Three Plays Study Guide

Three Plays by Eugene O'Neill

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This collection of plays by one of America's best known and most acclaimed dramatists explores variations on the central theme of family. Epic in both length and emotional scope, all three plays (written in the early years of the 20th Century) broke new ground in their explorations of sexuality, relationships, and theatrical storytelling. In doing so, they also explore secondary themes relating to the corruptible power of both love and revenge, and the complicated relationship between past and present.

The first of the three plays is Desire under the Elms, set in rural New England in the mid-1800s and written with a style of dialogue that carefully and deliberately evokes the lack of education of its characters. The narrative traces the struggle of Eben, youngest child of hard-edged farmer Ephraim Cabot, to retain what he believes to be his rights to the farm brought by his now dead mother into her marriage. His struggle is complicated by the presence of his two older half-brothers from Ephraim's first marriage, who claim rights to the farm as their father's legal heirs, and by the presence of Ephraim's third wife, the possessive and sensual Abbie. Eben's own surging desire for Abbie complicates matters further. The situation becomes fraught with tension when, after Eben's older brothers leave to chase gold fortunes in California, Eben and Abbie become sexually involved. The consequences of their union bring what they see as true love and what the audience would likely see as foolish tragedy to them both. The play's title is a reference to the elm trees surrounding the Cabot family farm and the desires that heave and explode in the house built beneath their shelter - for power, for sex, and for security.

The second play in the collection is titled Strange Interlude. It relates two decades of events and confrontations in the lives of Nina, a charismatic but emotionally unstable woman, and the three men who, in their various ways and for their various reasons, are in love with her. Over the course of the lengthy, emotionally dense narrative, Nina marries a man she does not love, aborts her husband's child, becomes pregnant by another man, passes that child off as her husband's, and possessively attempts to ruin the eventual engagement of her son - all in the name of self-redemption for what she sees as a past mistake. The most noteworthy element of this play is the way in which the characters speak their innermost thoughts aloud, revealing what is known to theatre professionals as "subtext" to the audience. In other words, what in most plays remains unsaid is, in Strange Interlude, verbalized in the same way as the regular dialogue. The title of this play is a quote from Nina's dialogue, in which she refers to an individual's life as a "strange interlude" in the mind and experience of God.

The collection's third play is Mourning Becomes Electra, a retelling and adaptation of one of the seminal pieces of world theatre - the Classical Greek play The Oresteia. The play's title is an ironic reference to a character in that play, the emotional young daughter (Electra) of the murdered father she adores. A multi-generational saga of horrific betrayal and revenge set at the end of the American Civil War, the action of the play is anchored by the story of Lavinia, a young woman not unlike Nina from Strange Interlude in her emotional volatility, her assertive ruthlessness, and her desire to control.

Lavinia is a witness to the murder of her beloved father by her hated mother, is an active participant in the death of her mother's lover, rejoices at the revenge-motivated death of her mother, and struggles to sustain the sanity of her worshiped brother (who believes he was responsible for his mother's death). Through it all, she desperately yearns for the freedom to love the decent man who has repeatedly proposed marriage to her. By the end of the play, however, she comes to realize that she is the true (not to mention the only remaining) heir to her family's tortured spiritual isolation, locked into place by the family history of betrayal and hatred, and resolves to spend the rest of her life alone.

Desire under the Elms, Part 1

Desire under the Elms, Part 1 Summary

This collection of plays by one of America's best known and most acclaimed dramatists explores variations on the central theme of family. Epic in both length and emotional scope, all three plays (written in the early years of the 20th Century) broke new ground in their explorations of sexuality, relationships, and theatrical storytelling. In doing so, they also explore secondary themes relating to the corruptible power of both love and revenge, and the complicated relationship between past and present.

Scene 1 - On the farmhouse porch, Eben comments on how pretty the land is, but then spits with disgust and goes inside. His brothers Simeon and Peter return from their field work (digging stones and laying them into a boundary around the farm), their conversation revealing that Eben is Simeon and Peter's half brother by their father Ephraim's second wife. Simeon and Peter compare the gold they hear of out in California with the stones they dig every day (see "Quotes," p. 4), and muse about whether Ephraim, gone without notice for two months, is dead or crazy.

Scene 2 - As Eben, Peter and Simeon argue over which of them should inherit the farm, Simeon recalls the last time he saw Ephraim, riding off "t'learn God's message ... like the prophets done." Frustrated and angry, Eben rushes out to visit a woman named Minnie, shouting down Peter and Simeon's taunts that she's old and that they and Ephraim have all "had" her long ago. Outside, Eben muses on his relationships with Minnie and his father (see "Quotes," p. 10).

Scene 3 - The following morning, Eben returns with news that Ephraim has returned and has married again - this time, a young woman about half his age. Simeon and Peter comment that she'll inherit everything of Ephraim's now, and they might as well go to California to dig gold. Eben offers to give them cash from Ephraim's secret stash if they sign over their rights to the farm to him. While Simeon and Peter consider the offer, Eben talks about how he'll never let Ephraim's new wife take the farm. After he goes to make breakfast, Peter and Simeon decide to stay on the farm until they at least see Ephraim's new wife - Eben, they think, may be trying to cheat them out of the farm.

Scene 4 - Eben taunts Simeon and Peter about California, and again urges them to sign over their rights to the farm. They cautiously agree, and Eben happily goes out to milk "his" cows. Simeon and Peter comment (as they have previously) on how Eben is exactly like Ephraim. Eben rushes back in to say Ephraim and his bride are coming. This leads Simeon and Peter to sign Eben's agreement, and Eben to give them six hundred dollars in gold. As they're leaving, Ephraim and his new wife (Abbie) arrive. As Abbie reacts possessively to her new home, Simeon and Peter taunt both her and Ephraim with a raucous version of a folksong. As Ephraim reacts furiously, Abbie meets Eben, telling him the story of her hard life. Fighting their mutual attraction, they each claim the farm. A furious Eben rushes out of the house as Abbie starts washing "her"

dishes, and the last words of the folksong, sung by the departing Peter and Simeon, are heard in the distance.

Desire under the Elms, Part 1 Analysis

The first scenes of this play function in the same way as the first scenes of any play - to establish the various elements that will motivate and define the narrative to follow. The most important of these are character and conflict, each of which is, here as in most dramas, defined by the other. In other words, the nature and identity of the individual characters defines the conflict between them. In this case, Eben's position as the younger son places him in conflict with his patronizing older brothers, while his position as the child of his father's dead (second) wife places him in conflict with both his father Ephraim and Ephraim's new wife, neither of whom recognize or value (at least at first) the value of Eben's mother. Perhaps most importantly, Eben's determined belief that he is the rightful heir to his mother's farm places him in even deeper conflict with all of them, since they all believe that THEY are the ones with the right to own and control the farm. In short, all these conflicts are established in these first scenes, and while the conflict between Eben and his older half brothers essentially ends with their departure for California, his conflicts with the other characters remain and intensify, heightening the dramatic tension that builds throughout the following two acts.

Meanwhile, it's important and interesting to consider elements common to the three plays in this collection: themes (revenge, sexual/emotional desire - see "Themes"), characters and characteristics (see "Topics for Discussion - What are the similarities ..." and "Consider the essential nature ...") and situations. In terms of this last, situational elements here that also play out in the other narratives include the relationship between family and home (essential to the narrative of "...Electra") and the struggle for the young to free themselves from the control of the old (essential to the later narrative of "...Interlude" and the entire narrative of "... Electra").

The stone walls around the Cabot farm, laboriously built and maintained by Ephraim Cabot and his sons, represent the spiritual, entrapping boundaries of their ways of thinking in the same way they represent the physical boundaries around the land and house they all so strenuously covet. In other words, on both the physical and metaphorical levels, the walls represent the Cabot family's desire for control. It could be argued that they also represent the degree of separation between the obsessive Cabots and the more easygoing members of the nearby community (read: society at large) as portrayed in the dance sequence at the beginning of Part Three. Meanwhile, for the symbolic/metaphoric value of both California and the stones to the narrative, see "Objects/Places - California."

Desire under the Elms, Part 2

Desire under the Elms, Part 2 Summary

Scene 1 - On a too-hot day two months later, Abbie attempts to seduce Eben into letting go of his resentment towards her. When he resists, Abbie taunts him about Minnie, but he taunts her right back about Minnie being prettier and goes. Ephraim then comes in from the fields, and Abbie, still angry with Eben, attempts to manipulate him into becoming angry as well, referring spitefully to Minnie. Ephraim muses about needing a son to leave the farm to, which leads Abbie to say that she's been praying for God to let her give him one. The excited Ephraim promises to give her anything she wants, even agreeing that she and her son could have the farm. As he prays for a male child, stage directions describe Abbie looking at him scornfully.

Scene 2 - As Ephraim talks to Abbie (in their bedroom) about how he and the farm both need a son from Abbie, stage directions describe how Abbie and Eben seem to be staring at/reaching for each other through the wall between them. Ephraim speaks at length about his hard life - his belief that he was doing God's will by turning his rocky land into a productive farm, how hard he had to become to do so, and how his hardness made him lonesome throughout his first and second marriages. After he goes out to spend time with his animals, Abbie and Eben are soon in each other's arms, kissing passionately. Eben, however, pushes free, still determined to preserve his right to the farm. Abbie says that no matter happens she'll make the farm hers, but then seductively leads him to the back parlor - which, according to Eben, hasn't been entered since his mother's coffin stood there for viewing. As he goes to join her, Eben calls for his mother.

Scene 3 - In the parlor, conversation between Abbie and Eben reveals that both feel the presence of Eben's mother, but where Eben is confused about what she wants Abbie is convinced that she (Eben's mother) is giving her blessing to whatever happens between them. Soon their tentative kisses become lustful, with both Abbie and Eben crying out their love for one another.

Scene 4 - The following morning, conversation between Abbie and Eben reveals that they both feel the ghost of Eben's mother has been put to rest. Ephraim comes in from the barn, saying he's had a restful night - the cows, he says, are teaching him how to sleep. For his part, Eben seems happy and excited, but also solemn, prepared to put his past tensions with Ephraim aside. The two men joke about how Eben is becoming the boss of the farm, with Ephraim commenting on how Eben is the spitting image of his mother.

Desire under the Elms, Part 2 Analysis

The most important element of this section of the play is the way in which it dramatizes one of the central themes of the entire collection of plays, the effect of the past on the

present (see "Themes - The Past Haunting the Present"). In this case, the haunting seems almost literal, as the presence of the past (in the form of Eben's mother) seems to be a kind of ghost. In the other plays, the past exists as an eternally troubling memory - although there are moments in "...Electra" when characters call out to dead characters in the same way Eben calls out to his dead mother. In any case, it seems clear that the narrative/thematic purpose of this strong sense of past is to both suggest and heighten the intensity of the characters' struggle to escape that past and move into a freer future.

Another important element to consider at this point in the narrative is the character of Minnie, who never appears but who is used as a kind of weapon by all the characters. It seems clear that she is at least a woman who has an uninhibited perspective on sexuality, or at worst a prostitute. In other words, when sexuality is expressed in terms of Minnie, it is something degrading, almost pathetic, a clear contrast with the way sexuality is expressed in terms of Eben and Abbie - or rather, in the way THEY express it and experience it, as something born of love and almost holy. The question, of course, is whether they are rationalizing their lust, deluding themselves into love as a means of easing their guilt over their passion. It's important to note, meanwhile, that here as in "...Interlude," an innocent child becomes a pawn in adult struggles for power. For consideration of Abbie's actions in this and the following act, see "Topics for Discussion - Do you believe ..."

Finally, there is the question of who Eben resembles. At various times, he is described as resembling Ephraim, at other times his mother. It's perfectly possible that both are true. On the physical level, it's possible for people to look like both their parents. On an emotional level, it's possible that Eben resembles his mother in terms of emotional sensitivity and connection to the farm and land, while he resembles his father in terms of his determination, his hardness, and his desire for control. Meanwhile, it's important to note that here is another commonality between the three plays. Young Gordon in "...Interlude" is said to resemble all three of his fathers (see "Strange Interlude - Part 2, Acts 8 and 9, Analysis), while in "...Electra" the question of which child resembles which family member, particularly which parent, is a key source of conflict. For further consideration of this aspect of the three plays, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the ways in which ..."

Desire under the Elms, Part 3

Desire under the Elms, Part 3 Summary

Scene 1 - One night in "late spring the following year," Abbie quietly watches as a dance takes place in the kitchen and several neighbors hint that the baby in the cradle upstairs was fathered by him and not by Ephraim. After leading the crowd in a rowdy dance to celebrate the birth of "his" son, Ephraim goes outside to get some air. Abbie takes the opportunity to slip upstairs where Eben has been listening. As gossip flies between the party guests, Abbie and Eben look down at what is revealed to be their child and comment on how awkward the situation is (see "Quotes," p. 44). Abbie urges Eben to be patient, saying something's bound to happen to Ephraim - who, out in the yard, muses on how it still feels like there's something wrong about the house.

Scene 2 - A short time later, Ephraim taunts Eben about the farm, saying that Abbie wanted and had a child in order to get it for herself (see Part 2, Scene 1). After Ephraim goes back to the dance, and when Abbie comes out looking for him, Eben angrily denounces her and their child, telling her what Ephraim said, saying he wishes the child had never been born, and calling for his mother to take vengeance on Abbie for her manipulations. Abbie asks whether he would love her again if she could prove to him that she loved him more than anything, even their son. He agrees, but storms off into the house. Left alone, Abbie vows to prove to him that she loves him "better'n everythin' else in the world!"

