

Chapter II

O'Neill's Use of Greek Tragic Elements:

Structure, the Unities of Time and Place, Chorus, and Masks

Eugene O'Neill is known as an experimental writer for he experimented with many literary theories in his writing, such as symbolism in The Hairy Ape, symbolism combined with realism in The Emperor Jones, expressionism in The Hairy Ape, The Emperor Jones and Days Without End, and naturalism in Long Day's Journey into Night, Mourning Becomes Electra, and Desire Under the Elms, in order to create a drama appropriate for modern theatre. Apart from these literary theories, O'Neill was also fascinated by ancient literature, especially Greek tragedy, with one of his desires being to re-create ancient tragedy and become an Aeschylus of his time.¹ In his Fragmentary Diary for 7 and 8 May 1929, he even made notes for his "Life of Aeschylus idea" which may have been inspired by the work he had done on his "Greek Tragedy plot idea." Unfortunately, he did not complete the play, leaving only a skeleton outline and notes.

¹Eric Bentley, "Trying to Like O'Neill," in O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 382.

Unlike other writers who adapt one or two elements of Greek tragedy into their works primarily for purposes of plot development, O'Neill utilizes several of the elements of ancient Greek tragedy and develops them to suit his time. In his three notably Greek influenced tragedies, namely Desire Under the Elms (1924), Lazarus Laughed (1925-26) and Mourning Becomes Electra (1929-31), the Greek tragic elements O'Neill uses are structure, chorus, unities of time and place, masks, plot, theme, the tragic hero, and destiny and its revelations. This chapter will deal only with structure, chorus, unities of time and place, and masks.

According to Aristotle's Poetics, Greek tragedies were usually created in trilogies, a tragedy composed of three separate but interrelated tragedies. O'Neill, in writing Desire Under the Elms and Mourning Becomes Electra, tries to account for this aspect in order "to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy in as near the Greek as one can grasp it. . ."² and to achieve his ambition to become an Aeschylus of his time. In Desire Under the Elms, his naturalistic New England variant on the

²Eugene O'Neill, Letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn, 1952, quoted in "Eugene O'Neill," in A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, Vol. 1: 1900-1940, C. W. E. Bigsby (Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 45.

Phaedra-Hippolytus theme, O'Neill divides the play into three parts which can be considered a trilogy. As O'Neill develops his writing, he finally succeeds in composing a true trilogy called Mourning Becomes Electra, a play largely influenced by Aeschylus' the Oresteia. Like the Aeschylean trilogy, which is divided into three tragedies entitled Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, and Eumenides, O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra is also divided into three tragedies called Homecoming, The Hunted and The Haunted.

In Desire Under the Elms, each part of the so-called trilogy consists of four scenes while Lazarus Laughed, although not a trilogy, is composed of four acts each of which consists of two scenes. However, it is in Mourning Becomes Electra, a play which emerged from O'Neill's "Greek Tragedy idea" and which is based loosely on Aeschylus' the Oresteia, that O'Neill follows almost incident for incident the structure of the Greek original. Furthermore, each of the tragedies within the trilogy also consists of four to five acts: the first tragedy, Homecoming, consists of four acts, the second, the Hunted, five acts, and the third, The Haunted, five acts. And while Greek tragedy has "stasima" or choral songs to mark off a tragedy into "acts," O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms, Lazarus Laughed, and Mourning Becomes Electra have the change of scenes to distinguish the play's acts. For example, Act I in Homecoming takes place before the

Mannon house, Act II in Ezra Mannon's study, Act III again before the Mannon house, and Act IV in Ezra Mannon's bedroom. However, there are also some "stasima" in Lazarus Laughed and Mourning Becomes Electra. In Lazarus Laughed, actual choral songs together with the change of scenes are used to mark off the acts. Some of the scenes in Lazarus Laughed begin and end with a choral song as in Act I, scenes i and ii. Act IV, scene ii begins with a choral song, and Act II, scenes i and ii, and Act III, scenes i and ii end with a choral song. In Mourning Becomes Electra, only Acts I and III of the first tragedy and Act IV of the second tragedy begin with the song "Shenandoah"³--"the brooding rhythm of the sea"⁴--sung by Seth Beckwith, the Mannon's gardener and by the Chantyman with the crew as chorus respectively. The song "Shenandoah" serves as a chorus song like the "stasima" in Greek tragedy.

³The song O'Neill learned when he was a crew member on the Charles Racine. It is a melancholy song concerning the desire to put to sea, which is related to the theme of the "Blessed Isles"--a dream of Eden which all the Mannons share.

