CHAPTER V

MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA

This chapter provides a detailed study of the human predicament on the level of situation and character in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. It will also be proved why this play has been considered to be one of the classics of the time. It will be interesting to see how O’Neill makes use of expressionistic techniques to depict the inner reality and bring out Human Predicament.

Eugene O’Neill is regarded as one of the greatest American playwrights in history. His plays gained such high recognition mainly because of his strong themes which include family life, Greek Mythology and putting up masks. Aspects of these themes are included in *Mourning Becomes Electra, Desire Under Elms* and *Long Days Journey into the Night*. The use of these themes contributes significantly to the plot of O’Neill’s works.

In the play *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the Greek mythology predominates a major part of the play, where the daughter Christine Mannon is in a strong case of Electra complex and the son Orin is in an equally strong case of Oedipus complex. This play tells of the mother’s murder of the father and the son’s murder of the mother’s lover. The theme is clearly drawn from Orestus story, a classic Greek myth as well as the similar Oedipus myth. Both Greek
stories tell of murder among parents as well as excessive love shown to parents by the children. As the plot of *Mourning Becomes Electra* develops it becomes apparent that the story is really a modern day version of Orestus set in New England.

Another theme used by O’Neill is that of his actors wearing masks. In some of his works actors will actually wear a mask on stage but often it is just figurative. A perfect example of this is seen in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Every member of the Mannon family or even some closely associated with the family is described as having the appearance of wearing the mask. Right at the beginning of the play, O’Neill gives a clear description in his stage direction of the character Louisa and her “mask”; the description reads as follows:

One is struck at once by the strange impression in repose of not living flesh but a wonderfully pale mask….in which only the deep set eyes are alive.

*Mourning Becomes Electra* begins with the mother and daughter, Christine and Lavinia, waiting there in the house of the Mannons, the return of Ezra Mannon from the war, which with Lee’s surrender is about to over. A thread of romance is introduced between Lavina and Peter, and between Lavina’s brother Orin and Hazel, Peter’s sister. Meanwhile, Captain Brant comes to call; he pays a certain court to Lavina, and she, acting on a cue from the hired man, who has on the place sixty years, traps him into admitting that he is the son of one of the Mannons who had seduced a Canadian maidservant and been driven from
home by his father, Lavina’s grandfather. She has all her data straight now. She has suspected her mother, followed her to New York, where Christine has pretended to go because of her own father’s illness, but has in fact been meeting Adam Brant.

Lavina has written to her father and brother, hinting at the town gossip about her mother. We learn that Captain Brant had returned to avenge his mother but instead had fallen passionately in love with Christine, who loves him as passionately as she hates her husband for leaving her alone and taking away Orin from her when she needed him the most. Thus, Christine replies to Lavinia:

CHRISTINE:    Well, I hope you realize I never would have fallen in love with Adam if I’d have Orin with me. When he had gone there was nothing left—but hate and a desire to be revenged—and a longing for love. (509)

From this point of view, the play moves on, with the father’s hatred of the son, who returns it, the son’s adoration of his mother, the daughter’s and the mother’s antagonism, the daughter’s and the father’s devotion, to Christine’s murder of her husband with the poison sent by Brant and substituted for the medicine prescribed against his heart trouble.

Orin returns after an illness from a wound in the head. Christine tries to protect herself in her son’s mind against the plots of Lavinia. Lavinia is still in
the room where her father’s dead body lies, tries to convince Orin with the facts; they trail Christine to Brant’s ship, where she has gone to warn him against Orin. Christine is successful in convincing Orin about the cause of their father’s death and thus Orin decides to shoot Brant.

BRANT: So its good-bye to you, ‘Flying Trades’!

And you’re right! I wasn’t man enough for you! (Orin fires twice).

LAVINIA: (stares fascinatedly at Brant’s still face). Is he –dead?

ORIN: Yes. (555)

This is too much a shock to Christine and she cannot bear it and next day on hearing the news about Brant’s death shoots herself

ORIN: Vinnie! Mother- shot herself-Father’s pistol-get a doctor-(then with hopeless anguish) No-it’s too late-She’s dead! (563)

Brother and sister take a long voyage to China, stop at the Southern Isles and come home again. To their horror what they find at home is that substitutions have taken place, Lavinia appears to be like her mother and Orin looks more like his father. Meanwhile, his old affair with Hazel encouraged by Lavinia, who now wants to marry Peter, is cancelled: he finds himself making an incestuous proposal to Lavinia and is repulsed by her. Orin here is forced by circumstances to associate Lavinia with his mother and be drawn by her purity and falls in love with her. He is confused and substitutes Lavinia to be his
mother. So he does not allow Lavinia to go and get married to Peter. He writes the history of the Mannon’s crimes and threatens to show the letter to Peter if Lavinia does not accept his proposal. Orin cannot forgive himself for leading his mother to commit suicide. He threatens her of what the future holds for her and incase she leaves him he would hand over the history of the evils of Mannon family to Peter.

