Mourning Becomes Electra Study Guide

Mourning Becomes Electra by Eugene O'Neill

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Contents

Introduction

Mourning Becomes Electra is considered O'Neill's most ambitious work. In the play, he adapts the Greek tragic myth *Oresteia* to nineteenth-century New England. Generally, critics praised the play as one of O'Neill's best. Even though performances ran almost six hours long, audiences seemed to agree; it ran for 150 performances.

Like *Oresteia*, O'Neill's play features themes of fate, revenge, hubris, adultery, and honor. Many critics note that the play reflects his recurring concerns about the unsuccessful struggle of an individual to escape a tragic fate and the dark nature of human existence. The play is structured as a trilogy, with three different plays *The Homecoming, The Hunted, The Haunted* comprising the story.

Author Biography

In 1888 Eugene O'Neill was born in New York City to a theatrical family. His father was the noted actor James O'Neill, who became famous for his starring role in Alexander Dumas's *Count of Monte Cristo*. During his childhood, Eugene traveled with his family on the theatre circuit.

In 1906 O'Neill attended Princeton University before being expelled for a drunken prank later that year. In 1907, he moved to New York, where he held several jobs. In 1909 he sailed to Central America to prospect for gold. Critics believe that his experiences in Honduras provide the setting and background for one of his most successful plays, *The Emperor Jones*. Disillusioned with the work, O'Neill returned to New York.

O'Neill worked as a seaman on ships sailing to South America, Africa, and Europe. His experiences as a sailor and working odd jobs on foreign waterfronts became the basis of his early maritime plays, such as *Thirst* (1914), *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916), *The Long Voyage Home* (1917), and *The Hairy Ape* (1922).

O'Neill returned to New York in 1911 and supported himself working odd jobs and living among the poor and downtrodden. These experiences provided the background for such later plays as *The Iceman Cometh* (1946) and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956). He worked as an assistant stage manager and actor with his father's theatre company, which provided him with theater experience.

In 1912, O'Neill worked as a reporter for the *New London Telegraph*. Diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1913, he spent six months in the Gay lord Farm sanitarium.

During his convalescence, O'Neill decided to become a playwright. After recovery, he entered Harvard to study with George Pierce Baker. He became involved with an experimental theater group, the Provincetown Players, who in 1916 put on his first produced play, the one-act *Bound East for Cardiff.*

O'Neill won the Pulitzer Prize four times and received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936. At the time, he was only the second American writer to receive that international honor, the first being novelist Sinclair Lewis.

Despite his financial and critical success, O'Neill retreated into seclusion in the late 1930s. Though he continued writing, theater companies infrequently performed his plays. He returned to the stage with *The Iceman Cometh in* 1946. He died in 1953.

It took the posthumous revival of *Long Day's Journey into Night* in 1956 to reestablish his esteemed position in the American theater. The success of O'Neill's plays since then proves his stature among the most prominent of American dramatists.

Plot Summary

Homecoming: Act I

In a small New England seaport town a group that functions as a Greek chorus Seth Beckwith, Amos Ames, Louisa, and Minnie sit in front of the Mannon home. They explain that the patriarch of the family, Ezra Mannon, serves as a general in Grant's army. A wealthy man, he is expected to return soon to rejoin his wife, Christine, and his two children, Lavinia and Orin.

As the scene progresses, Peter Niles asks Lavinia for her hand in marriage, which she refuses. Lavinia discloses that she followed her mother to New York, where she was carrying on an adulterous affair with Adam Brant. Seth, the family's elderly gardener, implies to Lavinia that Adam is David Mannon's son. The Mannon family disinherited David, Ezra's uncle, after he ran off with a French-Canadian nurse of humble origins, Marie Brantome.

Adam's arrival upsets Lavinia; they talk about "the Blessed Isles" of the South Pacific, which he has visited and describes as an early paradise. Lavinia tells Adam she knows the secret of his parentage. Adam informs Lavinia that he intends to take revenge on Ezra, who refused to help Adam's poor, sick mother when she was dying.

Homecoming: Act II

Talking in Ezra's study, Christine admits that she feels incapable of loving her daughter Lavinia, because she reminds her of her disastrous honeymoon and poor sexual relations with her husband. Christine states that she prefers her son Orin, because she was pregnant with him while Ezra was away fighting in the Mexican War.

Lavinia confronts her mother about her affair with Captain Brant. Christine agrees to stop seeing him. When Adam arrives, Christine tells him what has occurred and encourages him to get her some poison: she will kill her husband. She has already told others that Ezra has a weak heart, and she plans to poison him and claim that he had a heart attack.

Homecoming: Act III

One week later, Ezra returns home from the Civil War. He is obviously weak and dispirited from his war experiences. He tells his wife that he wants to try to start again and improve their marriage. She pretends to agree.

Homecoming: Act IV

The next morning Ezra and Christine make love. He suddenly realizes that she made love with him because she hoped he would have a heart attack and die. Christine tells Ezra the truth about her affair with Adam and his parentage. Ezra has a heart attack. Instead of giving him his medicine, Christine gives him the poison. Lavinia enters as Ezra gasps his dying words: "She's guilty not medicine."

The Hunted: Act I

The second play in the trilogy opens outside the Mannon house two days after Ezra's death. Again, a group of five local people form a chorus, gossiping about what has occurred and repeating rumors.

Orin returns from the war. Lavinia is jealous over her mother's preferential treatment of Orin. Christine, who despised her husband and loves her son Orin, hates Lavinia; she blames Lavinia for convincing Orin to go off to war.

The Hunted: Act II

Ezra's body is laid out in the study. Lavinia tries to convince Orin that Christine murdered their father and shows her brother the box of poison. Orin refuses to believe her, though he takes the poison from her and hides the evidence. He does not seem to care that his mother has murdered her father in his perverted mind, he considers it a chance to have a sexual relationship with his mother.

However, when Lavinia informs him of Christine's affair with Adam, Orin becomes jealous and threatens to kill him. Lavinia takes the poison back from Orin and places it on her father's body. Christine sees the poison and begs Lavinia not to tell Orin.

The Hunted: Act III

Lavinia enters and Orin tells her about his heroic deeds during the war. She tries to convince him that Christine murdered Ezra, but he will not believe until her until she reveals that their mother did so to cement her relationship with her lover, Adam Brant.

The Hunted: Act IV

At night on a clipper ship at an East Boston wharf, Adam Brant has a discussion with the Chantyman. The Chantyman reports that Lincoln and Mannon are dead. He states that though reports indicate Ezra died of heart attack, he knows from working for him that he was too cheap to have a heart. Brant gives him money to continue drinking and the Chantyman leaves.

Christine arrives to tell Adam about Ezra's death. Lavinia and Orin spy on them, and when Orin sees his mother embrace Adam and overhears her declarations of love he resolves to kill him. After Christine leaves, Orin shoots Adam. Then Orin and Lavinia mess up the cabin to make it seem as though Adam was killed in a burglary.

The Hunted: Act V

The next night, Hazel comforts Christine, who is secretly worried about Adam. Hazel leaves and Orin arrives, telling Christine he has murdered her lover. Orin wants to run away with his mother. Christine goes inside and kills herself.

The Haunted: Act I, Scene One

One year later, a chorus of local residents discusses the rumors that the Mannon house is now haunted. Lavinia and Orin enter; she looks like her mother Christine, while he resembles his father Ezra. Lavinia claims that the dead have "forgotten" them.

The Haunted: Act /, Scene Two

Inside the Mannon house, Lavinia and Orin discuss their recent trip to the "blessed isles," where Lavinia hoped to free Orin of his feelings of guilt for Christine's death. It becomes clear that while on vacation Lavinia had a sexual experience with an island man. She claims to love Peter and expresses hope that they will be married. She asks Peter and Hazel to help console Orin, and "make allowances for any crazy thing he might say."

The Haunted: Act II

Alone in Ezra's study, Orin writes a letter describing the many sins of the Mannon family. When Lavinia enters, he criticizes her for not trusting him. Lavinia admits to her sexual relationship with Avahanni, one of the islanders; faced with Orin's jealousy, she then denies it.

Orin fears losing Lavinia to Peter; furthermore, he is afraid that Lavinia will kill Orin to marry Peter. Orin promises to give Peter the confession letter if Lavinia goes through with the wedding or if Orin should die.

The Haunted: Act III

Peter and Hazel discuss their concerns about Orin with Lavinia: his behavior is increasingly erratic. Orin gives Hazel the confession, telling her that Lavinia must never marry and be happy, for "She's got to be punished!"

When Lavinia realizes that Hazel has read the confession, Lavinia agrees to "do anything" if she will return it to Orin. Orin retrieves the manuscript. When the others leave, he makes Lavinia call off her marriage with Peter and insinuates that they should commit incest as a way to bind themselves to each other. Lavinia refuses, crying out, "You're too vile to live! You'd kill yourself if you weren't a coward!"

Orin goes off to clean his pistol as Peter arrives. Peter wants to take the gun from Orin, worrying about letting him clean a weapon in his confused mental state. Lavinia insists on discussing their upcoming marriage. As they hear a pistol shot, she hides Orin's confession manuscript.

The Haunted: Act IV

Three days later, Seth sings as Lavinia picks flowers in front of the Mannon house. Hazel arrives and accuses Lavinia of driving her brother to commit suicide. Hazel begs Lavinia to break off her engagement with Peter, or at least let him read what Orin had written.

Lavinia refuses. When Peter arrives, she begs him to make love with her immediately. She asks him to want her so badly he would kill to have her, because that is what she's done, telling him, "I did that for you!" Then, she calls out, "Want me! Take me, Adam!"

Shocked, Peter calls off the wedding. He demands to read Orin's confession. Lavinia admits that she and the islander had sex, that she was his "fancy woman." Peter leaves her for good.

Lavinia, as "the last Mannon," decides that she must punish herself. She orders the shutters on the windows nailed up to keep out the light. As the play ends, Seth pulls the window shutters closed as Lavinia walks into the house, closing the door behind her.

Play 1, Act 1, Scene 1, Part 1

Play 1, Act 1, Scene 1, Part 1 Summary

This first play of the trilogy is entitled *The Homecoming.* As it begins, the stage is empty. Seth sings a sea shanty as he comes on with a group of townspeople, showing them the Mannon house. They discuss how General Ezra Mannon has been away fighting in the war, and how his wife Christine is beautiful but unlikable, having come from New York. As they're talking about her, she comes out of the house, looks around, and then goes out into the garden. When she's gone, the townspeople comment on how her face looks like she's wearing a mask; it's so strange, beautiful and unexpressive. Seth comments that all the Mannons look as though they're wearing masks and that when people marry into the family they start to look as though they're wearing masks as well. Their conversation hints at secrets in the Mannon family's past, including secrets surrounding General Mannon's brother.

At that moment Lavinia comes out of the house. We see that she has the same mask-like expression as Christine, and indeed resembles her in other ways as well. Seth urges the townspeople to disappear, and they go behind the house. Seth goes to speak to Lavinia.

Play 1, Act 1, Scene 1, Part 1 Analysis

The action, characters and themes in this play are adapted from three classical Greek tragedies -*The Oresteia* by Aeschylus, *Electra* by Sophocles, and *Electra* by Euripides. The three plays approach the same story from different perspectives, but essentially the actions, characters and themes are the same for all three. The specific parallels between the originals and *Mourning Becomes Electra* will be discussed as they appear.

In this first scene, character parallels include Ezra Mannon paralleling King Agamemnon, Christine paralleling Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra, and Lavinia paralleling their daughter, Electra. A story parallel can be found in the way that *Mourning Becomes Electra* begins in the same way as *The Oresteia*, with Ezra having been at war for a long time, just as Agamemnon was. In the original plays, Agamemnon was fighting in the Trojan War. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Ezra is fighting for the North in the American Civil War. This has a thematic significance, in that the concept of freedom was central to that conflict. The battle Lavinia fights in the play can be seen as a similar fight, in that she struggles to live free from the emotional and spiritual influences of her parents. This brings us full circle back to the Greek originals, in which Electra and her brother, who enters the story later, themselves fight for freedom. In their case, they fight to escape the destiny that the gods had decreed for them. The tragedy of both *Mourning Becomes Electra* and the original Greek plays is that the freedom the characters fight for comes at a catastrophic cost.

Other non-story parallels between this play and the classical originals can be found in the play's narrative structure. The action of the entire story, under the title *Mourning Becomes Electra*, unfolds in a trilogy of relatively short plays. Classical Greek tragedies were also presented in this way, as trilogies under a single title - *The Oresteia*, for example, consists of three plays: *Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers,* and *The Eumenides.*

Another important parallel can be seen in the role Seth and the villagers play in the drama. They comment on the action and set the scene in the same way that the traditional Greek chorus did. A significant difference between the original and this play is that in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the chorus (with the exception of Seth) doesn't interact with the principal characters, whereas in the original it did.

Finally, there is a parallel to be found in the repeated references to characters looking as though they're wearing masks. This represents the way that actors in classical tragedy all performed masked. In ancient times, masks were part of the religious rituals from which classical theatre emerged. They became key elements in presenting the characters in classical plays as archetypes, or representatives of universal human characteristics, as opposed to individuals.

Play 1, Act 1, Scene 1, Part 2

Play 1, Act 1, Scene 1, Part 2 Summary

Seth asks Lavinia where she's been the last couple of days. At first Lavinia says she was visiting her friends Peter and Hazel, but Seth tells her he saw Peter on the street and that he had asked where Lavinia was. Lavinia then confesses she went to New York. Seth says there's something he needs to tell her about a friend of the family, Captain Brant. Before Seth can explain, though, he sees Peter and Hazel coming and goes off.

Lavinia invites Peter and Hazel to sit with her. The three of them talk about how nobody's heard from Lavinia's brother Orin in a long time, and Hazel seems particularly concerned. Peter reassures her that if Orin had been hurt, they would have been told. Peter then passes on the news that he's completely healed from his wound and has received his orders to go back to the front. He says that he probably won't have to though, and hints that the war is over and that Orin and Ezra will be home soon. Hazel excuses herself to visit another friend, hints that Peter has something to ask Lavinia and then leaves Peter and Lavinia on their own.

The conversation that the two of them have reveals that Peter had intended to ask Lavinia to marry him and that he had asked her once before. She had refused him then for the same reason that she refuses him now; she believes her father needs her. When Peter comments that her mother can take care of her father, Lavinia angrily says that he needs her more. Peter continues to hold out hope, saying that he was worried because he'd heard rumors about Lavinia falling in love with Captain Brant. Lavinia tells him that that would never happen, speaking contemptuously about Brant's romantic image and saying that there is no room for love in her life. Peter comments that Brant looks familiar, but he can't place where from. Lavinia says she doesn't want to talk about Brant, and Peter agrees, but before they can talk about anything else Christine joins them. Peter says a polite hello and then goes out.

Christine comments on how badly Lavinia is treating Peter and then accuses Lavinia of avoiding her. Lavinia says she has needed to be alone to think about things. Christine asks what things, but before Lavinia can answer, Christine changes the subject and asks why Seth was showing people around the estate when she had given him orders not to. Lavinia explains that she had given Seth her permission, and says she couldn't ask Christine because she was in New York visiting her father. She asks Christine how he's doing, adding that he can't be that well because she's gone to New York so often over the past year. Christine says he's doing much better and then turns to go into the house. She comments on how ugly it is, and says it's just like Abe Mannon (Ezra's father) to build such an ugly, lasting monument to himself. She then remembers that Lavinia likes it and comments that it suits her character.

Christine mentions that Captain Brant is coming to visit. Lavinia mentions the rumor that the war is over and that Ezra might be coming home soon. Christine says that she'll believe it when she hears the sound of guns firing a salute from the fort. As she's going into the house, Lavinia tells her that they'll have to have a talk, very soon. Seth appears, clearly waiting to have a conversation with Lavinia. Christine goes into the house for a rest.

Play 1, Act 1, Scene 1, Part 2 Analysis

Character parallels in this section include Orin, who parallels Electra's brother Orestes; Peter, who parallels Orestes' best friend Pylades, a suitor for Electra's hand in marriage; Adam Brant, who parallels a character named Aegisthus whose significance will be discussed later; and Abe Mannon, who parallels King Agamemnon's father, Atreus.

Additional story parallels are hinted at in this scene. In the source material, a curse placed on Atreus for disrespecting the gods was the root cause of the complications and tragedies in the lives of the central characters. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, there is a parallel in the actions of Abe Mannon, hinted at in this scene, which will be revealed later. There is also a parallel in the idea that the transgressions of the past have repercussions in the present, a belief that was a key component of ancient Greek spiritual practices. In this play, the idea is symbolized by the house, which represents the looming presence of those repercussions. To be specific, Christine's comment that the house suits Lavinia's character points to the fact that Lavinia is affected most deeply by those repercussions. Christine's other comment, on the house's ugliness, foreshadows the ugliness we later see in Lavinia.

Several other elements of foreshadowing occur in this section. They include Seth's desire to talk to Lavinia about Brant as well as the discussions about Orin's return home, the trips to New York taken by Lavinia and Christine, Ezra's impending return, and Lavinia's desire to speak with Christine. This last is particularly significant, given that Lavinia speaks with heavy meaning about Captain Brant, the health of Christine's father, and about wanting to speak with Christine. All of this suggests that Lavinia knows something about Christine and her trips that Christine doesn't want her to know.

Lavinia's comment that her father needs her offers a key insight into her character, and into the driving force behind her actions throughout the play. Her desperation for her father's affection and attention is more overt and more specifically defined than was the case for Electra in the original plays, but Electra did experience a similar desperation. In fact, in the field of psychology, the term "Electra complex" refers to an emotional balance caused by a woman's intense focus on her father. It is certainly possible that Lavinia is imbalanced as a result of her feelings for her father, a possibility that appears even more likely as the story unfolds.

Play 1, Act 1, Scene 1, Part 3

Play 1, Act 1, Scene 1, Part 3 Summary

Lavinia and Seth sit and chat. They discuss Adam Brant's resemblance to the Mannon family, and Seth asks whether Lavinia knows anything about Abe Mannon's brother David. They talk about how David had married a French Canadian nurse after getting her pregnant. Seth then tells Lavinia the rest of the story: how Abe threw David out of the house and out of the family, how David and his wife went west, and how David died, leaving his wife to raise their child alone. Seth also theorizes that Adam Brant's unusual last name came from his French Canadian mother's last name of Brantome. Lavinia reacts angrily, but Seth says that for her father's sake she must learn whether Brant is or isn't David Mannon's son. Seth suggests that she catch Brant off-guard and ask him about his family. Just then, Brant appears. Seth goes out, leaving Brant and Lavinia alone.

Brant talks about how Lavinia must be glad that her father is coming home, comments on her devotion to Ezra, and tells her how much she looks like her mother. Lavinia angrily protests that she looks much more like her father. Brant tries to calm her down by talking about a stroll they took on a beach in the moonlight and apologizing for taking up so much time talking about his love of ships. They talk about some of the islands he's been to, where love is free and easy, but then Lavinia accuses him of telling her romantic lies. She says she shouldn't expect anything more from the son of a "low Canuck nurse girl."

Brant loses his temper and angrily tells a long story about how his parents had been financially and spiritually ruined by the Mannon family, saying that his father had committed suicide and left his mother penniless; she had eventually died when Ezra Mannon refused her a loan. Brant concludes by saying that if he could, he would kill Ezra when he came home. Lavinia goes in the house, accusing him of using Christine to get at Ezra and promising to tell both of her parents everything. Even though Brant protests that he loves her, she still goes in, leaving him alone.

Play 1, Act 1, Scene 1, Part 3 Analysis

The only clear parallel in this section between *Mourning Becomes Electra* and the original source material is related to the idea of the Mannon family being "cursed" in the same way that the House of Atreus was cursed in the original plays. To be specific, Abe Mannon had betrayed his brother in the same way as Atreus betrayed his, with the result that their descendents carry the burden of anger and lust for revenge. In the case of this play, the desire for revenge is most apparent in Adam Brant, but will emerge for different reasons later in Lavinia and Orin.

An element of relationship that doesn't exist in the originals is the intimacy between Brant and Lavinia. The implication of Lavinia's reaction to him in this section, and her later reaction when her suspicions about Brant and Christine are confirmed, is that in spite of her devotion to her father and rejection of love in general, Lavinia does have feelings for Brant. This also explains her extreme reaction to discovering that Christine and Brant are having an affair, which we see in the following scene. In the final moments of the trilogy, when Lavinia passionately calls out Brant's name instead of Peter's, the truth of this idea is revealed. All of this suggests that her sense of betrayal and resultant desire for revenge on Brant and Christine run deeper, and come from more sources, than anyone suspects.

Play 1, Act 2,

Play 1, Act 2, Summary

This scene is set in Ezra Mannon's study, which is dominated by a large portrait of Ezra hanging on one wall. In the painting, he wears the robes of a judge, and we learn that he had been a judge before he went off to war. Lavinia paces, trying to control herself. Christine comes in, and Lavinia confronts her with the information that she had followed her to New York and seen her making love with Brant. For a moment Christine denies it and then changes her mind and confesses, telling Lavinia that she did it because she's always hated Ezra. As Lavinia protests, Christine tells her that the reason she and Lavinia have never gotten along is that Lavinia is the product of Christine and Ezra's first night together. Christine adds that while she was pregnant with Orin, Ezra had been away fighting a war in Mexico, so she had had a chance to really bond with him. She says that she and Brant would never have fallen in love if Ezra had treated her well. Lavinia tells Christine that Brant doesn't love her, and that he is only using her to get back at the Mannon family. She tells Christine a brief version of the story of Brant's life, but Christine explains that she already knows and doesn't care.

Lavinia tries to get Christine to promise to give Brant up and never see him again, threatening to tell Ezra everything, which will lead to him divorcing her and ruining both her and Brant. Christine accuses Lavinia of wanting Brant for herself, and when Lavinia says that isn't true, Christine says that Lavinia has always wanted to be rid of her and have Ezra and Orin all to herself. Lavinia accuses her mother of keeping her from being loved and then calms down and demands to know what Christine is going to do. Christine promises to never see Brant again after his visit that evening. At first Lavinia doesn't believe her, but Christine convinces her. Christine also says that she had told Brant to flirt with Lavinia so that she wouldn't suspect. Lavinia doesn't believe her but is clearly upset. She tells Christine that she already wrote to Ezra and Orin with enough hints about Brant to make them suspicious. She then goes out, telling Christine that she wants Brant gone from the house and from their lives by the time she comes back in half an hour.

Christine is alone for a moment, and Brant comes in. He looks at the portrait of Ezra, and the resemblance between Brant and Ezra is clear. Brant asks whether Orin resembles Ezra as well. Christine tells him that there is no resemblance between him and Ezra, saying that she fell in love with him because he resembled Orin. They discuss what to do now that Lavinia knows the truth and is prepared to tell Ezra. Brant's temper flares, and he says that he wants to kill Ezra because he hates what he did to Christine as well as for revenge for his mother's death. Christine tells him it would mean ultimate ruin for him to kill Ezra himself and then tells him of her idea. She says that because she's put it around that Ezra has a weak heart, if he dies of a heart attack when he comes home, no one will be suspicious. She tells Brant to send her a drug from Boston that will hasten such an attack and then tells him that she'll refuse to give Ezra his medicine. He appears reluctant, and she bullies him into doing as she tells him,

promising that this is the only way for them to happily be together and for him to realize his dreams of being able to sail all over the world with his own ship.

A cannon fires offstage; it is the shot from the fort that indicates that Ezra has returned home. Brant goes out to get ready to sail for Boston. Alone, Christine comments that he'll never leave her now and then goes out.

Play 1, Act 2, Analysis

A significant parallel with the original appears in the conversation between Christine and Brant, which parallels a conversation in the source material between Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. In both cases, the characters plot a murder, and in both cases it is revealed that the woman has the stronger sense of conviction and that the man has the weaker will. The main difference between the killing in the original and the killing here is that in the original, Clytemnestra hacks Agamemnon to death with an ax while he's having a bath, which in ancient times was an act of spiritual as well as physical cleansing. The circumstances of Ezra Mannon's death are somewhat different, as we shall see.

The issue of resemblances between the male members of the family plays a key role in this scene, and takes on a similar thematic resonance to that of the house. In both instances, the symbols represent the way in which the repercussions of Abe Mannon's original "crime" are carried on into successive generations. This sense of the past overshadowing the present is also symbolized by the way that Ezra's presence literally hangs over the action. The portrait reminds us not only of the important role that Ezra plays in the lives and desires of all these characters, but also of the role their shared Mannon past plays. The way that Ezra is portrayed in his judge's robes represents the way that all the Mannons judge themselves and each other, feel the presence of that judgment, and act in response to it.

In terms of the resemblance between Christine and Lavinia, the principle is the same. The similarity of their appearances represents the way that Christine's desire for revenge on Ezra is the same as Lavinia's desire for revenge on her mother. Lavinia's increased resemblance to Christine later in the trilogy makes the point even further.