⁴Eugene O'Neill, Mourning Becomes Electra, in his Three Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Vintage Books, c 1958.), p. 227. All future references to the work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

Apart from being written in trilogy form, a Greek tragedy consists of six or seven parts: the prologue, four or five episodes or "acts," and the exodos or epilogue. The prologue, as discussed by Aristotle in his Poetics, is the introductory scene of the play in which the background of the play is created. However, the Greek tragedy can also begin with either the prologue or the parodos, the chorus' entrance song before they take part in an action. The exodos, which is the last section of the play, is all that succeeds the last chorus song.

In Desire Under the Elms, Lazarus Laughed and Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill does provide a parodos, but not as a separate section as in Greek tragedy. In Desire Under the Elms, the opening of the play, Part I, scenes i and ii, is really a parodos for it is two dialogues--one between Cabot's two cunning sons, Simeon and Peter, and the other between his three sons, Simeon, Peter and Eben. Their dialogues establish the background of the play. In the first dialogue, they talk about Simeon's wife who died eighteen years ago, about the gold rush in California, and their wish for the death of their father who has been away for two months. In the second dialogue, they provide more background for the play and their conversation bears some relation to the main theme of the play: the way Cabot laboured Eben's mother to death and their quasi-incestuous relationship with Min, a town prostitute whom their father has visited. Therefore,

these dialogues serve as the play's parodos because the function of Cabot's sons here is really that of the chorus in the parodos of Greek tragedy: that is, to provide the background and the main theme of the play.

Lazarus Laughed opens with the chorus of Old Men's song followed by conversations between Lazarus' guests, who also serve as another chorus of the play. This is a true parados since the audience are provided with the play's complete background: the miracle of Lazarus' resurrection, his change after the miracle and the events before his death. In Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill also begins each tragedy of the trilogy with a parodos. The song sung at the beginning of Act I in Homecoming and the dialogues among the members of the "chorus" of the people in the opening scene of each tragedy, like those between Amos Ames and his wife Louisa, and Minnie and Seth Beckwith in Homecoming, between Josiah Borden and his wife, and Everett Hills and his wife and Doctor Joseph Blake in The Hunted, and between Seth Beckwith, Amos Ames, Abner Small, Joe Silva and Ira Mackel in The Haunted, all serve as parados, after which the true action takes place.

Generally, in Greek tragedy violent action normally took place "off-stage." The audience found out about a violent incident by means of a messenger's announcement or another character's revelation. Likewise, in Desire Under the Elms, Abbie's murder of her son is not enacted on the stage. The audience knows of it when she

tells Eben: "I--I killed him, Eben,"⁵ and when she tells Cabot: "I killed him, I tell ye! I smothered him" (Desire, III.iv, p. 54). In Lazarus Laughed, the crucifixion of Jesus is revealed by a Messenger: "The Nazarene has been crucified! . . . Jesus is dead! Our Lord is murdered!"⁶ In Act II, scene ii, the massacre of Lazarus' followers is not enacted but the audience will hear from off-stage the blaring trumpets of the Legions and the incident itself is then described by a Roman General, Crassus: "They did not wait for our attack. They charged upon us, laughing! . . . They stabbed themselves, dancing as though it were a festival! They died, laughing, in one another's arms!" (Lazarus Laughed, II.ii, p. 494). And in The Haunted, the suicidal shooting of Christine and Orin are also heard from off-stage. However, there are some murders which are presented on stage, like Pompeia's poisoning of Miriam, Caligula's strangling of Tiberius, and Tiberius Caesar's

⁵Eugene O'Neill, Desire Under the Elms, in Three Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Vintage Books, c 1952.), p. 51. All future references to the work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁶Eugene O'Neill, Lazarus Laughed, in his Nine Plays, int. Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Random House, 1932), p. 398. All future references to the work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

burning alive of Lazarus in Lazarus Laughed. This may be because these acts physically are not considered as horrible as the murders in Greek tragedy for they have nothing to do with blood.

Another important feature of Greek tragedy which O'Neill tries to capture in his writing is that of the "unities." In the Poetics, Aristotle says that a tragedy should be confined to a twenty-four hour period or something near that. Thus, in order to cope with this unity of time, "[a] correlary use of cosmic rhythms by O'Neill was the day-night cycle."⁷ In Desire Under the Elms, each part of the play is confined to a twenty-four-hour period. That is, Part I begins with sunset and ends with dawn of the same night. Part II opens with an afternoon two months later and closes with dawn of the same night. Similarly, Part III takes place at night in the following year and ends with an hour after dawn.