Orin cannot control his guilt consciousness and shoots himself. In the end Lavinia speaking words of love to Peter, finds Adam’s name on her lips. She breaks up with Peter, orders the blinds of her house nailed shut, and goes into the house, to live there till her death. Justice has been done, the dead Mannon’s will be there in the Haunted house to keep her company.

The magnificent theme that there is something dead that we cannot placate falsely is in the Greek plays and in the O’Neill play. The end of the play is by imaginative insight Greek in spirit: Lavinia goes into the house, the blinds are closed forever. The stage is silent, the door, the exaltation is there, the completion, the tragic certainty. Finally the peculiar kind of suspense employed is Greek. The playwright has learned the adult suspense of the classics as compared with the adolescent script of suspense, hit off happily enough at times, that reins in the romantic drama of the North.
Classic suspense does not depend on a mere crude strain, wondering how things will turn out, however entertaining and dramatic that effect may be. The classic suspense has even a biological defense: you know that in life you will come to death, but just how the course of all your living will shade and fulfill itself you do not know, and you are borne up by an animal will to survive, a passionate participation. In the classic form, where the outcome is already known, lies the highest order of suspense. Knowing how things will end, you are left free to watch that qualities and what light will appear in their progression towards their due and necessary finish. Suspense proves thus not to be necessarily a contrivance, effective as that may be; it is an inner quality.

It is interesting in our confused and feministic epoch that this new employment of the theme gives the play to Electra. Nowhere in Greek does this happen. From Sophocles there survives only what must be a section of trilogy, the Electra; and though so much of the waiting and torment has been hers, Electra is at the end left off with a betrothal to Orestes’ faithful Horatio, Pylades, and the forebroodings and the remorse rise in Orestes only, who has struck the death blow on his mother.

In Euripides’ Electra, the conclusion is the forebroodings of Orestes and the marriage of Electra to Pylades; in his Orestes, Electra cleaves to her brother who is in a violent neurotic sickness, quite modernly indicated; they are both in danger from the State for their action, and whole situation is solved with a trivial
and silly denouement. Along with these more accessible manifest likes and dislikes, there are numerous points about Eugene O’Neill that are additions to or changes from the original Greek and that are yet both high creative invention and, in modern terms and material, re-creations in the most profound sense of Greek equivalents.

The most brilliant of these is the insect motive coming towards the end of the play. For Orin Mannon there comes the sudden form of his desire, incest: the realization and the admission of what it has all been all along, his feelings towards his father, towards his mother, towards Brant, towards Lavinia. This recognition of his obsession is his avenging Erinyes. In this detail alone might rest the argument that Eugene O’Neill, placing a Greek theme in the middle of a last century, has written the most modern of all his plays.

The motives of resemblances among the three men, Mannon, Orin and Brant are a great dramatic image: it provides a parallel to the Greek motive of a cursed house; and at the same time remains modern and fresh. The Greek husband returned from the war with his paramour and after sacrificing his daughter; Mannon’s return will bring the son also home again to a more subtle and complex situation than the other.

The Islands of the Blessed, everywhere in Greek dreams, the southern islands that are the symbol of so much modern meaning, in *Mourning Becomes*
*Electra*, makes a fine motif. The mother in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is not killed by her son but takes her own life; his essential murder, nevertheless, of his mother turns in his mind with a terror more modern but no less destroying; his mind storms with the Furies—“thoughts that accuse each other”.

Says, Travis Bogard, of the depressing element of *Mourning Becomes Electra*:

I have only to say that it seems to me above anything else exhilarating. There is a line of the Leopardi’s where he speaks of poetry as “my delight and my Erinyes” and once thinking of the eternal silence, he hears the winter among the trees and goes comparing the infinite silence to that voice and remembers the eternal, and the dead seasons, and the present and the living and the sound of it. In this immensity his thought drowns, and shipwreck is sweet to him in such a sea. When the play ended and the last Mannon was gone into the house, the door shut, It felt in a full, lovely sense, that the Erinyes were appeased [1972:31]

O’Neill’s quest for discovering appropriate forms to dramatize his usual themes led him initially to the school of expressionism and he achieved a measure of success in his plays such as *The Emperor Jones* and the *Hairy Ape*. Masks and phantom forms and other novel devices were used to express the suppressed fears and atavistic memories of man and the ontological problem of
being, becoming and belonging were for the first time in America presented on stage to reveal the inner motivation and the mental and emotional make-up of the people acting out their allotted role in life.

