Chapter IV

Toward O'Neill's Tragedy

Like many other Western writers, O'Neill is influenced by Greek tragedy. However, unlike other Greek influenced writers, O'Neill does not just borrow the plot from a tragedy and then discard it. On the contrary, he adopts from Greek tragedy not only the plot but also several Greek tragic elements such as structure, the unities of time and place, chorus, masks, the tragic hero, and destiny and its revelations, and he experiments with these elements to develop a drama appropriate for his time and a myth of his own unique creation.

In writing *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill melds what he gets from Greek tragedy into something different through the addition of other psychological sources. Thus, there are several departures from the Greek originals. The most remarkable departure is his heavy use of the idea of fixations on the parent of the opposite sex, the so-called Oedipus and Electra complexes. Hence, Freudianism is attributed to him by critics. However, O'Neill disclaims any "conscious use of psychoanalytic material," in a letter to Joseph Wood Krutch, by saying that

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> as for that complexes of the characters . . . I must confess that . . . in the writing I never thought of them as such in any Freudian sense and that's probably why no exposition of them obtruded. I'm no great student of psycho-analysis although, of course I do know quite a bit about it, without even having gone in for a complete analysis myself, and I'm enormously interested to see what will eventually emerge as sciences out of these theories and the Behaviouristic ones.[1]

Further, he claims that although his work

> is undoubtedly full of psycho-analytic ideas, still those same ideas are age-old to the artist and . . . any artist who was a good psychologist and had had a varied and sensitive experience with life and all sorts of people could have written the play without even having heard of Freud, Jung, Adler and Co.[2]

Additionally, Kenneth Macgowan records that O'Neill, after his interviews with Dr. Hamilton, told him that he was suffering from this very complex, himself.[3] Apart from

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[1]Eugene O'Neill, Letter to Joseph Wood Krutch, 25 July 1927, quoted in C. W. E. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Vol. 1: 1900-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p, 71.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 596.

his own Oedipus complex, O'Neill also gets the idea of the strong attachment between brother and sister and the rivalry and hostility between daughter and mother from his experience with the Halladays, his neighbours. As Louis Sheaffer points out:

> O'Neill in dealing Mourning Becomes Electra with incestuous feelings between brother and sister, with rivalry and hostility between daughter and mother, would have more than classical drama and the case histories of Freud to draw on for models."[4]

In Desire Under the Elms, Eben hints at his Oedipus complex when he tells his brothers: "I'm Maw--every drop o' blood! . . . I'm her--her heir."[5] On the other hand, when talking about his father, he says: "I pray he's died" (Desire, I.ii, p. 5) and he thinks that it is his father who is the real cause of his mother's death. Therefore, he seeks revenge against him. Another indication of his Oedipus complex is that although he is attached to Abbie, his stepmother, he refuses to accept

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[4]Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), p. 329.

[5]Eugene O'Neill, Desire Under the Elms in his Three Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Vintage Books, c 1952), p. 6. All future reference to the work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

it until she, in his mother's parlour, identifies herself with his mother:

> Abbie . . . Tell me about yer Maw, Eben.
> Eben They hain't nothin' much. She was kind. She was good.
> Abbie . . . I'll be kind an' good t' ye!
> Eben Sometimes she used t' sing fur me.
> Abbie I'll sing fur ye!
> Eben This was her hum. This was her farm.
> Abbie This is my hum! This is my farm!
> . . . .
> Eben . . . An' I love yew, Abbie!--now I kin say it! I been dyin' fur want o' ye--every hour since ye come! I love ye!
> (Desire, II.iii, pp. 35-37)

In addition, O'Neill also gives Ephraim, Eben's father, a complex. His love for the cows indicates his need for motherly warmth since cows are a conventional symbol of maternity.

In Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill diverges intentionally from the Greek original. In his Fragmentary Diary for April 1929, he writes the outline of the play:

> Electra loves Aegisthus--always fated to be mother's rival in love, always defeated--first for father's love, then for brother's, finally for Aegisthus; . . .

> Aegisthus bears strong facial resemblance to Agamemnon and Orestes.[6]

It is obvious, then, that O'Neill emphasizes in the play a child's fixation on the parent of the opposite sex. Lavinia struggles with her Electra complex. She loves her father but hates her mother. She once tells Brant: "I love Father better than anyone in the world. There is nothing I wouldn't do--to protect him from hurt."[7] Her words to her father also emphasize this complex: "You're the only man I'll ever love! I'm going to stay with you!" (Homecoming, III, p. 266). This very complex makes her unable to love anyone other than her father, with the exception of Brant who strongly resembles her father. It also misleadingly makes her conclude that her father needs her, too, as seen in her words when she refuses Peter's proposal:

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[6]Eugene O'Neill, Fragmentary Diary, April 1929, quoted in Virginia Floyd, ed., Eugene O'Neill at Work: Newly Released Ideas for Plays (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981), p. 186.