Another level of emotional context that exists in this play but not in the original is explored in this scene, and that is the insistence by Christine, Lavinia and Brant that their actions are done in the name of love. This motif also shows up later in conversations between Christine and Ezra. The action of the play suggests that love can become so intense that it becomes twisted, bound up with lust for revenge into a twining rope of hatred. This can be seen in just about all of the central relationships in this play, and in this scene, it is particularly clear in Lavinia's reaction to Christine's accusation that she loves Brant. Christine is more right than she knows, as the action of the rest of the trilogy bears out.

Play 1, Act 3,

Play 1, Act 3, Summary

One night about a week later, Seth comes on stage drunkenly singing the sea shanty he sang at the beginning of the play. Lavinia comes out, complaining that this is the second time in a week he's been drunk. Seth tells her it's a time for celebration, adding that this might be the night Ezra comes home. He then asks Lavinia whether she found out anything new about Brant, but Lavinia lies and says there's nothing to Seth's ideas. She then asks what Brant's mother, the French-Canadian nurse, was like. He says she was lively and pretty, and that everyone was fond of her, including Ezra. He says that Ezra was extremely upset when he found out that she was involved with David. Lavinia refuses to believe him and sends him to bed.

As Seth goes, Christine comes out of the house wearing an emerald green dress. She wonders whether Lavinia is waiting for a lover in the moonlight, and Lavinia accuses Christine of plotting to get back together with Brant. Christine tells her daughter she's doing no such thing, to which Lavinia replies that Ezra will be home very soon. Christine comments that he must be the lover Lavinia's been waiting for. Before Lavinia can respond, Ezra himself appears, wearing the uniform of a Brigadier General. Stage directions describe him as having the same kind of mask-like face as the other characters. Lavinia rushes into his arms in tears, but Ezra reminds her that he taught her never to cry; then he moves away from her, and formally kisses Christine. Christine urges him to sit with her on the steps for a while, but Lavinia tries to get him to go inside. Ezra decides to stay with Christine, commenting that he only has a few days leave before he has to go back and disband his brigade. He talks about how "the assassination of the president" is an awful thing but says that it won't change the course of events.

Christine asks where Orin is. Ezra tells her that Orin had been wounded in the head but not seriously, explaining that as a result, Orin is suffering from "brain fever" but will be home in a few days. Lavinia then asks Ezra about his heart, and Ezra says it's not too bad but that the doctors have told him to avoid unnecessary exertion. Christine says he'll have to go to bed soon and get the rest he needs. Lavinia insists that he stay up for at least a while, saying that she needs to talk to him about Brant. She and Christine argue over what Brant did and whether this is the right time to talk about it. Ezra sharply tells them to stop arguing, saying that he'd hoped they'd stopped disagreeing with each other while he was gone. Ezra tells Lavinia to go to bed, and she does, saying he's the only man she'll ever love.

Christine tells Ezra to relax and then, knowing that Lavinia has written him, tells him that there's nothing between her and Brant. She says that the only reason he comes by is to bring her news of her father in New York. Ezra relaxes, saying that he didn't really believe anything was going on but was jealous in spite of himself. He says he's got some things he needs to talk about, but that it has always been difficult for him to talk to

Christine because of a wall between them. He goes on to say that his need to talk is making him try to break down that wall. He says that one of the things he needs to talk about is the way in which death lost all meaning for him after seeing so many men killed in the war; he adds that the Mannons have always been obsessed with death and that going to church had fed and increased that obsession. He says that his own death became meaningless to him, a realization that made him analyze his life and how much he longed for Christine while he was away. He tells her that he realizes that she hasn't loved him for years, but nevertheless tries to get her to agree to help him break down the wall. Christine sharply asks him to stop talking, but when she sees how hurt he is tells him she only wants him to stop because he's tiring himself and needs to go to bed. She kisses him, and he embraces her.

Lavinia comes out. Ezra tells her to go back to bed, and then he and Christine go into the house. Lavinia cries out that she hates her mother and accuses her of stealing all the love from her life ever since she was born. Ezra opens his bedroom window, and calls out that it is time for her to be quiet and go to bed. Lavinia promises to go in, and Ezra closes his window again. Lavinia doesn't move, but stands staring up at her father's window.

Play 1, Act 3, Analysis

The main parallel with the source material in this scene is the way in which Christine and Ezra greet each other. In both the original and this play, husband and wife greet each other with great formality, and the wife seduces the husband into going into the house, ostensibly to rest but in reality to die. There are significant differences, however, between the two scenes. In the original, the formality between husband and wife springs from the fact that they're king and queen greeting each other in a public place. Here, the formality springs from a long-standing emotional constraint. Another difference is the way in which Ezra's formality breaks down as he tries to make Christine both understand what he's been through and join with him in trying to break down the wall that's been built up between them. A third difference is that in the original, King Agamemnon brings with him a captured Trojan princess, saying she's to be his servant when in fact everybody knows that she's there as his mistress. This adds an extra layer of injury to Clytemnestra's hatred, thus fueling her desire to kill her husband even more. In this play, however, the added tension created by the presence of a mistress is missing because there is no mistress, meaning that Christine's determination to kill arises solely from long standing hate and her desire for Brant.

Another significant difference is in the role Lavinia plays in the action. In the original, Electra doesn't make such a direct effort to come between her father and mother; Lavinia's obsession with getting her father's love is even stronger and more vividly portrayed than that of Electra. This obsession, also indicated by her anguished cries at the end of the act, gives lie to her earlier comments that she has no need for love in her life. At this point, it is clear that she both needs and wants love, but only from her father, brother, and Brant.

An important element of foreshadowing occurs in the stage directions, in which it's made clear that Christine wears a green dress. This foreshadows the green dress that Lavinia wears later in the play, when it symbolizes the way in which her physical, spiritual and emotional resemblance to her mother is at its peak. Another element of foreshadowing appears in the reference to Orin's mental state, which foreshadows Orin's continued deterioration and eventual breakdown as the action of the play unfolds.

Ezra's comment about the death of the president refers to the assassination of President Lincoln. His comment that the assassination won't change the course of events is a comment on the nature of fate, with the idea being that events will unfold as they are intended to without the possibility of human choice altering them. The belief that events in every life were preordained and manipulated by the gods was a fundamental premise of both classical theatre and classical spirituality. Later in this play, though, we see that the playwright is in fact making the opposite statement with *Mourning Becomes Electra*, that statement being that it is personal choice that truly controls an individual's destiny.

Play 1, Act 4,

Play 1, Act 4, Summary

Early the following morning, Christine slips out of bed and puts on a dressing gown. From the bed, Ezra says he wants to talk. Christine turns away from him so he can't see her face. Ezra speaks about an uneasy feeling he has, a premonition that Christine, the room, the spirits of his ancestors, and the house itself are all waiting for him to die. In response, Christine taunts him about the way he "took" her so forcefully, as though that would make him live. This makes Ezra accuse her of lying to him with her body the way she's always lied to him. Christine tells him that he's right, that being with him fills her with disgust, and that she's in love with Brant, who treats her like a lover in a way that Ezra never did. Ezra, who's becoming dangerously upset, begs her to stop. Christine finishes by telling him that Brant is Marie Brantome's son.

Now furious, Ezra struggles to get out of bed, but falls because of a stab of pain in his chest. Christine runs out for a moment, and Ezra asks for his medicine. Christine gives him the pill that she had gone to fetch, makes him swallow it, and then watches as he realizes it's not his medicine and calls out to Lavinia. As he sinks toward a coma, Lavinia rushes in. Christine explains that he had a heart attack and that she gave him his medicine, but Ezra has just enough left in him to point an accusing finger at her, say she's guilty, and tell Lavinia that what Christine gave him wasn't medicine. As Christine watches, paralyzed with fearful reaction, Ezra dies in Lavinia's arms.

Lavinia asks Christine why Ezra said she was guilty. Christine, still in shock, admits that she told him about her and Brant. Lavinia then accuses Christine of deliberately causing the heart attack, but Christine says it's Lavinia's fault for having made Ezra suspicious in the first place. Lavinia asks what Ezra meant by saying that it wasn't his medicine, but before she can answer Christine falls into a faint, and the pillbox she's holding falls to the floor. Lavinia picks it up, realizes that Christine poisoned Ezra, and vows to take revenge.

Play 1, Act 4, Analysis

This scene contains the most significant difference in all three plays between *Mourning Becomes Electra* and the original. In classic Greek tragedy, murders, deaths and maimings (and there were a lot of them) never took place in sight of the audience. Characters about to die went offstage, and a messenger character appeared shortly afterwards to tell the audience what had happened to them. This play breaks with that tradition by putting Ezra's murder right in front of us, giving us the chance to viscerally share in his pain and shock, Christine's sudden horror at what she's done, and Lavinia's blazing grief and surge of angry desire for revenge. This is another example of the way that this play brings the emotions of its characters to the surface, Lavinia's desperation

for her father's attention being the first example with others, like Orin's tortured remorse, yet to come.

We understand without the text ever actually stating it that Christine and Ezra have made passionate love before this scene begins, and that the "medicine" Christine gives Ezra is in fact the poison she had told Brant to send from Boston. Meanwhile, Ezra's comments anticipating his own death are clear foreshadowing, and perhaps take the place of a piece of foreshadowing in the original, in which the captured princess, who could see the future, foresees Agamemnon's death.

Another element of foreshadowing appears in Christine's fainting after her shocked realization of what she has done, which foreshadow the intensely haunted remorse she experiences later. A third element of foreshadowing occurs in Lavinia's final words of the scene, as we very clearly get the sense that when she vows to take revenge, she means business.

Play 2, Act 1, Part 1

Play 2, Act 1, Part 1 Summary

This second play in the trilogy is entitled *The Haunted*. Two days after Ezra's death, a group of townspeople leave the house after paying their respects to Christine. This is a different group from the group Seth showed around the estate at the beginning of Play 1, but they comment about the family and the situation in a similar fashion, discussing how broken down Christine seems, how Lavinia seems cold and detached, and how Lavinia had gone into town to meet Orin's train. They talk about how much of a shock Ezra's death was, with one of the women saying it's possible that he was struck down by God because of his arrogance. Other members of the group angrily say that she's wrong, and another member of the group, a doctor, comments on how he's known for a long time that Ezra had a heart condition and how it's very possible that an act of love (i.e. making love) with Christine brought on the fatal heart attack. The townspeople leave just as Christine comes outside.

Play 2, Act 1, Part 1 Analysis

The group of townspeople performs the same chorus-like function as the townspeople at the beginning of the first play, establishing the context of the action to follow. Their comments about Ezra being struck down because of his arrogance echo remarks that were often made by classical choruses, given that many classical plays dealt with arrogant humans being made to face the judgment of the gods. Meanwhile, the doctor's comment about Ezra being killed by an act of love is ironic in that Ezra did die because of love, but not the kind of love that the doctor means - Ezra died not so much because of making love but as a consequence of trying to re-connect with the love that brought him and Christine together. There is an important thematic statement here, which hints that blind pursuit of love can bring dangerous consequences. This theme is also a part of the relationships between Lavinia and Ezra, Lavinia and Orin, Christine and Orin, and Christine and Brant.

Play 2, Act 1, Part 2

Play 2, Act 1, Part 2 Summary

Christine stands alone on the porch. Hazel joins her, and they talk about how glad they both are that Orin will be coming home soon. Christine tells Hazel that she wants to see her married to Orin, and tells her they have to be secret conspirators since Lavinia will do everything she can to keep them apart. Christine goes on to talk about how genuinely good and kind Hazel is, saying she was once that way herself, and that she wishes she still was; she muses that God chooses to twist people's lives around so they can no longer be themselves. She then takes Hazel, who's a bit confused by the conversation, into the house, saying that she can't stand to wait outside in the same way as she waited for Ezra.

After Christine and Hazel go in, Orin comes on, followed by Lavinia and Peter. Orin is described in the stage directions as having a strong resemblance to Ezra, with the same kind of mask-like expression on his face. He comments on how strange and frightening the house looks and then apologizes by saying his brain fever has made him confused. Lavinia sends Peter inside so she can talk with Orin alone for a moment.

Once Peter has gone in, Orin comments on how strangely quiet Lavinia has been and then imagines that she's upset with him for not grieving more obviously over their father. He talks about death in the same way that Ezra had, saying that being in a war changes how a man feels about dying. He then asks what she had meant by writing to him with the rumors about Christine and Brant, saying that if the rumors turn out to be true, he'll kill Brant. Lavinia tells him she's glad he feels that way and that she has more to tell him about the situation, but then she sees Christine coming and can't tell him anything else. She warns Orin not to listen to anything Christine says, but he becomes angry again and says Lavinia is taking her feud with their mother too far.

Christine comes out of the house, and Orin runs into her arms. They each talk about how the other has changed, and then Christine shows Orin into the house. A moment later, she comes back out and confronts Lavinia, asking why she's been silently staring at her, and so apparently angry. When Lavinia doesn't answer, Christine says that she's got no reason to be angry since she has given Brant up and had had every intention of being a good wife to Ezra. She then asks Lavinia about a pillbox that's gone missing, saying it contained pills she used to help her sleep. When Lavinia still doesn't answer, Christine demands to know if Lavinia thinks she did something to hasten Ezra's death. When Lavinia is still silent, Christine shakes her, but gets no response. Lavinia walks into the garden. Orin calls for his mother from inside the house, and Christine goes in.

Play 2, Act 1, Part 2 Analysis

Even though Christine is still in some kind of shock after Ezra's death, she is able to plot against Lavinia, warning Hazel against anything that Lavinia might say against her. What's interesting is that this is the same tactic Lavinia uses with Orin, warning him against anything Christine might say. Aside from the often repeated comment that they physically resemble each other, this is the first of the behavioral parallels drawn between Lavinia and Christine. The ultimate parallel, as mentioned earlier, comes in the third play when Lavinia appears in a green dress similar to Christine's at the point at which they are spiritually most alike.

In terms of parallels with the source material, Orin is this play's equivalent to Orestes, the tortured son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra and brother to Electra. In the original, Orestes comes home from a long journey, as opposed to a war, and does not have a pre-existing head injury. There are, in fact, no indications that Orestes has any kind of "brain fever," whereas Orin's pre-established mental instability works well in this play to foreshadow his eventual breakdown and suicide. Another difference is that Orin and Christine have a much more openly emotional and intimate relationship than the characters in the original. This is another example of the way in which powerful human emotions add depth and immediacy to the relationships and situations in this play, as opposed to the relatively cerebral relationships in the source material. An additional example of this is Christine's paranoia, which plays an increasingly important role in the action as the play progresses.

Play 2, Act 2

Play 2, Act 2 Summary

This scene is set in the family's sitting room, which, like the study, is dominated by family portraits. In this case, the paintings are of Abe Mannon and his wife. Hazel and Peter sit quietly as Orin continues to call out for his mother. They talk briefly about how ill Orin looks and then fall awkwardly silent as Orin and Christine come in together. They all argue playfully about who needs to be taken care of more, Orin or Christine. Christine says that she and Hazel will take care of Orin, and Hazel gets him a cushion for his back as he sits down. Orin comments on how Lavinia takes care of Ezra in the same way, and Christine reminds him that Ezra's dead and no-one can take care of him any more. Orin says that he still feels Ezra's presence, but Hazel gently reminds him that talking about Ezra upsets Christine. Orin remarks on how gentle and good Hazel is and then talks to his mother about how she is somehow looking younger and more beautiful.

Lavinia comes in and listens as Orin talks about his memories of seeing Hazel wave goodbye to him at the train station and then says that women should be made to go off to war to "give them a taste of murder." Christine and Hazel urge him to talk about something else, but then Lavinia commandingly tells Orin to come and see their father's body. Christine says she wants him to stay with her, and Orin agrees. Lavinia goes out, reminding him to remember what she said to him earlier. Hazel and Peter become uncomfortable and leave, with Christine wishing Hazel a particularly fond good night.

Orin asks Christine why she's become so fond of Hazel all of a sudden, and also wants to know why he never had any letters from her. Then he comes right out and asks whether there's anything to the rumors he's heard about her and Brant. Christine tells him that Lavinia made up those rumors in order to make Ezra angry at her. Orin says she'd never do anything like that, but Christine insists, saying that Lavinia has always been closer to her father, while Orin has always been closer to his mother. Orin agrees with her, and they reminisce about the games they played together when Orin was a child, which leads Orin to confess that he never had a good relationship with Ezra and is in fact glad that he's dead. Christine says she feels the same way and tells him about the wonderful life they'll have together as long as he refuses to let Lavinia's lies poison his mind.

Orin resents Christine's comments, but Christine explains that Lavinia had gotten stranger over the last little while, had fallen in love with Brant, and then had gotten even stranger when he rejected her. She says that all Brant had wanted was for Ezra to help him get a bigger and better ship and then reminds Orin that it was Lavinia who had insisted that he go off to fight in the war. She then gives him another example of how twisted Lavinia has become, saying that Lavinia believes that Brant is Marie Brantome's son and has even accused her of having an affair with him on her visits to New York. In spite of Orin's disbelief, Christine pleads with him to believe her and starts to weep,

saying that she's actually afraid of what Lavinia might do. Orin promises that Lavinia will never turn him against her, but says that if it the rumors were to turn out to be true, he would kill Brant. Christine tells him he doesn't seem like her son when he says things like that. Orin apologizes, and they embrace.

Orin tells Christine about a book he read while he was away, about some beautiful south sea islands where the people are free and love is easy. He talks about imagining himself on those islands and says that in his imagination everything reminded him of her. They talk again about their times together when Orin was a child, and then Orin says that when Lavinia marries Peter it will be like that again, just the two of them.

Lavinia comes in and again tells Orin to go see Ezra's body. After Orin has gone out, Christine triumphantly tells Lavinia that she's already convinced Orin to see things from her perspective, and that anything Lavinia says is a story she made up because she was rejected by Brant. She then breaks down and pleads with Lavinia to keep Orin out of their argument. Lavinia furiously goes out. Christine realizes she has to contact Brant and warn him about what's going on.

Play 2, Act 2 Analysis

The thematically significant idea that the past haunts the present is again symbolized by the portraits on the wall, which reinforce the idea that the drama being played out by Christine, Brant, Orin and Lavinia is the result of actions taken in the past by Abe Mannon. The influence of the past is also represented by Orin's comments about feeling Ezra's presence, a presence that all of the characters continue to feel throughout the rest of the play.

The most important element of this scene, however, is the way the truth is used and manipulated in various ways. Christine in particular proves to be masterful in the way she uses the truth of her relationship with Orin to manipulate him into believing what she says about Lavinia, using various truths about Brant and Lavinia's feelings for Brant as the raw material for her lies. There's an old adage that a little truth mixed in with a lie makes the lie easier to believe. Christine certainly proves the validity of that in this scene.

Orin's comments on the book about the islands in the south, combined with the intimacy with which he discusses his mother in that context, brings the issue of incestuous love to the surface. Up to this point, the respective relationships between Orin/Christine and Lavinia/Ezra have been uncommonly close, but it is in this scene that we begin to sense that underneath that emotional connection there is a hidden desire for physical union as well. This idea is reinforced by the fact that Brant previously referred to the islands in very sensual terms, by the fact that Christine has been sexually intimate with Brant, by the physical resemblance between Orin and Brant, and by Christine saying earlier that she became intimate with Brant because he resembled Orin. This incest element is missing from the source material, although it does awaken echoes of another Greek tragedy: the story of Oedipus. In that story, Oedipus killed his father, married his mother,

and fathered children by her. Granted, he didn't know that the man he killed and the woman he married were his parents, but the similarities between Oedipus' story and that of the Mannons are still suggestive.

The islands themselves reappear as an important symbol of freedom and of living with nature throughout the play. Later in the action, it becomes clear that the naturalness of the islands is intended to highlight by contrast the un-naturalness of the Mannons, both in terms of their incestuous desires and their cravings for revenge.

Play 2, Act 3

Play 2, Act 3 Summary

This scene is set in Ezra's study, with his portrait again looming over the action. Ezra's body lies on a bier for viewing. Orin looks down at his father and, as Lavinia appears and listens without him knowing, mocks Ezra for being no different in death than he was in life. Lavinia locks the door behind her and then tells him to be respectful. Orin responds by saying that men who've been in war react to death differently. He then tells her about some of the men he killed and then tells the truth about how he got wounded; he had lost his reason one day, decided that the best way to end the war would be if men from the opposing sides met and shook hands, and had then walked toward the enemy lines to do exactly that. He says he got wounded for his pains, and Ezra had decided to make him a hero rather than have him declared insane.

Lavinia tells him to stop and says she's got things to tell him, but Orin tells her that Christine has already warned him about what she's going to say and that he doesn't want to hear it. Lavinia angrily suggests that Christine has poisoned his mind against her, and then threatens to go to the police with her suspicions if Orin refuses to listen. She accuses Christine of murder, and produces the pillbox she had picked up after Christine dropped it on the night of Ezra's death. Orin threatens to have her declared insane. Lavinia calls out to her father to help her prove that what she is saying is true and then taunts Orin by saying that Ezra thought the war had made a man of him but that the truth is he's still weak and under his mother's thumb. She goes on to say that if Orin won't believe Christine is guilty and then maybe she can convince him that Brant is. In spite of his protests, she tells him what she saw when she followed Christine to New York, and Orin begins to believe her. He says that if she can prove that what she says is true, he'll hate both Christine and Brant.

At that moment, Lavinia and Orin hear Christine outside, calling to Orin. Lavinia quickly tells Orin to pretend that what Lavinia has been saying is a pack of lies. She puts the pillbox on Ezra's body, and then tells Orin to let Christine in. Orin unlocks the door, Christine comes in, and Orin apologizes for keeping her out, saying that Lavinia insisted and that he can't stand to listen to her lies anymore. Christine says that Ezra needs peace now and then notices the pillbox and reacts with shock. Orin sees her reaction and stumbles out of the room. Lavinia suggests to Christine that it was Brant who got the poison for her. Christine's denials don't convince her, and she leaves the room. Christine cries out to Ezra to protect Brant and then rushes out.

Play 2, Act 3 Analysis

The action of this scene has echoes of a key scene in the second play of *The Oresteia*. In that scene, as they pray at Agamemnon's grave, Electra convinces Orestes to take revenge on Clytemnestra. This scene is essentially the same. Although we're not

actually at Ezra's grave, his body is in the room, which amounts to the same thing and actually makes his presence, and the importance of his role in Lavinia's argument, even more vivid. Also, Lavinia is doing exactly the same thing to Orin as Electra did to Orestes, mercilessly breaking through his determined resistance and convincing him that it is at least possible that a murder occurred. Another similarity is the way in which Lavinia cries out to Ezra for help in convincing Orin, which has clear echoes of the way Electra cried out to the spirit of Agamemnon to inspire the desire for revenge in Orestes.

Lavinia's call for aid is a twist on the previously established relationship between the past and present. Previously, the past as represented by the portraits and the stories of Abe, David and Marie has been a relatively passive influence on the action, informing it but not actively influencing it. When Lavinia cries out to Ezra, she is actually seeking an active intervention from the past, i.e. her father, in the hope that Orin, in the present, will be directly affected and be inspired to act.

Play 2, Act 4

Play 2, Act 4 Summary

This scene is set in a harbor near a ship. A drunken sailor sings the same song sung by Seth in Play 1, and then changes his tune and sings an Irish drinking song. Brant, dressed in a captain's uniform, comes out and orders the sailor to be quiet and identify himself or he'll shoot. The sailor apologizes, and Brant puts away his weapon. Their conversation reveals that there have been a lot of robberies in port, that the sailor used to work on ships owned by Ezra Mannon, and that he has read in the news that Mannon has died. As Brant reacts with surprise, the sailor speculates on what will happen to all Mannon's money. Brant tosses him a silver dollar, and the sailor goes away, singing a mournful dirge. Brant paces the deck of his ship nervously.

Christine appears. Brant runs down to her and then ushers her up to the deck, where she tells him that Lavinia knows everything. Brant asks how she got away, and Christine explains that Lavinia and Orin went away to visit friends, and she had taken the opportunity provided by their absence to come and see him. She also explains that she has convinced Orin that Lavinia is out of her head. Brant takes Christine down into his cabin so they can talk in private.

Lavinia and Orin appear, having lied about going away. They eavesdrop as Christine tells Brant everything that happened the night of Ezra's death and what has happened since. Brant talks about how he would have liked to take revenge on Ezra in his own way, like a man and then tells Christine that they have to decide what to do. Christine tells him their only option is to sail to the east where they'll be free of both their past and potentially damaging rumors. Brant admits that he is reluctant to leave his ship behind but says he would gladly do it if it would mean he could be with her; she has brought him love, he says, and that's worth everything. Christine mentions Orin's reference to the Islands, and Brant says that he knows what Orin means and describes the peace that's possible for them there. Christine says she has to leave, and Brant urges her to be careful around Lavinia and says he'll walk her to the end of the wharf.

As they go, Orin pulls out his gun, but Lavinia convinces him to wait, telling him to hide so he can take Brant by surprise. Orin hides, Brant returns, and Orin ambushes him and kills him. Lavinia then tells Orin to smash everything in the stateroom to make it look as though Brant had been killed by a thief. While he's gone Lavinia prays, without really meaning it, that the soul of her cousin (Brant) rest in peace. Orin returns and goes through Brant's pockets, making it looked as though he were robbed. He stops suddenly and comments on how much Brant looks like both himself and Ezra. Then he tells Lavinia about a dream he had in which all the men he killed had Ezra's face. Lavinia shakes him out of his daydream and pulls him away.