Subsequently, in his later plays, he interestingly attempted to explore the subconscious and the inner recesses of the human psyche where libido exercises a domineering control over the animal instincts and the seemingly irrational actions. Freudian concepts helped him in searching out and plumbing the depths of the subconscious. Time and again he was able to create plays with haunting quality. The great success of Strange Interlude, Mourning Becomes Electra and Desire under Elms is mainly because he was able to re-enact the complex drama of human passions and the ranging conflicts of a divided self. These plays created a stir in the world of theatre and the paying public was moved to state of ecstatic adulation and savored forever the tragic intensity where passions and possessive greed unfold a misfortune that is both predictable and relentlessly inevitable.

Mourning Becomes Electra is also regarded as one of his first classics to be produced by the American Theatre. The tragedy depicts Eugene O’Neill tormented self with a terrifying veracity which must have needed all the courage, self analysis, dissection and detachment of a man at deaths door. In O’Neill the human predicament is a result of situation and character and not so much as a given state of existence.
T.S.Eliot once observed that good poets borrow and great poets steal; the plot for *Mourning Becomes Electra* produced in 1932 was stolen from Euripides, Sophocles and Orestus of Aeschylus. Electra’s title indicates O’Neill’s interest in the daughter, Lavina Mannon who avenges the murder of her father Ezra (Agamemnon) by his wife Christine (Clytemnestra) and his lover, Ezra’s cousin Adam Brant (Aegisthus).

It is a trilogy. The three parts are called (i) Home Coming, (ii) The Hunted, (iii) The Haunted.

As Carpenter has said:

> The logical perfection of *Mourning Becomes Electra* and the sustained psychological intensity of its feeling produced an artistic work of great power [1957:38]

Comparisons are very unpleasant odious. But we can still look for certain elements of Greek tragedy in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. For example, although the unity of time is not strictly observed in the play, the other two unities of action and place have been duly observed. The action of the play is one continuous action without a sub-plot to divert the attention of the audience. The place is always the same the Mannon House, its study or its garden or the steps
leading to the house except the one scene of the killing of the Branton the Flying Trades. Thus these two unities have been effectively observed by the writer not because they are unities prescribed by Aristotle but because they reflect the sense of the past and deepen the sense of doom hanging on the Mannons, like the ancient curse on the house of Agamemnon.

The title of the play suggests the analogy with drama. A thousand ships were launched to teach Troy a lesson. Agamemnon brother of Menelaus goes with the Greek expedition to wipe out Troy. His wife Clytemnestra, the sister of Helen in the absence of her husband takes for her paramour Aegisthus. In the course of time Agamemnon returns. He brings with him Cassandra, the daughter of Priam. Clytemnestra and her lover murder him on his return.

His daughter Electra prays for the return of her brother Orestus who has been sent out of the country long ago. Orestes returns and kills Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. For this crime of killing his mother he is pursued by Erinyes but a long wandering he is cleansed out of his sin.

This Greek legend echoes through the corridors of centuries and invests O’Neill’s story with gloom and agony. The Greek classical atmosphere and the sense of doom hang over the play from the very start. B.H.Clark says:

O’Neill turned to Aeschylus because the Greek had ready to hand a set of conventions that enabled him to present a
certain aspects of life that seemed important, without having to explain too much of the background or characters. The chorus, the masks, the formal literary language, the common heritage of history, legend, religion, politics—such were the among the advantages enjoyed by the ancient Greek dramatists who were not much concerned with the surface of things….Greek tragedy offered O’Neill a wider field for expression of his ideas than he could have had he chosen a modern scene and characters [1947:64]

Thus his source of inspiration is the Greek legend and he has invested his play with Greek dignity and sense of Fate. The parallel between the legend and <i>Mourning Becomes Electra</i> has been consciously and deliberately maintained.

Agamemnon comes from the Trojan War; in our play General Ezra comes back from the Civil War after the victory of his side. In the Greek legend and plays, Agamemnon is murdered by his lustful wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. In the play <i>Mourning Becomes Electra</i> General Ezra is murdered by his wife Christine with the help of the poison supplied by her lover Adam Brant. In the Greek story, Clytemnestra murders her husband because he had sacrificed her daughter to please the gods and because she wanted power over Argos for herself and her lover. In the play being studied Christine murders her husband because she did love him and because she wanted to marry Captain
Thus both the legend and the play hinge on the theme of crime and punishment.

Orestus, at the command of Apollo, kills his mother and her lover. In the play being considered Orin, the son of General Ezra and Clytemnestra shoots the lover of his mother and his father’s co-murderer and unconsciously goads his mother, Christine, to commit suicide.