[7]Eugene O'Neill, Mourning Becomes Electra, in his Three Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Vintage Books, c 1958), p. 241. All future references to the work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

Lavinia . . . I can't marry anyone, Peter. I've got to stay home. Father needs me.

Peter He's got your mother.

Lavinia . . . He needs me more!

(Homecoming, I p. 235)

Like his sister, Orin, too, is dominated by such fixation. While Lavinia is the mother's rival in the father's love, Orin is the father's rival in the mother's love. When Orin learns that his father is dead, he is very happy because his most important rival is gone and he believes he has his mother to himself. He even dreams of living with his mother on an island and tells her: "You're my only girl!" (The Hunted, II, p. 300) and "I love you better than anything in the world" (The Hunted, II, p. 299). When he learns that his mother loves Brant, he is very angry because he thinks that he has been betrayed by his mother-lover. Furthermore, after his mother's death, he transfers his love for his mother to his sister, who more and more resembles her mother. Even Brant, Christine's lover, cannot escape from this complex. He, like Orin and Eben, hates his father and loves his mother. He, like Eben, accuses his father of his mother's death and tries to avenge her death. He begins with Christine, whom he hates at first because she is Ezra's wife. He plans to use her as a means to hurt Ezra but later he falls in love with her because her hair reminds him of his mother's. O'Neill also utilizes the idea of the Oedipus or Electra complex in many of his other plays such as

Where the Cross is Made (1918), Dynamo (1924-1928), The Great God Brown (1925), Strange Interlude (1926-1927) and Days Without End (1931-1933). Because of his strong emphasis on the characters' complexes, it can be said that O'Neill substitutes the Greek notion of fate or destiny with psychological pressures. In Desire Under the Elms and Mourning Becomes Electra, it is obvious that all the crimes stem from such complexes.

Another departure from Greek tragedy that O'Neill makes in writing his tragedies is the aim of the action. In Greek tragedy, the aim of the action is not a "quality"--a change in character--but a "mode of action"--"a consequent development of or variation upon the original action in which some interpretation of the original may be implied."[8] Doris V. Falk explains:

> In the Greek . . . tragedies the sequence of events originates with the determination of the protagonist to accomplish an aim or end--to become an all powerful king, say, or to avenge a murdered father. He may achieve his aim with ironic, direful results, or he may fall victim to forces within or without himself which finally defeat him, but somewhere in the

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[8]Doris V. Falk, "The Trapped," in her Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension: An Interpretive Study of the Plays (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 137.

> process . . . the truth about himself and his relation to the action is revealed to him. This revelation of the self is essential to the depth and significance of a Greek . . . tragedy, but it is not an end in itself. It is a step in the action of the play, necessarily a crucial step leading to another "mode of action;" that is an event of vital importance, but it grows out of events and leads to further events different in kind from those which preceded it.[9]

In the Agamemnon, the protagonist led the troops to Troy because of divine will. This action leads him to make choices between alternate actions in order to accomplish another action, and the choice he made, sacrificing his daughter, leads to his wife's treachery, which finally leads to his death. Therefore, these actions have nothing to do with "quality." On the contrary, each of O'Neill's protagonists has tried to achieve his real self and the sense of belonging, as Falk further writes:

> In O'Neill's play, however, this self-revelation is the one end and aim of all the action; its purpose is not to lead to further action, but to solve the mystery of the self. The end of such a search for self is not a "mode of action," but a "quality"--a change in character.
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> An O'Neill protagonist is not compelled to make choices between alternate actions in order to accomplish another action; he must make a choice

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[9]Ibid., pp. 137-138.

between alternate images of the self in order to discover the real self--which he often fails to do.[10]

Ezra, before joining the war, thought in Puritan style: "Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born" (Homecoming, III, P. 269). After his war experience, he reveals to his wife:

> It was seeing death all the time in this war got me to thinking these things. Death was so common, it didn't mean anything. That freed me to think oflife. . . . Death made me think of life. Before that life had only made me think of death!
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> (Homecoming, III, p. 269)

Furthermore, O'Neill, like Jung, "sees man's primary need [as] a longing for life of meaning and purpose--for a sense of order in the universe to which man can belong and in which he can trust."[11] In Desire Under the Elms, Ephraim, in Part II, scene ii, expresses what is in his heart to Abbie, his wife, whom he thinks understands him and whom he believes he can trust. He tells her that before marrying her he was lonesome, and sought a way out by working hard. However, hard work only made him more lonesome. He, then, married his first wife

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[10]Ibid., p. 138.