In writing Lazarus Laughed, O'Neill made extensive use of Greek "double chronology" to limit the time cycle. The play opens at twilight of a certain day; each scene in the play, therefore, occurs at night, at a later hour each time. The last scene occurs just before dawn.

⁷John H. Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University, 1972), p. 19.

Therefore, although the action of the play is spread out over months, the time cycle is that from twilight to predawn.

Double chronology is also used to some extent in the Mourning Becomes Electra trilogy to achieve the appearance of conformity to the unity of time. In the Homecoming, O'Neill confines the time to a day in April and another day only a week later. The play opens on a late afternoon in April just after the end of the Civil War. Between Acts I and II no time elapses. Between Acts II and III, some time elapses. Making use of the Greek double chronology device, O'Neill opens Act III around nine o'clock of a night a week later. Then, in Act IV, the action develops until near daybreak which is the time when the play ends. Thus, the play is seemingly confined to a twenty-four hour period. In the second tragedy, The Hunted, the action takes place on a moonlit night, a night two days later, and the night of the following day. The play opens on a moonlit night two days after the murder of Ezra Mannon. Between Acts I, II, and III no time elapses while between Acts III and IV, and Acts IV and V, some time elapses. That is, Act IV takes place a night two days later and Act V takes place the night of the following day. However, the play is still apparently confined to one night. In The Haunted, the last tragedy of the trilogy, the play takes place during an evening in summer, an evening a month later, and a late afternoon

three days later. That is the play opens on an evening in the summer of 1866 and one month elapses between Acts I and II, and three days between Acts III and IV. However, the time cycle is that of evening to late afternoon. Thus, the play is seemingly confined to a twenty-four hour period. Therefore, in using the double chronology device as the Greek tragedians did, O'Neill is capable of confining his tragedies to an apparent twenty-four hour period of time.

Apart from the unity of time, another unity O'Neill tries to capture is the unity of place, which O'Neill maintains faithfully in Desire Under the Elms and Mourning Becomes Electra. In Greek tragedy, the play typically opens before a palace or temple in Greece. However, there are some tragedies which take place at other places such as in a rustic landscape as in Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus, in front of the tomb of Agamemnon as in Aeschylus' The Libation Bearers, and in front of a farmhouse in the countryside as in Euripides' Electra. O'Neill seems to keep this in mind. Thus, the play Desire Under the Elms opens in front of Cabot's farmhouse, and as the play develops it shifts to a room inside and then back to the front of the farmhouse again. However, in producing this play on stage, O'Neill did not change the scene. Throughout the play, the scene remained the same, but a wall was removed to reveal the room or rooms where the action took place.

In creating Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill opens each of his three tragedies before the Mannon house in New England, a setting very similar to that of a Greek tragedy. Although the setting is New England, O'Neill uses Greek architecture for the Mannon building to create the illusion of a Greek temple. The house looks like a "white Grecian temple portico with its six tall columns" (Homecoming, I, p. 227). Although the first tragedy of the trilogy is not limited to one scene, there is no change of place--rather, just a shift of scenes in and around the Mannons' home. It is only in Act IV of the second tragedy that there is a change of place. While other acts take place at the Mannon house, Act IV takes place at a seaport in East Boston. Here, O'Neill's motive for this shift is obvious, to allow Christine to reveal freely her deed without anxiety about being overheard. This leads to Orin's enlightenment of the real cause of his father's death and the relationship between his mother and Brant which is very important for the purpose of plot development.

In writing Lazarus Laughed, O'Neill does not follow the unity of place for the scenes vary from place to place; however, he does try to maintain a classical setting. That is, some of the settings are in front of a temple or the palace in Rome. The other settings are at Lazarus' home in Bethany, on a street in Athens or inside a Roman theatre. Thus, except for Lazarus Laughed, we can

say that Desire Under the Elms and Mourning Becomes Electra maintain the unity of place and that all of the play have settings similar to those of the Greek originals.

Apart from the prologue, parodos and the unities of time and place, in Greek tragedy there is always a chorus that serves many functions. O'Neill, in writing his Greek influenced plays, also accounts for this aspect either directly or indirectly. In Desire Under the Elms, he has the two elder sons of Cabot and Cabot's guests from neighboring farms as his choruses. In Lazarus Laughed, he has the chorus of Old Men, the chorus of Seven Guests, the chorus of Lazarus' Followers, the chorus of Greeks, the chorus of Senators, the chorus of the Legions, the chorus of the Guard, and the Crowd, who themselves also serve as a chorus. All of these choruses in the play wear masks. In one of his letters to Kenneth Macgowan, O'Neill emphatically declares deliberate use of both the masks and chorus as integral parts of the play:

[Lazarus Laughed] is not a scenic designer's [play]. It should be plain on the program--this is "important" to me!--that masks, chorus, etc. are all in my script, that they are in my design of this play for an imaginative theatre. I want to be known as having done this, for better or worse, so there can be no

mistake in people's minds as to the materials I work with.⁸

The "chorus" of Cabot's neighbors in Desire Under the Elms and the choruses in Lazarus Laughed do sing and dance the choral song, which is the main function of the chorus in Greek tragedy. However, in Mourning Becomes Electra, although O'Neill introduces a "chorus" in each tragedy of the trilogy, it is not really a chorus of a traditional Greek type in that their function in the play is not to sing and dance the choral song. Perhaps O'Neill realized, as he developed his writing, that, as Oliver Taplin states:

choral singing and dancing has no equivalent place in [modern] life to that it held in the Greek's life. . . . For the Greeks a chorus was an intergral part of many communal occasions, religious and secular. . . .⁹

Thus, his chorus in Mourning Becomes Electra is not a chorus of elders of ancient Greek tragedy but of the commonfolk of New England, whom O'Neill describes as

⁸Eugene O'Neill, Letter to Macgowan, Jan. 21, 1927, in The Theatre We Worked For: The Letters of Eugene O'Neill to Kenneth Macgowan, ed. Jackson R. Bryer with the assistance of Ruth M. Alvares (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 146.

⁹Oliver Taplin, Greek Tragedy in Action (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1978), p. 13.

"townsfolk rather than individuals, a chorus representing the town come to look and listen and spy on the rich and exclusive Mannon" (Homecoming, I, p. 228).

Unlike the Greek chorus, O'Neill's chorus does not remain on the stage until the end of the play; they enter and leave the stage at a certain time. In Desire Under the Elms, the elder sons of Cabot appear only in Part I, and the neighbors who come to the feast at Cabot's house show up only in Part III, scene i. Similarly, the choruses in Lazarus Laughed do not remain on the stage until the end of the play; they enter and leave the stage. Only the choruses of Old Men and Lazarus' Followers appear from time to time throughout the play while the others appear only in a certain act. The chorus of each tragedy in Mourning Becomes Electra appears in the opening scene of each play and then disappears. Only Seth Beckwith, who serves as the leader of the chorus, and Peter Niles and his sister, Hazel Niles, enter and exit from time to time throughout.

According to Aristotle, "[t]he Chorus . . . should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and take a share in the

action. . . ." ¹⁰ Additionally, "[a]t times [their leader] might take part in spoken interchange with the actors."¹¹ Like the Greek chorus, O'Neill's chorus is regarded as one of the actors. In Desire Under the Elms, Simeon and Peter, who serve as the "chorus" of the play, converse with and sell their shares of the farm to Eben, their half-brother who is a protagonist in the play. In Part III, scene i, there are also other characters who serve as the "chorus" of the play. They are Cabot's neighbors at the feast celebrating his supposed son. Like Simeon and Peter, these neighbors have spoken with the other protagonists in the play, Cabot and Abbie. In this scene, when Abbie asks where Eben is, a girl who is one of Cabot's neighbors replies that Eben has spent most of his time at home since "she" came. This reveals to the audience that all the neighbors know about Abbie and Eben's affair. Additionally, when Cabot tells the Fiddler to stop laughing at Eben for he says Eben is better than any of his neighbors and can do a day's work almost up to what he can, the Fiddler laughingly says: "An' he kin

¹⁰Aristotle, On Poetics, trans. Ingram Bywater, in The Work of Aristotle, Vol. 2, ed. Robert Maynard (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), p. 691.

¹¹Alexander W. Allison, Arthur J. Carr, and Arthur M. Eastman, "Introduction," in Masterpieces of the Drama (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), p. 1.

do a good night's work too!" (Desire, III.i, p. 42). From this, the audience know that Eben is having a quasi-incestuous relationship with his step-mother, Abbie.

Similarly, the chorus of Old Men in Lazarus Laughed also play an important role in the play. They threaten Lazarus with a hostile chant:

Beware, Lazarus!
 We burn! We kill!
 We crucify!
 Death! Death!

(Lazarus Laughed, I.ii, p. 396)

In Act II, scene i, the Greek crowd led by their chorus nearly fight with the Roman soldiers in order to help Lazarus because they think that he is the reincarnation of their God, Dionysus. These choral actions suggest to the audience that there are people who love Lazarus and are ready to help him, but that, on the other hand, there also are those who hate him and want to kill him. In the beginning of Act II, scene ii, two members of the chorus of the Senators even command Lazarus, the protagonist of the play:

FIRST SENATOR. I have a mind to question him.
 (*Calls as to a slave*) You, there! Jew, turn round! In the name of the Senator! (*Lazarus seems not to hear him. LUCIUS remarks with a weary smile*) So much for our authority!