Lavina, Christine’s daughter stands for Electra who was shamed and degraded in the Greek legend and prays for the return of her brother, Orestus, to avenge the death of her father. Lavina also leads Orin to shoot Brant on his ship and goads through Orin in the same way as her mother is goaded to kill herself. In the Greek plays Orestus is acquitted of the charge of matricide but in our play Orin does not actually kill his mother instead he had goaded her onto suicide. So O’Neill brings about his death as a master stroke of Freudian psycho-analysis while the potential theme of incest makes his death inevitable. The theme of potential incest is so characteristic of Greek plays and O’Neill exploits it to make ruin inevitable.

So, the structural pattern in both is almost similar. It does not demand as in Shakespeare any tragic flaw. But as in the Greek tragedy the characters are foredoomed to pain and death. The exploitation of the Greek atmosphere is greatly responsible for the somber colors of our tragedy. The theme of a whole
line of Mannons and their sins is brought to a stupendous climax by Eugene O’Neill. Sins of the father are visited upon their children.

Each part of our trilogy deals with a death. In Home Coming, we see the death of General Ezra. The Hunted, the second play, shows us the killing of Adam Brant by Orin which constitutes the second stage of tragic evolution. And in the third play, The Haunted, we see Orin killing himself and Lavina resigning herself to a life of isolation to atone for the crimes of the dead. With the third part the retribution is complete.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra* we can O’Neill bring out the desires and emotions from the layers of the subconscious mind of his characters. O’Neill extended the dimension of the field of psychoanalysis by delving deep into the psychology of his characters to reveal hidden desires, twists and turns of psychology and unconscious desires lying deeply hidden in the minds of men. Clifford Leech observes:

The characteristic structure of an O’Neill play is determined by a movement towards unmasking, which is often also a movement of the principal characters towards of the stance they must take forward the fundamental problem of existence.[1963:47]
Lavina at first hates love but in the end she wants to marry Peter immediately and within few minutes she changes her decision and wants to shut herself up in the haunted house with the ghosts of the dead Mannons. These sudden psychological twists and turns are deliberately used by O’Neill to express the inner reality of his characters as is seen in the speech of Lavina after she has made up her mind to punish herself:

LAVINIA: I am not going the way Mother and Orin went. That would be escaping punishment. There is none left to punish me. I’ am the last Mannon. I must punish myself. Living here alone with the dead is a worse punishment than death. (609)

When at home tells his mother that he knows that Brant is her lover and that she and Brant had murdered Ezra. Christine is bewildered. All her plans of going to South Sea Island are thrown to the winds; her lover is dead she has nothing to live for so she goes into another room and shoots herself. It is her death that triggers the action of denouement in the play. Though she is a bold woman without actual moral scruples she says to Lavina:

CHRISTINE: Suppose I go off with Adam. Where will you and your father and the family’s name be after the scandal?.......I’ve had the man I love at least. (523)
Ezra was frustrated in his married life. So out of despair he joined the Mexican War and became a major. But deep in his heart he knew that his wife did not reciprocate his love. After the Mexican War he successfully joined the shipping company and thus channelized his disappointment in love in other directions. At the time of the Civil War he joins the War out of sheer desperation of an unloved man. He hoped to be killed in the war. But he becomes Brigadier General and wins laurels. People called him a successful and able man but the one thing he could not get was his wife’s love.

The title of the play is apt as well as suggestive. Actually the play basks in the reflected glory of the Greeks. By linking the name of Electra with the title of the play O’Neill has underlined the Greek similarity and origin.

O’Neill has emphasized his debt to the legend of the curse on the house of Atreus. After Agamemnon returns from war, his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus kill him. Clytemnestra killed her husband because she wanted to take revenge for the sacrifice of her daughter by Agamemnon. She was also actuated by her desire to rule over Argos along with her lover.

Electra Agamemnon’s daughter wants her to come back to take revenge. In the Greek tragedy Electra is left in the background; but O’Neill converts her onto a dominating personality the play *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Orestus comes and takes his revenge by killing Clytemnestra, his mother and her lover.
But this was pronounced to be a crime of matricide and the furies, the maternal earth spirits pursue him. He goes to Delphi and also submits himself to a jury of the citizens. The jury absolves him of the crime of matricide; and goddess Athence intervenes; so the Furies are satisfied and Orestus is left in peace. For Electra the time all along has been a time of mourning. Thus *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

In our O’Neill wanted to make a major character out of Electra (Lavina). So he shifts the emphasis from Orin (Orestus) to Lavina. Christine, mother of Lavina was in love with Adam Brant and loathed her husband Brigadier General Ezra. This hatred is so acute that she decides to kill her husband by giving him a poison pill. At the time of the death Lavina enters the room.