Scene 3 - A short time later, Ephraim is asleep in his bedroom as Abbie confesses to Eben that she's killed their child so that he (Eben) will love her again. Eben reacts with rage and disgust, commenting on how the baby looked like him and crying out to his mother for not saving the baby's life. Abbie insists that she did it to win his love back, but Eben refuses to believe it, telling her he's going to tell the Sheriff what she did and then go out to California to dig for gold. After he runs out, Abbie crumples to the floor, crying out for Eben to love her again.

Scene 4 -Abbie confesses to Ephraim that she murdered the baby, telling him that Eben has gone for the Sheriff. Ephraim goes, musing aloud on how lonesome he feels and telling the returning Eben to get off the farm and stay off. Eben goes into the kitchen and tells Abbie the Sheriff is coming, that he (Eben) has realized he loves her, and that he's decided to face the consequences of the baby's death with her - it was, after all, his idea that the baby could/should die. As Abbie tries to talk him out of it, Ephraim returns, crazily shouting that he's decided to go hunt gold with Simeon and Peter. He searches for his hidden money, discovers that it's gone (see Part 1, Scene 3), and realizes that God has other plans for him - specifically, to stay hard and stay on the farm. As he's musing about how lonesome both he and God are, the Sheriff arrives and arrests Abbie and Eben, who profess their love for each other. As they look at the "purty" sunrise, the Sheriff comments on what a "jim-dandy" farm it is.

Desire under the Elms, Part 3 Analysis

The first noteworthy element here is structural - specifically, the way the narrative builds to its climax in this section as Eben, Abbie and Ephraim are all confronted by their deepest feelings and the situations they have gotten themselves into as the result of acting on those feelings. The second noteworthy element is related to the first; specifically, the question of how Abbie came to love Eben as much as she claims. Some readers/audience members might find it incredible that she feels as intensely as she does, and intensely enough to do what she does. There are clear indications that Eben and Abbie (note the similarity of their names) feel a powerful, instinctive attraction to each other the moment they meet. Is it love, or lust, at first sight? Hard to say, but it must be remembered that since the earliest days of theatre, women have occasionally been portrayed as having both loved and hated strongly enough to kill their children (see the Greek tragedy Medea for proof), a circumstance that can (unfortunately?) still be encountered in today's news.

A third noteworthy element here is the powerful presence of irony - an experience having an entirely different meaning than that which is superficially presented. In this case, the first scene of Part 3 is painfully rich in irony, given that everyone except Ephraim (but including the audience) knows that the baby is not his. This makes his discovery that the baby is in fact Eben's somewhat pathetic, and a reader/audience member might even be inclined to feel a little sorry for him, even though he's been such a negative character throughout the rest of the narrative. There is also irony in the fact that even though Abbie and Eben have apparently discovered what they believe (and what the reader/audience seems expected to believe) is true love, they lose everything they once thought was important ... the farm, the life of their child, even their own lives. There is the possibility that this fact might make their story tragic - again, it depends on whether one buys into the idea that their love is genuine.

Finally, there is the irony of the lines that conclude the play. They seem to be a deliberate echo of Eben's lines at the beginning of the play, which also refer to how good a farm it is. The irony here is that while the land itself may be great and good, what it drives people to do (betrayal, murder, infidelity) is ultimately destructive.

Strange Interlude, Part 1, Acts 1 and 2

Strange Interlude, Part 1, Acts 1 and 2 Summary

Act 1 - As Marsden waits to see Nina, his childhood sweetheart, his thoughts (spoken aloud) reveal his worries for the fragile Nina and his jealousy of Nina's fiancé Gordon Shaw (killed in an accident after ending their relationship). Nina's father Professor Leeds comes in and greets Marsden, eventually confessing that for Nina's own good, he arranged for Gordon to back away from the relationship. Nina comes in, her thoughts (also spoken) revealing how haunted she is by Gordon's memory. Aloud, she tells her father she's decided to leave home and go work in a hospital - she must, she says, learn to give herself to others in order to redeem herself for not having given in to Gordon's desire for her on his last night at home. She also reveals she knows the Professor arranged for Gordon to end their relationship. After she and Marsden go, the Professor muses about Nina's future, how she must hate him, and how bleak his own future seems.

Act 2 - About a year later, shortly after the Professor's death, Marsden waits for Nina's return, his spoken thoughts revealing his preoccupation with her sexual behavior. Nina arrives with Ned Darrell, a young doctor from the hospital where she works, and Sam Evans, an attractive, simple-hearted friend of Darrell's. After Nina takes Darrell to see the Professor's body, Evans' thoughts reveal his idolization of Gordon and his devotion to/desire for Nina. Aloud, Evans confesses his feelings to Marsden, whose thoughts are resentful but who aloud wishes Evans good luck. Darrell returns and sends Evans to get Nina a prescription to help her sleep. After he's gone, Darrell tells Marsden how the trauma of Gordon's death led Nina into sexual and emotional promiscuity, and how he (Darrell) believes that the best way for her to recover is to marry Evans. Nina comes in, in shock after seeing her father's body and speaking incoherently - to Marsden about the lies he lives and to Darrell about how emotionally cold he is. After sending Darrell out, she then speaks to Marsden of her ideas that God should be identified as a woman, of her desperation to have faith, and of her promiscuity. Against his will, Marsden tells her she should marry Evans. As she falls asleep on his knee calling him "father," Nina agrees.

Strange Interlude, Part 1, Acts 1 and 2 Analysis

The first thing to note about this play is its innovative narrative technique - specifically, the way in which the characters speak their thoughts out loud. On one level, the technique isn't as innovative as it must have seemed when the play was first performed in the early part of the 20th Century. Since the beginnings of theatre in Classical Greece, through Shakespeare and in the work of other so-called "classical" writers, characters have spoken their inner thoughts aloud. For the most part, however, this externalizing of the internal took place as soliloquy (a character alone on stage speaking at length about his thoughts and feelings) or aside (as direct commentary on

the action to the audience). Rarely, if ever, had characters interjected their thoughts directly into the dialogue while the dialogue was taking place - in other words, here a character's reactions to another character have to be suspended, at least to some degree, to allow for the thoughts to be heard. It's difficult to say whether the dramatic and/or narrative momentum of a scene would/could be slowed and/or sustained through such a process. It unquestionably adds to the play's length, already considerable given its narrative scope (a period of twenty years in the lives of its characters).

Other noteworthy elements here include the development of one of the collection's common themes (the way the past haunts the present, manifest here and throughout the play in the way all the characters are driven by their memories of Gordon Shaw) and Nina's somewhat twisted logic (giving herself to others to redeem herself for not giving herself to Gordon). Here there is a strong element of irony - while she undoubtedly means giving herself emotionally and spiritually (which she does to Evans throughout the narrative), she also ends up giving herself sexually (not just to the residents of Darrell's hospital, but also to Darrell himself).

Finally, the Professor's admission of the way he manipulated Nina's and Gordon's relationship foreshadows Nina's attempted manipulation of her son's relationship in Part 2 Act 8. This, in turn, is a manifestation of one of the collection's core themes, the resemblances between parents and children. In this case, however, the resemblance is emotional and motivational, rather than physical.

Strange Interlude, Part 1, Acts 3, 4 and 5

Strange Interlude, Part 1, Acts 3, 4 and 5 Summary

Act 3 - Several months later at Evans' country home, Nina and the visiting Marsden bid each other a teasing good morning, with conversation revealing that Nina and Evans are married and Nina's thoughts revealing she has a happy secret. When Nina goes to get some coffee, Marsden's thoughts reveal his pain at having lost her, and his self-contempt for thinking he "lost" something he never had in the first place. He then goes out, encountering Evans and his mother (Mrs. Evans) as they come in. Evans speaks cheerfully of his plans for his home and marriage, his thoughts revealing his hope that Nina's going to have a baby. As he goes out to his fields, he says goodbye to Nina as she comes in, who greets Mrs. Evans, who in turn takes advantage of being alone with her and tells her a family secret - that insanity runs down the Evans side of the family and, for that reason, Nina and Evans can never have a baby. When Nina reacts with shock (her thoughts revealing that she's already pregnant), Mrs. Evans pleads with her to stay in the marriage, saying that if she left it would kill Evans. Nina agrees.

Act 4 - Again several months later, as Evans works in the Professor's study, his thoughts reveal his desire for a baby. Nina's thoughts, meanwhile, reveal her distaste for her husband, her simultaneous commitment to her promise to Mrs. Evans to make him happy, and that she's had an "operation" to get rid of the first baby. When Evans tells her he's asked Darrell to come to a visit to cheer her up, Nina happily hurries out to get a room ready. Marsden arrives, his thoughts revealing his perception of Nina's "operation." Darrell arrives, and while Evans is out fetching Nina, Marsden asks for advice about his (Marsden's) mother, who is very ill. Darrell bluntly suggests that Marsden get her to see a specialist as soon as possible. After a frightened Marsden hurries out, Nina comes in, her thoughts comparing Darrell unfavorably to Gordon as, aloud, she tells Darrell about Mrs. Evans, the baby, the "operation," and her desire to have a baby with another man to fulfill her commitment to Evans. She and Darrell, speaking about themselves and each other in the third person, clinically discuss the possibility that Darrell could be that man (see "Quotes," pp. 126 and 129). Mutual passion eventually takes them over and they end up in a tight embrace.

Act 5 - Several months later, Nina reflects on having conceived a baby with Darrell and how connected to nature she feels (see "Quotes," p. 133). Evans comes in, his thoughts revealing his fear that she no longer loves him. When Darrell comes in with a letter of reference for Evans, who is applying for a new job, Nina's and Darrell's thoughts reveal their need to be with each other physically, while Darrell's reveal his determination to keep Nina at a distance. They argue about whether to continue their intimate encounters, with Nina eventually convincing Darrell that being together is inevitable. Evans comes back in to talk about the grieving Marsden (whose mother has recently died), but Nina goes out. Darrell's thoughts reveal his anguish at hurting Evans, and then he realizes there's a way out - he reveals that Evans is about to be a father, and that he (Darrell) is about to leave immediately for Europe. Stunned but happy, Evans

bids him farewell. After Darrell goes, Nina runs back in to find out where he went. Evans tells her he knows she's going to have a baby and that Darrell is leaving. Nina's thoughts reveal that she feels the same way as she did when she learned Gordon was dead. As Evans comforts her, however, she commits again to making him happy, her thoughts revealing that to her, her baby will belong neither to Evans nor to Darrell, but only to her.

Strange Interlude, Part 1, Acts 3, 4 and 5 Analysis

There are several important elements to this section, in addition to the (perhaps melodramatic) developments in the plot. The first is the way the play's, and the collection's, thematic interest in resemblances between parents and children is turned around in the relationship between Mrs. Evans and her son. While in her way Mrs. Evans is as manipulative as the Professor (Part 1, Act 1) and Nina (Part 2, Act 8), Evans is never as manipulative as she is. He is, in fact, neither secretive nor manipulative, but is essentially honest, trustworthy, and direct. In other words, an important thematic and dramatic point (about resemblances between family members) is illuminated by contrast (a portray of family members with no resemblance). A related point is the parallel mother/son relationship between Marsden and his mother, a character who never appears in the narrative but who nevertheless has an evidently profound impact on the life and perspective of one of its central characters. The sense here, and throughout the entire narrative of Strange Interlude, is that Marsden is repressed in just about every way possible: sexual, emotional, intellectual, physical, creative. He is, therefore, a clear contrast to Nina, who is just as clearly NOT repressed in any of those ways. He is also a clear contrast to Darrell (intellectually and sexually free, albeit tortured), Evans (emotionally and creatively free), and to the Gordon Shaw of Nina's imagination (free in all ways). It's interesting to note, therefore, that Nina ends the play in his arms, a suggestion that she has found her way into the arms of a kind of personal restraint she'd never known before.

The second important element here is the reference to Nina's "operation", a term that can clearly be seen as a euphemism for abortion. In consideration of this point, it's important to remember that the copyright for Strange Interlude dates it to 1928, a time long before abortion was commonly discussed. The point is not made to suggest that abortions did not take place, but rather to suggest that although they did, the subject was not discussed. The reference to it here, therefore, can be seen as provocative for its time, and perhaps a little daring and/or risky.

Other interesting elements have to do with varied use of language. Nina and Darrell speaking of themselves in the third person (at the end of Act 4) indicates that they're striving to be much more clinical and rational about their decision than they actually feel. Meanwhile, Nina's thoughts relating to her connection to nature develop a sub-theme that has been present throughout this play, but which is absent in the others - an attempt and/or desire to perceive and/or experience God in a non traditional way, which, like the reference to abortion, would have been perceived as at least unusual, at most

heretical. For further consideration of this point, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss Nina's views of God ..."

Finally, it's important to note that Nina's choice to stay in her marriage to Evans seems to be intended by the author, and perhaps by the character, as a manifestation of her earlier commitment (Part 1, Act 1) to give herself to others to gain redemption for not giving herself to Gordon Shaw. In other words, she is giving over her life to Evans because she didn't give over her life (as manifest by her sexuality) to Gordon. Whether the parallel is justified, whether what is being given is "equal" is ultimately irrelevant, for the narrative of the play is ultimately defined by Nina's perceptions and her actions based on those perceptions. She believes she is redeeming herself, therefore she does what she does. The irony here, of course, is that readers and/or audiences will probably not see her actions as redemptive, but as manipulative and self-indulgent.