SIXTH SENATOR. (*with injured dignity*) What

insolence! (*In a rage*) Ho, barbarian cur, turn round!
The Senator commands you!

(Lazarus Laughed, II.ii, p. 424)

Moreover, the First Senator, known as Lucius, haughtily haggles with Caligula, another protagonist of the play, in this very act and scene, thus further illustrating the involvement of the chorus in the play.

The chorus in Mourning Becomes Electra is also given an important role in the play. They give the protagonist sage council and warnings. In Homecoming, Seth warns Lavinia of Adam Brant's identity and tells her about the history of her grandfather's brother and his wife. He also suggests to her a way to verify his story, saying: "Catch him off guard sometime and put it up to him strong--as if you know it--and see if mebbe he didn't give himself away" (Homecoming, I., p. 240). It is also he who at the end of the closing scene of the trilogy warns Lavinia not to go in the Mannon house when she remarks that she will bind herself to the Mannon dead, because he fears that she will commit suicide like her mother and brother. Moreover, Peter Niles and his sister, Hazel, who also serve as a chorus in the trilogy, act as actors in the play. Peter, who appears again and again throughout the trilogy, is the suitor Lavinia initially rejects and then, as a result of his persistence, accepts through her own proposal. Similarly, Peter's sister, Hazel, loves Orin, Lavinia's brother, and later becomes his fiancée.

She tries to save Orin when she sees the unhealthy influence that Lavinia exerts over him. After Orin dies, she begs Lavinia not to marry her brother, Peter. She is aware that there is something extremely peculiar concerning the Mannons because Orin had tried to give her a manuscript to be read by Peter before his planned marriage to Lavinia. Therefore, she actively attempts to prevent the marriage.

The first function of O'Neill's chorus in the play is akin to that of the Greek, to give the background of the play. In Desire Under the Elms, the audience learns of the events that occurred before the play opened through the conversation between Cabot's three sons, and in Part III, scene i, Cabot's guests function to provide the background of the events that occurred before the scene's opening.

Similarly, the chorus of Old Men in Lazarus Laughed in Act I, scene i recount the tale of Lazarus' unsuccessful life, the events of the miracle of Lazarus' resurrection to life and his change after the miracle. In Act II, scene i, the chorus of Greeks speculate about whether Lazarus is the reincarnation of Dionysus, their Lord. They also discuss deeds Lazarus is supposed to have done before the scene opens. In Act II, scene ii, the chorus of Senators relate that Tiberius Caesar has fled to Capri because "[he] was terrified by the multitude of laughing idiots who appeared today with [Lazarus]"

(Lazarus, II.ii, p. 424). Thus, from the choruses of the Greek and the Senators, the audience knows of the events occurring before the play opened and the events supposed to take place before the scene's opening without need of presentation on the stage.

In Mourning Becomes Electra, the chorus, whom O'Neill describes as "a human background for the drama of the Mannons" (The Hunted, I, p. 281), seem to exist simply to provide the audience with all the background information worth knowing for understanding the play. In Homecoming, the audience knows from the chorus about the story of the "curse" of the Mannon house, how the Mannons make their living, where Lavinia was the previous day and that Ezra Mannon had

been a soldier afore this war. His paw made him go to West Point. He went to the Mexican war and come out a major. Abe died that same year and Ezra give up the army and took holt of the shippin' business here. But he didn't stop there. He learned law on the side and got made a judge. Went in fur politics and got elected mayor. He was mayor when this war broke out but he resigned at once and jined the army again. And now he's riz to be General. Oh, he's able, Ezra is!

(Homecoming, I, p. 229)

In The Hunted, the audience is informed of the reactions of Christine and Lavinia Mannon to Ezra Mannon's unexpected death: Christine "will have herself in bed sick if she doesn't look out" while "Lavinia is cold and calm as an icicle" (The Hunted, I, p. 282). And from the

chorus, the audience knows about Lavinia and Peter Niles' going to the train station to meet Orin, the arrangements for Ezra's funeral, Dr. Blake's belief that Ezra died of angina, and the doctor's conclusion that Ezra died as the result of lovemaking with Christine. In The Haunted, the audience learns that Christine's suicide is believed to have been a result of her grief due to Ezra's sudden death and that her ghost is believed to haunt the house. Moreover, the background of the play is emphasized through the presence of Hazel and Peter. Through them, the audience gains further background information on Lavinia and Orin.