Play 2, Act 4 Analysis

An aspect of symbolism in the name "Mannon" becomes clear in the context of Brant's conversation with the sailor about money. The word "mammon" is found in the Bible, and is used to describe large amounts of money that have been obtained by illegal or crooked means. This means that the name "Mannon" is significant in two ways. First, it is similar to the latter part of the name "Aga-MEMNON," of the original Electra story. Beyond this, though, it is also used to describe the relationship between the Mannons and money, which had played a key role in the relationships between Abe Mannon, his brother David, and David's wife Marie, the French-Canadian nurse. Interestingly, money doesn't seem to play any role in the situation the second and third generations of the family find themselves in. For Christine and Brant, the second generation, and for Lavinia and Orin, the third generation, anger, misguided love and the desire for revenge seem to be enough.

Brant's death at Orin's hands is a parallel to the death of Aegisthus in *The Oresteia*, but in this case the death again occurs in plain view of the audience. In the original, the death took place offstage. Meanwhile, Orin's comments about the various family resemblances take on a thematic significance as we begin to get the sense that in physically killing each other, the Mannons are spiritually destroying themselves. In other words, by killing Brant, Orin is setting in motion the process of his own emotional deterioration, which results in his eventual suicide.

Play 2, Act 5

Play 2, Act 5 Summary

This act is set in the yard outside the Mannon house the following night. Christine is alone in the moonlight as Hazel comes out. Their conversation reveals that Christine had called Hazel to come over and keep her company since the nights are lonely and difficult now that Ezra's is gone, especially since Lavinia and Orin are away. Hazel offers to stay the night, and Christine accepts gratefully. Hazel leaves to tell her mother that she'll be staying, and Christine urges her to hurry back. Christine watches her go and then comments that she can see her talking to someone at the gate.

Orin and Lavinia appear, with Orin carrying a newspaper. He confronts Christine with the news that they followed her, saw her meet Brant, and heard them plotting to run away. Orin wonders whether Christine and Brant would have eventually planned to kill him and then tells Christine that he killed Brant instead. He shows her the newspaper as proof, explaining that the police think he was killed by thieves. As Christine begins to weep, Orin angrily asks her how she can grieve for someone who planned to murder her husband. He says that he believes Christine must have been "hypnotized" by Brant, and then as Christine continues to mourn, he promises to make her forget him, saying that they'll leave Lavinia behind and go to their islands in the east. Lavinia tries to get his attention, but he is completely focused on Christine, bewildered because she's not responding to him. As he pleads for Christine's forgiveness, Lavinia orders him to go into the house, and he does. She then tells Christine that Brant only got what he deserved. Christine jumps up, glares at Lavinia and goes into the house. Lavinia almost goes in after her, but she stops herself, telling herself that justice has been served.

Offstage, Seth sings the seafaring song again. As he sings, a shot rings out from inside the house. A moment later, we hear Orin's cry of grief, and a moment after that he rushes out and tells Lavinia that Christine has shot herself. Lavinia tries to calm him, but Orin blames himself for her death, saying that he shouldn't have killed Brant, that he shouldn't have tortured his mother, and that he as good as murdered her. Lavinia soothes him, and he goes in.

Seth appears and asks whether she heard a shot. Lavinia tells him to go fetch a doctor, saying that Christine has killed herself out of grief over Ezra. Seth goes out, and then Lavinia follows Orin into the house.

Play 2, Act 5 Analysis

The first few moments of this act are heavy with irony, in that we know that Orin and Lavinia are not in fact visiting friends and that Christine's unhappiness is about to be made even worse. Her misery is made even more vivid because of the clear contrast

with Hazel, whose simple openhearted generosity is so completely different from anything that any of the Mannons experience or express.

Even in his apparently heartless confrontation with Christine, Orin still manages to hold on to his illusions about her. He clearly believes that she has been victimized, and has been freed by Brant's death. Her intense grief comes as a shocking surprise to him, a surprise so profound that it makes his discovery of her suicide even more intensely painful.

At this point, there is another clear divergence between this play and the source material. In the original, Clytemnestra is actually physically killed by Orestes, making his crime all the more serious in terms of the culture of the time. In those days matricide (the killing of a mother by a son) was a deed almost unthinkably barbaric, since the bond between mother and son was just about the most sacred bond there was. This meant that the subsequent mental and emotional breakdown experienced by Orestes had a more immediate, more visceral, and even culturally defined trigger. Orin, on the other hand, only believes himself to have killed his mother. The question of which is the more powerful trigger is debatable, as is the question of which scenario would be more psychologically damaging. Either way, the result is the same; Orestes and Orin both lose their grip on reality.

The symbolic significance of the song sung by Seth in Play 1, and again by Seth and the sailor in this play, finally becomes clear. The song is "Shenandoah," which has lyrics referring to distance between the singer and a beloved place. This represents the way that the characters either confront the distances between them or build more distance. Ezra is an example of the former, in that he tries to bridge the distance between himself and Christine. On the other hand, the fact that Seth sings the song just as Christine shoots herself illuminates the latter. By becoming involved with Brant, Christine has put distance between herself and the rest of her family, while by shooting herself, she puts the ultimate distance between herself and the child she loves the most. Also, Orin puts distance between himself and Christine by confronting her and then tries to bridge that distance by offering to take her to the islands. Finally, he realizes that the distance between them is unbridgeable and as a result loses his mind. For her part, Lavinia puts more and more distance between herself and all her loved ones all the time. Her tragedy is that she won't realize that this is what she has done and that there are tragic consequences for her actions until the end of the third play.

Play 3, Act 1, Scene 1

Play 3, Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

This third play of the trilogy is called *The Haunted*. Seth and a group of men from the town sit outside the Mannon house, which looks as though it's been empty for quite a while. The men are drunk, and they make jokes about the house being haunted by Christine's ghost. Their conversation reveals that one of the men, Small, has been dared to go into the house; if he stays he night, he gets ten dollars. Small drinks some courage into himself, the other men joke about the party they'll have with his ten dollars, and then Seth shows Small into the house. The other men talk about their experiences of ghosts. When Seth comes back, they ask him whether it's really true that Christine killed herself out of grief over Ezra the way Lavinia said she did, adding that it was strange that Ezra died the very first night he was home. Seth angrily tells them to mind their own business. The men almost come to blows, but calm themselves when they see Peter and Hazel coming.

Just as Peter is telling the men that he's had a telegram saying that Lavinia and Orin are coming home, there is a scream of terror from inside the house. Small runs out shouting that he saw Ezra's ghost and throws his ten dollars at Seth. As the men laugh, Seth tells him he probably just saw Ezra's portrait. Small protests that he knows a ghost when he sees one and then goes out with the other men. When they're gone, Peter and Hazel take Seth to task for allowing strangers into the house. Seth explains that he was trying to put to rest rumors that there was a ghost, but then sheepishly confesses that he half believes those rumors, saying that he's been in the house enough times to feel the spirit of evil there. He then asks when Lavinia and Orin will be back. Hazel tells him the next day, and Seth goes out to get some lanterns. While he's gone, Hazel talks about how she feels the same sense of evil that Seth does, and when Peter tries to tease her out of it, she talks about how haunted Orin looked on the day of Christine's funeral. Peter mentions how strange it was that Lavinia rushed Orin away on a trip to the east so quickly after Christine's death, saying that it seemed that Orin hardly knew what he was doing. Just as Hazel is remarking on how good the trip will have been for the two of them, Seth returns with lanterns, and the three of them go into the house to get it ready.

After a moment, Lavinia appears. She is described in the stage directions as no longer being as thin and stiff as she had been, and as resembling Christine more than ever, even to the point of wearing the same kind of green dress that Christine had worn earlier. She looks at the house for a moment then calls for Orin to join her. Orin appears, resembling Ezra strongly but also painfully thin and mentally distracted. Lavinia first encourages him and then orders him to come up to the house, look in, and see that there aren't any ghosts. He obeys her mechanically, but begins to become upset when he remembers that this is where he last saw Christine alive. Lavinia urges him on, saying the past is done and the dead have forgotten them. Together they go into the house.

Play 3, Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The scenes with Seth and the other three men, and with Peter and Hazel, perform the same function as the scenes with the townspeople in the other two plays; they set up the context of the action in the same way as the classical chorus did in the source material. Their discussions of ghosts and the way the house is haunted are symbolically important in that the spirit of evil that reportedly haunts the house also haunts Orin and Lavinia. As we will see, Orin has been affected far more strongly than Lavinia, but ultimately what happened to Ezra, Christine and Brant has affected them both deeply in the same way that what happened to Abe, David and Marie a generation earlier had affected their children. This suggests that the ghosts in the house also represent the family history and its ongoing presence, all of which foreshadows the spiritual and physical destruction of Orin and Lavinia at the end of the play.

There may or may not be foreshadowing of Lavinia's destruction in her appearance in this scene, an appearance that illuminates the meaning of the trilogy's title, *Mourning Becomes Electra.* The stage directions describe Lavinia as looking filled out and beautiful, implying that her looks have improved since the death of her parents. In other words grieving, or mourning, becomes her, or improves her appearance. Since Lavinia is the counterpart of Electra, this is the source of the play's title, which is ironic because Lavinia's apparent physical and emotional prosperity is short-lived and has come at the expense of true happiness.

Lavinia's appearance in a green dress similar to the one her mother had worn earlier represents the way in which she has in many ways become her mother, not only in terms of her physical appearance but also in terms of the fact that her desire for vengeance on Christine is identical to her mother's desire for vengeance on Ezra. Her comment to Orin about the dead having forgotten them is another irony, given that they are both haunted by thoughts of what has happened.

Meanwhile, where Lavinia has on some level clearly prospered, Orin has just as clearly fallen apart both physically and emotionally. Described as thinner and paler, speaking distractedly in incomplete phrases, he is the wreck that Lavinia's willpower and self-righteousness are keeping her from becoming. His appearance foreshadows both his physical suicide and Lavinia's virtual suicide at the end of the play.

Play 3, Act 1, Scene 2

Play 3, Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

This scene is set in the sitting room, where the portraits of Abe Mannon and his wife again loom over the action. Lavinia comes in, imagines the portraits are looking at her accusingly, and tells them to stop. She then realizes that Orin hasn't come in with her and calls for him. He comes in, saying he was looking for Christine in the study, but then he remembers that she is gone forever and almost breaks down. Lavinia bullies him out of it and then changes her tone and talks cheerfully about Peter and Hazel. Orin bitterly says that neither he nor Lavinia has any right to love in their lives and then comments on how much like Christine she has become. Their conversation hints that while they were on the islands, Orin had begun to feel inappropriate attractions to Lavinia, and that this is why they had to leave. Lavinia reminds him of how much she's done for him, and when he seems about to break down again, she forcefully reminds him of what they have made themselves believe - that Christine murdered Ezra because Brant had her under some kind of spell, that Brant got what he deserved, and that Christine's suicide was an act of justice.

Lavinia then starts to take the dust covers off the furniture. Peter comes in, for a moment believes her to be Christine, and reacts with shock. When Lavinia sees him, Peter covers his surprise by saying that he had been expecting her a day later. Lavinia explains that they decided they needed to come home as soon as possible and comments on how glad she is to see Peter and how he hasn't changed at all. He talks again about how pretty she looks. She replies that when he knew her before she was dead, but when Orin joins the conversation, he refers to the way Lavinia "stole" Christine's colors. He then talks about how Lavinia enjoyed being on the islands, loved the ways of the people there, and refers to a particular islander named Avahanni. Lavinia quickly changes the subject and tells Orin to go and find Hazel in the kitchen.

Once Orin is gone, Lavinia explains to Peter that Orin has been occasionally strange since Christine's death. Peter comments again that she has changed and then asks whether she's changed enough to love him. Lavinia explains that she's more than able to love him, she wants to love him, and that being on the islands taught her what the spirit of love, of freedom from the past, was all about. She also says that the islander that Orin referred to merely smiled at her, and she smiled back. They talk about getting married and Lavinia kisses him passionately, saying that once they're married and start having children they'll create an island of their own. Suddenly Lavinia remembers Orin, saying that she can't leave him. She explains to Peter that Orin believes himself to be responsible for Christine's death and asks him to warn Hazel. Peter says he will. They kiss again.

As Peter and Lavinia are embracing, Orin and Hazel appear. At first Orin seems angry and resentful of Peter and Lavinia, but he quickly covers it up and offers his congratulations. Hazel does as well, but all four of them are uneasy.

Play 3, Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

The key element of this scene is the reappearance of love as a motivator of the dramatic action. This isn't the obsessive, destructive love that's been at the twisted root of all the revenge plotting and murder, but the selfless, natural love held up as an ideal throughout the play and symbolized by "the islands" and the people who live there. We get the sense that this kind of love is a manifestation of union with nature, the spirit of life, growth, moving forward and healing transformation. The implication of this, as suggested previously, is that the relationships that we've seen in the Mannon house have been unnatural. Given that those relationships have been defined by lust, murder, revenge and incestuous desire, there is certainly support for that point of view. It is a point of view shared by *Mourning Becomes Electra's* source plays and the culture in which they were written and performed; in classical Greece, loyalty and respect for family were seen as fundamental rules of nature. In other words, in classical terms the various killings and lustings of the various husbands, wives and children in the source material were seen as crimes against nature, the most serious crimes that could be committed. The same perspective exists in terms of contemporary culture, which means that a key thematic point made by *Mourning Becomes Electra* is that humanity hasn't changed much in two thousand years.

A secondary thematic point is made as the third play unfolds. As Orin and Lavinia both continue to deteriorate mentally and emotionally, the action suggests that however much union with nature is desired, once the unnatural has been embraced in the way that Lavinia and Orin have embraced it, any attempt at union with nature is doomed. Finally, a key element of foreshadowing in this scene is the reference to Avahanni, an unseen character who plays a key role in the eventual loosening of Lavinia's intense but fragile grip on both Orin and Peter.

Play 3, Act 2,

Play 3, Act 2, Summary

This scene is set in Ezra's study a month later. Underneath the looming portrait of Ezra in his judge's robes, Orin sits at his desk writing. As he finishes, he talks to the portrait, explaining that he's writing down the truth about everything that happened. Lavinia rattles the locked door. Orin hides his document and then goes to open it. Lavinia comes in, in another green dress like Christine's. Orin explains to her that he is studying his father's law books, and when Lavinia asks why he keeps the curtains closed, he refers to the sun as an accusing eye and says the dark is a fitting place to sit and examine questions of guilt. Lavinia tries to tease him, saying he can keep on being mysterious if he wants. She then says that being closed up in the dark isn't good for his health and comments that the walk they took that afternoon with Hazel did him good. Orin asks why she won't leave him alone with Hazel for much longer than a few minutes at a time and then admits that he can't blame her, saying that he knows he's been acting strangely. Lavinia confesses that she's afraid he'll admit the truth to Hazel, and Orin accuses her of believing she can avoid justice for what she did. He says that isn't possible, referring to the picture of Ezra in his judge's robes and to his writing.

Lavinia asks again what he's been working on, and Orin finally says that he's been writing down the entire history of the crimes of the Mannon family starting with Abe and working down to her, whom he says is the most interesting criminal of all. He goes on to talk about how she began to lust after men while they were on the ship at sea, referring to a sea captain who had a resemblance to Brant and to Avahanni. Lavinia taunts him in the same way that Christine taunted Ezra in the moments before his death, saying she's got a right to love. Orin's temper explodes as his father's had, and he threatens to kill her. Then he suddenly breaks down and collapses, pleading with her to tell him it was all a lie. She confesses that it was, and that she doesn't know why she lied, saying it was an "evil spirit" that rose up inside her. She pleads with him to forget it all, and he responds by saying he will if the ghosts in the house will let him forget.

Orin then becomes insistently angry again, saying that if there had been anything between Avahanni and Lavinia he'd have killed them both. When Lavinia cries out that she can't take any more, Orin suggests that they should plan to kill him in the way they planned to kill Brant, saying that he should kill himself so as to direct suspicion away from her. Lavinia taunts him again with Christine's words, but this time she realizes that this is what she has done, leading Orin to say bitterly that they've become the recreations of their parents. As Lavinia breaks down, Orin says that there is no way he'll stand for her marrying Peter. He tells her that he'll put what he's written in a safe place and make arrangements to have it read if she does. Lavinia weeps, and Orin tells her to go away. She leaves, and Orin sits down to continue working on his manuscript.

Play 3, Act 2, Analysis

The darkness in which Orin sits is a metaphor for the spiritual darkness into which he has sunk, and it foreshadows the darkness into which Lavinia sinks at the end of the play. Meanwhile, his writing down of the family history is an attempt to release some of his guilt, but it doesn't seem to work; he is too haunted by the past to ever be truly free. Finally, his references to his father's law books and the presence of the portrait of Ezra in his robes suggest that he is presenting a legal case to his ancestors in his own defense, even though he knows he is guilty. It may be, in fact, that his writing is less of a defense than a confession, and that he is waiting for judgment to be passed on him.

The parallels between Orin's situation and that of Orestes in the source material become more metaphorical than literal at this point. In the original, Orestes was haunted by the Eumenides, who were more commonly referred to as the Furies. They were actual physical manifestations of guilt, taking revenge on those like Orestes who commit unforgivable crimes. The Furies hunted down their victims no matter where they went, the idea being that the guilty could never escape retribution. In this play, the spirit and intent of the Furies is represented on one level by the looming portrait but on a deeper and more significant level by the internal torture through which Orin is clearly putting himself. This sense of Orin being pursued by guilt gives this part of the trilogy, *The Haunted*, its name.

Lavinia has so far resisted putting herself through the same torture, in the same way as Electra did in the source material. In this act, however, Lavinia's resistance begins to break down, and by the end of the play she, in her own way, ends up as spiritually broken as Orin. This is different from Electra, who emerges from all three versions of the source material with her spiritual integrity relatively intact. Also in this scene, Lavinia realizes with horror the truth of what Orin says and what we've been made aware of all along: she has become her mother, Orin has become her father, and they're playing out the emotional, sexual, and spiritual dynamics of their parents' relationship. This is also different from the action in Electra.

Play 3, Act 3,

Play 3, Act 3, Summary

This scene is set in the sitting room, where the portraits of Abe Mannon and his wife hang. Lavinia comes in and nervously tries to calm herself after her confrontation with Orin. Seth comes looking for her, tells her that the cook is upset, and asks her to go down and see her. Lavinia goes out. A moment later, Seth shows Hazel and Peter in, saying that Lavinia is just taking care of something in the kitchen and will join them shortly. Hazel talks to Peter about how much she hates coming to the house and how she worries about Orin being shut up all the time and having Lavinia hovering around him constantly. Peter tells her not to worry, but Hazel says that she has invited Orin to their house for a visit and that she hopes it will help him feel better. Peter says he hopes it works, telling Hazel about Lavinia's refusal to marry him while Orin is still unwell. Hazel has difficulty believing that Peter still wants to marry Lavinia, but before they can talk further, Orin comes in. When Peter says he has to leave right away to go to a meeting, Orin ushers him out and then returns with an envelope and gives it to Hazel. He says that if he should die, or on the day before Peter marries Lavinia, Peter must read what's inside. He tells Hazel that Lavinia has to be punished, and also says that she (Hazel) can't be permitted to love him any more, saying that he doesn't deserve to be loved. Hazel tries to convince him that she forgives him for what happened to Christine, saying that Lavinia has already told her what is on his mind. Orin isn't convinced and says again that Peter has to read the manuscript, telling her to go home and lock it away.

Before Hazel can go, Lavinia appears and immediately senses that something has passed between Hazel and Orin. Hazel says that she's inviting Orin for a visit, but Lavinia refuses to let him go. She then catches sight of the envelope and demands that Hazel give it to her. Hazel refuses. Lavinia pleads with Orin to destroy what's inside, and then says she'll do anything to get him to agree. Orin takes the envelope back from Hazel and then tells her to leave, never come back, and forget all about him. After Hazel is gone, Orin makes Lavinia promise to give up all hope of marrying Peter, saying that he loves her too much to let her be with someone else and implying, through touching her, that they are meant to be together forever. Lavinia loses control and shouts that she wishes he were dead. Orin reacts as though she is driving him to commit suicide in the same way that he had driven Christine. The he realizes that this might be exactly the kind of justice that his ancestors and his actions demand, and also realizes that death might be the way to find the kind of peace and love he had glimpsed on the islands.

Peter comes back in, and Orin excuses himself, saying he's going into the study to clean his pistol. Lavinia starts to run after him but then changes her mind and rushes into Peter's arms, saying that love is the only thing that matters. Peter tries to go to Orin, saying that someone in his mental state shouldn't have a gun, but Lavinia holds him tightly. Just then they hear a gunshot from the study, and Peter runs out. Lavinia cries

out for Orin's forgiveness and then turns to the portraits. She says she's done with them forever and that she's her mother's daughter, and goes out.

Play 3, Act 3, Analysis

This act contains the play's dramatic and thematic climax. Generations worth of high emotion, lust, desire, anger and grief come to a head in the confrontation between Orin and Lavinia, who are both desperate to escape their pasts but find that what they've done has made escape impossible. This in turn makes the play's second main thematic point, that once unnatural acts like murder, incestuous lust, and revenge have been committed, an individual's soul has been corrupted and the spiritual consequences of that corruption must be accepted. Lavinia's clinging to Peter at the moment of Orin's death is a continuation of her attempt to avoid those consequences, but as the final act of the play and trilogy reveals, the attempt is a futile one.

The resolution of this situation, Orin's suicide in this act and Lavinia's becoming a recluse in the next, differ from the resolution in the source material. In the original, the gods intervened, coming down from Mount Olympus and decreeing the punishment for Orestes. In each of the three source plays listed at the beginning of this analysis, the details of the resolution are slightly different, but one thing about all three is the same: Orestes lives. This makes the play's third and most important thematic point, that human beings must take responsibility for their actions and not rely on "the gods" for forgiveness.

Play 3, Act 4,

Play 3, Act 4, Summary

This scene is again set outside the house. Seth appears, again singing "Shenandoah." He comments on how he can see Lavinia picking flowers, and how she has filled the entire house with them since Orin's death. Lavinia then appears with her arms full of flowers. The stage directions indicate that she again looks the way she did at the beginning of the play, thin and haggard. She tells Seth to give the flowers to the cook and put them around the house. Seth comments on how she looks as though she's been getting no sleep and then asks whether he can bring something outside onto the porch for her to sleep on. Lavinia says that she can't go into the house anymore, haunted as it is by all the dead Mannons. She refers to it as a "temple of hate and death," and Seth urges her to marry Peter and move away. Lavinia says that that is exactly what she's going to do. Seth sees Hazel coming and goes into the house.

Hazel appears, and blurts out that she knows that Orin meant to kill himself. Lavinia tries to convince her that that's not the case at all, and Hazel then says she's going to do everything she can to keep Lavinia from marrying Peter and ruining his life. She says that because of Lavinia, Peter has quarreled with his mother, something he's never done. Lavinia threatens to get Orin's pistol and shoot her. Hazel becomes frightened and gets ready to go, but before she does, she urges Lavinia to show Peter what was in that envelope, and then compassionately says that she knows Lavinia is suffering and that she knows that God will forgive her.

As Hazel leaves, Lavinia says to herself that God's forgiveness doesn't matter, and that what's more important is that she forgives herself. Peter appears and tries to comfort her. He says that he plans to marry her and take her away from the house, adding that he hates the town and can't wait to get away. Lavinia hears anger and resentment in his voice that she had never heard before. She tells him she knows what happened between him and his mother and asks whether he's wondering about her and what Orin put in that envelope. When Peter protests that he's not paying any attention to what Orin said or wrote, Lavinia tells him she wants to marry him right away. When he protests that it would be disrespectful to Orin, she says that she can't wait for marriage, that she wants to be loved, held and loved and kissed and wanted, and that their being together will chase all the dead and their spirits away. In her passion, she gets carried away and calls him Adam.

Lavinia realizes what she has said and simultaneously realizes that the dead will never stop coming between them. She tells Peter that she can't marry him, because the dead are too strong. Peter tries to calm her down and then begins to wonder what it was that Orin wrote and asks whether there was anything to what Orin had suggested happened in the islands between Lavinia and the native. At first Lavinia is offended and then realizes that this is the way she can get out of the marriage. She coarsely tells Peter that she and the native lusted after each other and made love. Peter is completely

shocked, realizes that his mother was right, says it's no wonder Orin killed himself, and runs out. Lavinia tries to call him back and then stops herself in mid cry.

Seth reappears, singing his song again. Lavinia starts to go into the house and Seth, alarmed, tells her not to. She tells him not to worry, reassuring him that she's not going to kill herself the way Christine and Orin did and saying that's the easy way out. She says she's going to close herself up in the house, close the curtains and never go out, adding that to be shut up alone in the dark with the memories of all the dead Mannons and their histories is the most fitting punishment there could be. She tells Seth to nail all the shutters closed, and to tell the cook to throw out all the flowers. Seth goes. Lavinia remains outside a moment; then, as Seth slams shut one of the shutters, she turns, goes into the house, and closes the door behind her.