Strange Interlude, Part 2, Acts 6 and 7

Strange Interlude, Part 2, Acts 6 and 7 Summary

Act Six - Almost a year later, Nina sits knitting quietly while Evans reads the newspaper and Marsden watches them both. Nina's thoughts reveal that she's become content with Evans, that their baby's name is Gordon, and that she's still in love with Darrell. Evans' thoughts reveal his ambition and pride in his family, while Marsden's thoughts reveal his jealousy of Evans, his lingering grief over his mother, his love for Nina, and his resentment of Darrell, whom he recalls seeing in Germany. Superficial conversation between the three of them reveals that Evans has become successful in business and that he and Nina are relatively happy together. After Nina goes to take care of the baby, Evans asks Marsden for financial help in setting up a new business, but Marsden refuses. Evans' thoughts reveal his determination to try again. After Evans goes out for a walk, Darrell arrives and is greeted by Marsden, their thoughts revealing their mutual animosity and Darrel's thoughts revealing his continued desire for Nina. Nina hurries into the room, her thoughts revealing that she realizes Darrell still loves her. Marsden's thoughts reveal his growing suspicions about their love and the baby's true parentage, but also his realization that he can now fight to defend the baby against what he sees as Nina and Darrell's immorality.

After Marsden goes out to find Evans, Nina and Darrell passionately confess their love for each other, and Nina convinces Darrell to become her lover. Darrell initially resists out of friendship for Evans, but eventually gives in. Marsden and Evans return, with Evans greeting Darrell happily. Nina's thoughts reveal her triumphant realization that she now has control over all three of "her" men, and also controls a forth - her son, Gordon. The thoughts of the three men reveal Darrell's wretched devotion, Marsden's resentful watchfulness, and Evans' simple-hearted happiness that his friend is home.

Act Seven - This act takes place several years after the events of the previous one - specifically, on the eleventh birthday of Nina's baby, Gordon, who sits on the floor playing (and thinking nastily about Darrell) as Nina sits watching, thinking proudly about her son and Darrell also sits watching, thinking wretchedly about the futility of his love for her.

Strange Interlude, Part 2, Acts 6 and 7 Analysis

One of the most telling and evocative moments not only in this play but in the entire collection takes place in this section - specifically, the point at the end of Act Six in which all three of Nina's "men" are in the room with her, and she exults in the control she has over them. This combination of vivid visual image and narration of what that image represents is a powerful summing up of Nina's intention and action that has even more impact because the men involved have no real conscious idea of what she's all about. It could be argued that there are moments of similar impact in the other plays - Abbie's

murder of her baby in "Desire ...," Christine's murder of Ezra, Orin's murder of Brant, and Lavinia's exit into the house in "...Electra." It must be remembered, however, that these moments are powerful because of a character's choice. The moment here is more powerful because the three male characters seem to have NO choice - they are being manipulated and controlled by the sheer selfishness and paranoia of Nina's will. In other words, the image here is one of what might be argued is a universal human truth - helplessness in the face of a greater, remorseless, apparently omnipotent will.

Strange Interlude, Part 2, Acts 8 and 9

Strange Interlude, Part 2, Acts 8 and 9 Summary

Act Eight - Ten years later, Darrell, Evans, Marsden and Nina have gathered on Evans' yacht to watch Gordon row in an important race. They are joined by Madeline, Gordon's attractive young fiancé. Nina's thoughts reveal her jealousy of Madeline and her perceptions of Darrell, her former lover (see "Quotes", p. 192-3). Meanwhile, Marsden's reveal his despair over the death of his sister (with whom he's been living since the death of his mother), Evans' reveal his joy in his son and family, Darrell's reveal his sense of freedom from Nina, and Madeline's reveal her awareness of Nina's jealousy and her determination to win Gordon for herself. As the race begins, Nina decides to tell Madeline about the history of insanity in Evans' family (since everyone believes Gordon is Evans' biological son, Madeline will believe that he might become insane and will end the relationship). Darrell realizes what she's planning and interrupts. Nina immediately has a kind of mental breakdown, telling Marsden the truth of Gordon's parentage. Marsden sympathizes, his thoughts revealing his desire to marry Nina once Evans (who evidently has health issues) passes away. Gordon wins the highly competitive race, but in its aftermath, the excited Evans suffers a stroke. Darrell tells Nina that its effects will be severe and long lasting, and that she must make sure to take care of him. A dazed Nina asks, "Again?" Meanwhile Madeline, watching Gordon on the water, claims him for her own.

Act Nine - A few months later, Gordon and Madeline discuss Evans' death. As he watches them, Marsden muses on the peaceful turn his life has taken. Madeline goes out to wait for Gordon (who has something to say to Nina and Darrell) as Darrell and Nina, deep in mourning, come out. Nina's thoughts reveal her relief at Evans' death, and her self-satisfaction at making him as happy as she promised. Gordon confronts Nina and Darrell about what he believes to be their past feelings for each other, eventually saying he believes them to have nobly not acted upon their love and giving them permission to marry. Gordon then leaves. Darrell and Nina acknowledge that it's time for Darrell to leave Nina's life permanently. Darrell suggests that Nina marry Marsden, to reward him for "his life long devotion." At that moment, Gordon's plane flies overhead. As they all wave, Darrell cries out that he is Gordon's father, but realizes Gordon can't hear him. Nina, meanwhile, cries out for this Gordon to not crash to earth like the other Gordon, but to "fly always" and be happy. After Gordon has gone, Darrell walks resignedly into the house, leaving Nina and Marsden alone. Nina comments on how she feels as though he, her father, and the devoted younger Marsden of her childhood are all one person, and that she can now be at peace. As Marsden embraces her, she falls quietly asleep.

Strange Interlude, Part 2, Acts 8 and 9 Analysis

As previously discussed, Nina's failed attempt to break up Madeline and Gordon is a clear echo of her father's successful attempt to break up her relationship to the first Gordon, a manifestation of the collection's thematic interest in exploring the resemblances (physical and otherwise) between parents and children. In this context, it's important to note that Gordon has, in fact, little resemblance to his biological father (Darrell), a strong resemblance to his spiritual father (Gordon Shaw), and a certain resemblance of character, in terms of integrity and honesty, with his legal father (Evans).

Meanwhile, this play's thematic exploration of how the past haunts the present finally draws to a close with Nina's literal and metaphoric farewell to her troubled history - specifically, the long dead, much beloved and much envied, Gordon Shaw. She finally manages to reach a kind of peace and closure in the arms of Marsden who, since he has evidently loved her since she was an innocent girl, can be seen as representative of a truth she once knew about relationships, but has since let herself forget: that they can be simple, honest, trusting, loving, and present. The long suffering Darrell bids a similar farewell to his past, but where the troubles of Nina's past are grounded in a long-lingering sense of lost love, Darrell's are grounded in equally long-lived resentment (of the first Gordon and of Nina) and compounded by more recent resentment (of young Gordon's dislike for him).

The final noteworthy element here is the reference to the play's title, buried within Nina's reflections on the changes in Darrell (see "Quotes," p. 192-3). There are several levels of interest here. The first has to do with the concept of length - that of a human life and that of this quite substantial play, both of which are portrayed in this quote as being very (too?) short. In other words, the idea expressed by the quote (and therefore by the title) is one that might be familiar to those who know something of eastern and/or new age philosophy, or at least those who have a degree of perspective on the way the universe works - that human life, in the big picture, is ultimately infinitesimally small. This is the second level of interest to the title and the quote, it's philosophical and/or spiritual implications. The final level of interest related to the title is the concept of "strange." For further consideration of this idea, see "Topics for Discussion - Why do you think ..."

Mourning Becomes Electra - Homecoming, Acts 1 and 2

Mourning Becomes Electra - Homecoming, Acts 1 and 2 Summary

Act 1 - Seth and the townspeople (see "Characters") discuss General Ezra Mannon's long absence while fighting in the Civil War, and how the face of his beautiful wife Christine, like the faces of all the Mannons, is like a mask, strangely immobile. Finally, their conversation refers to secrets in the Mannon family's past. Lavinia, whose face is (according to stage directions) as mask-like as her mother's, comes out to speak with Seth. After the townspeople leave, Seth catches Lavinia in a lie about where she's been, manipulating her into confessing that she's been in New York. Lavinia's friends Peter and Hazel arrive, causing Seth to leave. Lavinia, Hazel and Peter discuss the long absence of Lavinia's brother Orin, with conversation hinting that both Orin and Ezra will soon be home, now the war is over. After Hazel goes, Peter asks Lavinia to marry him and she refuses, with conversation revealing that Peter had asked her once before, but Lavinia had refused out of devotion to her father. Christine comes out to talk to Lavinia, and Peter leaves. Christine and Lavinia argue about Lavinia's treatment of Peter, Christine's frequent absences (apparently in New York visiting her sick father), and how Christine hates the house, built by family patriarch Abe Mannon (see "Quotes," p. 237). This leads Lavinia to comment that Ezra will be home soon, which in turn leads Christine to comment that she'll believe it when she hears a military salute coming from the nearby fort. As she goes back into the house, Lavinia pointedly comments that the two of them will soon need to talk.

After Christine has gone, Seth returns and discusses Mannon family history with Lavinia - how Abe Mannon had a brother (David) whom he threw out of the family and how that brother fathered a child out west. When Seth hints that family friend Captain Adam Brant might be that child, Lavinia reacts angrily. When Brant appears, Seth leaves him and Lavinia alone. After arguing over whether Lavinia looks more like Christine or Ezra (Lavinia angrily insists she resembles her father), Lavinia accuses Brant of being David Mannon's lost son. In admitting that he is, Brant angrily tells her his parents were financially ruined by both Abe and Ezra, vowing to kill Ezra if he can. Then, even though he protests he still loves her, Lavinia angrily goes inside.

Act 2 - The action of Act Two takes place in Ezra's study, the atmosphere of which is dominated by an almost life-sized portrait of Ezra in judge's robes. Lavinia angrily tells Christine she (Lavinia) saw her (Christine) in New York with Brant. After at first denying the accusation, Christine then admits it's true, saying she's always hated Ezra. In an effort to break up the affair, Lavinia tells Christine what she's just learned about Brant, but Christine reveals that she already knows and doesn't care. Lavinia leaves, demanding that Brant be gone by the time she returns. A moment later Brant comes in,

and after telling him what's just happened, Christine bullies him into engineering Ezra's death with her, saying there's a way to take advantage of Ezra's heart condition (by giving him poison, which Brant will obtain, instead of medicine). At that moment there is the sound of artillery fire from the fort, signaling Ezra's return

Mourning Becomes Electra - Homecoming, Acts 1 and 2 Analysis

Any analysis of Mourning Becomes Electra must begin with an understanding of the play's source material - the Classical Greek drama The Oresteia, written by Aeschylus. For detailed consideration of this aspect of the play, see "Objects/Places - The Oresteia."

That consideration aside, it's important to note how several of the themes common to the three plays in the collection are dramatized in this section of the play, and indeed throughout. Primary among these is the exploration of the nature and effects of revenge, which is the motivating force for all the main characters in this play - Christine's and Brant's revenge on Ezra, Lavinia's and Orin's revenge on Christine, the revenge of Orin's love for his mother on Orin himself. Other elements developed here common to all three plays include references to resemblances between parents and children - specifically, Lavinia's evident dislike of being told she resembles her mother and her determination to be perceived as resembling her father.

Finally, it's important to note the repeated references to masks, made occasionally in dialogue but repeatedly in stage directions that describe all the members of the Mannon family as having mask-like faces. This is clearly a reference back to The Oresteia, or rather the tradition of Classical Greek theatre of which The Oresteia is a cornerstone. In that form of theatre, actors were all masked, a technique that functioned on two levels - to evoke the archetypal/universal nature of the characters and their experiences, and to allow the words and music of the language to convey the narrative, rather the emotions/reactions of the characters. The references to masks in the stage directions here perform a similar function: to suggest that the experience of revenge and its corruptible, destructive power is a universal human one, and to suggest that the Mannon family is cold and unemotional. The irony, of course, is that the desire for revenge is one of the rawest, most powerful, most fundamental, and potentially most obsessive human emotions that there is ... all of which is made clear by the action of both this narrative and the classical Greek narrative that inspired and shaped it.

In relation to the unique identity of this play, as opposed to its relationships to its inspiration, there are several key elements to note. These include its heightened sense of emotional intensity in its characters and actions (which lends the play an almost melodramatic sensibility), the complex interplay of relationships and desires, and its core thematic explorations of the effect of the past on the present and of revenge, all of which begin in this section.

Mourning Becomes Electra - Homecoming, Acts 3 and 4

Mourning Becomes Electra - Homecoming, Acts 3 and 4 Summary

Act 3 - A week or so later, back outside the house, Lavinia asks what Brant's mother was like. He tells her she was pretty and popular, but Lavinia doesn't believe him and sends him to bed. As he's going, Christine comes out, and she and Lavinia argue over whether Christine is still in love with Brant. In the middle of their argument, Ezra arrives. Stage directions describe him as having the same sort of mask-like face as the other characters. Lavinia greets him emotionally, but he tells her to keep her feelings under control and then stiffly greets Christine, who asks where Orin is. Ezra tells her he's been wounded and is suffering from "brain fever" but will be home soon. Lavinia then asks Ezra about his heart condition, but he says he's fine and then orders her to bed. Ezra speaks at length to Christine of how he's been changed by the war, how he's realized what a bad husband he's been, and how much he longs for her. Christine tells him he's overtiring himself, and that it's time for bed. After they go in, Lavinia comes back out, unable to sleep and giving voice to her belief that her mother has kept her from love. She is left outside and alone, looking up at her father's closed window.