Lavina tells her mother that she has deliberately given a poison pill to her father instead of his regular heart medicine. Lavina is shocked and decides to take revenge. When her brother comes she tries to convince him that father was poisoned by their own mother and her lover. Orin is initially reluctant to believe this charge against his dear mother unless otherwise proved. So she takes him to Brant’s ship and shows him the scene between their mother and Adam Brant. After Christine has taken leave of Brant Orin enters Brant’s cabin and shoots him. Thus one of the culprits meets its nemesis at the hands of Orin.
At home he has a show-down with his mother. He tells her that he is aware of the guilt that she has killed his father along with her lover and that he had been to Brant’s ship and witnessed all that had passed between them. Christine is horrified to hear this and she goes to Ezra’s study and shots herself with a pistol. She doing so prefers to die than lead a life of disgrace and dishonor.

But Orin had sustained a head injury in the war. And in his muddled way of thinking he starts into believing that he was responsible for the death of his mother. This morbid psychology, leads him to absurd actions. For example he writes the history of the crimes of the Mannons; he believes that Lavina had become Christine and he identifies himself with his father General Ezra. Incestuous ideals crawl through his unhealthy and rotten mind. He tells Hazel, the girl he loves that she should forget him; and he tells Lavina that he will not allow her to marry Peter.

Lavina therefore chides him and even threatens him but he is adamant. When Peter comes she rebukes Orin strongly. Orin cannot tolerate this insult and he has no choice but to kill himself and he does so by entering the study and shooting himself. Thus Lavina is the last living Mannon.
That is why her character gains considerable importance. Her last act of complete self-abnegation and her act of secluding herself with the dead portraits of the Mannons give her character a tragic stature.

All the actions of the play emanate from Lavina (Electra). All the actions revolve around her. She demands that her brother take revenge and is responsible for Orin’s harsh words to his mother. This results in Christine’s suicide. Lavina comes to hate her brother in the end and wishes he were dead. This leads to Orin’s suicide.

In the play she asks Seth to throw away all the flowers out of the house. She walks into the haunted house to live there forever and in isolation- and in complete mourning. Thus the title *Mourning Becomes Electra* (Lavina). As the last of the Mannon she goes to reside with the dead with a hope that this action of hers will atone for the sins of the family

O’Neill’s use of symbolism is artistic, conscious, and is intended to extend the scope and the meaning of the play. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* O’Neill has made extensive use of psychological symbols. He has used in his play a number of symbols for example-the Mother image, the Blessed Isles, the Mannon portraits etc. The very house of the Mannons stand as the symbol of hatred and callousness. As Winther observes:
In *Mourning Becomes Electra* the Mother is a primordial image, an archetypal experience shared by all the Mannons. Thus, Lavina is identified with her mother, Christine, and are both the image of Marie Branoimie.[1961:40]

Adam Brant falls in love with Christine because he associates her with his mother Marie. To him Lavina looks like his mother. Only his mother Marie Brantomie had hair like hairs. O’Neill uses the mother image in detail in case of Orin. His love for his mother has sexual overtones. He is his mother’s cry-baby. As a child he used to wait patiently to get an extra goodnight kiss from his mother. When he comes back from the war he find’s his mother beautiful, she is his only ‘girl’. And Christine replies:

CHRISTINE: You’re a big man now, aren’t you? (494)

Lavina and Orin are drawn to the parent of opposite sex. With Orin, it his mother who is his world while it is the father’s world to Lanvina. Orin feels his mother around him in the Blessed Isles; the breaking of the waves was her voice. The sky had the colour of her eyes. Thus, the mother symbol to Orin stands for—peace, security, freedom from fear.

After the suicide of Christine, Lavina occupies the mother image for Orin and he loves her with all the guilt in him, the guilt they shared. Orin’s
subconscious motive in taking Lavina is to posses his mother completely and Lavina would be able to share the burden of his guilt.