Play 3, Act 4, Analysis

A second symbolic meaning of the song "Shenandoah" becomes clear in this final scene of the trilogy. Its lyrics, as previously mentioned, refer to the distance between people and that which they love. In this scene, therefore, because those lyrics are juxtaposed with Lavinia deliberately destroying the one chance she has left for happiness, we understand that the song represents the distance the characters have placed between themselves and genuine, selfless love. The action of the play suggests that acts of revenge and hatred, such as those that all of the members of the Mannon family commit, are what keep people from connecting with such love.

This idea is reinforced throughout the play by the way in which "the islands," representative of the natural order inherent in selfless love, are so far away and so out of reach for all the Mannons. It is also reinforced in this scene by the way that Lavinia resolves to shut herself up in the house, a physical manifestation of the emotional and spiritual isolation from love that she, and indeed all the Mannons, have placed themselves in as a result of giving in to unnatural desires. It may be that the previously discussed meaning of the name "Mannon" as a representation of the evilly seductive power of money and greed is another manifestation of those unnatural desires. This idea is reinforced by the way that all of the characters, but Lavinia in particular, hold the name as a symbol of what the family stands for, and also by Lavinia's reference to the Mannon's house as a "temple." A secondary meaning of the word "mammon" refers to a place where money was obtained through illegal trading or other questionable means.

An important piece of information relating to the relationship between Lavinia and Brant is revealed in the final moments of the play, in which Lavinia accidentally calls Peter by Brant's first name, Adam. This suggests, as Christine did earlier, that Lavinia had fallen deeply in love with Brant and sought revenge, as Christine also suggested, because he hadn't loved her in return. It is certainly tempting to imagine what might have happened if love between Lavinia and Brant had bloomed. However, the symbols, actions, and thematic nature of this epically, mythically dysfunctional family all combine to suggest that such love would have ended up like the flowers that Lavinia orders removed from

the Mannon "temple" - abandoned and destroyed by the ways that history has of repeating itself, and that ultimate justice has of being served.

Bibliography

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Characters

Amos Ames

A middle-aged carpenter, Amos and his wife Louisa form part of the chorus in *Homecoming* and *The Haunted*.

Louisa Ames

Louisa is the wife of Amos. She appears as part of the chorus of local people in *Homecoming* and has a taste for vicious gossip.

Doctor Joseph Blake

Doctor Blake is a "stout," "self-important" family physician, who, as part of the chorus in *The Hunted*, provides background on Ezra's medical condition. After relating Ezra's symptoms, Christine has convinced the doctor of the seriousness of her husband's heart condition. This helps Christine conceal the actual cause of Ezra's death murder by poison.

Josiah Borden

A manager of the Mannon family's shipping company, Josh and his wife Emma appear as part of the chorus of town folk in *The Hunted*, providing insight into the backgrounds of Christine and the family.

Captain Adam Brant

Brant is the black sheep of the Mannon family; it is his quest for revenge that propels the play. When his father, David Mannon, is exiled from his family for marrying Marie Brantome, Brant's family falls into ruin. When he is old enough, he runs off to sea. When he returns, he discovers his father has drunk himself to death, and, shockingly, David's nephew, Ezra, refused to help Brant's poor, sick mother.

After his mother's death, Adam vows revenge on the other Mannons. This desire for vengeance motivates his pursuit of Christine and ultimately drives the play's action.

Chantyman

The Chantyman chats with Brant near the ship in The Hunted and gives him information about Ezra. Brant gives him money to continue drinking, and the Chantyman leaves.

Hazel

Hazel is Peter Miles' sister and Orin's fiancee. She loves Orin and tries unsuccessfully to separate him from his sister Lavinia. Less naive than her brother Peter, Hazel sees the evil surrounding the Mannon family; her efforts to save Orin from that evil fail.

Everett Hills

Everett Hills is a Doctor of Divinity of the First Congregational Church and married to Mrs. Hills. Both appear as part of the chorus of local people in *The Hunted.*

Mrs. Hills

Mrs. Hills is married to Everett Hills, a Congregational minister. Both appear as part of the chorus of local people in *The Hunted.*

Ira Mackel

Ira is a member of the chorus of townsfolk in *The Haunted*. He is a whiskered farmer who walks with a cane. Believing the Mannon house to be haunted, he and others bet Abner Small ten dollars that he cannot spend the night there.

Christine Mannon

Christine is Ezra Mannon's wife and mother of Lavinia and Orin. She hates her husband and has an incestuous love for her son. While Ezra was away fighting in the Civil War, she began a passionate affair with Adam Brant. They plan to kill Ezra so they can be together.

When Ezra returns from the war, he and Christine make love, but she does so in hopes that he will have a heart attack and die. When he realizes this, he does have a heart attack. When he demands his medicine, she gives him the poison. He realizes that she has poisoned him while he is dying. After Brant is murdered by Lavinia and Orin, Christine commits suicide.

Brigadier-General Ezra Mannon

Ezra is Christine's husband and father of Lavinia and Orin. He is the patriarch of the Mannon family. As the play opens, he returns from the Civil War.

A hardhearted businessman, Ezra refuses to help his brother's Canadian-Indian wife Marie Brantome when she really needs it. As a result, she dies and her son, Adam Brant, vows revenge.

Realizing the precarious nature of his marriage to Christine, he hopes to reconcile with her after he returns from the war. He is oblivious to her plans to murder him until they are making love the realization that she wants to kill him causes him to have a heart attack. Christine gives him poison instead of medicine and he dies.

Lavinia Mannon

Lavinia is the daughter of Ezra and Christine Mannon and Orin's sister. She is meant to resemble the Electra figure in O'Neill's retelling of the *Orestia*. She is a manipulative, evil woman.

Although she is somewhat in love with Captain Brant, she convinces Orin to kill him. She then drives her mother Christine to suicide. The two siblings travel to the South Seas to escape their mutual guilt and Lavinia sleeps with a local man. Exploiting Orin's feelings of guilt over Brant's murder and their mother's suicide, she drives him to commit suicide too.

Toward the end of the play, Lavinia almost believes it possible for her to be happy and escape the guilt of her past. Ultimately, she realizes that as the last Mannon, she has sinned and must punish herself. In the last scene, she orders the flowers removed from the house, the windows shut up, and closes herself inside, presumably never to exit alive.

Lavinia presents a complex character, with strong and forbidden desires as well as powerful, if reprehensible, needs for revenge. In a sense, she seems trapped in a web of emotional and sexual desires for her father Ezra, her brother Orin, and her mother's lover Brant. Moreover, she acts without conscience until the end, when her conscience comes back to haunt her.

Orin Mannon

Orin is the youngest son of Ezra and Christine. A First Lieutenant of Infantry, he served in the Civil War under his father and is recognized as a courageous soldier. After getting wounded, he returns from the war overcome by the death and destruction.

In love with his mother, Orin helps Lavinia murder her mother's lover, Brant. He does this to revenge the murder of his father; also, he is jealous of Brant's relationship with his mother.

Orin is engaged to Hazel. She wants to take Orin away from Lavinia, perceiving the destructive and sick bond the two siblings have. Yet Orin will not allow this; he even suggests to Lavinia that they consummate their relationship as a way of binding themselves together in sin and guilt.

Orin writes his confession and history of Mannon family sins, which he threatens to give to Peter if Lavinia leaves him. Orin's guilt and incestuous feelings lead to his destruction. He feels he has lost the love of his mother and of his sister.

Eventually Orin breaks his engagement with Hazel and commits suicide, "accidentally" killing himself while cleaning his gun.

Minnie

Part of the chorus of townsfolk in *Homecoming*, Minnie is Louisa's cousin. She is known as a gossip.

Captain Peter Niles

A member of the U.S. Artillery, Peter is Hazel's brother and Lavinia's boyfriend. He wants to marry her, but she keeps him at a distance. He becomes uneasy when she resists handing over Orin's confession. Finally, Lavinia shocks Peter by suggesting that they have sex prior to marriage.

In an emotional fit of passion, she cries out to him not his name, but that her mother's lover, Adam Brant. Horrified, Peter ends their engagement, condemns Lavinia, and storms off. Though not a bad person, Peter seems naive, unable to see Lavinia's dark, complex personality.

Joe Silva

Silva is a member of the chorus in *The Haunted.* A Portuguese fishing captain, he is one of those who bets Abner Small that he cannot stay overnight in the supposedly haunted Mannon house. They win the bet, though Abner refuses to pay.

Abner Small

Abner forms part of the chorus of local people in *The Haunted.* He is the hardware store clerk who accepts the bet that he can spend the night in the supposedly haunted Mannon house. He runs out after a short time, refusing to pay the ten dollars he has lost.

Themes

Revenge

Revenge serves as a primary motivation for the play's actions. Seeking to revenge the death of his mother, Marie Brantome, Adam hopes to destroy the Mannon family, especially Ezra.

The Mannon family is a complex web of revenge scenarios: Christine wants revenge on her husband for her unhappy marriage; Lavinia wants revenge on her mother for killing her father; Orin wants revenge on Brant for sleeping with his mother.

Paradise

Paradise is an obsession for many of the play's characters. As a seafaring family, early generations of Mannons had sailed to beautiful South Pacific isles. Orin wants to run away with his mother Christine an attempt to escape societal norms so that he can sleep with his mother. Christine wants to go with her lover, Adam.

Eventually, Orin does eventually go to the islands with his sister Lavinia. During their visit, she has sex with one of the islanders. In O'Neill's play, the island paradise offering erotic possibilities and freedom from materialism becomes a symbol of all that New England society is not.

Incest

Incest and incestuous desire lie behind most of the relationships central to *Mourning Becomes Elec-tra*. Ezra's daughter Lavinia loves her father; Christine's son Orin loves his mother, and Lavinia and Orin love each other.

While O'Neill presents these relationships as unconsummated desires, Orin does urge Lavinia to sleep with him in act three of *The Haunted*, hoping that by committing incest that they will be bound together in sin and guilt. His sister refuses.

Sin and Guilt

O'Neill's work illustrates his fascination with sin, guilt, punishment, and redemption. In *Mourning Becomes Electro*. , the sins include murder (Christine's killing of her husband; Lavinia and Orin's killing of Adam); adultery (Christine's with Brant); suicide (Christine's and Orin's); and premarital sex (Lavinia's with the islander).

In a sense, Ezra murders Brant's mother by refusing the sick woman money for food and medicine. Also, Lavinia "kills" Christine and Orin by driving them both to commit suicide.

Orin's feelings of guilt lead him to write his confession, which he threatens to give to Peter if Lavinia marries him. At the play's end, Lavinia's guilt forces her to give up hopes of happiness and to punish herself, as the last Mannon, by rejecting love and shutting herself in the house.

Style

Chorus

Traditionally in Greek tragedies, the chorus consists of masked actors who dance and chant. Generally, they do not participate in the action itself, which allows them to remain objective and offer advice or commentary. They often present background information and represent the community's position or traditional values. In the *Mourning Becomes Electra* trilogy, the groups of local people whose conversations and actions open the plays serve as the chorus.

Expressionism

Expressionism is a style of art that expresses internal experiences and psychological truth. Such art does not present a realistic image of world, but instead tries to create in the viewer a powerful "true" experience of a particular emotion, feeling, or state of mind.

Many of O'Neill's plays have expressionistic elements: masks, which conceal the actor's faces; and asides, in which actors address the audience without others on stage hearing. Expressionistic elements in *Mourning Becomes Electra* include the pairing of characters (Lavinia resembles Christine and Orin resembles Ezra) and the symbolism of the Mannon house, which resembles a Greek temple.

Naturalism

Naturalism is a nineteenth-century theory that developed in the wake of Darwin's theory of evolution. Naturalists perceived people as products of their heredity and environment. Naturalistic drama presents a vision of human life as akin to that of animal nature, in which these Darwinian drives motivate people. In many ways, these forces of nature minimize or even eliminate the individual's free will.

Naturalistic elements in *Mourning Becomes Electro*, include the ways the characters' personal histories and environments determine their actions and motivations.

Realism

Realistic theater attempts to present realistic character actions, situations, and motivations. Furthermore, the stage recreates the experience of a real situation. Realistic drama avoids melodramatic acting, stagy effects, and dramatic conventions like a *deus ex machina*, character asides, and soliloquies.

Setting

The setting refers to the place in which the play's actions take place. Settings often have a symbolic value. For example, the neoclassical architecture of the Mannon mansion in Mourning *Becomes Electra* resembles a Greek temple, so the setting reminds us that the play itself offers a retelling of a cycle of Greek tragedies.

Historical Context

Born in 1888, Eugene O'Neill's life spanned some of the most important events of contemporary history. While he played no actual role in the events themselves, the issues involved particularly those related to democracy and materialism figure prominently in his plays.

O'Neill came of age during America's Progressive Era. Interested in politics and political philosophy, the young playwright associated with the radicals and reformers who comprised his Greenwich Village and Provincetown circle of Bohemian friends.

A close friend of John Reed, the journalist known for his book about the Russian Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, O'Neill had a longtime affair with Reed's wife, the journalist Louise Bryant. Many critics believe that O'Neill based Strange *Interlude's love* triangle on this experience. O'Neill's writings explore the problems confronting American society, particularly rampant materialism, loss of individuality, and lack of spiritual values.

During the first twenty years of the twentieth century, more than ten million European immigrants arrived in America. O'Neill's father and his family had come to America during an earlier wave of immigration, arriving from Ireland in 1850. Factory jobs and mass transit drew millions of people to the cities, and America became an increasingly urban nation. Many immigrants brought with them a tradition of union activity and joined the American labor movement.

During his presidency, Theodore Roosevelt attempted to regulate large corporate interests and enforce anti-trust statutes. In 1902, he forced an arbitrated settlement during a major coal strike. President William Howard Taft, though less aggressive than Roosevelt, generally continued his predecessor's progressive policies, breaking up the Standard Oil Company's monopoly, and establishing a Children's Bureau and Department of Labor.

President Woodrow Wilson urged banking reform and anti-trust actions, supported farm loans and a ban on labor by children under fourteen though the Supreme Court deemed this later action unconstitutional. In 1920 the 19th Amendment to the constitution gave women the right to vote.

Domestically, politicians did little to end segregation, halt the rising influence of the Klu Klux Klan, or curb the practices that prevented many African Americans from voting. In two plays, O'Neill created a leading role for a black man: *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924). Both plays appeared as productions of the Provincetown Theatre.

This was also an era of American imperialism. Overseas, the United States fought a war with Spain in 1898 and gained colonial influence in places like Cuba and the

Philippines. In 1903, American gained dominance over Panama and began the construction of the Panama Canal.

In Europe, industrialization, colonialism, and militarism resulted in World War I. Wilson tried to maintain American neutrality, restricting trade with the warring parties. However, the United States entered the war in 1917. After the war ended in 1919, Wilson worked for the formation of the League of Nations, precursor to today's United Nations.

Declining wages, farm economy problems, protectionist tariffs, and overproduction of manufactured goods contributed to the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression, which threw millions of people out of work. While President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies of government spending to stimulate employment did improve conditions somewhat, the American economy did not fully recover until the Second World War.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill's symbolic use of the post-Civil War setting reveals his understanding of American history and ideology, raising parallels between an earlier war fought for firm ideological beliefs and WWI, which was fought in large measure over colonial issues. He also compares New England's nineteenth-century Puritan heritage with contemporary America, in which conformity and materialism contribute to cultural relativism and the lack of a moral compass.

Critical Overview

In adapting *Oresteia*, Eugene O'Neill set himself a challenging task. He explains he that hoped to create a "modern psychological approximation of [the] Greek sense of fate" and sets the play in New England because it evokes the "Puritan conviction of man born to sin and punishment." Critics continue to debate to what extent O'Neill succeeded in his project.

In its early reviews, Brooks Atkinson praised the play as "Mr. O'Neill's masterpiece," and John Mason Brown characterized it as "an achievement which restores the theatre to its high estate."

However, Eugene Burr derided the play as a "marathon by an author who takes himself too seriously... who wastes his own and his audiences' time by delving into morbid psychology that is just as unreal, just as fundamentally unimportant and certainly as unentertaining as the sentimentality which is *verboten* [forbidden] by his devotees."

According to George H. Jensen, O'Neill was an experimenter in technique who attempted ambitious projects; an "epigrammatic evaluation of O'Neill's career might be that he wrote some of the very best and some of the worst plays of the twentieth century."

Most critics consider the play one of O'Neill's best works. Some praise the piece for its insight into the human condition. Barrett H. Clark, for example, perceived the playwright's search "for a rational explanation of life and death, and what used to be called sin and evil."

Yet Clark also criticized *Mourning Becomes Electra* for a lack of emotion, describing it as "a tearless tragedy, remote, detached, august, artfully shaped, cunningly devised, skillfully related and magnificently conceived. It is concerned only indirectly with life as most of us see and feel it: it is comparable not so much to music or painting as to architecture."

Some critics characterize O'Neill's work as sensational, exploiting sex and violence without offering substantial motivation or explanation. For example, in Mourning Becomes Electra, his repeated use of incest shocks and promises some powerful thematic significance.

According to Clark, it instead lacked "complexity, darkness, or genuine passion ... [it seems] the mentalized fantasy of an adolescent temperament, and totally incompatible with the portentous philosophical attitudes it is meant to support."

Frederic Carpenter concurred that the play suffers from excessive reliance on Freudian notions of the Oedipus complex (in which a male child loves the mother and wants to eliminate the father) and the Electra complex (in which the female child loves the father and wants to eliminate the mother):

These protagonists [Orin, Christine, Lavinia, and Ezra] seem to have been born damned. Except for Electra [Lavinia], they do not achieve tragedy; they become merely the helpless victims of their inherited natures ... this psychological equivalent of original sin.

While many critics perceive that Orin is motivated by jealous Oedipal rage against his mother's infidelity, Carpenter asserted that his acts were the product of his mad heroism during battle. This interpretation makes O'Neill's point more political than psychological, in that "Orin seems to be driven by the tortured conscience of all modern men, in their realization of the evil of world war."

According to Michael Manheim, *Mourning Becomes Electra* disguised the playwright's "compulsion to reveal (while carefully hiding) the personal melodrama of his family home." Manheim identified two key themes: the "events and emotions centering on Ella O'Neill's addiction and later death" and "O'Neill's hostility toward his mother."

Manheim maintained that these conflicts appear most prominently in the play with the "sinning" or "suicidal" Christine representing Ella, while the "outraged" Lavinia and "guilt-ridden" and Orin symbolize Eugene.

One reason for the contradictory nature of O'Neill's critical reception may stem from the stereotypically American notion that sees everything bigger as better. According to Brustein, O'Neill's work seemed "afflicted with the American disease of gigantism," which accounts for the playwright's epic ambitions.

Ideally, O'Neill hoped to see the six-hour trilogy performed one play a night over three nights. More than one critic believed the play would have benefited from cutting and compression. John Mason Brown no doubt expressed the thoughts of many when he wrote that parts of the play, particularly "*The Haunted*, seem overlong ... That it is longer than it need be seems fairly obvious, as does the fact that, like so many of O'Neill's plays, it stands in need of editing."

The other side in this debate about the epic pretensions of O'Neill's work, of course, claims that some stories arguably that of the Mannon family require a wealth of narrative detail and need to be told in epic fashion.

While praising *The Emperor Jones, Anna Christie,* and *Ah, Wilderness*!, Bernard De Voto found much of the playwright's other work including *Mourning Becomes Electra* falling short.

De Voto contended that at best O'Neill "is only the author of some extremely effective pieces for the theatre. At worst he has written some of the most pretentiously bad plays of our time."

De Voto also asserted: "What he tells us is simple, familiar, superficial, and even trite and because of a shallow misunderstanding of Freud and windy mysticism, sometimes flatly wrong."

While admitting that O'Neill "has given us many pleasurable evenings in the theatre," De Voto maintained that "he has never yet given us an experience of finality, of genius working on the material proper to genius, of something profound and moving said about life. Just why, then, the Nobel Prize?"

While critics may debate the value of this play, almost all would agree that O'Neill has made important contributions toward today's American theatre. He moved beyond the early century's obsession with melodrama to embrace realism and naturalism, and lead the way for major dramatists to come, among them Edward Albee, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6
- Critical Essay #7
- Critical Essay #8

Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Schmidt analyzes O'Neill's attempt to modernize Oresteia, *and how these changes affected the theme and structure of the play.*

Early in his composition of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Eugene O'Neill stated his goal and problem: to create a "modern psychological drama using one of the old legend plots of Greek tragedy for its basic theme," asking "Is it possible to get [a] modern psychological approximation of the Greek sense of fate into such a play, which an intelligent audience of today, possessed of no belief in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by."

O'Neill also wanted to present a play with a uniquely American sensibility, and so he set the play in post-Civil War New England because it evoked the "Puritan conviction of man born to sin and punishment." While O'Neill generally succeeded in his goal of adapting from an ancient Greek to a modern American viewpoint, in the process he changed the plays' character motivations, the ethical model, and the tragic ending. These changes have far-reaching thematic, psychological, and cultural implications.

To better understand *Mourning Becomes Electra*, we must examine the ancient Greek myth of *Oresteia.* The best-known retelling of the Oresteia might be the three-play cycle by Aeschylus.

The *Oresteia* myth concerns the house of Atreus, a doomed family cursed from its inception. According to legend, Atreus's grandfather, Tantalus, kills his son Pelops and serves the pieces of his body to the gods at a feast. Because of this atrocious crime, the gods restore Pelops to life and sentence Tantalus to eternal punishment in the underworld.

Atreus, one of the sons of Pelops and Hippodamia, becomes king of Mycenae. Cuckolded by his brother Thyestes, who covets his throne, Atreus seeks revenge. Atreus kills Thyestes's sons and serves them to their father at a banquet. Discovering Atreus' dastardly deed, Thyestes curses him and all his heirs.

Thyestes's son, Aegisthus, revenges his brothers' murder and kills Atreus. Thyestes takes over the throne of Mycenae, forcing Atreus' sons Agamemnon and Menaleus into exile. These events spark the tragic rivalry central to O'Neill's story between Agamemnon (Ezra Mannon) and Aegisthus (Adam Brant).

Agamemnon marries Clytemnestra (Christine), producing their daughters Iphegenia and Electra (Lavinia), and their son Orestes (Orin). Menaleus marries Helen. When Paris elopes with Helen, Agamemnon and Menaleus start the Trojan War to retrieve her.

While the Spartans (Menaleus is the king of Sparta) prepare their invasion fleet, Agamemnon goes hunting and kills a stag sacred to the goddess Diana, the virgin huntress. Angered by this act, Diane prevents the fleet from sailing unless Agamemnon

sacrifices his daughter, Iphegenia. As a father, Agamemnon resists, but, believing Helen's rescue to be the will of the gods, he ultimately relents and agrees to Iphegenia's sacrifice. As the sacrifice begins, the goddess Diane changes her mind and spares Iphegenia, whisking her away to serve as a votive in a distant temple. Significantly, Agamemnon's family believes that Iphegenia is dead.

The role that Agamemnon plays in Iphegenia's death partly explains why Clytemnestra hates him and why she ultimately kills him. When Agamemnon departs for the Trojan War (As Ezra did for the Civil War), Clytemnestra (Christine) takes Aegisthus (Brant) as a lover, and plots her husband's murder.

After Agamemnon returns from the Trojan War, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus kill him. The rest of the *Oresteia* centers around Electra's and Orestes's plans, at Apollo's urging, to avenge their father's death by killing their mother and Aegisthus. Electra plays no part in the story's end, which tells of Orestes's persecution by the Furies for committing matricide.

A court eventually hears his case and, when the court deadlocks, Athena casts the deciding vote, freeing Orestes from the Furies.

As we can see, each trilogy the Greek and the American chronicles the tragic story of a family corrupted by the sins by its ancestors. Aeschylus' version differs from O'Neill's in ways that tell us much about the societies that produced them.

In Aeschylus' version of *Oresteia*, Electra and Orestes suffer because of the sins of their patriarch Tantalus, their grandparent Atreus, and his brother Thyestes. Thyestes's desire for power leads him to betray his brother's trust. The focus of Aeschylus' plot reveals the anxieties about political stability and legal due process which concerned Athens during the 4th and 5th centuries BCE.

Significantly, critics view the concluding play *Eumenides* as dramatizing the way the Athenian concept of justice evolved from a system based on revenge to one based on the rule of law.

O'Neill's work also tells us much about the society in which he lived. In many works, the playwright presents America's greatest failing as its materialism of valuing money above all else and of seeing people and things only in terms of their material value. Perhaps most obviously, note how much "Mannon" resembles "mammon," the biblical term for worldly material concerns.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the Mannon family's "sin" is its betrayal of the American ideal of being a classless society, one that rejects a caste system that defines people by their economic background. Lavinia's and Orin's suffering results from the struggle between their great-uncle David Mannon and the Mannon family.