Act 4 - This scene is set in Ezra and Christine's bedroom, with conversation revealing that although they have just made love, Ezra has a premonition that his life is about to end. His ancestors, he says have gathered and are waiting for him to die. Christine taunts him by telling the truth about her feelings for Brant, and also about Brant's ancestry (the fact that Brant is the son of Abe Mannon's estranged brother). The suddenly angry Ezra suffers a heart attack, and cries out for his medicine. Christine gives him what he thinks are his pills and he takes one, realizing too late that it's poison. He cries out for Lavinia, who rushes in just in time to hear him accuse Christine of murder and then die in her (Lavinia's) arms. After being confronted by Lavinia, the suddenly anxious and remorseful Christine faints. Lavinia finds the pillbox containing the leftover pills, realizes the truth, and vows to take revenge.

Mourning Becomes Electra - Homecoming, Acts 3 and 4 Analysis

The play begins its intense thematic exploration of the nature of revenge in earnest in this section, as Christine takes action on her and Brant's intention to take revenge on Ezra, and by extension the Mannon family, for the wrongs they believe they've suffered. It's important to note, however, that the seeds for the next stage of revenge are also planted here - as the result of what Lavinia both sees and believes about Christine, her determination to take her own revenge begins. It's also important to note that as

Lavinia's desire grows, so does her spiritual resemblance to her mother - and, indeed, so does her physical resemblance (as discussed by Peter later). Here, then, is a manifestation of the collection's thematic exploration of the resemblances between parents and children.

There are significant examples of foreshadowing in this section. Lavinia's reference to her father's heart condition foreshadows his death as the result of that condition, while Ezra's reference to Orin's "brain fever" foreshadows the near-insanity suffered by Orin after his mother's death. Finally, the appearance of the pillbox and its indication to Lavinia of the truth of her father's death foreshadows its reappearance in the second play, and its indication to Orin of that same truth.

An intriguing element of this play not found in The Oresteia is Lavinia's loneliness for love, and her simultaneous belief that Christine has kept her from finding it. Nowhere in the original does Electra express similar feelings ... but elsewhere in this collection, other young women (Abbie in "Desire ...," Nina in "...Interlude"). For further consideration of this link between the three plays, see "Topics for Discussion - Consider the Essential Nature ..."

Mourning Becomes Electra - The Hunted, Acts 1 and 2

Mourning Becomes Electra - The Hunted, Acts 1 and 2 Summary

The action of this play is set two days after the death of Ezra Mannon.

Act 1 - Outside the house, townspeople discusses the intensity of Christine's grief, Lavinia's apparent emotional detachment, and the impeding return of Orin. After they've gone, Christine comes out with Hazel, telling her how anxious she is for Orin and Hazel to marry, but hinting that Lavinia will oppose the marriage. After she takes Hazel into the house, Orin comes on with Lavinia and Peter. Stage directions describe Orin as having a similar mask-like face to the rest of his family. Lavinia sends Peter inside, saying she wants to talk with Orin alone. In similar language to Ezra's in Play 1, Act 3, Orin comments on how war changes one's feelings about death and dying, with further conversation revealing that Lavinia has written to him with her suspicions about Christine and Brant. Orin angrily comments that if Lavinia's suspicions are true, he'll kill Brant. Christine comes out, and Orin runs to her. After they embrace, and after she has shown Orin into the house, Christine comes back and accuses Lavinia of trying to turn him against her. When Lavinia doesn't respond, the nervous Christine demands to know whether Lavinia suspects her of having caused Ezra's death. Lavinia walks silently into the garden. Christine then goes inside, having heard Orin call for her.

Act 2 - The action of this scene takes place inside. Hazel and Peter discuss how ill and upset Orin seems. When Orin and Christine come in together, conversation becomes stiffly playful, as the four of them banter about who in the family is best suited to taking care of whom. Lavinia comes in and demands that Orin come with her to see Ezra's body. Christine, however, demands that he stay with her, and Orin does so. As Lavinia angrily leaves, Hazel and Peter sense the tension in the air and go out as well. Alone with Christine, Orin asks her plainly whether there's any truth to what he's heard about her and Brant. Christine suggests that Lavinia has become mentally unhinged ever since Brant rejected her and starts to weep, saying she's afraid of her own daughter. As Orin comforts her, he repeats his threat to kill Brant, leading Christine to claim tearfully that when he says things like that, he doesn't seem like her son. As Orin apologizes, Lavinia returns, again insisting that Orin visit Ezra's body. After Orin goes out, Christine gloats to Lavinia about how she's made Orin see the current situation the way she (Christine) wants him to. After Lavinia furiously leaves, Christine realizes she has to warn Brant about what's going on.

Mourning Becomes Electra - The Hunted, Acts 1 and 2 Analysis

At this point, it might be useful to consider the secondary characters of Peter and Hazel. The first point to note is that they have no parallel characters in The Oresteia: they are creations unique to this particular theatrical work. The second noteworthy point is that they are essentially characters of contrast, functioning not only as plot complications and love interests but also to highlight the desperation, coldness, and ruthlessness of the other characters by displaying opposite characteristics - patience, warmth, and compassion. The third point to note, particularly about Hazel, is a brief exchange she has with Christine, in which Christine talks about she was once as kind as Hazel is but has become hard after having her life twisted around by God (see "Quotes," p. 286). There is a tantalizing glimpse here of a potential secondary theme that remains almost entirely undeveloped in this play, but might be perceived as being explored in "...Interlude", where (the undoubtedly male) God is portrayed as being omnipotent to the point of indifference, and perhaps even in "Desire...," where God is portrayed as being hard and demanding.

Meanwhile, the parallels between The Oresteia and this play continue to both develop and diverge. In terms of the former, Lavinia's increasing desire for revenge parallels that of the despairing Electra in The Oresteia, while in terms of the latter, Orin's intensely emotional relationship with his mother and Christine's awakening guilt are quite different from the original.

Christine's anxious departure to warn Brant is a clear and vivid foreshadowing of his death at Orin's hands in the following section, and perhaps even of her own.

Mourning Becomes Electra - The Hunted, Acts 3, 4 and 5

Mourning Becomes Electra - The Hunted, Acts 3, 4 and 5 Summary

Act 3 - In Ezra's study, Orin speaks mockingly to his father's portrait. Lavinia chides him, but Orin says men who've fought in a war react to death in ways other people don't. Lavinia attempts to tell him her stories about Brant and Christine, producing the pillbox as proof and crying out to Ezra's spirit to make Orin believe her. Orin says if he finds out that what Lavinia is saying is true, he'll kill both Brant and Christine. Christine comes in and sees the pillbox, reacting with such shock that Orin has no choice but to believe Lavinia. As the traumatized Orin goes, Lavinia accuses Brant of getting the poison for Christine and then goes after Orin. Christine cries out to Ezra to protect Brant, and then follows Lavinia.

Act 4 - At the harbor where Brant's ship is docked, a drunken sailor gives Brant the news that Ezra has died. As the sailor goes, Christine arrives, desperate to warn Brant about Lavinia but convinced that Orin is on her side. Lavinia and Orin arrive and listen as Christine tells Brant everything that's happened to Ezra, to her, and to the family, struggling to convince him the only way to save their lives is to immediately sail to the Far East. Orin gets out his gun and prepares to run in, but Lavinia tells him to wait. Christine leaves, saying to Brant that she's going home to pack. Brant comes out, intending to follow her, but Orin takes him by surprise and kills him, agreeing to Lavinia's suggestion that he make it look as though Brant was killed by a thief. Orin comments on how Brant looks like the other Mannons and revealing that he's dreamed that all the men he's killed have the Mannon face. Lavinia leads him away from the harbor.

Act 5 - Outside the house the next night, conversation between Christine and Hazel reveals that loneliness is starting to prey on Christine's mind. Hazel offers to keep her company, and Christine gratefully accepts, urging her to hurry when she goes home to explain to her mother what's happening. After Hazel's gone, Orin and Lavinia appear, confront Christine with what they overheard on Brant's boat and with news of his death. As Lavinia listens with increasing disbelief, Orin tells Christine that he believes she was entranced by Brant, and that he (Orin) will take her away with him to the Far East so they can heal together from everything that Ezra did. Lavinia tries to get Orin to listen to her, but neither he nor Christine seems to be paying any attention. Moments after they go into the house, a shot is heard. Orin rushes out, shouting that Christine has shot herself and that it's his fault for killing Brant. He says, in fact, that he as good as murdered her. Lavinia calms him, and sends him back into the house. Seth comes, saying he heard a shot. Lavinia tells him Christine killed herself out of grief over the loss of Ezra, and tells him to go get a doctor. As he goes, Lavinia goes in to Orin.

Mourning Becomes Electra - The Hunted, Acts 3, 4 and 5 Analysis

Aside from the developments in this play's central thematic exploration of revenge, the first point to note here is the parallel that exists in Act 3 not between this play and The Oresteia but between this play and the other plays in the collection. Specifically, the moment when Lavinia cries out to Ezra's spirit (which does, in fact, echo a similar cry by Electra in The Oresteia) has clear echoes of Eben's cries to his mother in "Desire..." and Nina's cries to the dead Gordon Shaw in "...Interlude." In all these cases, there is the strong thematic sense that the past, as represented by the "spirits" of these dead characters, is very much alive in the minds, hearts and experiences of the living ones.

A second important point relates to Orin's comment about Brant's face, and more specifically his dream about the faces of the other men he's killed. Both suggest that the members of the Mannon family, the dead and the still living, are in fact the living dead - that because of their shared lust for revenge, albeit the different revenges for the different crimes, their souls have lost the capacity for life, true love, and compassion (as evidenced, by contrast, in the characters of Hazel and Peter).

The third noteworthy point about this section is the way in which the action of this play diverges from that of the material upon which it's based. Yes, in the original, Orin/Orestes kills Brant/Aegisthus; but where in the original Clytemnestra's death at the hands of her son is literal, Christine's death here at the hands of her son is metaphorical. It's important to note, however, that for both sons, the deaths of their mothers have the same impact: they are both essentially driven mad.

Finally, this section contains an important reference to the idea of the Far East, which appears throughout the play as a haven of peace, rest, and natural beauty. For further consideration of this image, see "Objects/Places - The Far East."

Mourning Becomes Electra - The Haunted, Acts 1 and 2

Mourning Becomes Electra - The Haunted, Acts 1 and 2 Summary

Act 1, Scene 1 - Outside the house some time later, Seth and a group of drunken townsmen joke about the Mannon house being haunted, argue over whether it's true that Christine killed herself out of grief, and discuss whether it was as strange as it seems that Ezra died so soon after he came home. Peter and Hazel arrive, with news that Orin and Lavinia are on their way back after several months overseas. Seth confesses that he almost believes the ghost stories being told about the place, saying it's got a strong sense of evil about it. Hazel says she's sensed that evil herself, and as the other townsmen leave, goes into the house with Seth and Peter to get it tidied up. Soon afterward, Lavinia and Orin arrive, with Lavinia ordering Orin to get over his evident fear of the house and Orin remembering that they are standing where he last saw his mother alive. Lavinia tersely reminds him that the past is the past and forces him inside.

Act 1, Scene 2 - In the sitting room a short time later, Lavinia imagines that the portraits there (of old Abe Mannon and his wife) are looking at her accusingly. Meanwhile, Orin comes in almost in tears, saying he went looking for Christine and suddenly realized she was dead. Lavinia tries to boss him out of his grief, and then starts talking happily about Peter and Hazel. This leads Orin to comment that neither of them deserves love in their lives. Peter comes in and reacts with negative surprise to how much Lavinia now looks like Christine. Lavinia tells Orin to go and get Hazel. After he's gone, Lavinia explains to Peter that since they've been away, Orin's become even stranger and that she can't marry until he's well again. When Peter indicates he understands, she kisses him gratefully. At that moment Orin and Hazel return. Orin reacts jealously to the kiss, but then quickly calms down and offers his congratulations. Peter and Hazel react uneasily, and Lavinia watches him with dread.

Act 2 - In the study a month or so later, Orin's near-obsessive writing is interrupted by Lavinia, who teasingly suggests that more time with Hazel would brighten his mood. When he comments that Lavinia never leaves him and Hazel alone, Lavinia tells him she's afraid that he'll tell Hazel the truth about what happened to Brant and Christine. Orin accuses her of trying to evade justice, eventually confessing that he's writing down the Mannon family history - not only of his and Lavinia's crimes, but those of Ezra and Abe. Lavinia pleads with him to forget everything, and he says he'll try but doubts that the ghosts of the house will let him and commenting that their constant arguing makes him think that they've become their parents. As Lavinia weeps, he settles down to finish writing his family history.

Mourning Becomes Electra - The Haunted, Acts 1 and 2 Analysis

The final lines of Act 1, Scene 1 are among the most ironic not only of the play, but of the entire collection. Specifically, Lavinia's contention that the past is nothing more than the past and can have no effect in the present is a complete contradiction of everything that this play, and indeed all the other plays, is about. For further consideration of this point, see "Themes - The Past Haunting the Present." Also, for further consideration of the metaphoric implications of the family portraits, see "Objects/Places - The Portraits."

Meanwhile, it's interesting to consider Peter's comment in Act 1, Scene 2 that Lavinia has come to look more like Christine, a manifestation of the collection's thematic interest in exploring the various levels of resemblance between parents and children. On one level, Peter's comment can be taken as a reference that both Lavinia and Christine have been taken over by the spirit/intent of revenge, and have been transformed because of it. On another level, however, and given what the narrative is about to reveal about Lavinia's experience of becoming sexually and emotionally freer as the result of her visit to the islands of the Far East, the comment could be seen as a reference to how Lavinia and Christine have both been changed by freeing themselves from perceived sexual constrictions.