The Blessed Isles are a symbol of joy, purity and innocence of Orin, Lavina, Christine and Adam. O’Neill is voicing a yearning in the heart of the puritan man for an ideal paradise full of beauty and sinlessness. Thus, the Blessed Islands have been invested with psychological dimensions of peace and new trouble free life. The islands are thus an image of fresh new life. The islands motif runs through the whole play tantalizing and attracting Orin, Lavina and Christine to a life of peace and unalloyed happiness-their dream of an early paradise. As Lavina says:

LAVINIA:       I loved those islands. They finished setting me free. There was there mysterious and beautiful-a good spirit-of love-coming out of the land and sea. It made me forget death. (528)

The islands stand for freedom from all puritan taboos, freedom from pain and misery. O’Neill shows an average American’s yearning to escape and return to paradise. But it remains a paradise lost; a vision unachieved for grief is the lot of Mannons and *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

The song of Shenandoah serves the purpose of a choral song. In the first part, Home Coming, Seth sings that melancholy song which has the brooding
rhythm of the sea. The song foreshadows unattainability and frustration for the characters. The song is there again after Christine’s suicide; casting a veil of finality and mystery on Christine’s death.

The symbol of Mannon house shows us much more than a large house. It is a house built in hatred (of Marie Brantomie’s marriage with David). It is a house of death and the dead Mannon’s portrait always intervene in the path of happiness of their younger generation. It is a house haunted by ghosts, the evil and sins.

The use of symbolism adds a poetic quality to the prose of O’Neill and universalizes the theme. It adds a new dimension of emotion and depth of meaning to the dark events of the play. Thus as Travid Bogard puts it:

*Mourning Becomes Electra*, perhaps O’Neill’s most secular play, is also his least symbolic work to date. Such symbols as exist in the play-portraits, the house, flowers all revolve with human-beings at their centre. Now, none of the conflict between character and symbol that beset many of the minor works and such major plays-Strange Interlude enters to plague this study of crime and retribution. There are no ambiguities nor is anything vague or suggested. The characters are drawn precisely. Their story fully told and move towards a comprehensible and convincing destiny.[1972:66]
Four years after Strange Interlude, O’Neill completed *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), which could more accurately be called his “woman play”. Although appearing late in O’Neill’s career, Electra is his first work—and indeed one of the very few in his cannon—to explore relationships between women in any depth. A discussion of mother woman bonds in O’Neill’s canon would begin and end with *Mourning Becomes Electra* and a *Touch of the Poet* (1942). In his depiction of Christine Mannon and her daughter, Lavina, O’Neill again seems to have taken his cue from Freud. Freud postulated that girls turning away from the mother is accompanied by hostility; the attachment to the mother ends in hate. A hate of that kind may become very striking and last all through life.

Lavina eventually comes to empathize and identify with her mother but only after her mother’s death—a suicide for which Lavina herself is largely responsible. While Christine is alive there is no sense of love or mutual understanding between the two, and the cause of their conflict, not surprisingly, is jealously over the men in their lives. Lavina Mannon is obsessed with her father Ezra, and Christine admits she wouldn’t have taken a lover if her son Orin had not taken off to war. The spiral of incestuous desire finally concludes with Lavina, the most courageous of the family, who locks herself in with her memories instead of choosing the suicide into which her mother and brother escaped.
Dorris Alexander observes:

Lavina attains classically a tragic stature only when she sacrifices the ‘natural’ and ‘female’ aspects of herself to the furies, the bastions of the political and patriarchal form. [1992:68]

Still, O’Neill’s feminine principle is not as benevolent as this suggests. This female force can devour, destroy as well as comfort. Further, the Blessed Islands of which Orin Mannon dreams have a revealing sexual component. He tells his mother:

ORIN: The breaking of the waves was your voice. The sky was the same color as your eyes. The warm sand was like your skin. The whole island was you. (531)

Orin’s literalized mother ‘nature’ is an oedipal vision grounded in male desire. The female god, the Blessed Islands, the recuperative powers of the femininized natural world, is all based on O’Neill’s equation of motherhood and womanhood.

In play after play, characters seize opportunities to tell each other their stories, more often retelling the past, they enable an ordering of the characters, sense of self, and thereby an escape from the present. Seemingly hardened characters reveal their vulnerability in confessional sequences often spoken in
the presence of another character, but the response to self-revelation is usually blank. Our inability to hear each other and the inopportuneness of the moment chosen to speak, are recurring motifs. While Ephraim expatiates on his life and loneliness in Part ii of *Desire Under the Elms*, his wife, Abbie, is preoccupied by her own private longings. Too late Ezra Mannon struggles to account for himself to an unreceptive Christine in *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

O’Neill was dissatisfied with the unreal and the romantic situations. He wanted to show living pulsating human beings. Thus, we find in the early plays of O’Neill a blend of realism and romanticism. But he is not averse to using melodrama in his plays. According to him pure realism would make the plays colorless and monotonous. Christine shooting herself and Orin shooting himself out of a guilty feeling and Lavina dramatically entering the haunted house and choosing a life of isolation and seclusion are all melodramatic situations which add color to drab the realities which might turn uninteresting.