Thus, the function and the role of O'Neill's chorus are similar to those of the chorus in Greek tragedy. They sing the "choral song", act as actors in the play and provide the background information needed to understand the play. However, they do not remain on the stage until the end of the play; some of them appear only at the beginning of the play while others appear from time to time throughout.

The final element of Greek tragedy which will be discussed here is the use of masks. In his plays, O'Neill tries to keep the Greek convention of masks. He uses them both in the original Greek sense and in a modern sense. His experiments with masks are "both an expression of his dissatisfaction with the theatre which he inherited and an assertion about the direction in which he believed the

theatre should go."¹² O'Neill, in his "Memoranda on Masks," insists:

I hold more and more surely to the conviction that the use of masks will be discovered eventually to be the freest solution of the modern dramatist's problem as to how--with the greatest possible dramatic clarity and economy of means--he can express those profound hidden conflicts of the mind which the probings of psychology continue to disclose to us. He must find some method to present this inner drama in his work, or confess himself incapable of portraying one of the most characteristic preoccupations and uniquely significant, spiritual impulses of his time. With his old--and more than a bit senile!--standby of realistic technique, he can do no more than, at best, obscurely hint at it through a realistically disguised surface symbolism, superficial and misleading. But that, while sufficiently beguiling to the sentimentally mystical, is hardly enough. A comprehensive expression is demanded here, a chance for eloquent presentation, a new form of drama projected from a fresh insight into the inner forces motivating the actions and reactions of men and women (a new and truer characterization, in other words), a drama of

¹²C. W. E. Bigsby, "Eugene O'Neill," in his A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, Vol. 1: 1900-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 67.

souls, and the adventures of "Free wills," with the masks that govern them and constitute their fates.¹³

However, he does not literally mask his characters in Desire Under the Elms. He uses masks only figuratively because he "regarded the human face as a mask concealing abstract qualities rather than itself being the evidence of a complex identity."¹⁴ That is, Eben, the protagonist of the play, "wears two figurative masks--one ruthless and self-centered like his father, the other sensitive and as hungry for beauty and love as his mother was."¹⁵ Doris V. Falk interestingly states:

O'Neill makes the double identity quite clear. While Eben constantly asserts that he is the "hire" of his mother--"I'm Maw--every drop o' blood!"--his brothers keep reminding him that he is the "spittin' image" of his father. His very determination to avenge his mother reflects the personality of his father; in buying out his brothers' share of the farm in order,

¹³Eugene O'Neill, "Memoranda on Masks," in O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism, eds. Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin, and William J. Fisher (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 116.

¹⁴Biggsby, p. 94.

¹⁵Doris V. Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension: An Interpretive Study of the Plays (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 96.

eventually, to be sole owner, Eben demonstrates his father's greed; in desiring possession of his father's paramours (including a neighboring prostitute, as well as Abbie), he duplicates his father's lust.¹⁶

In Greek tragedy, the purpose of the mask was to give its wearer a new personality. Further, it had to identify him for the audience. Thus, the characters of Greek tragedy usually fell into types. Like the Greeks, O'Neill, in one of his most complicated plays, Lazarus Laughed, the play which he himself called a "play for an imaginative theatre,"¹⁷ uses three hundred masks, including the double sized masks of Greek tragedy, the half-faced masks, and the ordinary full-faced masks. The masks used in this play are types like those in Greek tragedy. All the characters, including the chorus, are masked, except for Lazarus, in accordance with their age, character, nationality and social role, as the following outline reveals:

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 96-97.

¹⁷ Eugene O'Neill, Letter to Macgowen, 21, Jan, [1927], reprinted in The Theatre We Worked For: The Letters of Eugene O'Neill to Kenneth Macgowen, ed. Jackson Bryer with the assistance of Ruth M. Alvases (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 146.

Lazarus Laughed¹⁸

Masks

The masks to be worn by the various crowds are type-masks arranged in series of seven according to the following formulas of age & type

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Kind & content	Truthful	Happy	Unhappy	Strong	Senile	Cruelty	Weak
	Simple	laughing	Jealous	Proud	envious	Hatred	Sorrowful
	Humility	Loving &	& Tortured	rebellious	&cringing	&fanaticism	Sensitive
	Sensuous	lovable	Grief-tears	& defiant	&hypocritical	&revenge	Self-conscious
1) Youth							
14-21	1-1	2-1	3-1	4-1	5-1	6-1	7-1
2) Young Manhood							
21-28	1-2	2-2	3-2	4-2	5-2	6-2	7-2
3) Manhood							
28-35	1-3	2-3	3-3	4-3	5-3	6-3	7-3
4) Manhood							
35-42	1-4	2-4	3-4	4-4	5-4	6-4	7-4
5) Middle age							
42-49	1-5	2-5	3-5	4-5	5-5	6-5	7-5
6) Maturity							
49-53	1-6	2-6	3-6	4-6	5-6	6-6	7-6
7) Age							
63 on	1-7	2-7	3-7	4-7	5-7	6-7	7-7