Orin's conversation with Lavinia in Act 2 brings the subject of justice into the narrative and thematic forefront of the action, raising the questions of what justice is, who decides what justice is, who dispenses justice, and whether its (victims? recipients?) have any recourse. This issue was the primary concern of The Oresteia, with debate over these very questions taking up most of the dramatic action of its third section. The debate here is less direct, but makes its point no less clearly - where Orestes is freed in the original, his mother's crime having been deemed worse than his, Orin feels he has no just alternative but to take his own life. Lavinia, as the end of the play will soon reveal, also feels like she has no choice but to metaphorically take her own life. This would remove herself from the physical world in the same way as her brother did with a gunshot, but leave herself spiritually and emotionally alive enough to contemplate and truly repent for the failings of her family and herself.

Finally, Lavinia's reference to the ghosts of the Mannon family at the end of Act 2 clearly echo Eben's and Abbie's comments about the ghost of Eben's mother, once again manifesting the collection's thematic exploration of the way the past haunts the present.

Mourning Becomes Electra - The Haunted, Acts 3 and 4

Mourning Becomes Electra - The Haunted, Acts 3 and 4 Summary

Act 3 - Hazel talks with Peter about how worried she is about Orin. When Orin comes in, Peter immediately goes. Orin gives Hazel an envelope, saying that before she marries Orin or before Peter marries Hazel, or if Orin dies, she is to read its contents (it seems clear that the envelope contains Orin's draft of the family history). Lavinia comes in, sees the envelope, and demands that Orin destroy it. Orin takes the envelope, telling Hazel to go and forget him forever. After Hazel goes, Orin insists that Lavinia forget Peter, saying he (Orin) loves her too much to let her be with anyone else. As he adds that he thinks she is manipulating him into killing himself the same way he manipulated Christine, he suddenly realizes his death may be the kind of justice the ancestors are seeking, the true kind of justice he learned about in the Far East. Peter suddenly returns, and Orin goes out, saying he wants to clean his pistol. Lavinia first runs after him, but then goes to Peter, saying love is all that matters to her. Peter tries to go after Orin, but Lavinia holds him back. Suddenly there's a gunshot from the study. As Peter runs out, Lavinia begs Orin to forgive her. She then turns to the portraits, saying she's finished with the family forever and confessing to them that she truly feels she is her mother's daughter.

Act 4 - Outside the house, conversation between Lavinia and Seth reveals that Lavinia is unable to go inside, feeling it's haunted by the ghosts of all the dead Mannons and describing it as a "temple of hate and death." Seth tells her to marry Peter and leave, and Lavinia tells him that's her plan. Seth sees Hazel approaching and goes in. Hazel tells Lavinia that she knows Orin intended to kill himself because of Lavinia, that she wants Lavinia to let Peter see what was in the envelope and let him go, and that she (Hazel) has faith that Lavinia will be forgiven for the suffering she's caused. After Hazel goes, Lavinia comments that she doesn't care about God's forgiveness, only her own. Peter appears, speaking of his plans to marry her and take her away. When Lavinia says she wants to marry him immediately, he says it would be disrespectful to Orin's memory. Lavinia says that when they're together the spirits of the dead Mannons will leave them alone. As she passionately embraces him, however, she calls him by Brant's first name, suddenly (and painfully) realizing that the dead will never stop being a presence in her life. She tells Peter she can't and won't marry him, and the very hurt Peter quickly goes.

As Lavinia starts into the house Seth reappears, and tells her to stay outside. Lavinia assures him she's not going to kill herself, but is going to lock herself up inside, close all the curtains, and keep herself in the dark with the ghosts of all the dead Mannons, their crimes and their punishments. She orders Seth to shutter all the windows and nail the

shutters closed. After Seth goes, she stays outside for a long last moment ... and then vanishes into the house, closing the door firmly behind her.

Mourning Becomes Electra - The Haunted, Acts 3 and 4 Analysis

The play's thematic exploration of the relationship between past and present, and indeed the collection's exploration of that subject, builds to its destructive climax in this section, with a series of vividly portrayed deaths. While only one of the remaining characters ends up literally and physically dead (Orin), the other three main characters (Lavinia, Hazel and Peter) are all spiritually killed as the result of the revenge-defined past of the Mannon family. It may be that the spirits of Hazel and Peter remain relatively intact, that they physically live to spiritually live (and love) another day. For Lavinia, however, the ending is unequivocal - in the same way as Orin ends his spiritual life, she ends her emotional (and sexual) life by vowing to spend what's left of her existence locked up inside the earthly representation of her family's spiritual corruption.

In the middle of all the drama, however, one can glimpse some tantalizing hints of additional meaning. The first is Lavinia's indifference to God's forgiveness, which like the references to abortion and God in "...Interlude" and to sexuality in all three plays would likely have been considered close to scandalous in the (conservative) times the play was written and first presented. The second is Hazel's compassion, which suggests that somewhere, on some level, there is hope for humanity - if Hazel can get past the horror of Lavinia's and Orin's actions, then it's possible for people in general to get past the horror of what's done to them. This is perhaps even true of people who have lived through, and caused, the amount of pain that the Mannons have. The third is the development of the image of the Far East which here, as it has been throughout, is one of pure nature, free and just. The significant irony is that in her determination to be rid of Peter and his goodness, which Lavinia believes that in her evilness she doesn't deserve, she turns the good of the islands into something monstrous. The conservative Peter believes her and gives in to his simultaneous shock and repulsion, but it's probably fair to say that the playwright intended the audience to perceive Lavinia's comments as a betrayal of both herself and the hope mentioned above.

The play concludes with another, and quite direct, reference to the play's (and the collection's) thematic focus on the haunting of the present by the past. Here once more the haunting is literal, from actual ghosts (if ghosts can be actual) as opposed to the more metaphoric idea of guilt and/or remorse.

For further consideration of Lavinia's reference to the Mannon house as "a temple," see "Objects/Places - The Mannon Estate."

Characters

Desire under the Elms - Eben Cabot

Eben is the central character and protagonist of Desire under the Elms, the youngest son (by a second marriage) of crusty landowner Ephraim Cabot. Eben is impetuous, volatile, and emotional, determined to stay connected to the spirit of his dead mother and to retain control over the farm and land she brought into her marriage to Ephraim.

Eben is very different from his older half-brothers, Simeon and Peter. Where Eben is impulsive, his brothers are more measured. Where Eben is intelligent and curious, his brothers are mentally slower and more settled in their thinking process. Most importantly for the play and its story, where Eben is determined to hold onto the farm out of the loving memory of his mother, his brothers are determined to gain control solely for its own sake.

Eben's relationships with his father Ephraim and his stepmother Abbie are even more intense and confrontational than those he has with his half-brothers. Where Ephraim is concerned, Eben is bitter about the way his mother was treated, and is determined to have his revenge, which takes the form of his intense desire to keep the farm and his intention to hate Ephraim's latest wife no matter what (see "Themes - Revenge"). His relationship with Abbie is colored by their mutual sexual desire, which adds both tension and complication to a relationship that, on both sides, is materialistic (albeit for different reasons), resentful, and intensely competitive. For further consideration of Eben's character, see "Topics for Discussion - What are the similarities ..."

Abbie Putnam

On one level, Abbie is the main antagonist of Desire under the Elms, in that she is one of the principle foes and/or catalysts for change for Eben, the protagonist. She enters the narrative relatively late in the action, as the much younger third wife of elderly Ephraim Cabot. It's important to note that while she tells Eben a great deal about her history (in essence, that she's had a hard life and been forced by circumstances to struggle to survive), the context in which she tells that story suggests that her word cannot, or perhaps should not, entirely trusted. In other words, it's clear from her first appearance that she is ruthless, materialistic, and willing to go to any lengths to secure what she wants - or rather, what she thinks she needs.

On another level, however, Abbie could also be considered a co-protagonist with Eben. She is, in some ways, as transformed by their tense, sexually passionate, competitive relationship as he is. It might be difficult, in fact, for some readers (and/or audience members) to accept that by the end of the play she's prepared to kill her baby in order to keep Eben's love. Yes, this fits with the essential ruthlessness of her character evident in her first appearance - and, in fact, may be a manifestation of the same essential

greed, wanting both Eben and the farm with the same desperate intensity. On the other hand, Abbie's and Eben's mutual transformations into people prepared to take extreme actions in the name of love (whether that love is genuine or not, they feel it, want it, and live from it) can be seen as a manifestation of one of the themes running through all three plays (see "Themes - Revenge and Love").

Ephraim Cabot

In Desire under the Elems, Ephraim is the father of Eben and the husband of Abbie, a hard (and hard working) man whose intense way of living and somewhat selfish (self-serving) philosophy of life is, in spite of his belief that he's acting out the will of God, ultimately both manipulative and destructive. He is a catalytic character, triggering change in others (particularly Eben and Abbie) without changing much himself. While it's interesting to note that he describes himself as increasingly and repeatedly lonesome in his life, particularly within the context of his three marriages, he never seems aware that it's his own character and actions that have driven other people away, and therefore left him lonesome.

Simeon and Peter Cabot

Simeon and Peter are Ephraim's sons by his first marriage, appearing only in the first scene of the play. While they are, on some level, portrayed as disagreeable (narrow minded, greedy for the sake of greed, stupidly vicious), it's interesting to recognize that they are, ironically, the only members of the Cabot family to escape the torturous, destructive atmosphere of the farm brought about by Ephraim's cold hardness.

Eben's Mother

This character never actually appears in the narrative, but is nevertheless a powerful presence, evoked by all the characters at one point or another as having profoundly affected the current situation. Eben and Abbie in particular are affected by what they believe to be her ongoing presence in the house and in the lives of the people living there. This presence is, in fact, a manifestation of another of the plays' common themes (see "Themes - The Past Haunting the Present").

Strange Interlude - Nina Leeds

Nina is the central character of the second play in this collection, Strange Interlude. Strangely charismatic, emotionally volatile, manipulative and cunning, there are clear similarities between her and young women in the other two plays - Abbie in "Desire ..." and Lavinia in "...Electra." All three love men that convention dictates they shouldn't, all three are essentially and eventually destroyed by that love, and all three seem helpless to avoid that destruction even though they are all, to varying degrees, aware that their own actions are at least part of the reason for that destruction.

In Nina's particular case, she begins the play traumatized by the recent death of her athletic, sexy, passionate beloved, and struggles for the rest of the (quite lengthy) narrative to either recover from or mask that trauma. As both her (spoken) thoughts and her actions make clear, however, she is unable to do so, carrying both her desire for the lost Gordon and the memory of her pain with her through decades of manipulation, self-deception, and false passion. However, while she is selfish and destructive, both of herself and of others, there must still be something powerfully attractive about her, something that captures the protective attention helpless passion of three men (see below). Is it vulnerability? Need? Weakness? The narrative makes it explicitly clear, but ultimately it doesn't really matter. Nina is, at her core, a manifestation of essential human frailty, her actions a portrayal of the desperation with which that frailty acts to protect itself, and of the existential loneliness at the core of that desperation.

Charles Marsden, Edmund Darrell, Sam Evans

These three men, in their respective ways and for their respective reasons, remain emotionally enslaved to the captivating Nina for the twenty or so years covered by the narrative of Strange Interlude. Marsden is a writer, emotionally weak and imaginatively stunted, prudishly shocked by Nina's volatile sexuality and childishly attached to his mother, later his sister, and finally to the young Nina he knew and loved as a child. Darrell is a physician, smart and ambitious but unable to resist Nina's sexual allure. Ultimately, he and Marsden are both revealed to be essentially weak, self-pitying, self-serving, and self-indulgent.

Evans is a businessman, somewhat simpleminded and by far the least emotionally complicated of all the characters in the play (and perhaps of all three plays). He is, however, the most admirable, noble and essentially honest - again, in all three plays. In Strange Interlude, however, is victimized, one way or another, by all the other characters, and has a pathetic lack of awareness of where he stands in the various love triangles triggered and manipulated by Nina. Nevertheless, he remains well intentioned, generous of spirit, and unconditionally loving, a powerful (and unique) contrast to most of the other characters not only in this play but in all three plays. His good qualities are echoed in those of Hazel and Peter in Mourning Becomes Electra, who likewise end up unappreciated and victimized but nevertheless spiritually whole, emotionally bloodied but uncorrupted).

Henry Leeds, Mrs. Evans

Both these characters appear in only one scene - Leeds in Part 1 Act 1, and Mrs. Evans in Part 1, Act 3. Leeds is Nina's father, Mrs. Evans is Sam Evans' mother, and both essentially serve as manifestations of the author's thematic concern (evident in all three plays) with the way the past haunts the present (see "Themes - The Past Haunting the Present"). Leeds carries with him the pain of having broken up Nina's engagement to Gordon Shaw, and therefore triggering her emotional trauma, while Mrs. Evans carries

with her the secret of the insanity running through the Evans family. Both have been spiritually destroyed by the secrets they're carrying.

Gordon Shaw and Gordon Evans

Gordon Shaw never appears in the narrative of Strange Interlude, but like Eben's mother in Desire under the Elms, his presence is keenly felt throughout - he is Nina's idealized lost love, and is viewed by all the characters (at one point or another) as an ideal of manhood, and more specifically of humanity. He was apparently athletic, attractive and honorable, although it isn't really possible for a reader and/or audience member to determine what he actually WAS like, since the characters' memories of him seem so colored by wishful thinking and idealism.