The most significant element of O’Neill’s realism is the Realism of theme. He selects themes which have a universal appeal. Which are taken from day to day life. His plays have a powerful social and economic bias. In *Desire Under the Elms* he portrays the theme of mother complex and adultery and a similar theme of Oedipus complex and Electra complex is shown in the play *Mourning Becomes Electra*. A touch of psychoanalysis adds to the intensity of the play. As Christine is unfaithful to her husband and when her son discovers the same he kills her lover following which she is forced to shoot herself. This
guilt complex leads Orin to shoot himself. All these have been realistically depicted.

O’Neill has given a touch of reality to his settings as is seen in the backdrop of the luxurious Mannon house ordinary people like Seth and Abner are shown in a very realistic manner.

As Michael Manheim says:

The earliest plays take place at the sea or shore mostly in sordid surroundings. In Mourning Becomes we get a touch of sordid life in the morbid psychology of the characters and adultery. It is a psychological sordidness that he presents. Mother’s love or Oedipus complex forms are important aspects of O’Neill’s psychological realism. It is psychologically a symbol of lost happiness. Orin’s love for Christine is almost obsessive and borders on adorations. He liked to touch his mother’s copper golden hair and as a child hid on the landing to receive a goodnight kiss from her. [1982:72]

We notice this realism in his themes, characters, situations and dialogue. Situations are always realistic. In Desire Under the Elms; we see the step son loving the step-mother; and old farmer marrying a young wife; and the crime that takes place as a result of this is so common place in life. Similarly, in Mourning Becomes Electra has the story of love obsession and mother complex
that has tragic consequences. Normally a tragedy idealizes life; as realism is common to comedy. But O’Neill uses tragic realism and psychological realism of the characters that makes his plays appealing.

The themes of O’Neill’s plays show a minute observation of men, manners and situations. He thus gives us a realistic picture of life. Similarly, his plays like *Beyond the Horizon, Anna Christie, The Straw* etc are full of realistic situations.

But O’Neill’s crown and glory lies in his psychological realism. After experimenting with external realism O’Neill turned to psychological realism. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* we see some excellent psycho-analysis in the portrayal of the character of Christine. The workings of Christine’s mind, her hatred to sleep with her husband her morbid attraction for Adam are all instances of psychological realism.

Similarly, Lavina and Orin possess complex psychology. Orin has a feeling of guilt complex after he drives his mother to shoot herself and in the end Lavina is also a victim of a similar guilty complex that she decides to shut herself in the haunted house to atone for the sins of the Mannon family, which is artistic, subtle and convincing.
O’Neill says:

I sought to convey that mourning benefits Electra! It becomes Electra to mourn; it is her fate; black is becoming to her and it is the color that becomes her destiny. [1947:14]

As Carpenter observes:

The search led him into many and varied manners of speech: realism, expressionism, naturalism, symbolism, fantasy, poetry and in various combinations and experiments with devices form older dramatic traditions. But behind the apparent diversity was a single impulse; to find an idiom in which to express the human tragedy. And whatever other circumstances O’Neill may have possessed or lacked he had a firm grasp of one essential element of tragedy— the eternal conflict between man’s aspirations and some intransigent, ineluctable quality in life which circumscribes and limits him, and frustrates the realization of those dreams which to make life worth living. [1957:44]

Although, O’Neill had exercised the ‘negative capability ‘ of a pure artist and kept himself aloof from the sociological polemics, he was nevertheless becoming deeply aware of the issues that had brought about “universal breakdown. His understanding of the power system that operates within the human soul has an almost
prophetic poignancy in view of the modern dark age. Hitlerism and Fascism. That the deliberate organization of the human resources, whether material, or spiritual tends to be a self-perpetuating, nightmarish routine is an old insight of his, which is the post war world, was fast becoming a dreadful reality.

In dealing with illusion and reality, O’Neill does not treat them as negation of each other, but as two valid realms of verity, always co-existing with each other. As long as their relationship is only tangential, the easy going heartiness of Harry Hope’s underworld is preserved. But once their deeper complicity is brought to light, and the characters consciousness, or what Mark Twain call’s “Moral Sense” is aroused, the will to live is put out.

As Doris Alexander asserts:

In his last phase as a playwright, O’Neill quest apparently comes full circle. Pressing towards new dimension of dramatic reality, he arrives at the point where he had originally started with regard to human existence. In fact as early as 1912, writing as a lisping versifier, he had set the theme-song of his philosophy of life- When truth and Love and God are dead. It is time, full time, to die!