When David marries Marie Brantome, a Canadian woman of lower social class, the Mannons drive him out of the family. When David needs money, Ezra Mannon Lavinia's and Orin's father cheats David out of his fortune and ultimately contributes to Marie's

death. So, while the rivalry by the brothers in the *Oresteia* concerns sexual desire and power, the American trilogy explores common O'Neill themes most specifically the violation of class boundaries.

When the Mannons ostracize David and Marie, they help destroy the newlyweds. Furthermore, Ezra Mannon, by swindling David, shows that he values money more highly than family. From O'Neill's perspective, then, the "sins" that set the action of the play in motion seem uniquely American.

O'Neill's interest in the attractions and dangers of materialism comes from his immediate family. Eugene believed that his father, the talented Shakespearean actor James O'Neill, exchanged commercial for artistic success. James spent most of his life performing the role of Edmond Dantes in Charles Fletcher's theatrical adaptation of Alexander Dumas's novel, the *Count of Monte Cristo*, a role which brought him fame and fortune.

When Eugene O'Neill retold the story of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy in *Mourning Becomes Electra,* he naturally made some changes. The first two plays in O'Neill's trilogy, *Homecoming* and *The Hunted*, rather closely follow the first two plays in Aeschylus' trilogy, *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers.*

However, critics disagree as to how faithfully O'Neill follows Aeschylus' *Eumenides* in the third play in the trilogy, *The Haunted*. Some critics believe that he abandoned the Aeschylean model, but others contend that the dramatic symmetry remains intact, if only symbolically.

For example, O'Neill presents no actual trial scene that parallels that of the Athenian court in *The Eumenides*. In act II of *The Hunted,* however, Orin addresses the portrait of his father Ezra, a judge, as "Your Honor," creating a venue of crime, judgment, and punishment, and symbolically echoing the Aeschylean play.

Yet while there may be general similarities between the Greek and American trilogies, O'Neill's characters, their actions, and the play's overall message differ substantially from those of Aeschylus. Key among these is that Electra has disappeared from the *Eumenides*, but Lavinia plays the central role in *The Haunted* and arguably, as the last surviving Mannon, in the trilogy itself.

O'Neill explains that he intended in *The Haunted* to interpret the Electra story from a new perspective, presenting her in heroic terms. In his notes for the play, he tersely wrote: "Give modern Electra figure in play tragic ending worthy of character. In Greek story she peters out into undramatic married banality."

According to Frederic Carpenter, O'Neill's Electra (Lavinia) must confront the evils of her family and herself and live with that evil. I see Lavinia as adopting a rather existential or Byronic attitude toward her transgression. She identifies a law (matricide), which she has had the strength of will to violate. She knows herself to be guilty and could escape punishment, but she also questions the legitimacy of living in a world without values. She will not allow the world to punish her, though, and so punishes herself instead.

Another difference between the Greek and American versions of the *Oresteia* can be seen in O'Neill's characters, which differ sharply from those of Aeschylus. This changes the ways audiences view their psychological motivations and the nature of their crimes.

In the *Oresteia*, for example, Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon in part because she holds him responsible for the death of their daughter. While we may not agree with Clytemnestra's retaliation, we can sympathize with her as a grieving mother mourning the loss of her child at what she believes to be her husband's hand. This may not justify murder, but it makes revenge seem understandable, if not excusable.

In O'Neill's trilogy, Christine's reasons for murdering her husband Ezra seem venial and vague. In part, she no longer finds him sexually attractive, but this hardly seems ground for murder. When the audience meets Ezra, he seems sick and frail; while he may have done wrong to Marie and left Christine unsatisfied, he provokes pity.

O'Neill also changes the motivations behind the actions of Orin and Lavinia. While Orestes kills Aegisthus out of duty to revenge his father, Orin's motivations for killing Brant seem murky. True, he claims to be sorry at his father's death and does feel some responsibility to revenge him, but Orin really only acts when Lavinia points out to him that Christine chose Brant over Orin. Principally, Orin acts out of incestuous jealousy, not paternal feeling.

The same incestuous desires cloud the purity of Lavinia's motivations, who seems to love her father almost in a wifely way.

I do not intend to condemn the psychological aspects of O'Neill's play, but rather to show how these psychological motivations diminish the characters and their actions. While we may not admire Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Electra, or Orestes, Aeschylus presents them as bold, larger than life, of heroic proportions if not actually heroes. O'Neill's changes make his characters very different.

According to Carpenter, Ezra seems less a war hero than a broken old man. Christine's feelings toward her husband Ezra and her lover Brant seem driven less by mighty passions than by neurosis. Christine's death by suicide rather than by Orin's hand makes them both smaller and anti-heroic. Orin too appears diminished, since he cannot find release by struggling against the Furies as Orestes does in Aeschylus' *The Eumenides*. Instead, Orin commits suicide to escape his conscience.

It becomes difficult to view any of O'Neill's characters Lavinia, Brant, Orin, and Christine as sympathetic, heroic, or noble. They all seem weak, unethical, and evil.

Part of the problem here is that the *Oresteia* poses moral dilemmas but offers no real solutions. Both Agamemnon and Orestes must choose between obeying their duties to their families or to the gods.

Agamemnon consents to having his daughter Iphegenia sacrificed, but only because he believes he must follow the will of the gods. Orestes obeys Apollo in revenging his father and killing Clytemnestra and her lover. Neither faces an easy or obvious decision.

Clytemnestra conspires to murder her husband because of his role in what she believes to be the death of their daughter.

All in all, their reasons seem justified if not justifiable certainly far more than the compulsions of the Mannon family. O'Neill's characters have options; they simply refuse to exercise them.

O'Neill makes another change: setting. By making the *Oresteia* American, critics contend that O'Neill changes the play's ethical basis from a shame culture (in which one's sense of right and wrong comes primarily from how one will be seen and judged by others) to a guilt culture (in which a one's ethical sense is internal, and one is judged by one's self).

O'Neill's shift from a Greek shame culture to an American guilt culture accounts for the ending. If shame the opinion and judgment of others characterizes Greek culture, public judgment by a court seems purely natural. If guilt characterizes American culture, then the self-punishment of O'Neill's characters (Christine's and Orin's suicides, Lavinia's self-imposed isolation) seems an extension of that guilt ethic.

This shift has consequences, however. Arguably, O'Neill's tragedy leaves audiences in some sense unsatisfied in comparison with the tragedies of Aeschylus. According to John Chioles, the Greek playwright balances tragedy's "inevitability" with its "containment," and by the end of his *Oresteia* trilogy, the world that has been torn asunder has been reassembled, "pieced together and healed anew."

No such healing occurs at the end of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, when we see instead "the ultimate pessimism of O'Neill's world." While O'Neill acknowledges the individual and family tragedies, his drama fails to reconcile the effects of these actions with their ramifications in the wider community.

Where Aeschylus resolves the blood feud in the rule of law, redeeming the society if not all the individuals, O'Neill will have none of that. Beyond two damaged individuals, Peter and Hazel, the Mannons leave behind nothing, certainly nothing that redeems or heals society.

This seems congruent with O'Neill's modernist vision, balanced with a healthy dose of romantic pessimism. In general, O'Neill's plays explore ethics in an early twentieth-century world which, in the wake of industrialism, materialism, and war, seems to lack values. His characters' actions reveal profound psychological complexity, questioning the nature of individual consciousness and human identity, ethics and spirituality.

Significantly, modernist art often remains fragmentary and introspective. In that sense, one key difference between the *Oresteia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* comes from the ending, where O'Neill's play offers no sense of closure, no orderly universe. Yes, the individuals involved have been punished in one way or the other, but society remains unhealed, unlike the ending to Aeschylus' *Oresteia.*

That link between tragedy and social healing is missing, but it somehow seems more realistic or true in a society that has seen the atomic bomb and the Holocaust. In O'Neill, tragedy offers no social reintegration; instead, *Mourning Becomes Electra* remains modernist in its (ir)resolution.

Source: Arnold Schmidt, for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Maufort argues that O 'Neill used Melville's Pierre *as a source, and that together O 'Neill and Melville show a criticism of Puritan American family relationships.*

O'Neill's dramatization of family relationships in *Long Day's Journey Into Night,* his culminating masterpiece, is admittedly autobiographical. Moreover, disguised portraits of the O'Neills abound throughout the entire canon, a feature which critics have repeatedly underlined. *Mourning Becomes Electra* undoubtedly represents a notable exception to that pattern. In this drama, O'Neill resorts to various artistic models to depict the conflicts besieging the house of the Mannons. Besides obvious references to Aeschylus and Shakespeare, there exists a more obscure literary allusion in *Mourning Becomes Electra*: muted reminders of Herman Melville's neglected novel, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*, that have hitherto largely escaped critical attention.

At first glance, to assert that O'Neill may have been indebted to Melville in the composition of his trilogy would seem exaggerated. And yet I submit that a direct connection is highly probable, an impression reinforced by the many analogies linking the two works. Critic Joyce D. Kennedy, who first pointed out the possible kinship between the novel and the play, conjectured that O'Neill had been introduced to *Pierre* by his scholarly friend Carl Van Vechten. The latter, who had strongly contributed to the Melville revival of the twenties, visited the O'Neills at Le Plessis in the summer of 1929, a period during which the dramatist drafted his play. The fact that comparable plot incidents occur in both *Pierre* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* could therefore constitute a tangible result of O'Neill's and Van Vechten's conversations.

In addition, O'Neill appears to have nurtured a life-long admiration for Melville which concretized itself in a 1921 press interview. He then described the hero of *Diffrent,* Caleb Williams, as an Ahab-like captain: "He belongs to the old iron school of Nantucket-New Bedford whalemen whose slogan was 'A dead whale or a stove boat.' The whale ... is transformed suddenly into a malignant Moby Dick. . .." In a hitherto unpublished introduction to Hart Crane's *White Buildings*, the playwright further alluded to Melville's mystical vision of the sea: "In Crane's sea poems ... there is something of Melville's intense brooding on the mystery of 'the high interiors of the sea.'" In a private communication, Louis Sheaffer informed me that, according to Agnes Boulton, O'Neill's second wife, the dramatist was fascinated by *Moby Dick.* Finally, it may not be purely coincidental that in *Mourning Becomes Electra* Orin Mannon evokes yet another romance by Melville, Typee. In a lyrical confession, he asks his mother, "Have you ever read a book called 'Typee' about the South Sea Islands? ... I read it and reread it until finally those Islands came to mean everything that was peace and warmth and security."

In view of these hints, I regard the influence of *Pierre* upon *Mourning Becomes Electra* as plausible. The resemblance between the two works, however, resides primarily in a relationship of confluence, more than of influence, originating in the authors' affinity of vision. Considered in that perspective, *Pierre* offers a privileged observation post from

which to examine the "Americanness" of the family feuds O'Neill delineates. Through such an analysis, the playwright emerges as a writer imbued with both the cultural and literary heritage of his nation.

I

As critics have remarked, *Pierre* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* possess features strongly reminiscent of the stories of Orestes and Hamlet. Both Orestes and Pierre, in attempting to avenge paternal honor, engage in conflictual relationships with their mothers. Isabel Banford, Pierre's half-sister, qualifies as a latter-day counterpart to Electra, for in leaving his manorial estate to live with Isabel as her husband, Pierre indirectly provokes the demise of his mother. Owing to his hesitations, Pierre can also be regarded as a replica of Shakespeare's romantic Hamlet.

The plot of *Mourning Becomes Electra* , like that of *Pierre,* owes a great deal to the myth of Orestes. Indeed, Lavinia Mannon urges her brother Orin to take the life of Adam Brant, Christine Mannon's lover. She thus hopes to punish her mother for plotting the death of the family head, Ezra Mannon. As a result of Orin's violent deed, Christine eventually commits suicide. Further, the action of O'Neill's play also recalls that of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Lavinia's first task consists of convincing her brother of Christine's guilt. Likewise, Hamlet must dispel his own doubts before deciding to act. In short, the plot incidents devised by the writers to portray the intricacies of their heroes's family crises derive their most strikingly identical features from Aeschylus and Shakespeare.

II

While in the works of these classical authors, the incest motif performs a restricted role, in *Pierre* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* it acquires a paramount importance. Melville's and O'Neill's male characters experience odd feelings towards their domineering mothers. In *Pierre*, Mrs. Glendinning adopts an authoritarian conduct when dealing with her son and praying that he may "remain all docility to me." However, Pierre lives with her in perfect harmony, giving her a "courteous lover-like adoration." In the opening pages, Saddle Meadows, the Glendinnings's estate, could even be decoded as a symbol of the Biblical paradise. Pierre enjoys there the beauty of a "scenery whose uncommon loveliness was the perfect mould of a delicate and poetic mind .. . ."

The buried incestual metaphor defining Pierre's link to his mother is duplicated in Orin's affection for Christine Mannon. As in Melville's novel, the mother's mixture of mild authority and loving gentleness forms an essential component of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Indeed, Christine's tenderness is rooted in possession, as is evidenced in her exclamation, "Oh, Orin, you are my boy, my baby! I love you!" And yet, the male protagonist spontaneously confesses his erotic bond with the maternal heroine, while betraying his wish of living with her in the islands of *Typee:*

ORIN. Someone loaned me the book... those Islands ... I used to dream I was there. And later on all the time I was out of my head I seemed really to be there. 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.... A strange notion, wasn't it? But you needn't be provoked at being an island because this was the most beautiful island in the world as beautiful as you, Mother!

If Saddle Meadows functions as an image of the celestial paradise on earth, where mother and son can enjoy unmitigated bliss, the islands of *Typee* play a comparable role in O'Neill's drama. Ironically, one might get the impression that the playwright uses Melville's *Typee* in order to reproduce in his trilogy an atmosphere of happiness comparable to the initial chapter of *Pierre*. This phenomenon inevitably leads one to consider the divergences separating O'Neill and Melville in their treatment of the mother/son relationship. As a typical writer of the twentieth century, O'Neill integrates his Melvillean model into a modified context, thereby distancing himself from the meaning of his source. He demonstrates his awareness of the limited value that Orin's projects can preserve in the terrible world of New England. Whereas Melville's Saddle Meadows actually shelters the characters, Orin's allusions to *Typee* remain purely abstract. Moreover, his hopes are threatened by Christine's love affair with Brant. That O'Neill should debunk his character's aspirations by applying the modernist technique of literary quotation testifies to the highly innovative nature of *Mourning Becomes Electra.*

Ill

The two authors' rendering of the brother/sister incest motif is even more unique than that of the mother/son relationship. This theme offers considerable insight into their concept of the American family. In *Pierre*, the hero declares his passion for his half-sister on the first night of their stay in the city:

He moved nearer to her, and stole one arm around her; her sweet head leaned against his breast; each felt the other's throbbing ... his whole frame was invisibly trembling. Then suddenly in a low tone of wonderful intensity, he breathed: "Isabel! Isabel!" ... "Call me brother no more!... I am Pierre and thou Isabel, wide brother and sister in the common humanity ... the demi-gods trample on trash, and Virtue and Vice are trash!..."

In a kindred manner, Orin Mannon suggests his secret love for Lavinia: "(*He stares at her and slowly a distorted look of desire comes over his face*)... There are times when you don't seem to be my sister but some stranger with the same beautiful hair (*He touches her hair caressingly*)."

Significantly, both *Pierre* and Orin prefer to regard their sisters as strangers bearing no kinship to them. Through these portrayals of perverted love affairs, the two writers obliquely indict the Puritan environment that allowed such a desecration of parental links to occur. *Pierre* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* focus on the doom of fated Puritan families whose members are stifled by a narrow code of moral principles. Being the unconscious victims of that background, Pierre and Orin adopt distorted sexual

behaviors resulting in the disintegration of their lives. The Glendinning house is eventually shattered by murder and death, while the Mannons become prey to an implacable fate. Clearly, O'Neill and Melville reject the harsh set of Old Testament ethics underlying their heroes' religious system.

As with the mother/son incest motif, O'Neill seems simultaneously to adhere to Melville's view and to negate the validity of his philosophy. The dramatist's possible borrowing from Melville appears woven into a larger context, tending to complicate the situation detectable in *Pierre*. If in Melville's work the protagonist is motivated solely by his Oedipal longings, in *Mourning Becomes Electra* the source of the action proceeds from a more intricate design. At first, Peter Niles, prompted by Lavinia's indifference to his proposals, informs the young heroine of Adam Brant's affair with Christine Mannon. The report infuriates Lavinia and awakens her desire for revenge, thwarted as she feels in her secret loving admiration for Brant. She then seeks to bring Orin to murder the sea captain, after clearly evidencing Christine's guilt. Out of a thinly veiled love for his sister, Orin finally agrees to act according to her wishes.

In *Pierre*, that fatal step requires a lesser number of transactions. Indeed, Isabel's letter to the hero does not, as is the case in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, constitute the result of a series of events. With his method of amplifying the impact of his apparent model, O'Neill seems to indicate that the strange bond between Orin and Lavinia exceeds in horror and complexity that uniting Pierre and Isabel. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the pressure of Puritanism, causing the degeneration of a genuine brother/sister relationship, deprives mankind of any hope of salvation.

IV

Not only do the two writers regard the disappearance of family cohesion as a product of American Protestantism; they also endow this gradual decline with tragic resonances. In *Pierre* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, one discovers elements of an innovative tragic form, one that seeks to ennoble the American common man. Although they remain the hereditary proprietors of manorial estates, Glendinnings and Mannons alike are subjected to the psychological woes that any New World citizen could experience. It is precisely the magnitude of the heroes' sufferings that confers upon *Pierre* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* their tragic aura.

But in the end, one can only speak of near-tragedy when considering these two works. First, *Pierre* is written in a novelistic form which is generally not associated with pure tragedy. Second, the almost exclusively psychoanalytical nature of the characters' conflicts reduces the impact of the artists' tragic endeavors. Their creatures manifest marked Oedipal fixations, which, while they contain in themselves a tragic potential, tend to mitigate the social and metaphysical implications embedded in Aeschylus' and Shakespeare's dramas. Residing in the protagonists' psychological turmoil, the concept of fate displayed in *Pierre* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* acquires an inner shape. Orin and Pierre are literally imprisoned within their own soul and prove unwilling to assume the full consequences of their public acts. Indeed, they choose to commit suicide while Lavinia, unable to face the world, buries herself alive.

This testifies, in my opinion, to Melville's and O'Neill's ironical stance, which emerges with perhaps even darker pessimism in the playwright's work. Whereas at first, the authors seemingly confer a tragic nobility upon their heroes, they subsequently deny them the benefit of any spiritual enlightenment. The two artists imply that true tragedy cannot exist in the New World, owing to the exaggeratedly private psychoanalytical, to use a modern critical term quality of the crises characterizing American family relationships. Thus adopting a view that corresponds to the night side of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Melville and O'Neill offer us a bleak picture of the possibilities of tragic elevation in America.

V

A final point of confluence between *Pierre* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* consists of their common metaphysical import. In these works, O'Neill and Melville explore the essence of the connection between members of American families and the divinity presiding over their destinies. Both come to the bitter conclusion that no God can improve the tormented relationships in which such family members are engaged. The hero of *Pierre* never succeeds in understanding his link with the deity, a failure best expressed through his sudden discovery of Plotinus Plinlimmon's pamphlet, "Chronometricals and Horologicals." This treatise, advising the reader not to seek to interpret God, tells of the impossibility of reconciling the horror of the human plight and divine goodness. In other words, Plinlimmon suggests, "in things terrestrial (horological) a man must not be governed by ideas celestial (chronometrical)." Struck with the "Profound Silence" of God's voice, Pierre nearly "runs, like a mad dog, into atheism." God remains indifferent to the sufferings Pierre incurs while living with his half-sister Isabel. The hero qualifies as an American Enceladus, a character who, in his efforts to attain divine status, is confined to the earth:

You saw Enceladus the Titan, the most potent of all the giants, writhing from out the imprisoning earth... still turning his unconquerable front toward that majestic mount eternally in vain assailed by him ... Enceladus was both the son and grandson of an incest; and even thus, there had been born from the organic blended heavenliness and earthliness of Pierre, another mixed, uncertain, heaven-aspiring, but still not wholly earth-emancipated mood....

Orin Mannon, another New World Enceladus, feels estranged from a heavenly God and consequently gropes in the darkness of the earth. He dimly realizes that he must rely on his own strength in order to survive the psychological crisis generated by his Oedipal desires:

ORIN. And I find artificial light more appropriate for my work man's light, not God's man's feeble striving to understand himself, to exist for himself in the darkness! It's a symbol of his life a lamp burning out in a room of waiting shadows!

In *Pierre* as in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, then, one witnesses a movement towards agnosticism. In his trilogy, with the aid of Melville's novel, O'Neill presents us with a

portrait of a torn apart family bereft of the help of God, thus prefiguring the agnostic universe of *Long Day's Journey Into Night.*

VI

If one admits that O'Neill kept *Pierre* in mind while composing *Mourning Becomes Electra*, one is forced to note that the confluence between the two works resides in the moral, tragic, and metaphysical probings of their authors. Like James Joyce or Virginia Woolf, O'Neill apparently resorts to the technique of literary quotation, as defined by Jean Weisgerber, in order to structure his drama. *Mourning Becomes Electra* can be regarded as a mosaic of literary allusions, whether to Aeschylus, Shakespeare, or Melville. Moreover, comparing this trilogy with *Pierre* offers a new image of O'Neill as a writer belonging to the tradition of American literature. In addition, I have suggested that, in two instances, O'Neill qualifies Melville's notion of the family unit in America and amalgamates his borrowings within a highly personal framework. To this end, he manipulates ironic commentaries his reference to *Typee* and the device of amplification evident in the complex structure in which Orin's murder is inserted. This double angle of vision reveals the profundity of the playwright's delineation of family relationships in *Mourning Becomes Electra* . In the process of translating the ancient patterns of Aeschylus' and Shakespeare's works to describe the American components of such conflicts, he was most probably aided by the legacy of Melville's *Pierre.*

Source: Marc Maufort, "The Legacy of Melville's *Pierre*: Family Relationships in *Mourning Becomes Electra*," in The *Eugene O'Neill Newsletter*, Summer-Fall, 1987, Vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 23-28.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Werner contends that the theme of the islands in ONeill's play represents the recovery of the paradise of the original bond between mother and son.

In the plays of Eugene O'Neill, the breaking of the bond between a son and a mother is a common pattern, figuring an original fall from innocence. Just as O'Neill's biography can be read as a series of unsuccessful attempts to re-establish in adulthood the kind of exclusive attachment with a woman that would replicate and replace the broken filial-maternal bond, his plays can be seen as a series of imaginative struggles with the same need. In O'Neill's vision, maternal abandonment is the original sin, and life is a series of necessary, but futile, attempts of men always to try to remake in some way the original closed pairing of mother and child. This theme, dealt with explicitly in *Desire Under the Elms, The Iceman Cometh, Long Day's Journey into Night,* and A *Moon for the Misbegotten*, forms also the essential basis for understanding *Mourning Becomes Electra.* While critical attention to O'Neill's trilogy has tended to focus particularly on the character and point of view of Lavinia in the play (an emphasis explicable in terms of the title of the work), O'Neill's treatment, not of Electra's story, but of the Orestes myth can take us closer to the fructifying imaginative origins and meaning of *Mourning Becomes Electra.*

The theme of the Blessed Islands reveals O'Neill's central intention in the trilogy. The islands represent the paradisal world of prenatal existence, where a child, rocked in the warm lullaby of his mother's self, forms with her a perfect and unviolated unity. Birth is the first evil, a beginning of estrangement that the processes of living inevitably worsen. The child's sense of betrayal when he realizes that the woman he loves is not just his own pure mother, but also another man's mistress, impels him to retaliate, to punish her by attacking her lover and to abandon her, too to leave and to seek out another. While her betrayal brings pain, his revenge stirs the more wrenching affliction of guilt. Seeking a new partner then, he attempts to find in adulthood a replication of the original island unity of love with a mother, an exclusive closed circle of two. But peace is impossible in Eden, given the nature of Eve. Woman is the first betrayer, who lets pure love turn to passion. She is the original deceiver, who is not only mother, but mistress.

O'Neill works out this pattern of human experience through three generations of the House of Mannon. The prototype for the women in the play is the Canuck nurse girl Marie Brantome. Marie is first of all seen as a madonna image, then recognized in her passionate nature as a fallen woman. After her follow Christine Mannon and then Lavinia. Each of these women first mothers and then deserts a Mannon son for a lover, as her own fatal femininity blossoms. The betrayed are Ezra and Orin. Adam Brant and Peter Niles embody the masculine potential to initiate the same kind of filial-maternal estrangement.

Seth's description of Marie Brantome indicates the original of a pattern to be repeated throughout the chronicle. Ezra Mannon idealized Marie. Seth explains:

He was only a boy then, but he was crazy about her, too, like a youngster would be. His mother was stern with him, while Marie, she made a fuss over him and petted him.

But besides being a mother-like nurse to him, Marie was alive to passion too, "always laughin' and singin' frisky and full of life with something free and wild about her like an animile" *(Homecoming,* III). Ezra's pained outrage when he realizes the implications of her womanly nature is clear. Seth says: "Ayeh but he hated her worse than anyone when it got found out she was his Uncle David's fancy woman" *(Homecoming*, III). Ezra is the child furiously hurt by the discovery of his mother's passionate involvement with a lover.