Gordon Evans is Nina's son, the biological son of Edmund Darrell and the legal son of Sam Evans. He appears in two manifestations, as an eleven year old boy (Act 2 Scene 7) and as a young man in his twenties (Act 2 Scene 9). It's interesting to note that in Act 2 Scene 8, when Gordon is competing in an athletic event in the same way as his namesake, Gordon Shaw did, he does not actually appear - he is spoken of at length, but not seen. This strengthens the sense that for Nina and the other characters he is, in many ways, a reincarnation of the first Gordon, the object of all the characters' projections of longing and grief. When the older Gordon appears in Act 2 Scene 9, however, there is the sense that he is in the process of becoming his own man, of leaving behind the clinging memory of the first Gordon and the equally clinging longings of his jealous, manipulative mother (Nina).

Madeline Arnold

Madeline is the young, attractive, sensible girlfriend of the second Gordon. She appears only in Act 2 Scenes 8 and 9, but makes a vivid impression of reasonableness, unconditional love and uneducated wisdom - in other words, a clear contrast to the impulsive, unreasonable, manipulative, calculated Nina. In Madeline there is the sense that in spite of the traumas perpetuated by Nina and her various lovers, she and Gordon have somehow managed to find their way to a free, respectful relationship and union, and that unlike most of the rest of the characters in all three plays, their future will be relatively untroubled by their past. In other words, the central theme of the three plays (the haunting of the present by the past) is further defined by the presence of a contrasting experience, that of Madeline and the new Gordon.

Mourning Becomes Electra - Lavinia Mannon

Lavinia, as pointed out in the analysis of Mourning Becomes Electra, is the parallel character to Electra in The Oresteia. Both are young women emotionally attached to their fathers, both are resentful of their mothers, and both are vengefully embittered by the acts of murder perpetrated on the latter by the former. Where Lavinia differs from Electra, and it's a very important difference, is that Lavinia has an additional reason for

hating her mother, Christine: Christine's relationship with Adam Brant, which parallels Clytemnestra's relationship with Aegisthus but with the additional layer of Lavinia's own attraction to, and desire for, Brant. In The Oresteia, there is no reference whatsoever to Electra having any interest in Aegisthus.

Another key difference between Lavinia and Electra is Lavinia's relationship with Peter. Electra has no parallel relationship in The Oresteia (in a play by Euripides that bears her name she is paired off with her brother's friend, while in a play by Sophocles that also bears her name she is married to an ineffectual shepherd). The relationship with Peter adds another, and different, layer of emotional meaning to Lavinia's story that in many ways deepens the tragedy of the family. In other words, the failure of the Peter/Lavinia relationship is a manifestation of the author's thematically relevant suggestion that the pain caused by the obsession with revenge spreads outside those immediately involved.

A third and final difference, not unrelated to the second, between Lavinia and Electra is the fate of the two characters. In The Oresteia, after Orestes has taken his revenge on Clytemnestra, Electra disappears from the action. Orestes is left to face the wrath of the justice-seeking Furies alone. In this play, Lavinia becomes Orin's ally against his internal Furies, encouraging him to resist their influence. When Orin succumbs to them (another difference from the source material - see "Orin Mannon", below) Lavinia, again unlike Electra, assumes the heavy mantle of the ultimate victim of the family curse. Alone, unloved, bitter, she accepts the fact that she has been forever corrupted by the destructive influence of revenge, a corruption symbolized by the towering home in which she vows resignedly to live the rest of her life.

Orin Mannon

Orin is the parallel character to Orestes in The Oresteia. Both young men are absent from their homes for extended periods, both return troubled (albeit to different degrees) by their experiences during those periods, and both are incited to retributive violence against their mothers by their emotionally volatile sisters. The key difference between the two characters is their varied relationships with their mothers. Orin is by far more overtly devoted to Christine than Orestes ever is to Clytemnestra. It's important to note here that while both suffer intense, debilitating guilt over what they've done, that guilt manifests in different ways. For Orin it's internal suffering, catalyzed by his experiences in the war, his conscience, his own weak will, and his intense (incestuous?) devotion to Christine. For Orestes the suffering is more external, triggered by the pursuit and assault of the justice seeking Furies. This difference (internal vs. external) can perhaps be seen as having cultural roots - the Ancient Greeks externalized and deified (put into the form of the gods) almost all everyday aspects of existence, including feelings, which modern culture attributes almost exclusively to psychology.

The other key difference between the characters is their eventual fate - Orestes survives to live an (apparently) redeemed life. Orin, however, kills himself under the

weight of his guilt. For further consideration of this difference between the two characters, see "Topics for Discussion - Of Orin and Orestes ..."

Christine Mannon

The character of Christine in "...Electra" parallels that of Clytemnestra in The Oresteia. Both are strong willed, embittered by the actions of their long-absent husbands, involved in affairs with other men, and murderously determined to seek revenge for what they believe to be the wrongs done to them. The main difference between the two characters is the nature of those wrongs. In The Oresteia, Clytemnestra believes herself to be taking revenge on Agamemnon for his murder of another of their daughters, Iphigenia, sacrificed to the gods to enable the Greek fleet to sail for Troy. In "...Electra," there is no such motivation for Christine's hatred. All she has is her resentment of Ezra's absence and his lack of feeling for her when he was at home.

Other similarities between Christine and Clytemnestra include the tense relationship both women have with their daughters, the way they bully their respective lovers, and of course the way both women and kill their husbands, and both women are in turn (and in revenge) killed by their sons. It's interesting to note, however, the differences here. Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon with an axe while he's bathing in preparation for lovemaking, while Christine kills Ezra essentially with neglect - specifically, by withholding his medication when he has a heart attack after lovemaking. Then - Clytemnestra is actually physically murdered by Orestes, with the same axe she used to kill Agamemnon. Christine, on the other hand, kills herself, but (at least in Orin's mind) as the result of Orin's rejection. In other words, Orestes' murder of his mother is literal, while Orin's murder of HIS mother is not only metaphorical, but debatable.

Ezra Mannon

Ezra in "...Electra" is the equivalent of Agamemnon in The Oresteia - both are renowned military leaders, both are long absent from home, both return from war eager to reunite with their families, and both are slaughtered by their vengeful wives. The key difference between the two is the manner in which they return. Agamemnon returns strong and in triumph, bringing with him a captured Trojan princess as his lover and asking Clytemnestra to accept her into their home (thereby giving Clytemnestra additional motivation to kill him). Ezra, by contrast, returns vulnerable and alone, changed (some might argue for the better) by the war and willing to attempt to heal the damage he's done to his marriage and his life. This makes him a much more pathetic victim than Agamemnon, and therefore makes Christine much easier to hate, at least in the eyes of the audience, than Clytemnestra.

Brant is the equivalent of Aegisthus in The Oresteia, with both men essentially serving as the hapless, manipulated, caught-in-the-fallout-of-revenge lovers of the much stronger Clytemnestra and Christine. While both men have their individual reasons for wanting to take revenge on Agamemnon/Ezra (for the actions of the previous

generation), both are ineffectual at achieving that revenge, instead tying theirs to the more powerful, more effective desires of the women they are ultimately too weak to resist.

Adam Brant

Brant is the equivalent of Aegisthus in The Oresteia, with both men essentially serving as the hapless, manipulated, caught-in-the-fallout-of-revenge lovers of the much stronger Clytemnestra and Christine. While both men have their individual reasons for wanting to take revenge on Agamemnon/Ezra (for the actions of the previous generation), both are ineffectual at achieving that revenge, instead tying theirs to the more powerful, more effective desires of the women they are ultimately too weak to resist.

Abe and David Mannon

These two characters, like Eben's mother in "Desire ..." and Gordon Shaw in "...Interlude," never appear in the actual narrative of the plays, but nonetheless have a defining and motivating impact on the action through their past actions. They are, like those other two characters, manifestations of the author's thematic intent to examine the way the past (affects? colors? poisons?) the present.

Like most of the other characters in "...Electra," Abe and David have parallels in The Oresteia - specifically, as the two brothers (Atreus and Thyestes) whose horrific feud brought the curse onto their family. In "...Electra," the feud between Abe and David brings the metaphorical curse of revenge onto their descendants.

Seth and the Townspeople

In all three plays of "...Electra", the action is introduced through conversation between Seth, an elderly servant of the Mannon family, and people of the town near the Mannon estate. These characters are "... Electra's" version of the Classical Greek chorus, a group of individuals who introduced, observed, reacted to, and commented on, the action taking place before them. The key difference between a classical chorus and the townspeople here is that in Classical Greek theatre (in which the chorus was almost always used), the chorus spoke with one voice as one character. Here the chorus speaks with separate voices and separate characters. Also, in Classical theatre, the chorus was onstage the entire time, and witness to all the action. In "...Electra," the "chorus" of townspeople serves only to introduce the action. In other words, to provide context and/or exposition. The exception is Seth, who as a servant, appears throughout the action and at times participates in it. Classical choruses rarely participated in the action, their functions being defined as observing and commenting.

Peter and Hazel Niles

There are no real equivalents to these two characters in The Oresteia. They are essentially good people caught up in the family drama playing out before and around them, and end up hurt as a result. As discussed in reference to Lavinia above, Peter and Hazel represent people caught into the periphery of revenge, with their suffering being no less because they're indirectly affected.

Objects/Places

Desire under the Elms - The Cabot Farmhouse

The action of "Desire ..." takes place entirely in and around the farmhouse - appropriate because the house is the focus of the conflict between the characters. All of them - father Ephraim, older sons Simeon and Peter, younger son Eben, new wife Abbie - claim ownership of the house for their own reasons, and all go to varying lengths to secure that ownership. Like the Mannon estate in "...Electra," the farmhouse is a symbol of the entrapping emotional and spiritual tension at the core of the play - in this case, individual power, status, and security.

The Parlor

This room in the Cabot house is particularly significant, in that it represents the house's true identity - as a manifestation of Eben's mother/Ephraim's second wife, the original owner of the farm who brought it into her marriage to Ephraim and whose death essentially leaves control of the farm up for grabs. The way that the parlor is regarded as sacred, or haunted, or both by Eben and Abbie is a manifestation of the thematic presence common in all three plays - the controlling role played by the past in defining the present.

California

For the male characters in "Desire...," California (where, they all claim, there are fortunes to be made in gold) represents hope and freedom. It's interesting to note, as discussed in "Characters - Desire under the Elms - Simeon and Peter" that the least developed, least passionate characters in the play are the ones to escape from the entrapment of the farm and all it represents. What remains to be seen, however, is whether Simeon and Peter actually achieve happiness as the result of that escape.

The Elms

Several times throughout the play, the elms are referred to as hanging, almost looming, over the house. There is a certain sense of ominousness to these references, suggesting that the elms are a symbol of the spiritual corruptness, disguised as love, at work in the lives of the play's three central characters - Eben, Ephraim and Abbie.

Strange Interlude - The Leeds home, the Evans' homes

While the houses/homes in "Desire..." and "...Electra" play metaphorically essential roles in defining the action and themes of the plays in which they appear, the various homes in "...Interlude" function on a somewhat different level. They tend to reinforce the idea that Nina, the central character of "...Interlude," spends her life in a series of artificial psychological and/or emotional and/or spiritual homes. In other words, as she erratically and emotionally back and forth between love and hate, passion and coldness, affection and disdain, the action veers back and forth between various houses. The action is never anchored in one place in the same way as Nina's emotional state is never anchored in any sort of calmness or centrality.

Nina's Babies

The nature and function of Nina's babies is examined here (in "Objects/Places") rather than in "Characters" because that's how she sees them - as objects rather than as people - as incarnations of the idealized Gordon Shaw, as tools for fulfilling her vow to keep her husband happy, as ways of feeding her desire to control.

Mourning Becomes Electra - The Oresteia

The Oresteia is the story of the House of Atreus, one of the central narratives of Classical Greek mythology. Atreus was an ancient king who fed his brother Thyestes on the flesh of his children. In response to this horror, the gods cursed Atreus and his descendants, including his son Agamemnon, who matured into one of the military leaders of the Trojan War. Agamemnon's long absence at the war (compounded by other circumstances not adapted into Mourning Becomes Electra) triggered loneliness and resentment in his strong willed wife Clytemnestra, who took as her lover Aegisthus, the last remaining son of Thyestes. This triggered the resentment of Agamemnon's and Clytemnestra's daughter Electra, an emotionally volatile young woman devoted to her father.

Upon Agamemnon's return, he was murdered by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Electra vowed revenge, which she was able to take upon the return of her long-missing brother, Orestes. Orestes, devoted to his mother, nevertheless killed both her and Aegisthus in the name of what he (and Electra) believed to be the gods' justice. Ancient spirits called the Furies, however, claimed that a son murdering his mother was a greater crime than a wife murdering her husband, and so haunted and pursued Orestes, driving him mad and crying out for his punishment. Orestes appealed to the gods, and they decided in his favor, eventually releasing him and his family from the ancient curse placed on them as the result of the actions of Atreus.

In short, the character parallels between those in The Oresteia and those of Mourning Becomes Electra are these - Atreus/Abe Mannon, Thyestes/David Mannon, Agamemnon/Ezra Mannon, Clytemnestra/Christine, Aegisthus/Adam Brant, Electra/Lavninia, and Orestes/Orin. For detailed analysis of these parallels, see the analysis of the individual characters in "Characters - Mourning Becomes Electra."