All the characters--crowds, guests, chorus--are masked according to character, age and types: "[1] Boyhood (or Girlhood), [2] Youth, [3] Young Manhood (or Womanhood), [4] Manhood (or Womanhood), [5] Middle Age, [6] Maturity and [7] Old Age" (Lazarus Laughed, I.i, p. 381). These periods in turn are represented by seven different types of character, probably drawn from Carl G. Jung's Psychological Types. They are "[1] the Simple, Ignorant;

¹⁸Virginia Floyd, Eugene O'Neill at Work: Newly Released Ideas for Plays (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishings, 1981), p. 100.

[2] the Happy, Eager; [3] the Self-tortured, Introspective; [4] the Proud, Self-Reliant; [5] the Servile, Hypocritical; [6] the Revengeful, Cruel; [7] the Sorrowful, Resigned" (Lazarus Laughed, I.i, p. 381). The masks are all further divided according to the nationality of the characters: Semitic, Greek and Roman. In his "Memoranda on Masks," O'Neill explains his reason for using masks so extensively in Lazarus Laughed:

I advocate masks for stage crowds, mobs--wherever the sense of impersonal, collective mob psychology is wanted. This was one reason for such an extensive use of them in Lazarus Laughed. In masking the crowds in that play, I was visualizing an effect that, intensified by dramatic lighting, would give an audience visually the sense of the Crowd, not as a random collection of individuals, but as a collective whole, an entity. When the Crowd speaks, I wanted an audience to hear the voice of Crowd mind, Crowd emotion, as one voice of a body composed of, but quite distinct from, its parts.

And, for more practical reasons, I wanted to preserve the different crowds of another time and country from the blighting illusion--shattering recognitions by an audience of the supers on the stage . . . with masks--and the proper intensive lighting--you would have been freed from these recognitions; you would have been able to imagine a Roman mob; you would not even have recognized the Third Avenue and Brooklyn accents among the supers, so effectively does a mask change the quality of a voice.¹⁹

¹⁹Eugene O'Neill, "Memoranda on Masks," p. 120.

In Lazarus Laughed, the masks of the chorus are double the size of the others because O'Neill considers the chorus more important than the crowds. Furthermore, in a letter to Macgowan O'Neill reveals that

[a]s for the size of the masks I picked double-sized rather tentatively. My objective was to approximate the effect of the Greek masks and give plenty of room for a megaphone effect inside the mouths that would give a distinctive volume & sound to the chanting and help to carry across each word distinctly. This last is important. My notion was that the masks should be double in every sense--the Chorus as utterly distinct (visually) from the crowd, no chance of confusing them with members of crowd, or strange & unreal intensification of the crowd.²⁰

However, O'Neill explains that "[t]he masks of Martha, Mary, Father & Mother are individualized reproductions of their own faces, with only a distinct trace of the type background in each. Thus Martha is type 1-3 as recognizable foundation for her own character. Mary is 2-

²⁰Eugene O'Neill, Letter to Macgowan, Jan. 23, [1927], in his The Theatre We Work For: The Letters of Eugene O'Neill to Kenneth Macgowan, ed. Jackson R. Bryer with the assistance of Ruth M. Alvases (New York: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 148.

2--Mother & Father are 1-7."²¹ Furthermore, as Virginia Floyd points out, "[t]he mask also represents what the character appears to be or what he wants to be; the mouth reveals what he really is or could be if his true nature were allowed to assert itself."²² Thus, Miriam's half-faced mask of the compulsion of motherhood, making her appear "sensitive and sad, tender with an eager" mouth, contrasts with those of Caligula and Tiberius, whose masks reflect their dual natures and desires. Caligula's half-mask appears as bright crimson; his large light bright eyes "*glare out with a shifty feverish suspicion at everyone. . . . His mouth also is childish . . . petulant and self-obsessed*" (*Lazarus Laughed*, II.i, p. 407) "with its cruel soft sensual lips a vivid scarlet."²³ On the other hand, Tiberius' half-mask is "*a pallid purple blotched with darker color . . .*" which is considered totally evil. "*Beneath the mask, his mouth*

²¹Eugene O'Neill, *Fragmentary Diary*, 1926, quoted in *Eugene O'Neill at Work: Newly Released Ideas*, ed. Virginia Floyd (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981), p. 101.