The experience is repeated for him in marriage. It was apparently Christine's resemblance to Marie that first attracted Ezra to her. She has the same copper yellow hair. He strokes it with an attitude of awe, trembling, as he gropes mentally for its significance: "Only your hair is the same, your strange beautiful hair I always " (*Homecoming,* III). While his own insight is never explicit, Ezra's attempt to understand the loneliness he feels in marriage suggests that what he longs for is actually a remaking of that exclusive and perfect union of a child with a mother.

The marriage has somehow failed to fulfill the hope he once held for it. Before their marriage, he says he felt sure Christine loved him, but afterwards he knew himself incapable of what he wanted most, "Able only to keep my mind from thinking of what I'd lost" (*Homecoming*, III). During their courtship her eyes spoke to him, but after their marriage they were only full of silence. He sensed there was always "some barrier between us a wall hiding us from each other" (*Homecoming*, III). Death as the end to life's slow process of dying holds no terror for Ezra, but death in terms of her husband being killed seems somehow queer and wrong. He feels it would be "like something dying that had never lived" (*Homecoming*, III). His wish for an achieved union in love with her takes the form of a daydream of going off together on a voyage to find some island to be alone together. He promises, "You'll find I've changed, Christine. I'm sick of death! I want life" (*Homecoming*, III). The wish has a quality of desperation to it: "I've got to make you love me!" (*Homecoming*, III).

That Christine has provoked his passion is part of her betrayal. When she recalls to him his treatment of her as a wife, he answers with scorn: "Your body? What are bodies to me? I've seen too many rotting in the sun to make grass greener" (*Homecoming, IV*). The island-mother image of green earth is corrupted in association with her. He flails out against her:

Is that your notion of love? Do you think I married a body? You made me appear a lustful beast in my own eyes! as you've always done since our first marriage night! (*Homecoming*, IV)

While physical desire may have been sated, his deeper need for love remains somehow untouched. Ezra feels betrayed by Christine as he was before by Marie Brantome.

Like Marie, Christine has also taken a lover. The transformation in her that makes the returned soldier Ezra instinctively uneasy is her awakened sensuality. She has filled the house with flowers in anticipation of Brant's arrival, not his. Her taunt to Lavinia indicates the nature of the outlook she has rejected: "Puritan maidens shouldn't peer too inquisitively into Spring! Isn't beauty an abomination and love a vile thing?" *(Homecoming*, III). Christine's blossoming womanhood is her affirmation of life, but it carries with it the seeds of death as well. It leads to her murder of Ezra and desertion of Orin, and finally to her own suicide.

Adam Brant's dialogue furthers the development of the island theme in the play. Brant's romantic descriptions of the South Sea islands he remembers establish their connection with a paradise before the fall, an Eden associated with existence as yet unspoiled, with life yet unborn. Lavinia recollects his talk about the native island women who "had found the secret of happiness because they had never heard that love can be a sin" (*Homecoming*, I). And Brant assures her "they live in as near the Garden of Paradise before sin was discovered as you'll find on this earth" (*Homecoming*, I). The island colors of green land, blue sky, and golden sun are the same colors associated with first Christine and then Lavinia, with their green velvet gowns, blue eyes, and strange golden hair. The quiet peace of Brant's description evokes prenatal slumber within the womb: ". . .the sun drowsing in your blood, and always the surf on the barrier reef singing a croon in your ears like a lullaby!" (*Homecoming*, I). He notes, "You can forget there all men's dirty dreams of greed and power!" (*Homecoming*, I). They are "The Blessed Isles" (*Homecoming*, I).

Lavinia's unsettling question put to him about whether one can forget there also men's "dirty dreams of love?" (*Homecoming*, I) indicates the precarious basis for this paradise. The islands are inhabited by the naked native women. And it is women with their capability for feeling and stirring passion that can obliterate the paradise of untainted and unbroken mother love.

In Brant's story too there are repetitions of the theme of desertion between a child and a mother. Brant says that when he was seventeen, he "ran away to sea and forgot I had a mother" (*Homecoming*, I). The sea and his ship became substitutes for the mother he left. He says that women are always jealous of ships, they always suspect the sea (*Homecoming*, I); and his description of sailing vessels, "Tall, white clippers, ... like beautiful, pale women" (H*omecoming*, I), establishes them as an image of feminine purity in his mind. Lavinia reminds Christine of how much his ship means to Adam, and he himself compares Christine to the Flying Trades: "You are like sisters" (*Homecoming*, II). Their plan for escape together after Ezra is murdered involves his desertion of his ship, an abandonment that destroys for him any hope for real happiness with her.

When Brant first spoke of going away with Christine, he had mentioned the islands: "By God, there's the right place for love and a honeymoon!" (*Homecoming*, II). But, as she reminded him, the closed circle was impossible as long as Ezra was alive. Christine hoped that their complicity in this murder would bind Adam to her irrevocably. Fearing the changes of time and her aging, she calculated on the crime sealing a permanent bond:

You'll never dare leave me now, Adam for your ships or your sea or your naked Island girls when I grow old and ugly. (*Homecoming*, II)

For both of them finally the alliance is vile and grotesque. The attempt to remake somehow in adulthood a community of two can be based only on other betrayals.

The island imagery of prenatal union is fully developed in the description of Christine's relationship with her son Orin. Christine reminisces with Orin after his homecoming: "We had a secret little world of our own in the old days, didn't we? which no one but us knew about" (*The Hunted*, II). She claims that Ezra hated his son because he knew that she loved the boy better than anything else in the world (*The Hunted*, II). The exclusion is something Ezra himself attested to: "You had turned to your new baby, Orin. I was hardly alive for you any more. I saw that" (*Homecoming*, III). But the original union is broken; mother and son have been separated. Orin's father took him away to a war, and he blames his mother now for the scarcity and coolness of her letters during his absence (*TheHunted* , II).

Upon his return, she attempts a reconciliation with him: "We'll make that little world of our own again, won't we?" (*The Hunted*, II). Her winding the bandage on his head wound is a symbolic gesture of swaddling and binding together again that recalls the earlier figure of the Canuck nurse girl. He leans against her knees, dreamily describing the South Sea islands again in a way that makes clear their maternal meaning for him:

Those Islands came to mean everything that wasn't war, everything that was peace and warmth and security. I used to dream I was there.... 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 whole island was you. (*The Hunted*, II)

To Orin the islands are mother.

Orin hoped to escape from the death of war by coming home again finally, but he curses his recovery from his battle injury when he recognizes his mother's guilty hand in his father's death:

I should never have come back to life from my island of peace! But that's lost now! You're my lost island, aren't you, Mother? (*The Hunted*, III)

He is willing to forgive her, though, the sin of this murder. Ezra was a threat to their own special love. Orin can still dream of a life with his mother, even if she has now become a lost island.

It is only when Lavinia convinces him of Christine's involvement with Brant that Orin finally breaks with his mother. It is Christine's and Brant's use of the island imagery that assures Orin of Christine's betrayal of him. As Lavinia and Orin eavesdrop during their shipboard meeting, Christine begins to talk about going away with Brant to the islands. Brant goes on, expressing the pull of hope he feels for something he no longer really believes in:

Aye the Blessed Isles Maybe we can still find happiness and forget! ... The warm earth in the moonlight, 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! (*The Hunted*, IV)

Steeped in the guilt of murder and sick with the sense of failure to make good on his own aspirations in his calling at sea, Brant recognizes the islands for an unachievable daydream. But Orin, overhearing, is convinced now that his mother has been a traitor to him.

It is this conviction that enables him to resolve upon and accomplish Brant's murder. The motivation of revenge is clear in his furious comment to Lavinia, "And my island I told her about which was she and I she wants to go there with him!" (*The Hunted*, IV). After Lavinia has arranged that he overhear the plans of Christine and her lover, it becomes easier for Orin to kill Brant. He shoots the man at close range and, in a scene of violation which follows, rips open drawers in the ship's cabin, rifles the place, tears things apart, goes through the dead man's pockets, and finally steals Brant's revolver. He destroys and attempts to take the place of this rival. Announcing Brant's death to his mother, Orin explains: "I heard you planning to go with him to the island I had told you about our island that was you and I!" (*The Hunted*, V). When she only moans with grief, he tells her that he will help her to forget:

I'll make you forget him! I'll make you happy! We'll leave Vinnie here and go away on a long voyage to the South Seas (*The Hunted*, V)

Lavinia is right in recognizing her brother's goal as a retreat to infancy: "Are you becoming her crybaby again?" (*The Hunted*, V). Orin still wants to reestablish his exclusive childhood hold on his mother's affections.

When Christine kills herself, that hope is eliminated. Orin is beset with the guilt of having first killed Brant and then having taunted his mother with the murder. With her dead now, there is no further hope of a reconciliation. He recognizes his plight with despair: "I've got to make her forgive me! I ! But she's dead She's gone how can I ever get her to forgive me now?" (*The Hunted*, V). She has in a final act of betrayal now irrevocably left him.

To find some other way to live, some other hope, Orin turns to his sister Lavinia. It is Orin and Lavinia who actually sail off to the Islands. Lavinia becomes a mother to him, nursing him like a sick child to life.

The idyllic peace of the islands is deceptive, though, and impermanent. The Blessed Isles do not remain the innocent haven Orin hoped for a place of nurturing peace with a mother. They provide somehow a changing atmosphere for Lavinia. A threatening aspect in her nature is awakened there. Orin tells Peter Niles:

They turned out to be Vinnie' 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 Vinnie with the men \(*The Haunted*, I, ii)

Orin accuses Lavinia of admiring the handsome, romantic-looking island men and desiring their attentions:

Oh, she was a bit shocked at first by their dances, 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. *(The Haunted*, I, ii)

He declares that it was his brotherly duty to take her away. He is jealous of the passionate nature he senses stirring in her and attempts to secure her unchanged for his own.

His sense of her awakening sexuality as the sin that will destroy their closeness becomes clear in his further accusations. He implies that she enjoyed the lustful looks of the native Avahanni and that something passed between the two. Although Lavinia avers it was only a kiss she shared with the islander, the moment marks the beginning of another betrayal forOrin. She shouts at him. "I'm not your property! I have a right to love!" (*The Haunted*, II). Lavinia explains that she loved the islands: "They finished setting me free" (*The Haunted*, I, ii). She has come to the conclusion that "Love is all beautiful" (*The Haunted*, I, ii). And with her new boldness she turns from Orin to Peter: "We'll be married soon. . . . We'll make an island for ourselves" (*The Haunted*, I, ii). Lavinia chooses to leave Orin just as Christine did before her.

Like Christine, she also tries to cover for her desertion of Orin by pushing him toward Hazel. Orin realizes by this time, however, the impossibility of any such hope of remaking the world of his childhood:

No. I'm afraid myself of being too long alone with her afraid of myself. I have no right in the same world with her. And yet I feel so drawn to her purity! Her love for me makes me appear less vile to myself! And, at the same time, a million times more vile, that's the hell of it! So I'm afraid you can't hope to get rid of me through Hazel. She's another lost island! (*The Haunted*, II)

His letter revealing all the crimes of the Mannon family is his last resort to prevent Lavinia from abandoning him to marry Peter. Lavinia has become Marie Brantome to him (*The Haunted*, III). Just as Marie deserted Ezra, Lavinia is now bent upon leaving him. Recognizing the impossibility of ever recovering innocence and peace again in life, Orin turns to death for an answer. He determines upon suicide:

Yes! It's the way to peace to find her again my lost island Death is an island too Mother will be waiting for me there Mother! (*The Haunted*, III)

Lavinia persists in her hope for an earthly paradise just a while longer. She clings wildly to Peter as her brother goes out to shoot himself, talking with desperate hope of a time when they will be married and have a home and a garden with trees: "Hold me close, Peter! Nothing matters but love, does it? That must come first! No price is too great, is it?" (*The Haunted*, III).

Besides Lavinia's sending Orin to his death, it is clear that this marriage would be based on other desertions as well Peter's abandonment of his mother and sister. Hazel tells how the plan has already broken his mother's heart and come between him and her too:

You've changed him. He left home and went to the hotel to stay. He said he'd never speak to Mother or me again. He's always been such a wonderful son before and brother. (*The Haunted*, IV)

Hazel's jealous love for her brother prompts her to introduce the topic of Orin's letter. His last resort becomes hers as well, as she tries to stop with it the processes of changing and leaving that life invariably brings. Though Peter comes to her haggard and tormented with the guilt of his desertions, Lavinia still hopes to snatch from life some moment of bliss.

It is only when in her frantic appeal for love she slips the name of his predecessor in her affections, Adam, that she gives up the hopeful illusion: "Always the dead between! It's no good trying any more!" (*The Haunted*, IV). Lavinia throws away the lilacs she had brought into the thouse and lets the windows be boarded up again. The conclusion of the play confirms the Mannon outlook that Ezra had so much wanted to defy: "Life is dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born" (*Homecoming*, III). Christine once asked wistfully, looking at the fresh young girl Hazel, "Why can't all of us remain innocent and trustful?" (The Hunted, I). Persistence in innocence is an impossible hope, like the Blessed Isles, an irretrievable dream that exists only once for a while in prenatal slumber. The peace of Eden is precariously held as long as there is a "yaller-haired wench" in the garden ready to say, "Take me, Adam!" (*The Hunted*, IV and *The Haunted*, IV).

Source: Bette Charlene Werner, "Eugene O'Neill's Paradise Lost: The Theme of the Islands in *Mourning Becomes Electro*," in *Forum*, Winter, 1986, Vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 46-52.

Critical Essay #4

I*n the following essay, Young describes Lavinia as the "American Electra" but Christine as the "most tragic member of the Mannon family."*

It is often an intellectual game among students of drama to debate who is the center of a play, whose story is being told. With some plays it's not much of a game: *Hedda Gabler*, for instance, is appropriately named since Hedda is, shall we say, the cornerstone of nearly all the triangular relationships in Ibsen's play. Ultimately all roads lead to Hedda (until of course the very end, when George and Thea get together). Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra is also, I think, properly named; but here, despite the title, it is not quite so clear to whom the play belongs. O'Neill set out to write a trilogy that would do for Electra what Aeschylus had done for Orestes, and in some ways he succeeds. In the end it is Lavinia, the American Electra, who must rid the world of the Mannons while simultaneously becoming a strange apotheosis of what it means to be a Mannon. Yet it is not Lavinia but her mother, Christine Clytemnestra's counterpart who is the most tragic member of the Mannon family because she more clearly wishes and strives to be free of the "Mannon curse."

The Mannon curse is to be forever bound to one's dead relatives; it is the fatal web which binds each character to the others and which ultimately binds the play together. The play is their cumulative ghost, and so of course it is not quite accurate to single out one character as the heart of the trilogy. But even within the inextricabilities of the Mannon web, the stories of the two women dominate the drama.

The main story is Vinnie's desire to be more like her mother. However, Vinnie never knows this is the story: even at the end she won't admit that she's never had a life of her own. And it is for this reason, this blindness, that Vinnie is more pathetic than tragic. Only at the very end does she take on tragic dimensions, when she realizes that there is no running from her punishment and indeed that she must punish herself.

But up until the final part of the trilogy it is Christine's play. Christine sees she sees the oppressive nature of her Christian responsibilities; she sees her life slipping by and she wants her freedom. The underside of American literature the vast sensual wilderness underneath the Puritan ideal that Lawrence describes in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, becomes manifest in Christine' s desire for Captain Adam Brant and a life on the virgin soil of a faraway island. Caught in what Lawrence calls "the mechanical bond of purposive utility," she feels she has a "right" to love, as her son Orin later says of her. Interestingly, when Vinnie virtually "becomes" her mother toward the end of the play, she too believes she has a "right to love." Vinnie cannot imagine another life without becoming someone other than herself. But once Christine gets a taste of love and freedom she will not give it up, and she will not be beholden to Vinnie. In the end, rather than submit to Vinnie's blackmail, she quite literally takes her life in her own hands. Christine's main failing, beyond a certain pathetic longing for youth and beauty, is that she doesn't see clearly enough that she's acted too late, and acting too late is the heart of tragedy.

Vinnie wants her mother to live according to the way things are, to live up to the traditional standards of mid-nineteenth century New England. Appalled at learning of her mother's adultery, she threatens to tell her father unless Christine gives up Brant: "You ought to see it's your duty to Father, not my orders if you had any honor or decency." Vinnie is ever cognizant of her Puritan chores: "I'm not marrying anyone," she tells her mother. "I've got my duty to Father." Christine's immediate answer shows an awareness of responsibility as well as its traps, something Vinnie would never admit: "Duty! How often I've heard that word in this house! Well, you can't say I didn't do mine all these years. But there comes an end." There comes an end to "duty," and to life itself. Vinnie can only see the timeless portraits of the Mannon line and their stony pride reaching through history. Indeed, Vinnie is herself described as having the timeless quality of an "Egyptian statue."

But Christine has been married for twenty years to a man she doesn't love. She has become less and less her husband's lover and mate and more and more the person who takes care of the family. She is mother to all and yet finally rejects her role and family, and the Mannon "tomb," for her pagan Captain (who turns out, ironically, to have a fair share of Mannon in him) and the promise of romance and adventure in the South Seas, where the Christian doctrine of sin is unknown.

I've been to the greenhouse to pick these. I felt our tomb needed a little brightening. (*She nods scornfully toward the house*) Each time I come back after being away it appears more like a sepulchre! 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. (*Then with a little mocking laugh*) Forgive me, Vinnie. I forgot you liked it. And you ought to. It suits your temperament.

Yes, mourning becomes Lavinia. Even in the end, when she nails shut the windows and retreats inside to punish herself and end the Mannon line, her sacrifice fulfills the Puritan creed. A noble act, perhaps; a necessary act; but still too willingly accepted. Why didn't she stay on the South Sea Islands where she had become a more natural woman? The answer, it seems, lies in the double edge of the play's message: consequences must be faced and in doing so you simultaneously fulfill and carry on the need for Puritan sacrifice. Vinnie's response to her mother's "there comes an end" is, "And there comes another end and you must do your duty again!" Ad infinitum!

But even if one accepts Lavinia's sacrifice as an act of courage, and a moment of insight, on the whole she is more pathetic than tragic. She doesn't see, or if she does she won't admit what she sees. She won't admit what is obvious to others that she is a poor imitation of her mother. Brant describes Vinnie's face as a "dead image" of Christine's. Orin realizes that Vinnie can never admit that she wanted Brant.

ORIN: And that's why you suddenly discarded mourning in Frisco and bought new clothes in Mother's colors!

LAVINIA: (*furiously*) Stop talking about her! You'd think, to hear you, I had no life of my own!

ORIN: You wanted Wilkins just as you'd wanted Brant!

LAVINIA: That's a lie!

Only Vinnie's subconscious allows her to admit her desire for Brant. She mistakenly calls out for "Adam" when asking Peter to make love to her.

Christine is a tragic figure because she possesses more of a mind of her own and realizes, nevertheless, that she has wasted much of her life. She doesn't fully realize, however, what the past has done to her, how cruel she's become. For much of the play Christine underestimates the Mannon curse to be forever tied to one's dead relatives because of an unwillingness to face the truth about one's living relatives. As Adam returns too late to his dying mother's bedside, and as Ezra tries too late to be open and loving with Christine, so Christine responds too slowly to years of bitterness toward Ezra and Lavinia. And bitterness is the handmaiden to cruelty. But it does not undermine Christine's victory as the central tragic figure of *Mourning Becomes Electro*..

Source: William Young, "Mother and Daughter in *Mourning Becomes Electro*, " in *The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter*, Summer-Fall, 1982, Vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 15-17.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, Curran discusses how the concept of the islands fails for certain major characters in O'Neill'splay, dominated as they are by Puritanism.

Approximately at midpoint in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1929, 1931), Orin Mannon leans his head on his mother's knee and in a "dreamy and low and caressing" voice announces that Melville's *Typee* (1846) provided him with a sense of peace in the midst of the American Civil War and stimulated "wonderful dreams" about her:

Someone loaned me the book. I read it and reread it until finally those Islands came to mean everything that wasn't war, everything that was peace and warmth and security. I used to dream I was there. And later on all the time I was out of my head I seemed really to be there. 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.

Orin did not read Typee critically. If he had, he would have recognized that Tommo's quest for a Polynesian retreat was a failure. The South Pacific contained no prelapsarian Eden. Like many of the early reviewers of *Typee*, Orin read his own interpretation of primitivism into the novel. For him *Typee* Valley, Tahiti or Imeeo became literally his mother.

The nineteenth-century Rousseauistic yearning for uncorrupted civilizations and noble savages attracted readers to books about the South Seas; while this contributed to the popularity of *Typee* and *Omoo*, it banished Melville to premature obscurity. His barbed ambiguities troubled the delicate hearts of the American public which wanted to root in the past for the lost Golden Age. The popular sense of primitivism, like Orin's, was opposed to Melville's own more profound approach. The public sought escape while Melville looked for an explanation of his sense of culture failure.

James Baird has explained that primitivism attends a sense of culture failure expressed mainly in the disintegration of religious symbolism. In *Typee* Melville refutes the naive primitivism of Rousseau. His experience in the South Seas undermined the Frenchman's notion of the moral superiority of primitive peoples. Afterwards, as Baird has pointed out in Ishmael, Melville embraced an authentic primitivism, "*the mode of feeling which exchanges for traditional Christian symbols a new symbolic idiom referring to Oriental cultures of both Oceania and Asia* ... [Baird' italics]. Melville's nineteenth-century, New-England audience and O'Neill in *Mourning Becomes Electra* follow mainly in Rousseau's footsteps: encouraged by the collapse of the Puritan theological basis for the Protestantism of New England, they distort the past. Melville, on the other hand, uses the past mainly Oriental culture as a source of new symbols to replace those of Protestant Christianity. Thus Orin's South Pacific island offers an escape, while Melville's affords an opportunity to attempt a reintegration.

In Mourning Becomes Electra everyone has an island. Orin has his own vision of Melville's Marquesas, and Captain Brant cherishes his Blessed Isles and promotes their image for Christine and Lavinia. Even Ezra has one, although his more vague retreat closely resembles most people's image of a refuge, since it has no specific location and promises him the emotional luxuries which would damn nearly every one of us, were we to possess them all concurrently. Love. Peace. Happiness. Forgetfulness. Guiltlessness. Those common emotional wishes, which, if we could just get mind and heart to cooperate, would insure that equilibrium we never quite strike. In fact, towards the end of the trilogy, with merely a wag of the tongue, Orin makes an unattainable island of Hazel Niles, who is barely a body of emotions, let alone a piece of land. Lavinia, too, shows similar disregard for geography when she tells Hazel's brother, Peter, "We'll make an island for ourselves on land...."

It would be somewhat dishonest, however, to dismiss the significance of the various forms of Blessed Isles in *Mourning Becomes Electra* merely as popular metaphors for human wish-fulfillment. They acquire a deeper meaning when we look at them in the light of modern psychology and Rousseauistic primitivism. This is not to say that the play is heavily indebted to Freud or Rousseau. Neither its use of modern psychological insight nor its approach to primitivism is highly technical. Both, in fact, are employed much as they were in the nineteenth century by such writers as Hawthorne in *The Marble Faun* and Melville in *Typee*. A general knowledge of both the psychology and the peculiar form of primitivism in the trilogy adds a dimension to our understanding of the work. For in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Eugene O'Neill reinterprets the failure of Rousseauistic primitivism in the light of twentieth-century psychological insight. The play is a modern version not only of the Oedipal tragedy in Aeschylus' Orestia trilogy but also of the failure of the doctrine of chronological primitivism in a culture dominated by Puritanism.

Rousseauistic primitivism underlies the various concepts of the Blessed Isles in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, but O'Neill's primary emphasis is upon the chronological aspect of Rousseau's mode of primitivism that earlier stages in human existence were better or wholly good. By extending this naive concept to every major character in the trilogy, he emphasizes the sense of culture failure motivating each person's desire for escape.

Particularly, that culture failure is rooted in the destructive influence of Puritanism on the Mannon family. It distorts their relationships without providing a reassuring creed around which to structure their lives. This negative religious legacy descends from the father's side and inhibits Ezra, Orin and Lavinia, whom Christine refers to as a Puritan maiden and who questions whether Brant's Blessed Isles can make men forget their "dirty dreams" of love. Christine also refers to the "Puritan gray ugliness" of the Mannon home and claims that each time she goes away and returns it becomes "more like a sepulchre! The 'whited' one of the Bible...." *Mourning Becomes Electra*, like Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," indicts Puritanism for encouraging neurotic sexual notions.

O'Neill, then, adds a few more lashes to the already striped carcass of Puritanism in American letters. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* he scores that religious legacy generally

for reinforcing the Oedipal complexes which haunt Lavinia and Orin. Classical though it may be in its structure, O'Neill's trilogy employs a knowledge of modern psychology in order to explore a nineteenth-century theme and to pin the blame once again on Puritanism. Prudish attitudes toward sex underlie and strengthen the Freudian determinism which besets the Mannons. And the indirect effect of those attitudes on both Lavinia and Orin make chronological primitivism attractive to them as each wishes to go back in time in order to slough off the destructive sexual frustration they feel.