Meanwhile, there are clear parallels between the events of the two plays. The conflict between Atreus and Thyestes is echoed in the conflict between Abe and David Mannon. Agamemnon's absence at the Trojan War is echoed by Ezra's absence at the Civil War, with the return of both warriors and subsequent deaths at the vengeful hands of their embittered wives playing key roles in defining the action of both plays. Meanwhile, the joining of emotional and spiritual forces enacted by Electra and Orestes in order to take revenge on their murderous mother is played out in similar actions by Lavinia and Orin. A significant difference between the two narratives is the contrast in how Clytemnestra and Christine meet their deaths, a contrast discussed in detail in the character analyses of Orin and Christine. Finally, for consideration of the parallels between Seth and the townspeople and the traditional Greek Chorus, also see Characters - "Seth and the Townspeople."

The Mannon Estate

Like the action in "Desire ..." the action of "...Electra" takes place either outside or inside the same location - the Mannon family estate. Unlike the house in "Desire...," however, there is relatively little literal and/or physical value to this placement of the action - in other words, no one is fighting over control of the property. The value of the house in "...Electra" is entirely metaphorical, and functions on a couple of different levels. The first is to create a resemblance to Classical Greek theatre, which was almost always (according to the surviving plays from the period) set outside, and specifically the outside of a temple or palace. This, in turn, is related to the origins of this sort of theatre in ancient religious/spiritual festivals. The fact that much of the action of "...Electra" takes place inside the mansion is, like the ways in which the characters and stories of the play diverge from the original, metaphorically relevant. Because the house itself is a metaphor for the "edifice" of hatred and revenge the Mannon family has constructed for itself, the fact that much of the action takes place within the house suggests that that action is itself contained within the oppressive confines of that revenge. Finally, the fact that at the end of the plays Lavinia enters the house, ostensibly to never emerge, makes the clear thematic statement that her entire being has been consumed by the hatred and revenge the house represents, which has literally destroyed the lives of her entire family and is about to swallow hers whole.

The Family Portraits

When the action of "...Electra" moves inside, it generally moves into one of two rooms: Ezra's study or the sitting room. Both of these rooms are dominated by family portraits (the exception is the final act of Play One, which takes place in Ezra's bedroom which

doesn't need a portrait - it's dominated by Ezra's living, but soon to be dead, presence). These portraits, described in stage directions as being almost life sized, represent the looming presence of the past, in the form of the characters portrayed, in the present. It's interesting to note that the portrait in the study is of Ezra in judge's robes, suggesting that the characters in the present are all being judged by the past.

Ezra's Pillbox

The poison Christine gives Ezra at the end of Play One is kept hidden here, in the same way as the "poison" at the core of her feelings for him is kept hidden in her heart. The exposure of the pillbox, therefore, metaphorically represents the exposure of Christine's hatred, and also the exposure of her role in Ezra's death.

The Eastern Islands

Throughout the play, characters (specifically Adam Brant and Orin Mannon) refer to the Eastern Islands, which are (in their descriptions) sanctuaries of freedom, innocence, and peace. Brant and Christine plan to escape to those islands but die before they have the chance, suggesting that their crimes against Ezra are/were too severe for them to earn peace. Orin and Lavinia, meanwhile, journey there temporarily, but have to return because of Orin's inescapable guilt. This suggests that he too has committed too serious a crime, at least in his own mind (see "Characters - Orin") for him to live in true peace.

It's interesting to note, however, that of all the characters who experience the islands, either as a dream or in reality, Lavinia has the most freeing experience of all of them, discovering emotional, spiritual and sexual release that none of the others do, and which seems to be most in line with the release dreamed about by the others. She too remains unable to live in that place of blessed peace as the result of her actions. She acknowledges the corruptness innate in her soul and actions by firstly deliberately lying about the joy of her experience to Peter and then by closing the metaphorical and literal door to that experience behind her as she enters the Mannon house (see above for the house's metaphorical meaning) forever.

Themes

Relationships between Parents and Children

The often intense, more often complicated relationships between parents and children is the core thematic focus of all three plays in this collection. At times spanning a number of generations, the varied connections between parent and child and that child's child all define and motivate the plays' narrative lines, exploring the effect of love, disappointment, resentment, devotion, obsession, rage and revenge - often all in one play. In "Desire ...," the central parent/child conflicts essentially competitive and grounded in power - specifically, those between the emotionally volatile Eben and his eccentric, controlling father, as well as between Abbie and her murdered baby. The relationship between Eben and his longed for dead mother is something different, anchored in a love that has become obsessive and somewhat unhealthy. This sort of love is also evident in "Interlude ...," in which almost all of the parent-child relationships are damaging rather than supportive. The tension between Nina and her father, between Nina and her son, between Darrell and his biological son, and even Marsden and his never seen mother all seem to have been warped, somehow, by the simultaneous intensity of love and resentment that exists between the two individuals involved.

There are also, however, somewhat more positive examples of parent/child love in "...Interlude." Mrs. Evans clearly loves her son and genuinely wants him to be well and happy. While there is some question about the validity of her tactics, her goals are ultimately selfless. By far the most genuine, loving parent child relationship in "...Interlude," and indeed in all three plays, is that between Evans and young Gordon, whom Evans believes to be his biological son but who is of course his child in name only. This is a significant irony, in that there is genuine (and mutual) respect between father and son of a sort that doesn't seem to exist in any other parent child relationship in the collection. In other words, the positive relationship between Evans and Gordon functions to define the corruption of the other parent-child relationships by providing a positive contrast.

The most complex web of parent-child relationships is in "...Electra", in which the family tensions cross three generations - the suffering brought about by patriarch Abe Mannon has repercussions in the lives of his son Ezra and his grandchildren Lavinia and Orin. There is not one single positive value in the parent/child relationships on display here - love between Ezra and Christine and their children is corrupted by over dependence, while the love of the children is corrupted by obsession, resentment and anger. Even the relationship between Peter and his mother, barely glimpsed at the end of the play in relation to Peter's desire to marry the troubled Lavinia, is one in which the son seems at best manipulated, at worst dominated, by his mother.

The question, of course, is what is the playwright attempting to say by portraying familial relationships in this way. For further consideration of this question, see "Topics for Discussion - What thematic statement do you think ..."

Resemblances between Parents and Children

Throughout all three plays, there are three sub-themes of the main theme above. The first is the exploration of how parents and children resemble each other - in emotional, spiritual, and intentional terms as well as in physical terms. In "Desire ...," these resemblances play out particularly in relation to Eben and both his father and mother, as well as in relation to Eben's child and his parents, with the resemblances being discussed more in physical terms than otherwise.

In "... Interlude," resemblances are more in character and action - between Nina and her father, and between young Gordon and his three "fathers" (see "Strange Interlude - Part 2, Acts 8 and 9, Analysis). In "...Electra," resemblances not only manifest on all levels (physical, emotional, spiritual, intentional), but for the characters, and almost without exception, such resemblances are automatically a bad thing while, at the same time, making important thematic points to the reader/audience. While specific details of how each play explores this secondary thematic concern are covered in the analysis of the individual plays, it's important to note here that explorations of resemblances are effectively evocative dramatizations of the second sub-theme of the plays' core thematic focus on family, that sub-theme being is the exploration of the relationship between past and present. In other words, the fact that children have similar emotional characteristics and take similar actions to their parents is an important way of illustrating the playwrights' concern with how the past affects, penetrates, and is inextricably tied to, the future.

The Past Haunting the Present

Throughout all three plays relationships, incidents and circumstances are defined and motivated by relationships, incidents, and circumstances in the past. Everything Eben does in "Desire..." is connected to his relationship with his dead mother, and his resentment of how his mother was treated by Ephraim. Everything that Nina does in "...Interlude", as well as all the ways all the other characters interact with her, is defined by all the characters' respective relationships with, and feelings for, the dead (martyred to desire?) Gordon Shaw. Perhaps most tellingly is the fact that everything the living members of the Mannon family do in "...Electra" is connected to characters and actions that existed in their past; specifically, patriarch Abe Mannon and his treatment of his younger brother. An additional layer of thematic resonance exists here, however, that doesn't exist in the other plays. This is the result of the play being so clearly and thoroughly based on another, the Classical Greek tragedy The Oresteia.

There is the clear moral, perhaps even theological, sense about The Oresteia that the fates of its characters were as much the result of pre-ordained destiny as of their own

actions and choices. In other words, what happened to them was the result of events and/or decisions made by the gods in the even further distant past than the actions of the corrupt, murderous patriarch. While the question of destiny is never explicitly raised in "...Electra," the nature of its source material nevertheless awakens echoes of that question in the minds and perceptions, perhaps even the sub-conscious, archetypally-aware souls, of its readers/audience.

Revenge and Love

While it could be argued that experiences of these two powerful motivators of human behavior are indelibly separate, it could also be argued that in this collection of plays, and perhaps even in narrative in general, they are in fact often closely connected. What, after all, is a more powerful motivator for revenge than betrayed love? Christine, Lavinia and Orin all take the extreme, revenge-defined actions they do in "...Electra" as the result of their love having been betrayed. Eben does what he does in "Desire ..." at least in part because of his desire to take revenge on his father for what he did to his mother.

Meanwhile, Abbie in "Desire ..." does what she does out of a desire to take revenge on Ephraim (for not loving her well enough) and on Eben (for not loving her enough, loving her right away, or loving her unconditionally). In "...Interlude" there is perhaps a less overt relationship between love and revenge in the actions of its characters, but close investigation reveals that it's there. Nina's father takes a kind of revenge on Gordon Shaw for taking Nina's love from him by ending their relationship, while Nina repeatedly takes revenge on, the men (particularly Darrell, but also her son) who don't love her the way she demands to be loved. Finally, Nina also takes revenge on Madeline for taking the love of her son away from her. All in all, then, and in all three plays, revenge and love are clearly portrayed as being two sides of the same coin, with the action of all three plays making it difficult, at times, to determine which is which - is love revenge, or is revenge love?

Style

Point of View

Because plays are written from the point of view of their characters, the particular point of view of a particular play is closely linked with its themes (for analysis of the themes in this collection of plays, see "Themes," above). Theme, in turn, manifests as a result of what the characters say and do, and while this is also true of most other narrative fiction, in a play this is the ONLY means by which an author can reveal point of view. In other words, in a play there is generally no outright narrative (as there is in other sorts of fiction) through which s/he can reveal point of view, meaning that point of view in a play is generally as objective as it can possibly be.

It could be argued, however, that because a play is by definition drama, and because drama is by definition an exploration of conflict between human beings, a play's essential point of view is, by definition, that conflict is a manifestation of a central aspect of humanity. This premise is supported by the fact that the third play in this collection, Mourning Becomes Electra, is essentially a re-development of a drama that came into existence thousands of years ago in response to myths and stories that came into existence hundreds of years before that. In other words, the core point of view of these three plays, as developed by Classical Greek theatre and manifest over hundreds and thousands of years in every play ever written, is the same as that of all drama - that conflict is a core motivator and/or definer of human existence. All the other elements of a play, therefore (theme, character, setting, language, structure, etc), are manifestations and/or evocations of that core point of view.

Setting

As discussed in the various entries under "Objects/Places", the various settings of the three plays are metaphorically evocative of the plays' various themes. To a greater and/or lesser degree, they are also metaphorically evocative of drama's core point of view as defined above. In "Desire...," for example, the play's single setting is the focus of the play's central conflict. In "...Interlude," the play's many settings are evocative of the multiple levels of conflict triggered by the volatile, capricious central character (Nina).

In "...Electra," meanwhile, the play's internal and external variations on its single setting (the oppressive, mausoleum-like Mannon estate), serve to evoke an essential aspect of that core point of view, what is arguably the central conflict in all drama, certainly in most Classical Greek Dramas (like that upon which "...Electra" is based). That conflict is between humanity and its destiny - or rather, the individual members of humanity and their individual destinies.

This may in fact be true of all three plays - that setting is evocative of the destinies all the characters are trying to change. It's certainly true of "Desire...," in which the house represents clear hopes for changed destinies ... it's also certainly true, as mentioned, of "...Electra." In "...Interlude," however, the evocation of the multiple settings is of something slightly different - of an unwillingness, specifically Nina's unwillingness but also that of the other characters, to come to terms with what that destiny actually is. In other words, the scenes in "...Interlude" move from location to location in the same way as the characters move from chosen destiny to chosen destiny, aware (unaware?) that true destiny is not actually chosen. It just is, in the same way as the Mannon house just is, and the Cabot house just is.

Language and Meaning

There are several noteworthy levels to the use of language in these plays. The first is the language of the dialogue, which to contemporary readers may well come across as over flowery, melodramatic, and unrealistic. It must be remembered, however, that these plays were written in the first third of the Twentieth Century, meaning that the characters speak in the theatrical language of the period. The second noteworthy element about language here is the incorporation of detailed stage directions - there is, in almost every line, direction from the playwright as to how it's spoken, and to what's going on emotionally with the character at the time. This is vastly different from contemporary playwriting, in which stage directions of this sort are generally kept to a minimum. The sense here is that the playwright had a clear, and profound, understanding of what his characters were doing and feeling at a given moment, and wanted that understanding to be apparent to both interpreters (actors, directors) and audiences.

A third noteworthy use of language can be found in "Strange Interlude," in which the characters' thoughts are spoken aloud, but are unheard by the other characters onstage (the audience alone hears what is thought). This is highly unusual, and while it makes for an exceptionally long play, it also makes for an exceptionally profound understanding of what characters are experiencing, and why.

