – a process indicated by her increasing physical resemblance to Christine.” She wears green which signifies this dominance of the pagan nature. Her psychological rebirth takes place with the love for the islands.

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. There was no hereafter. There was only this world.... the natives dancing naked and innocent without the knowledge of sin!... Now Lavinia longs for life and love with Peter. She says to Peter, “We’ll make an island for ourselves and love them their children and teach them to love life so that they can never be possessed by hate and death!” The maternal natural instincts of God the Mother resurge to triumph. Yet when passionately clinging to Peter she calls him as
‘Adam’ – an unconscious slip bringing to her knowledge her unconscious desire for Adam. It shows that even after the death of all the Mannons, Lavinia is still a Mannon. She says, “I’m bound here – to the Mannon dead.” Like Nina, she too tries to come out of the “sepulcher” – like house. But the Mannon part in her is too strong to dare.

Trapped by what she has done already, Lavinia accepts her guilt in all that has happened that she not only precipitated the first murder; but engineered the second also. No happiness is possible in her marriage with Peter. Realising that she has failed to understand the force that has brought her from a place of great promise – to one where the value of life has lost its charm, all its high promise, she feels that death is too easy a way to punish herself. She shuts out every ray of light, all the beauty of the world, “with a gesture of perfect beauty and tragic serenity she turns her back on the world and walks into the house” woodenly. This last step is described by Doris Alexander as “the final defeat of love and joy by Puritanism.”

In Professor Leeds, Ezra and others who share with him the Mannon blood, O’Neill offers a study of the psychological plight of the late-born puritans who have inherited from their ancestor a moral code without the religious faith originally bound up with it. Cut off from its religious roots, the puritan moral code retains its power over
them because it is the basis of their self-respect and family pride. Puritanism without its religious base offers no solution. When Nina could break away from this meaningless outer reality, Lavonia is pathetically killed by the puritanical moral rigors which were too great for her to throw off.