Man is the forlorn child of creation thrown upon the rudderless expanse of loneliness. He cannot go back for he does not have the advantage of the brute’s total subservience to natural law. Onward
he cannot go for his being is geared to a Time which moves him in “lazy circles”. The retreat into his own psyche is terrifying, for it is divided beyond repair. He has no sense of belonging, while the very essence of his humanity is the urge to belong and establish a relationship between him and the universe.

Viewed as a single aesthetic act, O’Neill’s dramatic work reveals the ordeal of an artist who had struggled without reaching any satisfying answer to the great question of how to find the tragic medium between tranquilizing optimism and paralyzing pessimism. Ever a seeker after the Mystery that makes man behave the way he does, the Mystery had always baffled him. He moved from naturalism to paganism, from paganism to psychology, from psychology to religion, and from religion to illusion in order to find a measure, and a margin for man, which would make his life worth living, and his battles worth fighting. [1992:76]

The imagination of disaster seems all the more powerful, and man, is incessantly responsible for his own faith. O’Neill’s characters succumb to Necessity, whether defined by external or internal causation: they express life’s dominance, rather than being expressed by it. If choice and the discrepancies arising out of it in moral action are the stigmata of tragedy in the usual sense of the term. O’Neill characters are too much the victims and the vanquished to attain great tragic dignity. In Desire Under the Elms and Mourning Becomes
Electra, the closet approximation to a modern tragedy, Abbie and Eben in Desire Under the Elms and Lavina in Mourning Becomes Electra take their fate into their own hands and scorn and defy necessity by making a virtual choice of their suffering; but the inner freedom they accomplish is only vaguely by self-knowledge. For almost axiomatically self-knowledge enacts certain disaster for O’Neill’s characters. The disaster and punishment that Lavina chooses for herself is to live all by herself; even asking Peter to forget her; asking Seth and Hannah to empty her live of all the illumination as she confines herself among the dead Mannons.

LAVINA: Live alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than Death or prison! I’ll never go out or see anyone! I’ll have the shutters nailed so close so no sunlight can ever get in; I’ll live alone with the dead and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until their curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die! (611)

In Mourning Becomes Electra, using Freudian determinism and Jungian mysticism to discover a mythic cognate for Fate, he once again tried to recapture the spirit of classical tragedy. But as long as myth was an imposition from without, his plays failed to achieve their intended purpose completely, they missed the ritualistic aspect of Greek drama. They remained imitations of imitated actions, concepts rather than vital dramatizations of the tragic spirit. But then this is true not only of O’Neill, but of the modern writers who have attempted to adapt ancient myths to symbolize modern conflict outside the
bounds of realism. Being an inherent structure of actual belief Myth is total reality in the actual life of the community, functioning through socially significant forms of ritual.

In presenting the mythic possibilities of modern day life, Eliot, Joyce, Faulkner and O’Neill have succeeded exactly where they have let the controlling ambience of contemporary experience enact its own ritualistic patterns of illusion and reality. *The Iceman Cometh* celebrates the triumph of reality, not over, but within the mythos of illusion. Its dramatic immediacy lies in its imitation of patience rather than action, and its double vision of the monstrous unreality of human actions, and the grotesque reality of human aspirations. Its characters are modern and yet universal in a sense that those in *Mourning Becomes Electra* fail to be. For they are involved not only in their individual past, but also in a wider context of the present, in which the loss of values and the breakdown of communication define a collective situation.

*The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day’s Journey into Night* have the most dramatically valid symbolism, molded put of direct, realistic elements which give an added depth to the artistic and psychological intuitions of human character and motivation.

*Mourning Becomes Electra* is an ironic triumph of justice over love, its tragic theme deriving no less from the palpable absence of Christian humility than from the frustration of classical pride. Thus, O’Neill’s plays in their conformation of sinful nature of man, in their emphasis on grace instead of
justice, love and gratitude instead of equity and nemesis are fundamentally Christian in their tragic vision. Guilt in his tragedies is more often the consequence of violated love than of frustrated pride by the Mannon; and doubt itself is the seed of sorrow, for it cuts man off from the mooring of a genuine, comforting faith.

_Mourning Becomes Electra_, provides from the beginning to the end, an external symbolization of the inner duality of the Mannon fate, so that every unity achieved reveals an unconquered duplicity. The house, with its Greek façade, and Puritan interior presided over by the Mannon portraits, and the garden of innocence which is finally rejected by Lavina in order to recede onto her own darkened memory, are instances in point.

Sunshine never enters the plays many unfolding scenes whose obscurities are made all the more disturbingly havoc by the circumambient awareness of the far-away fairy islands of radiance and harmony. Lavina’s self-mummification is so intense a dramatic image that terror and pity, melodrama and tragedy, the Gothic and the classical, the surrealistic and the expressionistic, fuse together into an explosive illumination.