The final noteworthy use of language here is as a manifestation of the core point of view of the plays and of drama in general as defined above. In a play, dialogue is virtually the only means by which conflict can be expressed and/or played out. Yes, some stage directions can give detailed information about physical manifestations of conflict, but for the most part conflict exists as the result of what is said. The essential meaning of language in plays, therefore, whether it's the poetry of Shakespeare, the florid melodrama of O'Neill or Williams, or the sparseness of Pinter, is to give voice to the fundamental human condition at the core of conflict, and therefore of drama, in theatre. This is the conflict arising from one character wanting something from someone else, that that someone else is unable and/or unwilling to give.

Structure

Unlike many contemporary plays, the essential narrative structure of these plays is linear, moving forward through time from one moment to the next, through an escalating series of conflict-based scenes and confrontations to a climax, followed by resolution and denouement (tying up of loose ends). In "Desire ..." this narrative movement is relatively quick, while in "...Interlude" it happens in fits and starts and is frequently interrupted by interjections of thoughts and feelings. In "...Electra," structural movement is slower, but this isn't necessarily problematic, in that this slowness, almost stateliness, creates a powerful sense of increasing tension that was an essential component of the play upon which it was based, The Oresteia. The story of The Oresteia was based in a myth that was, in its time and place, as universally known as the story of Christ is today. In other words, everybody knew the story and everybody knew the ending - what was intriguing to audiences then was the creeping inevitability, the sense of suspense in waiting for an ending that everybody knew was coming. That sense of suspense is clearly present in "...Electra," and while not everyone will know the specifics of the ending (as the audiences of the original all knew), the structurally-anchored sense of inevitable doom is inescapable.

The key component of drama's narrative movement, here and in most plays, is of course conflict, with tension between characters rising after each action and reaction, conflict therefore escalating until it explodes into a climactic eruption of feeling. It's important to note that each play contains several such climaxes, each one more intense than the one before and triggering action that leads inevitably to the next one, and the next one, and the next one, all the way to the big one at each play's respective conclusion. Here again there is a manifestation of drama's core point of view: that conflict leads to more and greater conflict until, one way or another, that conflict resolves.

Quotes

"Here it's stones atop o' the ground - stones atop o' stones - makin' stone walls - year atop o'year - him 'n' yew 'n' me 'n' then Eben - makin' stone walls fur him to fence us in!" Desire under the Elms, Part1, Scene 1, p. 4 - Peter to Simeon.

"Waal - thar's a star, an'somewhar's they's him, an' here's me, an' thar's Min up the road - in the same night ... I don't give a damn how many sins she's sinned afore mine or who she's sinned 'em with, my sin's as purty as any one of 'em". Ibid, Scene 2, p. 10 - Eben.

"I kin feel him comin' on like yew kin feel malaria chill afore it takes ye." Ibid, Scene 4, p. 14 - Eben.

"Hain't the sun strong an' hot? Ye kin feel it burnin' into the earth - nature - makin' thin's grow - bigger 'n' bigger - burnin' inside ye - makin' ye want t'grow - into somethin' else - ill ye're [joined] with it - an' it's your'n - but it owns ye, too - an' makes ye grow bigger - like a tree - like them elms ..." Ibid, Part 2 Scene 1, p. 25 - Abbie to Eben.

"I don't like lettin' on what's mine's his'n. I been doin' that all my life. I'm gittin' t'the end o'b'arin' it!" Ibid, Part 3 Scene 1, p. 44 - Eben to Abbie.

"Charlie sits beside the fierce river, immaculately timid, cool and clothed, watching the burning, frozen, naked swimmers drown at last ..." Strange Interlude, Part 1, Act 1, p. 70 - Nina.

"I must learn to give myself ... give and give until I can make that gift of myself for a man's happiness without scruple, without fear, without joy except in his joy! When I've accomplished this I'll have found myself, I'll know how to start living my own life again!" Ibid, p. 73-74 - Nina.

"...what beastly incidents our memories insist on cherishing! ... the ugly and disgusting ... the beautiful things we have to keep diaries to remember ..." Ibid, Act 2, p. 79 - Marsden.

"With you the lies have become the only truthful things. And I suppose that's the logical conclusion to the whole evasive mess ... Life is just a long drawn out lie with a sniffling sigh at the end ..." Ibid, Act 2, p. 91

"I seemed to feel Gordon standing against a wall with eyes bandaged and these men were a firing squad whose eyes were also bandaged - and only I could see! No, I was the blindest! I would not see! I knew ... that I was more maimed than they were, really, that the war had blown my heart and insides out!" Ibid, Act 2, p. 95

"...although last evening when we got here at first I said 'obviously haunted' to myself, now that I've spent one night in it I know that whatever spooks there may once have

been have ... drifted away over the grass, wisps of mist between the apple trees. Without one backward glance of regret or recollection." Ibid, Act 3, p. 98 - Nina.

"I used to be a great one for worrying about what's God and what's devil, but I got richly over it living here with poor folks that was being punished for no sins of their own, and me being punished with them for no sin but loving much." Ibid, p. 111 - Mrs. Evans.

"...I loved [being pregnant] more than I've ever loved anything in my life - even Gordon! I loved it so it seemed at times that Gordon must be its real father, that Gordon must have come to me in a dream while I was lying asleep beside Sam!" Ibid, Act 4, p. 126 - Nina.

"I am in the laboratory and they are guinea pigs ... in fact, in the interest of science, I can be for the purpose of this experiment, a healthy guinea pig myself and still remain an observer ... her husband is my friend ... I have always tried to help him." Ibid, p. 129 - Darrell.

"...the world is whole and perfect ... all things are each other's ... life is ... and the is is beyond reason ... questions die in the silence of this peace... I am living a dream within the great dream of the tide ... breathing in the tide I dream and breathe back my dream into the tide ... suspended in the movement of the tide, I feel life move in me, suspended in me ... I am a mother ... God is a mother." Ibid, Act 5, p. 133 - Nina.

"...typical terrible child of the age ... universal slogan, keep moving ... moving where? Never mind that ... don't think of ends ... the means a re the end ... it's in every headline of this daily newer testament ... going, going, never mind the gone ... we won't live to see it ... and we'll be so rich, we can buy off the deluge anyway! ... even our new God has His prize ... aren't we made in His image? or vice versa?" Ibid, Part 2, Act 6, p. 158 - Marsden.

"...there are things one may not do and live with oneself afterwards ... there are things one may not say ... memory is too full of echoes! ... there are secrets one must not reveal ... memory is lined with mirrors!" Ibid, Act 6, p. 167.

"Oh, Ned, when are we ever going to learn something about each other? We act like such brainless fools - with our love. It's always so wonderful when you first come back, but you always stay too long - or I always keep you too long! You never leave before we've come to the ugly bitter stage when we blame each other!" Ibid, Act 7, p.175

"My old lover, how well and young he looks ... now we no longer love each other at all ... our account with God the Father is settled ... afternoons of happiness paid for with years of pain ... the only living life is in the past and future ... the present is an interlude ... strange interlude in which we call on past and future to bear witness we are living!" Ibid, Act 8, p. 192-3.

"Flowers really have the power to soothe grief. I suppose it was that discovery that led to their general use at funerals - and weddings!" Ibid, Act 9, p.212

"...I always have the feeling that [people are] secretly glad someone is dead - that it flatters their vanity and makes them feel superior because they're living." Ibid, p. 214.

"...she doesn't love him any more ... even now he's all heat and energy and the tormenting drive of noon ... can't he see she is in love with evening?" Ibid, p. 219.

"...that's only the Mannons' way. They've been top dog around here for near on two hundred years and don't let folks ferget it." Mourning Becomes Electra, Homecoming, Act 1, p. 229 - Seth.

"Each time I come back after being away it appears more like a sepulcher! The "whited" one of the Bible - pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray ugliness! It was just like old Abe Mannon to build such a monstrosity - as a temple for his hatred." Ibid, p. 237 - Christine.

"I remember your admiration for the naked native women. You said they had found the secret of happiness because they had never heard that love can be a sin." Ibid, p. 242 - Lavinia.

"I couldn't fool [Ezra] long. He's a strange, hidden man. His silence always creeps into my thoughts. Even if he never spoke, I would feel what was in his mind and some night, lying beside him, it would drive me mad and I'd have to kill his silence by screaming out the truth!" Ibid, Act 2, p. 257 - Christine.

"All victory ends in the defeat of death. That's sure. But does defeat end in the victory of death? That's what I wonder!" Ibid, Act 3, p. 264 - Ezra.

"Shut your eyes again! I can talk better. It has always been hard for me to talk - about feelings. I never could when you looked at me. Your eyes were always so - so full of silence! That is, since we've been married. Not before, when I was courting you. They used to speak then. They made me talk - because they answered." Ibid, p. 268-9 - Ezra to Christine.

"Why can't all of us remain innocent and loving and trusting? But God won't leave us alone. He twists and wrings and tortures our lives with others' lives until - we poison each other to death!" Ibid, The Hunted, Act 1, p. 286 - Christine.

"I hardened myself to expect my own death and everyone else's, and think nothing of it. I had to - to keep alive! It was part of my training as a soldier under [Ezra]. He taught it to me, you might say." Ibid, p. 288 - Orin.

"There was no-one there but you and me. And yet I never saw you, that's the funny part. I only felt you all around me. 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 ... but you needn't be provoked ... this was the most beautiful island in the world - as beautiful as you, Mother!" Ibid, Act 2, p. 300 - Orin to Christine.

"I can see them now - so close - and a million miles away! The warm earth in the moonlight, the trade winds rustling the coco palms, the surf on the barrier reef singing a croon in your ears like a lullaby! Aye There's peace, and forgetfulness for us there - if we can ever find those islands now!" Ibid, Act 4, p. 319 - Brant.

"Do you remember me telling you how the faces of the men I killed came back and changed to Father's face and finally became my own ... he looks like me, too! Maybe I've committed suicide!" Ibid, p. 322 - Orin.

"For months after we sailed you didn't know what you were doing. I had to live in constant fear of what you might say. I wouldn't live through those horrible days again for anything on earth. And remember this homecoming is what you wanted. You told me that if you could come home and face your ghosts, you knew you could rid yourself forever of your silly guilt about the past." Ibid, The Haunted, Act 2, p. 343 - Lavinia.

"...they turned out to be [Lavinia's] islands, not mine. They only made me sick - and the naked women disgusted me. I guess I'm too much of a Mannon, after all, to turn into a pagan. But you should have seen [Lavinia] with the men ... handsome and romantic looking ... with colored rags around their middles and flowers stuck over their ears! Oh she was a bit shocked at first ... but afterwards she fell in love with the islanders. If we'd stayed another month, I know I'd have found her some moonlight night dancing under the palm trees - as naked as the rest!" Ibid, p. 343 - Orin.

"You understand, don't you? You've been with us Mannons so song! You know there's no rest in this house which Grandfather built as a temple of Hate and Death ... I'll 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 hosts will fade back into death. And the Mannons will be forgotten!" Ibid, Act 4, p. 369 - Lavinia to Seth.

"I hope there is a hell for the good somewhere!" Ibid, p. 372 - Lavinia.

"You trust me with your happiness! But that means trusting the Mannon dead - and they're not to be trusted with love! I know them too well!" Ibid, p. 374 - Lavinia.

Topics for Discussion

Research the life of the author of these plays, Eugene O'Neill. What aspects of his life can be seen as manifesting in the three narratives?

What are the similarities between the young sons in the three plays: Eben in "Desire ...," Gordon in "...Interlude," and Orin in "...Electra?" Consider both their essential characteristics and the circumstances of their upbringing that gave rise to those characteristics. Do you believe the playwright is making a thematic statement about the nature of being a "young son?" Also consider the author's biographical history. What aspects of his life and relationships might he have drawn upon to create the portrayals of these three characters?

Consider the essential nature of the central female characters in each of the three plays - Abbie in "Desire ...," Nina in "...Interlude," and Lavinia in "...Electra." In what ways are their characters and/or situations and/or actions similar? In what ways are they different?

What thematic statement do you think the playwright is striving to make in portraying family relationships in all three plays as being almost universally dysfunctional? Explain your answer.

Other than those already discussed, what parallels in character, action and theme can you find between the three plays in this collection?

Discuss the ways in which the issue of physical/emotional/resemblance between the generations might be a manifestation of any or all of the collection's themes.

In Desire under the Elms, what are the desires, other than sexual, to which the title of the play might refer?

In Desire under the Elms, do you believe Abbie truly loves Eben? Why or why not? If yes, when do you see her feelings transforming from a desire to own the farm to an experience of genuine love? If no, what is your explanation of her actions in killing the baby? Do these contradictions make Abbie an intriguing, multi-faceted character, or do they make her unbelievable?

Discuss Nina's views of God in "Strange Interlude" (see "Quotes," p. 153 and 192-3) and her perception that individual human life is but a "strange interlude" in God's perception. How do these ideas relate to your perceptions and/or experiences of God? Is there validity to Nina's perceptions and/or opinions? Why or why not?

Why do you think Nina refers to the "interlude" of human existence as "strange?" There are several possible definitions of "strange." Which one do you think applies, and why? Is life truly strange?

Obtain and study a translation of The Oresteia. What parallels, other than those explored in this analysis, can you find between that play and Mourning Becomes Electra?

Of Orin and Orestes, which character do you think receives true justice - Orin, tormented by guilt into taking his own life the same way he took his mother's, or Orestes, who is tried by the gods for his "crime," found innocent, and set free? Debate your answers.