The Blessed Isles, however, fulfill different needs for both renewal of Lavinia's basic sensuality and ultimately reinforcement of Orin's Puritan repression. Christine is Orin's Blessed Isle; naked Polynesian women only disgust him. Announcing his suicide, he exclaims: "Yes! It's the way to peace to find her [mother] again my lost island Death is an island of peace too Mother will be waiting for me there...."

O'Neill, of course, overemphasizes one facet of Rousseauistic primitivism the sexual freedom of primitive peoples. The New-England Puritan preoccupation with the evil of sexual pleasure explains the majority of the emotional difficulties in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. The women in the play and in O'Neill's plays generally tend to be extreme types: good women (like mother) and bad or "fancy women" in the terminology of Seth, the caretaker; Minnie and Abbie in *Desire Under the Elms* or Marie Brantome and Christine Mannon in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. When even the good women shows signs of natural sensuality, they become, to use Orin's words, "whores". Once Eve is diddled by the serpent, it seems she becomes at the same time a fallen and a scarlet woman. In Nabokov's phrase, she contracts the "apple disease."

Orin, as his thoughts on *Typee* will reveal, wants to return to those prelapsarian days before the knowledge of sexual sin. In wanting to regress, he wishes not only to repudiate his individuality, but, more significantly, he wants to deny history his own and his family's. Such a denial involves the destruction of one's identity. Ultimately, that denial means the disintegration of the self. For however doubtful the virtues of historical progress, the development of personality is inextricably bound to the forward movement of one's civilization. Irving's Rip Van Winkle attempted to deny history, sleeping through the Revolutionary War, and he awakened to find himself an anachronism. Captain Brant, who has not learned Tommo's lesson, shares Orin's belief in Rousseau's dream of escape by voyaging back in time to an island garden of Eden. Christine, not Fayaway, becomes his Eve, and he, like Tommo, leaves his island paradise. Brant finds his love among his own people and in his own time and place. But he is fated by the Mannon curse never to make his escape to the Blessed Isles where he feels he can play a trick on time.

For both Brant and Ezra Mannon, the islands represent mainly an escape from the present and an opportunity to turn back time. Ezra tells Christine, "I've got a notion if we'd leave the children and go off on a voyage together to the other side of the world find some island where we could be alone for a while. You'll find I have changed." Brant had told Christine earlier that he admired the naked native women because they had found the secret of happiness "they had never heard that love can be a sin." "They live in as near the Garden of Paradise before sin was discovered as you'll find on earth."

Each feels that the islands will enable him to shed the stigma of sin which his New-England Puritanism had bequeathed to sensual love. They want to regress, however, to unlearn rather than to modify. Change for them means a return to the innocence of childhood, for Orin almost a prenatal existence. Brant's repeated reference to "the surf on the barrier reef singing a croon in your ears like a lullaby!" pairs him with Orin, whose Blessed Isle is his mother. Unable to come to terms with their Puritan legacy, they wish instead to recover the purity of childhood, not of the supposedly uninhibited adulthood of the noble savage.

They associate inhibition with immaturity. Each interprets chronological primitivism naively, supposing that relationships with primitive peoples, isolation from their Puritan environment, and communion with nature will dissolve religious inhibitions. This error precipitates their tragic fate because they wrongly associate psychic with historical time. The Mannons believe that visiting peoples living in an earlier period of historical development can change their unconscious minds. They mistake the nostalgia aroused by a pleasant vacation for a spontaneous cure for their psychological condition. They wish to begin again with a clean slate in the Lockian sense because they do not realize that the noble savages they admire bear the markings of their own unique culture. Primitives' consciences are not without guilt either; they contain indigenous forms of "sin," and so-called primitive men are not the children of Eden whom Ezra and Brant wish to become again and can only become with the loss of their respective selves. All of the Mannons ultimately accept some form of this delusion. Even though Lavinia seems to have made a partial recovery during her vacation in a South Pacific Eden and an innocent affair with Avahanni, she too is forced to accept her self and her place in the New England of her day.

Hazel and Peter Niles act as foils to Lavinia and Orin: they become an ironic pair of noble savages in New England. Their childlike innocence affirms the ideals of purity and wholesomeness in contrast to the guilty Mannon consciences of Orin and Lavinia. These uncorrupted neighbors embody the elemental values of the Blessed Isles. Nonetheless, Orin recognizes the impossibility of attaining expiation and happiness through marriage to Hazel when he admits that "She's another lost island!" Lavinia, too, accepts finally that Peter can never be the Adam she mistakingly calls him, and she can never be his Biblical wife. No one returns to the prelapsarian garden in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, for O'Neill makes the simplemindedness of brother and sister Niles almost as unattractive as the Mannon guilt.

Orin's allusion to *Typee* in the play suggests that O'Neill is telling the same tale of paradise lost as Melville had told eighty-three years before. Like Melville, O'Neill recounts not only the failure of Rousseauistic primitivism, but also illustrates clearly in his ironic treatment of the various forms of Blessed Isles that any such wish is at best illusory. O'Neill, however, criticizes Puritanism, not missionaries, for developing a destructive guilt syndrome. When sex and sin are equated, love relationships are frustrated and they intensify our sense of isolation instead of our feelings of mutuality. Guilt isolates all the Mannons, and its source can be traced to the effect of Puritanism on their lives. To each successive generation of Mannons the fathers bequeath a sense of sexual sin, and the consequences of that inheritance far outstrip the influence of any

more palpable wrongdoing such as that of which Hawthorne's Pyncheons were gulty. The sins of the fathers in the Mannon family are the result of their collective acceptance of that aspect of Puritanism which considers sexual pleasure in or outside of marriage as sinful.

In Mourning Becomes Electro, Captain Brant, a figure of renewal like Holgrave in *The House of the Seven Gables*, is murdered. His death ends any chance of atonement and regeneration for the Mannon family. The destructive effects of Puritanism kill Ezra, Captain Brant, Christine, and Orin as surely as does the psychological fate born of the Oedipus complexes of Orin andLavinia. O'Neill re-employs in various forms the conventional image of exotic islands in order to gain a universally-conditioned response from his audience escape from unpleasant reality , but the islands fail for three important reasons: first of all, guilt is best relieved through some form of public confession in one's own community rather than privately and in isolation from it; second, Brant's epithet, "Blessed Isles," borrows an adjective the Christian connotations of which belie the islands' efficacy: these can never be given divine approval because the sexual license they suggest cannot be sanctified by the Puritan god of the Mannons. Finally, the islands must fail because they represent a happiness that can be gained only through the sacrifice of one's identity.

In *Mourning Becomes Electro*., O'Neill both updates the Orestia trilogy with his knowledge of modern psychology and localizes the universal Oedipal pattern which Aeschylus depicted by showing that for one part of the American character at least that pattern is reinforced by New-England Puritanism. Writing in this thematic tradition, O'Neill shows his kinship with the major writers of the American Renaissance, especially Melville and Hawthorne.

Source: Ronald T. Curran, "Insular Typees: Puritanism and Primitivism in *Mourning Becomes Electro*," in *Revue Des Langues Vivantes*, Summer, 1975, Vol. 4, pp. 371-77.

Critical Essay #6

In the following essay, Frenz and Mueller argue that Hamlet *and* Mourning Becomes Electra "*show similarities in plot wherever there are plot differences between* Hamlet *and the* Oresteia" *and that a comparison of the plays of Shakespeare and O'Neill "help to define the fundamentally different concept of action that separates O'Neill's trilogy from the* Oresteia."

There has been general critical agreement thatMowra-*ing Becomes Electra* was modeled on the *Oresteia*, and the publication of O'Neill's work diary has strengthened this assumption. On closer investigation, however, the similarities between the two plays are superficial, and more fundamental parallels may be found in O'Neill's trilogy and Shakespeare' s *Hamlet*. The latter play shares its basic plot with *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and it can be shown that in other ways, too, O'Neill owes more to Shakespeare and less to Aeschylus and to a genuine experience of Greek drama. One may indeed speak of a direct influence of *Hamlet*, but it is quite possible that the American playwright was not aware of it. The comparison of *Hamlet* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* will not only prove that these two plays show similarities in plot wherever there are plot differences between *Hamlet* and the *Oresteia* but also help to define the fundamentally different concept of action that separates O'Neill's trilogy from the *Oresteia.*

First of all, the murder of Ezra Mannon resembles the murder of *Hamlet's* father more closely than that of *Agamemnon*. Ezra Mannon is poisoned. It is easy to see the reason for this change. Since the crime had to remain undetected for the family drama to unfold free from outside interference, open violence was irreconcilable with the setting O'Neill had chosen for his trilogy. In the *Oresteia,* the murder of Agamemnon makes Clytemnaestra and Aegisthus the absolute rulers of Argos. At the end of the *Agamemnon*, after Clytemnaestra has proudly acknowledged her deed to the helpless Chorus, tyranny is established in Argos. Clytemnaestra's shameless confession, which indicates the absence of any authority to punish her, is crucial to the trilogy, since it justifies *Orestes's* revenge. In the *Oresteia*, as well as in the Electra plays of Sophocles and Euripides, secrecy surrounds the return of the avenger. Intrigue is restricted to the concealment of the avenger's identity until the moment of retribution. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, on the other hand, the crime itself is the secret, and the plot necessarily deals with the story of its discovery. That is to say, *Mourning Becomes Electra* shares its basic plot with Hamlet.

There are other differences between the *Oresteia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* that have been overlooked because O'Neill's identification of Lavinia with Electra has been accepted too readily. In the Greek tragedies Electra is the disinherited princess and her humiliation is the result of her father's death. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* the order is reversed. According to its position in the American trilogy, Homecoming should be an Agamemnon tragedy; actually, the play is dominated by the conflict between mother and daughter. The death of the father is only one episode in an Electra drama. Far from causing the humiliation of Electra-Lavinia, the death of Agamemnon-Mannon actually

terminates it. In Lavinia's and Christine's struggle for power, the daughter's discovery of the poison is the decisive event. The last remnant of Christine's doubtful ascendancy over Lavinia has now disappeared: Lavinia, casting off the role of the disinherited princess, assumes that of the avenger. There is no comparable situation in the Oresteia; for a parallel we have to turn to Hamlet. It has been suggested that *Hamlet* is both Electra and Orestes, and it may be argued that the discovery of his father's murder effects in Hamlet the change from Electra to *Orestes*. The frustration and the humiliation for which he lacked an "objective correlative" in the first court scene are absorbed by his new duty and his will to revenge.

In *Hamlet* the ghost scene achieves all at once the reversal that takes up the entire first part of O'Neill's trilogy. The discovery of the murder suddenly gives direction to Hamlet's profound but aimless disgust at his mother's "adultery." In Mourning Becomes Electra this reversal occurs gradually. Homecoming shows Lavinia at various stages of knowledge; each increase in knowledge is a step toward ascendancy, which she finally achieves with the discovery of the poison. The Lavinia who squabbles with her mother about the right to show the garden to strangers and who wilfully shuts herself off in her room is as contumacious as Electra; she is stronger than her mother, but she still lacks the power to break her authority. The quarrel, however, points to a change. Lavinia knows something about Christine that will give her power. At the end of the brief conversation she throws down the gauntlet:

LAVINIA (*harshly*): I've got to have a talk with you, Mother before long!

CHRISTINE *(turning defiantly*)'. Whenever you wish. Tonight after the Captain leaves you, if you like. But what is it you want to talk about?

LAVINIA: You'll know soon enough!

CHRISTINE (*staring at her with a questioning dread forcing a scornful smil*e)'. You always make such a mystery of things, Vinnie.

The unexpected revelation of Brant's identity turns Lavinia's knowledge of her mother's adultery into an even more effective weapon than she had thought. It gives her a superiority that is only seemingly and temporarily offset by the return of Mannon, who lends fatal support to his wife's authority. Mannon's dying words and the discovery of the poison make Christine the helpless victim of Lavinia's revenge.

Ashley Dukes, one of the critics of the London premiere of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, maintains that Mannon's return from war is like the return of Hamlet's father from the realm of death. But Mannon's death more closely parallels the ghost scene. Mannon's dying words: "She's guilty not medicine" (I,iv) are like the "Remember me" of Hamlet's father. Hamlet's reaction to his father's command is this:

Remember thee!

Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,

All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there:
And the commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter.
(I,v)

He confirms his vow by jilting Ophelia. Lavinia, too, rejects Peter's proposal from a sense of duty to her father. The parallel is valid if we consider that the sudden discovery is replaced in *Mourning Becomes Electra* by a series of partial revelations.

In this lives of Lavinia and Hamlet the call to revenge is the turning point that ends the humiliations of the past. Orestes's revenge takes a different course. His chief obstacle is the power of Clytemnaestra and Aegisthus, represented by the bodyguard at the end of the Agamemnon, and indirectly by the status of Electra at the opening of the Choephoroe. Lavinia lacks no opportunity to execute her revenge, but she wants to do it without arousing the suspicion of outsiders. Again Hamlet is the model, for the similar character of the crime entails a similar course of revenge. When Hamlet first hears the truth from his father he exclaims:

Haste me to know't, that I, withe wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge
(I,v)

But as soon as he meets his friends he realizes the difficulty of action: the need for secrecy forces Hamlet to modify his desire for instantaneous revenge.

The motif recurs in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, most explicitly when Christine initiates Brant into her plan. Brant has all sorts of ideas how he might "sweep" to his revenge: "If I could catch him alone, where no one would interfere, and let the best man come out alive as I've often seen it done in the West!" (I, ii). Christine replies succintly: "This isn't the West." Indeed, it is not. The house of the Mannons reminds one far more of the court of Denmark.

The need for secrecy and "indirections" (*Hamlet*) guides Lavinia's revenge. Her first task is to convince her brother of her mother's guilt just as Hamlet has to dispel his own doubts. Both of them decide to become actors and stage situations in which the criminal will betray himself. However, some time elapses before an opportunity arises. Hamlet mystifies the court by his antic disposition. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* Lavinia "mystifies" her mother who, like Claudius, recognizes the threat in her daughter's behavior. Later, when the roles are reversed and Lavinia has identified herself with her mother, she is terrified by Orin's deliberate mystification (I, i; II, i; III, ii). Hamlet's pretended madness furnishes Claudius with a pretext to remove the prince from the court; in *Mourning Becomes Electra.* Christine tries to convince Orin that Lavinia is mad (II, ii). The struggle between Christine and Lavinia corresponds to that of Claudius and Hamlet, but it takes very different forms. The two women fight for the possession of

Orin, and it is during the intrigues which this struggle involves that Orin becomes a true Mannon. The spoiled child of whom we had heard in *Homecoming* and who at his first appearance in *Hunted* is still associated with Peter and Hazel undergoes a change as he is drawn into the tragic circle. He exemplifies the truth of Christine's outburst: "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" (II, i). The spread of poison once corrupted Christine herself, and in the final play of the trilogy its all-pervasive power is again revealed in Lavinia's frantic but hopeless attempts to rid herself of it. Even Peter and Hazel are almost infected by it. At one point Hazel implores Lavinia not to marry Peter, who is already showing signs of her baneful influence (III, iv). The theme of poisoning thus develops a motif of the plot in a manner very similar to that of *Hamlet*. There the theme of poisoning occurs with many variations. The corruption of Laertes by Claudius is perhaps the best parallel to the corruption of Orin. Laertes runs into Claudius's trap with pathetic eagerness. His corruption, which he himself realizes only in his death, is conveyed to the audience much earlier. To Claudius's suggestion that he should fight Hamlet with an unbuttoned rapier Laertes replies:

I will do't:

And, for that purpose, I'll anoint my sword.
I bought an unction of a mountebank
So mortal that but dip a knife in it,
Where it draws blood no cataplasm so rare,
Collected from all simples that have virtue
Under the moon, can save the thing from death
That is but scratched withal. (IV, vii)

The Laertes who carries poison with him is very different from the young man who set out for France.

Christine fails to keep Orin on her side. She does not want Orin to be alone with Lavinia before she has spoken to him; hence, her anger at Peter: "Why didn't you call me, Peter? You shouldn't have left him alone!" (II, i). But Lavinia literally intercepts Orin, and her few words with him are enough to undermine Orin's trust in his mother. For a moment, indeed, Christine seems to win. It is with great reluctance that Orin tears himself from his mother to follow Lavinia to see his father's corpse (II, ii). The dialogue of Lavinia and Orin in the presence of the dead father is superficially modeled on the *kommos* of the *Choephoroe*, where the dead king is also "present." But unlike Orestes, Orin cannot be incited to action by Lavinia's words alone. Christine has too cleverly anticipated her accusations. Therefore, Lavinia suggests that they give Christine and Brant a chance to meet again at a place where Orin and Lavinia can overhear their conversation (II, iii). That meeting in the following act bears some resemblance to the scene in which Ophelia is used as a decoy. While Lavinia and Orin are plotting, Christine has followed Orin and is terrified to find the door locked. Lavinia seizes at her chance and on the spur of the moment stages a "mouse-trap." She places the medicine bottle on the dead man's chest and tells Orin to watch Christine closely. In like manner,

Hamlet and Horatio resolve not to take their eyes off the king. Both times the "play" succeeds. The similarity extends even to the reactions of Hamlet and Orin. Hamlet loses his control and forfeits half his triumph. Orin, too, is tempted to forget himself and is only restrained by Lavinia's warnings. Even so, the revelation is too much for him: he "stumbles blindly" out of the room (II, iii). His breakdown and his savage irony may be compared to Hamlet's hysterical behavior after Claudius's exit.

Like Lavinia, Orin is a descendant of Hamlet; actually, each represents a different interpretation of Hamlet. Lavinia lacks the reflection and irresolution of the popular Hamlet; she does not hesitate to act with speed and determination. She is very much like the Hamlet of Wilson Knight's "Embassy of Death." In fact, Knight's portrait really fits Lavinia better than Hamlet. Lavinia may well be called a superman even among the Mannons, who are all in their own way superhuman. Her obsession with truth and her strength of will lead her to reject escape in any disguise. Escape in *Mourning Becomes Electra* takes two forms: it is either illusion or death. Mannon's public career, Christine's affair with Brant, and Orin's dreams of a South Sea island belong to the former; the suicides of Christine and Orin, to the latter. Now Lavinia does not differ from the others in her attempt to escape into illusion; she tries harder than anyone else. She differs from the other characters in being herself the obstacle to her own happiness. Her penetrating intellect ultimately prevents any self-deception; it can bear the truth. Mannon, Orin, and Christine come to see the truth and realize the futility of illusion only to escape into death. Lavinia alone survives. She is the incarnation of the Mannon evil, "the most interesting criminal of us all," as Orin calls her (III, i, 2), and in this respect, too, she resembles Knight's Hamlet from whom death emanates.

Orin is a much less original creation. He is the disillusioned Romantic. Like the popular Hamlet, he is weak and oversensitive. He is either bullied by his mother or by his sister. He is given to reflection and is by nature unwilling to act; when he acts he does so in a state of blind excitement, a trait considered an essential feature of Hamlet by critics who think of him as the melancholy Dane.

Orin's share in the action is much slighter than Lavinia's; he does not come to the fore until *Haunted*, the plot of which is a pale echo of the preceding events. He is a portrait rather than a character revealed in action, except for his relation to Hazel, which may well be modeled on Hamlet's relation to Ophelia. Hamlet turns from his thoughts about suicide when he sees Ophelia:

Soft you now!
The fair Ophelia. Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember'd. (Ill, i)

Likewise, Orin is attracted to Hazel whether he has just returned from war or wishes to escape the burden of his guilt because she is an unchanging image of peace. But Hazel's innocence also provokes Orin's cynicism. His bitter remarks about war (II, ii) are meant to shock Hazel; in this regard they resemble Hamlet's obscenities in the play scene. In *Haunted*, Orin is led by his sense of duty to jilt Hazel just as Hamlet jilts Ophelia. Something of the intensity of Hamlet's feeling for Ophelia shows through her

report of his farewell. His savage insults in the decoy scene are but the other side of these feelings. The same contrast is found in Orin:

I have no right in the same world with her. And yet I feel so drawn to her purity! Her love for me makes me appear less vile to myself! (*Then with a harsh laugh*) And, at the same time, a million times more vile, that's the hell of it! (Ill, ii)

When he finally jilts Hazel, he first asks her gently not to love him any more (III, iii), but then changes to taunting cruelty to make the farewell final (III, iii).

Hazel offers the key to Christine's tragedy, for in a sense Christine is never so much herself as in the two short scenes with Hazel (II, i, v), which are modeled on the relationship of Gertrude with Ophelia. To compare Christine and Gertrude may seem strange at first. Gertrude is neither guilty of murder nor is it clear whether she has committed adultery. Hatred is foreign to her nature; in all she says and does she reveals her sincere affection for Ophelia and her great love for Hamlet. But above all, there is something very vague about her. Only once, in the closet scene, does she come to the fore, and then only to recede into a shadowy and ambiguous background. It is in this scene that Gertrude is shown lacking parental authority, just as Christine, in her various confrontations with her daughter, is handicapped by the loss of this authority.

There is a deliberate contrast between Gertrude's pale portrait in the play and the violent colors in which Hamlet and his father paint her offense. Christine, on the other hand, is a Gertrude with the merciful veil of ambiguity torn from her face; in a sense she is the woman one would expect from what Hamlet and his father say about Gertrude. There is no doubt about her adultery: we see her as she abandons a respectable husband to "prey on garbage," in favor of the "son of a low Canuck nurse girl" (I, i). We do not know whether Hamlet's imagination is accurate when he describes Gertrude's passion for Claudius, but Lavinia is an eyewitness of the clandestine rendezvous of Brant and Christine in a squalid New York hotel, and she dwells on it with the perverted pleasure Hamlet at times takes in sordid details (I, ii).

Although the events at Elsinore are concerned with Gertrude, she hardly takes part in them. Her only active interest seems to be the match between Hamlet and Ophelia; it is typical of her remoteness that she should continue to talk about it when it has long ceased to matter. When she hears from Claudius that Polonius has found the reason of Hamlet's madness, she replies:

I doubt it is no other but the main;
His father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage. (II, ii)

Polonius's news fascinates her. It is she, not Claudius, who asks him to come to the point, and when Claudius and Polonius have only the success of their scheme in mind, Gertrude looks to the future and addresses Ophelia:

And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish
That your good beauties be the happy cause
Of Hamlet's wildness: so shall I hope your virtues

Will bring him to his wonted way again,
To both your honours. (Ill, i)

The link between Gertrude and Ophelia is maintained in the following act. It is Gertrude who first receives the mad Ophelia; she also reports her death. At Ophelia's funeral Gertrude once more returns to the match in words whose quietness contrasts with the ranting of Hamlet:

Sweets to the sweet! Farewell.
I hoped thou shouldst have been my
Hamlet's wife:
I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,
And not have strew'd thy grave. (V, i)

The constant association of Gertrude and Ophelia in the spectator's mind balances the slanders of Hamlet and his father; her kindness to Ophelia belies at least their more extreme accusations. Gertrude looks at Ophelia with a twofold regret. She knows that she has offended Hamlet and seizes at the prospect of the match in order to secure his happiness as well as to regain his affection. It is understandable why marriage should appeal to her as the best means to this end: she herself had once experienced happiness in marriage. Her vision of the future is nostalgic; it attempts to regain the past.

The queen is choosing a young court lady as a match for her difficult son: so far the plot fits both *Hamlet* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. But Christine acts from fear rather than from solicitude for Orin. Also, she thinks primarily of her own interest; she uses Hazel as Claudius uses Ophelia. Whether Gertrude's plan is quite unselfish it is impossible to tell. Christine hopes that by furthering the romance between Orin and Hazel, which she had hitherto obstructed, she can isolate Lavinia and prevent her from winning Orin to her side. Thus she proposes a "conspiracy" between Hazel and herself, insinuating the danger that lies in Lavinia's jealousy. But the innocence with which Hazel at once goes into the trap and yet refuses to believe anything evil about Lavinia surprises and touches her, and a well of affection springs up for Hazel in whom she sees her own past reflected:

Hazel: Poor Vinnie! She was so fond of her father. I don't wonder she

Christine *(staring at her strangely*): You are genuinely good and pure of heart, aren't you?

Hazel (*embarrassed*)'. Oh, no! I'm not at all

Christine: I was like you once long ago before *(then with bitter longing*) If I could only have stayed as I was then! (II, i)

Just as Gertrude may see her former happiness in the mirage of a happy marriage between Hamlet and Ophelia, so the thought of Hazel makes Christine recall her time of courtship, which she describes to Lavinia: "No. I loved him once before I married him

incredible as that seems now! He was handsome in his lieutenant's uniform! He was silent and mysterious and romantic! But marriage soon turned his romance into disgust!" (I, ii). Then her eyes spoke and were full of life, as Mannon says in his clumsy attempt to break the barrier between them (I, iii). There was a time when she resembled Marie Brantome, the nurse girl, whose memory is invoked in the scene before Mannon's entrance in order to make the contrast between past and present as poignant as possible. Christine wants nothing so much as to be young Christine again. Her affection for Hazel and her longing for innocent youth spring from her desperate fear of growing old: "I can't let myself get ugly! Ican't!" (II, v).