²²Virginia Floyd, ed., *Eugene O'Neill at Work: Newly Released Ideas for Plays* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981), p. 101.

²³Eugene O'Neill, *Fragmentary Diary*, 1926, quoted in *Eugene O'Neill at Work*, p. 101.

looks as incongruous as CALIGULA's. The lips are thin and stern and self-contained--the lips of an able soldier-statesman of rigid probity" (Lazarus Laughed, III.ii, p. 445). These people cannot see their true natures and they play different roles in order to get what they want. In this play, Lazarus is the only one who has glimpsed the truth of death and understood. He has seen his true nature as well as that of others and needs nothing. Therefore, he is the only one in the play who does not wear a mask.

In writing Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill tries to keep the classical Greek convention of masks. However, in his article "Memoranda on Masks," he writes:

With Mourning Becomes Electra, masks were called for in one draft of the three plays. But the Classical connotation was too insistent. Masks in that connection demand great language to speak--which let me out of it with a sickening bump! So it evolved ultimately into the "masklike faces," which expressed my intention tempered by the circumstances. However, I should like to see Mourning Becomes Electra done entirely with masks, now that I can view it solely as a psychological play, quite removed from the confusing preoccupations the Classical derivation of its plot once caused me. Masks would emphasize the drama of the life and death impulses that drive the characters on to their fates and put more in its proper secondary

place, as a frame, the story of the New England family.²⁴

O'Neill discovered, however, that make-up could achieve the effect he wanted--that of a death mask "suddenly being torn open by passion."²⁵ Thus, he does not employ the concept of masks to give his character a new personality or to identify him for the audience, but rather uses them symbolically to suggest how each character in some way conceals his true self from the others. In the play, Christine's face appears as "being not living flesh but a wonderfully life-like pale mask, in which only the deep-set eyes, of a dark violet-blue, are alive" (*Homecoming*, I, p. 230). Lavinia's face is also described as "the same strange, life-like mask" (*Homecoming*, I, p. 231), while Mannon is described as having "the mask-like look of his face in repose" (*Homecoming*, III, p. 263). Generally speaking, everybody in the Mannon house appears to wear a life-like mask, even the servant, Seth Beckwith, and all the faces in the portraits hanging on the walls in Ezra's study. Furthermore, the house itself even has "an incongruous white mask fixed on [it] to hide its somber

²⁴O'Neill, "Memoranda on Masks," p. 120.

²⁵Travis Bogard, Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 338.

gray ugliness" (Homecoming, I, p. 227). O'Neill, in his "Notes," clarifies his idea of using masks in Mourning Becomes Electra:

What I want from this mask concept is a dramatic arresting visual symbol; of the separateness, the fated isolation of this family. . . . [The] Mannon drama takes place on a plane where outer reality is a mask of true fated reality--unreal realism. . . .²⁶

O'Neill's abstract use of masks with the help of make-up is plausible since the inner drama of a character, the profound hidden conflicts in the mind of a character can be discovered not only through the mask but by means of other characters' remarks or by a character's conscious or unconscious self-revelation to other characters, as O'Neill demonstrates in Desire Under the Elms, when Eben's brothers keep reminding Eben that he is the "spitting image" of his father, or in Lazarus Laughed when Tiberius unconsciously reveals to Lazarus the truth about his mother and about how he was brought up by her, or in

²⁶Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes and Extracts from a Fragmentary Work Diary, in Chief European Theories of the Drama: American Supplement, ed. Barret H. Clark (New York: n.p., 1947), p. 535, quoted in Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension: An Interpretive Study of the Plays (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 131.

Mourning Becomes Electra when Christine tries to make Lavinia realize that what Lavinia is attempting to do--to separate Brant and Christine--is the result of her unrequited love for Brant and her jealousy of her mother. Furthermore, asides and soliloquies can also provide additional insights into the true nature of a character. Thus, O'Neill discovered that it was not necessary to use literal masks in all of his plays. He used them only when he wanted to accomplish dramatically some special effect.

Not only in his use of the Greek dramatic convention of masks, but in his use of Greek dramatic structure, the chorus, and the unities of time and place, O'Neill manages to successfully interweave old with new to create a new dramatic experience that reflects modern man and the universality of life's complexities. It is a dramatic experience that is further enhanced by his use of other elements of Greek tragedy--plot, the tragic hero, and destiny and its revelations. Through his integration of these elements, O'Neill is able to reach in his plays new depths never before accomplished in American drama.