A portrait of Gertrude would be incomplete without mention of her timidity and lack of initiative. In these respects, too, Christine resembles her; for her actions, premeditated as they may appear, are actually reactions to forces over which she has no control. And it is blind fear that makes her commit her fatal mistakes. The fearful Clytemnaestra is, of course, known to Sophocles and Euripides, but Aeschylus shows her as a woman of immense courage. O'Neill's Christine commits the crime of the Aeschylean Clytemnaestra, although by nature she is much more like Gertrude.

One must keep in mind the fact that O'Neill's idea of action is quite different from that of the *Oresteia*. In Aeschylus the problem of necessity always presents itself as a fateful choice: Agamemnon makes a decision "when he put on the yoke of necessity" (*Agamemnon*); Orestes *decides* to kill his mother. Aeschylus has no abstract concept of fate, let alone a fate that deprives action of its meaning or relieves the agent of his responsibility. He even lets his Chorus speak out against a determinism that denies responsibility and thinks of crime as something that merely happens (*Agamemnon*). The consequences of an action are determined by the original choice, and this choice may not in our sense be "free," but Aeschylus would never have denied its existence.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and to a certain extent in *Hamlet*, we find a very different concept of action. It is summarized by Horatio:

So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventor's heads. (V, ii)

A contrast between deliberate actions that miscarry and rash or intuitive actions that are decisive runs through the whole tragedy of Hamlet. While Orestes asks: "What shall I do?" before proceeding to kill his mother, Hamlet comes to rely on intuition. His attitude toward action is exemplified by his account of his adventures at sea:

Rashly

And praised be rashness for it, let us know,
Our indiscretion sometime serves us well

When our deep plots do pall....

Up from my cabin,
My sea-gown scarf d about me, in the dark
Groped I to find out them....

Being thus benetted round with villainies,
Ere I could make a prologue to my brains,
They had begun the play I sat me down. (V, ii)

It is a corollary of such an intuitive view of action that the agent becomes a sufferer: the events happen to him as well as to the person he acts on. Hamlet dies with Claudius; their deaths are one action, as the deaths of Agamemnon and Clytemnaestra are not. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, such ideas are carried to an extreme. Action is no longer the result of choice and loses all significance; it becomes a stage in some pathological process that ends in death. Orin committed his "heroic" deeds in a kind of trance, in which he saw a blurred face his own, his father's? which he had to kill over and over again. He sees this face again when he looks at Brant whom he has just killed:

Orin: By God, he does look like father!
Lavinia: No. Come along!
Orin (*as if talking to himself*): This is like my
dream. I've killed before over and over.
Lavinia: Orin!
Orin: 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 smiles grimly*) He looks like me, too! Maybe I've committed suicide.... It's queer! It's a rotten dirty joke on someone! (II, iv)

Thus it is not accidental that O'Neill replaces the murder of Clytemnaestra with the suicide of Christine. The change was not merely due to the setting of the trilogy and the exigencies of the plot; it tells something about O'Neill's idea of action. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* a suicidal element is contained in all action; one might almost say that action is suicide. There is a telling ambiguity in the account of Mannon' s death which will illustrate this paradoxical statement. Christine's plan is easily summarized. Shortly after she hears of Mannon's imminent return, Christine begins to plan the murder of her husband should it become necessary. She spreads a rumor of his heart disease and chooses what seems a safe way of acquiring the poison with which to do the murder. The confrontation with Lavinia convinces her that the time to act has come. She dispatches Brant to get the poison, and in the night of Mannon's return she deliberately provokes a heart attack and gives him the poison instead of his medicine. In this outline each step of the action appears to be initiated by a decision on the part of Christine, but this is not the way things happen in the play. Christine never decides to kill Mannon; the encounter with Lavinia rather pushes her into a situation in which she suddenly realizes that her plan has started moving. At first everything works surprisingly smoothly, particularly since it emerges that Mannon's disease is more serious than he had cared

to admit. But Christine had not considered the nature of the victim. The Mannon whom she planned to murder was the man of whom Orin will later say:

Death sits so naturally on you! Death becomes the Mannons! You were always like a statue of an eminent dead man sitting on a chair in a park or straddling a horse in a town square looking over the head of life without a sign of recognition cutting it dead for the impropriety of living! (II, iii)

There is something innocent about Christine's plan, simply because it had never occurred to her that the man whom she was going to murder was not already "dead." When Mannon in his awkward fashion tries to remove the barrier between them and reveals that behind his mask he is alive and suffering, Christine realizes with growing dread what her plan really involves. For a moment Mannon has doffed his mask and beneath it she sees a man who in his way loves her deeply. In helpless terror she exclaims:

For God's sake, stop talking. I don't know what you're saying. Leave me alone. What must be, must be! You make me weak! (*Then abruptly*) It's getting late. (I, iii)

Mannon, "terribly wounded," dons his mask and becomes once more a pale ghost: Christine can proceed with her plan. She decides to bring on his heart attack. But at the beginning of the following act we see a timid Christine moving away from her husband's bed and the scene of the fateful action. Mannon calls back, turns on the light, and insists on talking to her. For the quarrel that develops between them it is important to remember what Christine had earlier said to Brant:

I couldn't fool him 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! (I, ii)

Something similar is happening now, only it is not Mannon's silence that drives her toward the murder. Far from pursuing her plan, Christine is persecuted by Mannon's insinuations and coarse insults until she breaks under the strain: she tells the truth. That this collapse enables her to carry out her plan no longer matters. O'Neill does not say explicitly that Mannon would have died of his heart attack, but he strongly suggests that Christine's murder is supererogatory. Christine and Mannon tear off one another's masks and the truth that appears is more deadly than any poison could be. The only certain victim of the poison is Christine herself, for it provides Lavinia with the weapon that will drive Christine into suicide. If one insists on calling Christine's death premeditated murder, one might just as well argue that Mannon commits suicide. Both arguments assume that every action requires a responsible agent, but that is precisely the assumption which is denied in O'Neill's trilogy.

Finally, in Aeschylus the form of the trilogy has a meaning: Orestes is the third man in a chain of tragic events. He belongs to the third generation after the original crime of Thyestes; his fate is the third to be decided after the deaths of Agamemnon and

Clytemnaestra. As the "third savior" he is unobtrusively compared to Zeus, who is king in the third generation after Ouranos and Kronos. Will he succeed in breaking the chain of crime and retribution? That is the question the Chorus asks with great anxiety at the end of the *Choephoroe*; it is answered in the third play, the *Eumenides*. The three parts of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, on the other hand, are like the progressive stages of a disease. The form of the trilogy has lost its meaning; *Mourning Becomes Electra* is really one very long play that does not end until the pathological process has come to an end.

The traditional assumptions about the relationship of *Mourning Becomes Electra* and the Oresteia, then, should be revised. O'Neill misled himself and his critics by maintaining that the *Oresteia* was a blueprint for his trilogy. *Mourning Becomes Electra* significantly departs from the *Oresteia*, and wherever it does so it goes parallel with *Hamlet*. The murder of Ezra Mannon follows the poisoning of Hamlet's father, and the revenge plot based on the secrecy of crime and revenge rather than on the concealment of the avenger's identity also has Hamlet as its model. Lavinia and Orin are both descended from Hamlet rather than from Electra and Orestes, respectively. The relationship of Hamlet and Ophelia is the pattern for the relations of Peter and Hazel to Lavinia and Orin, and the relationship of Hazel and Christine is strikingly similar to that of Ophelia and Gertrude.

The comparison between *Hamlet* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* throws a new light on the "Greekness" of O'Neill's trilogy. Critics commonly contrast the "happy end" of the Oresteia with the grim pessimism of Mourning and then either condemn O'Neill for his extreme pessimism or as Roger Asselineau has done recently praise him for the deeper insight and greater daring with which he carried the story to its bitter end. But the difference is not one of degree or of mood. We have seen that the *Oresteia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* employ entirely different concepts of action. It is simply not true that O'Neill, as he said himself, psychologized Greek fate. For the "fate" that O'Neill considers so typical of Greek tragedy does not exist. There is no evidence that O'Neill's approach to Greek drama ever freed itself from the critical prejudices that persist even to this day; he saw Greek tragedy through the spectacles of a popular determinism. There is nothing in *Mourning Becomes Electra* which would suggest that O'Neill ever had an original experience of Greek drama in general, or of the *Oresteia* in particular. No doubt, he knew Aeschylus's trilogy well, but he must have read it with a notion, at once very strong and rather vague, of what a Greek tragedy ought to be like. He never penetrated to the Greekness of it; nor was he inspired by it. O'Neill's trilogy is no more Greek than the house of the Mannons: it only has a Greek facade.

Source: Horst Frenz and Martin Mueller, "More Shakespeare and Less Aeschylus in Eugene O'Neill 's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, " in *American Literature*, 1966, Vol. 38, pp. 85-100.

Critical Essay #7

In this favorable review of O'Neill'splay, Krutch appraises the original production o/Mourning Becomes Electra *as possessing all the "virtues ... which one expects in the best contemporary dramatic writing."*

Except for a dinner intermission Eugene O'Neill's new trilogy, *Mourning Becomes Electra* (Guild Theater), runs from five o' clock in the afternoon until about eleven-fifteen in the evening. Seldom if ever has any play received a reception so unreservedly enthusiastic as this one was accorded by the New York newspapers and, to begin with, I can only say that I share the enthusiasm to the full. Here, in the first place, are those virtues intelligence, insight, and rapid, absorbing action which one expects in the best contemporary dramatic writing. But here also are a largeness of conception and a more than local or temporary significance which put to rest those doubts which usually arise when one is tempted to attribute a lasting greatness to any play of our generation. O'Neill, though thoroughly "modern," is not dealing with the accidents of contemporary life. He has managed to give his I am almost tempted to say "our" version of a tale which implies something concerning the most permanent aspects of human nature, and it is hard to imagine how the play could lose its interest merely because of those superficial changes which take place from generation to generation. For this reason it may turn out to be the only permanent contribution yet made by the twentieth century to dramatic literature.

As the title suggests, O'Neill's fable follows, almost incident for incident, the main outlines of the Greek story. Though he has set the action in New England just after the Civil War, his Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon and his Electra persuades Orestes to bring about the death of their common mother. Nor do such changes as are necessarily made in the motivation of the characters so much modify the effect of the story as merely restore that effect by translating the story into terms which we can fully comprehend. It is true that Electra loves her father and that Orestes loves his mother in a fashion which the Greeks either did not understand or, at least, did not specify. It is true also that the play implies that the psychological quirks responsible for the tragedy are the result of a conflict between puritanism and healthy love. But this is *merely* the way in which we understand such situations, and the fact remains that these things are merely implied, that the implications exist for the sake of the play, not the play for the sake of the implications. It is, moreover, this fact more than any other which indicates something very important in the nature of O'Neill's achievement.

Hitherto most of our best plays have been of necessity perhaps concerned primarily with the exposition and defense of their intellectual or moral or psychological backgrounds. They have been written to demonstrate that it was legitimate to understand or judge men in the new ways characteristic of our time. But O'Neill has succeeded in writing a great play in which a reversal of this emphasis has taken place at last. Because its thesis is taken for granted, it has no thesis. It is no more an exposition or defense of a modern psychological conception than Aeschylus is an exposition or defense of the tenets of the Greek religion, even though it does accept the

one as Aeschylus accepts the other. It is on the other hand and like all supremely great pieces of literature primarily about the passions and primarily addressed to our interest in them. Once more we have a great play which does not "mean" anything in the sense that the plays of Ibsen or Shaw or Galsworthy usually mean something, but one which does, on the contrary, mean the same thing that "Oedipus" and "Hamlet" and "Macbeth" mean namely, that human beings are great and terrible creatures when they are in the grip of great passions, and that the spectacle of them is not only absorbing but also and at once horrible and cleansing. Nineteenth-century critics of Shakespeare said that his plays were like the facts of nature, and though this statement has no intellectual content it does imply something concerning that attitude which we adopt toward *Mourning Becomes Electro*, as well as toward Shakespeare. Our arguments and our analyses are unimportant as long as we attempt to discover in them the secret of our interest. What we do is merely to accept these fables as though they were facts and sit amazed by the height and the depth of human passions, by the grandeur and meanness of human deeds. Perhaps no one knows exactly what it means to be "purged by pity and terror," but for that very reason, perhaps, one returns to the phrase.

To find in the play any lack at all one must compare it with the very greatest works of dramatic literature, but when one does compare it with "Hamlet" or "Macbeth" one realizes that it does lack just one thing and that that thing is language words as thrilling as the action which accompanies them. Take, for example, the scene in which Orin (Orestes) stands beside the bier of his father and apostrophizes the body laid there. No one can deny that the speech is a good one, but what one desires with an almost agonizing desire is something not merely good but something incredibly magnificent, something like "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow ..." or "I could a tale unfold whose lightest word ...." If by some miracle such words could come, the situation would not be unworthy of them. Here is a scenario to which the most soaring eloquence and the most profound poetry are appropriate, and if it were granted us we should be swept aloft as no Anglo-Saxon audience since Shakespeare's time has had an opportunity to be. But no modern is capable of language really worthy of O'Neill's play, and the lack of that one thing is the penalty we must pay for living in an age which is not equal to more than prose. Nor is it to be supposed that I make this reservation merely for the purpose of saying that Mr. O'Neill's play is not so good as the best of Shakespeare; I make it, on the contrary, in order to indicate where one must go in order to find a worthy comparison.

Space is lacking to pay fitting tribute to the production and acting of the play. It must suffice to say that both they and the setting do it justice. Both Nazimova as Christine (Clytemnestra) and Alice Brady as Lavinia (Electra) contribute performances hardly less notable in their own way than the play, and, indeed, everyone concerned in the production may be said to share somewhat in the achievement. *Mourning Becomes Electra* reads well; when it comes to life on the stage of the Guild Theater it is no less than tremendous.

Source: Joseph Wood Krutch, "OurElectra," in the *Nation*, Vol. CXXXIII, no. 3463, November 18, 1931, pp. 551-52.

Critical Essay #8

Claiming that the playwright "has at last written a straightforward tragedy of major proportions," Skinner offers a positive review of the debut production of O'Neill's play.

Eugene O'Neill has at last written a straightforward tragedy of major proportions. For reasons which I shall try to explain later on, it would be lacking in a true sense of proportion to call it a "great" tragedy in spite of the fact that many of its passages are infused with the true greatness of the tragic spirit, and in spite of the further fact that in structure, in sequence and in rhythm, the three plays composing the trilogy, "*Mourning Becomes Electra*, " contain, by all odds, the finest dramatic writing of O'Neill's career.

As to the general character of this ambitious trilogy, it is already widely understood that O'Neill has made the deliberate experiment of transposing the basic legend of several of the most important Greek tragedies into the atmosphere and period of New England immediately after the Civil War. One can see clearly that O'Neill has felt, in the perfect outer form and inner emotional turmoil of New of ancient Greece. Essentially, however, he is not writing a tragedy of New England, but a tragedy of universal proportions expressing one of the oldest psychological problems of the tragic spirit, and merely using terms and circumstances sufficiently close to the present day to give it an immediate and understandable quality for modern audiences.

"*Mourning Becomes Electro*1' is a restatement for our own century of the story of the house of Atreus, of the murder of Agamemnon by his wife, Clytemnestra, of the vengeance wreaked upon her by Agamemnon's children, Electra and Orestes, and of their further pursuit by the Furies for having committed the sin of matricide. The core of Greek tragedy obviously lay in just such conflicts of obligation. Electra and Orestes were caught between the obligation to avenge their father's murder and the unspeakable horror of being forced, as part of that vengeance, to kill their own mother, thus piling crime upon crime through generations. The Greeks, always highly objective in their expression of such problems, made their tragic characters chiefly the victims of fate. Revenge was ordered by a god. But, in executing that revenge, another god was offended, and demanded in turn further punishment for the new crime.

O'Neill now restates this classic tragic dilemma, but in a spirit which is far removed from Greek objectivity. He summons up, instead of fate and factious gods, those mysterious inner impulses of the neurotic mind which modern psychologists have attempted to chart and label under the names of various "complexes." He summons them in terms of a mother's jealousy of her own daughter, of a son's jealousy of his father, and of a daughter's unconscious desire to occupy in the household the triple mental role of wife, mother and sister.

In all fairness to modern psychologists, it should be said that these explanations of tragic motives represent merely one school of thought, and a rather extreme and partly discredited one at that. When a young man shows signs of moral weakness, for example, and is unable to face the independent responsibilities of manhood, the more

advanced psychologists are content to say that he is regressing to a childish attitude and to a time when all decisions were made for him and when any rebuffs of the world could soon be forgotten at a mother's knee. Such a man might easily prefer for a wife the maternal type of woman who mothers him in difficulties, to a more independent type who forces him to face responsibilities squarely. He might also resent a domineering father who tried to drive him from his mother's apron strings. All these weaknesses and hidden resentments might easily result in a neurotic state of mind, in violent excesses of rage and remorse and in a perpetual inner conflict leading to a tragic outcome. The other and older school of psychologists would attribute the same neurotic symptoms to the young man's unadmitted and abnormal attachment to his own mother and to a definite jealousy of his own father. O'Neill uses the explanations of this latter school to describe the motives for his tragedy. Every one of his main characters is tied to a definite incestuous desire. This is more than evident at each successive stage of the trilogy, even though O'Neill carefully avoids using any of the modern psychological jargon.

Electra (Lavinia Mannon in the play) is doubly moved to avenge her father's death by the fact of her jealousy of her mother in relation to two men, her dead father and her mother's lover, who is also a cousin of her father, with many of her father's personal traits. Again, Orestes (Orin Mannon in the play) seeks in Electra (Lavinia) a substitute for the morbid love of his dead mother, and then, in the horror of his discovery, commits suicide. A dozen such deep and sinister currents of perverted emotion fill the course of the play, logically enough if you once accept the premise of O'Neill's school of mental analysis, but without any of the subtler modifying influences which a broader and less heavily sexualized interpretation would bring.

O'Neill departs still further from the Greek tradition and feeling in quailing before the possibility of matricide. Lavinia and Orin are content to avenge their father's death by killing their mother's lover. Nevertheless, when the shock of his death leads their mother to commit suicide, Orin feels as guilty as if he had killed her. Lavinia does not share this sense of guilt. But when Orin, too, kills himself, then, at last, Lavinia shuts herself up in the house of tragic memories, to expiate through years of silent though proud seclusion, the sins of her family. Symbolically, at least, O'Neill has chosen to end with the theme of the outcast and blind Oedipus, Lavina shutting out the sight of the world and living in it no more.

Essentially, then, "*Mourning Becomes Electro*." is not a Greek tragedy except in the bare outlines of the plot. Even the plot avoids the Greek culmination of matricide. The play is utterly modern (though hardly up to date) in its analysis of motives, and as far removed from the Greek spirit as Freud from Aristotle. What we have is a deeply involved story of abnormal desires transmitting themselves bit by bit into a chain of tragic and terrible consequences, into an overwhelming sense of guilt for each character in turn and at last into the lonely expiation and pride of Lavinia a pride which lets her say "I ask forgiveness of no one. I forgive myself!" In the very height and stature of this pride we fail to discover the rumor of resurrection which alone could lend the note of great lyric tragedy to this dark story. The trilogy is written with restrained intensity, with superb emotional power and with tremendous climactic pace. It holds both emotions and

interest with unrelenting firmness. It is a work of greatness in playwriting but it fails to emerge as a great tragedy. It is limited by the proud self-pity of its ending and by that symbolic blindness which does not presage resurrection from the house of the dead.

The Theatre Guild has given a production of extraordinary beauty and austerity to this group of three plays. In selecting Robert Edmond Jones to create the settings, and Alice Brady, Alia Nazimova, Earl Larimore and Thomas Chalmers for the leading parts, the Guild has shown rare aptitude in putting together exactly the qualities of artistry needed to bring the utmost of beauty and distinction from the sinister material of the plays themselves. No matter what one may think of the play material, there can be no question that, as the Guild has mounted it, it becomes one of the most distinguished exhibits we have had in many years of the power of the theatre to create and sustain illusion. The three plays of the trilogy are given in one day, the first play in the afternoon and the second and third in the evening. It might be added, at this point, that O'Neill has abandoned for the purposes of this trilogy the entire bag of theatrical tricks with which he has distorted so many of his plays. There are none of the asides of *Strange Interlude*, and there are no masks. In consequence, every moment is used to advance the dramatic action without the impediment of theatrical padding. The plays run through swiftly and directly in the writing as well as in the production.

Philip Moeller has directed this trilogy with consummate artistry and finely disciplined restraint. It is easily the best work of his career. The stage settings by Robert Edmond Jones catch the spirit of the plays with extraordinary fidelity. The stage curtain shows the Greek-Colonial fagade of the gloomy house of Mannon and shows, more strikingly than any words could possibly explain, what is in O'Neill's mind namely, the sense of identity between the spirit of New England and the spirit of Greece. Both the interior and the exterior scenes of the house itself, and the scene of a chipper ship at its dock in Boston, are typical expressions of Mr. Jones's finest artistry, that is, his ability to combine realism with an overpowering atmosphere of universal suggestion.

But it is the acting cast, after all, which deserves the maximum amount of praise for its complete mastery of one of the most difficult tasks ever assigned to a group of actors. The Lavinia of Alice Brady is one of the truly astonishing figures of the modern theatre. The way in which she manages to convey a torrent of interior emotions through an exterior of calm austerity is an achievement almost without parallel. The part of the mother, as played by Alia Nazimova, is also a performance of unquestioned greatness. Her sea-captain lover is played by Thomas Chalmers with downrightness and clear understanding, and Earl Larimore brings to the part of the weakling, Orin, the full terror of growing insanity.

In general, it is still true that O'Neill exhibits through this trilogy the picture of volcanic emotions violently at war with his intellect. These emotions, which might become his greatest creative gift, still lack utterly the disciplined direction of an informed will. Certainly it is the character of Lavinia who seems to be the creative artist in O'Neill, just as it is the distracted Orin who represents his lack of intellectual stability. There is no question that O'Neill is a true artist, and with true artists it is never possible to separate completely the artist from his work. There is still nothing to indicate that O'Neill, as an

artist, has yet achieved that self-mastery which, if once united with his creative power, might easily make him one of the great playwrights of all time. There is too much in this ' *'Electra*" trilogy to recall the futile search and the ultimate tragedy of "Dynamo," and yet if Lavinia, as a symbol of O'Neill's power, should ever emerge from her darkened house of the dead, we would unquestionably witness something of astonishing beauty.

Source: Richard Dana Skinner, Review of *Mourning Becomes Electro*, in the *Commonweal*, Vol. XV, no. 2, November 11, 1931, pp. 46-47.

Adaptations

In 1947, RKO Pictures released an adaptation of the play, which starred Raymond Massey, Rosalind Russell, and Michael Redgrave. The film compresses the play's six hours of action into three.

Topics for Further Study

Consider how setting the play after the Civil War and in New England impacts the play's themes and meaning.

Several times during the play, music serves to underscore the themes of *Mourning Becomes Electra.* Discuss the role music plays in O'Neill's play. What do the songs tell us about the characters who sing them, and about the play and the character's actions in general?

Compare and contrast O'Neill's play to the original *Oresteia*. Other than the obvious changes in setting, what other alterations did the playwright make? How do these changes function to modernize and deepen the play? What changes would you make to set it in the 21st century?

Compare and Contrast

1931: America is in the midst of a severe economic depression, known as the Great Depression. Led by President Franklin Roosevelt, the federal government proposes and implements a series of social programs known as "The New Deal."

Today: The country benefits from a robust and growing economy. Although there is still a wide chasm between the well-off and poor segments of society, most people enjoy low interest rates, low unemployment, a booming stock market, and cheap and accessible sources of fuel.

1931: Most Americans travel by train or ship. Commercial aviation is very limited, and cars are becoming more popular and financially viable for the middle classes. This improved mobility allows people to move from the cities into surrounding suburbs.

Today: Most Americans travel by car and airplane. Airline price wars decrease airline fares, allowing many Americans to travel frequently and cheaply.

1931: Robert Frost's *Collected Poems* wins a Pulitzer Prize, philanthropist Albert Schweitzer publishes *My Life and Thoughts*, Disney releases its first color film, *Flowers and Trees*, and the "Star-Spangled Banner" becomes America's National Anthem.

Today: Frost remains a popular and influential poet. Schweitzer's ideal of dedicating one's life to serving others inspired many, as seen in Mother Theresa's work with the sick and Jimmy Carter's work for Habitat for Humanity. Today, most films we see on television and in theaters are in color.

What Do I Read Next?

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411 BC) is a comic and perhaps the first anti-war play.

Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* (1895) describes the experiences of a young soldier during the Civil War.

Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) considers whether people act the ways they do because of nature (genetics, hormones) or nurture (environment, family life, social experiences).

Considered by many critics the perfect one-act play, John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904) chronicles the story of a mother who has lost her husband and all her sons to the sea.

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Comprised of critical essays on O'Neill's work.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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