[11]Doris V. Falk, "Theme," in her Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958),p. 6.

who bore him two sons and then his second wife, Eben's mother. Despite the fact that both of his wives were good women, they never understood him. Even worse, all his sons hate him. When his second wife died, he left the farm and met Abbie. However, as he opens his heart to Abbie, he realizes that she does not understand him, either. His attempt to belong desperately fails. Even in his own house, he can find no peace and has to go to the barn to sleep with the cows, as he says: "They's no peace in houses, they's no rest livin' with folks. Somethin's always livin' with ye . . . I'll go t' the barn an' rest a spell" (Desire, III.i, p. 45). (O'Neill, like his protagonists, was also a lonely man. He also sometimes escaped from the company his wife invited by sleeping in the barn.)

Tiberius Caesar, in Lazarus Laughed, Act IV, scene i, feels the same as Ephraim. Despite being a powerful caesar, he is lonely and has no one that he can trust. Thus, overwhelmed with loneliness, he pours his heart out to Lazarus, a stranger whom he has just met for the first time, concluding bitterly, "I talk aloud, Lazarus! I talk to my loneliness!"[12] Caligula, too, after murdering

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[12]Eugene O'Neill, Lazarus Laughed, in Nine Plays (New York: Random House, 1932), p. 464. All future references to the work will cited parenthetically in the text.

Tiberius savagely cries to the empty amphitheatre: "Kneel down! Abase yourselves! I am your Caesar and your God!" (Lazarus Laughed, IV.ii, p. 480). As he becomes acutely aware of his loneliness, he ends by "groveling in a paroxysm of terror" (Lazarus Laughed, IV.ii, p. 480).

Ezra Mannon is also confronted with the same problem. Like Ephraim, although he loved and lived close to his wife, Christine, "there'd always been some barrier between [them]--a wall hiding [them] from each other! [He] would try to make up [his] mind exactly what that wall was but [he] never could discover" (Homecoming, III, p. 269). He felt that he did not belong and in order to get out of his suffering, he went in search of his real self and of the place to where he really belonged. He joined the Mexican War and even despairingly hoped that he might be killed. He explains to Christine: "I made up my mind I'd do my work in the world and leave you alone in your life and not care," and "I became a judge and a major and such vain truck . . . only to keep my mind from thinking of what I'd lost" (Homecoming, III, p. 270). Thus, as Falk suggests, Ezra "makes a choice between alternate images of the self in order to discover [his] real self. . . ."[13] However, he, like other protagonists,

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[13] Doris V. Falk, "The Trapped," in her Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 138.

fails. Therefore, he returns home to his last chance, but he fails since the one whom he thinks of as his last hope unmercifully betrays him and poisons him. O'Neill, himself a lonely man, also searched for belonging. He laments his destiny, which he considers the destiny of all men, in Long Day's Journey into Night, his autobiographical play. He believed himself, in Edmund's words, "a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death."[14] This aspect of modern man also appears in other of his plays such as The Hairy Ape, Dynamo and Strange Interlude.

Additionally, O'Neill also departs from the idea of Greek tragic fate. Fate in the Greek sense means divine determinism, the god's preordaining of and intervention in human affairs. O'Neill, in a conversation with Joseph Wood Krutch, tells him what he believes is a subject worth writing about: "Most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God."[15] However, O'Neill

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[14]Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), p. 135.

[15]Eugene O'Neill, Conversation, quoted in Joseph Wood Krutch, "Introduction," in Nine Plays, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1932),p. xvii.

believes that "the old God" was dead and "science and materialism" failed to create a "new One." Thus, O'Neill concludes: "The one subject for drama is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but it is now with himself, his own past, his attempt to belong."[16] In addition, O'Neill once said:

> I'm always, always trying to interpret Life in terms of lives, never just lives in terms of character. I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind--(Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it--Mystery certainly)--and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression.[17]

Hence, O'Neill inevitably substitutes the Greek divine determinism with the modern determinism--psychological determinatism and Emile Zola's naturalistic determinism.

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[16]Eugene O'Neill, quoted in United States Information Service, Eugene O'Neill (n.p.: n.p., 1971), p. 1.

[17]Eugene O'Neill, Letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn, 1925, quoted in Doris V. Falk, "The Searchers," in Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension: An Interpretive Study of the Play (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 25.

The fundamental view of a naturalist is that man is an animal in the natural world responding to environmental forces and internal stress and drives, over none of which he has control and none of which he fully understands. In Desire Under the Elms, the environment, the land, plays an important role in the play. Close to the soil and belonging to it, the characters' identities and destinies are shaped by it. In this play, Ephraim, Eben and Abbie all desire the land--however, with different meanings. Ephraim's sense of earth is as the source of his salvation. Eben identifies it with his mother while Abbie desires it to be her home. Nevertheless, O'Neill implies that "[t]he land . . . cannot be possessed. It demands surrender."[18] Thus, O'Neill's characters' attempts to possess the land are futile. Ephraim has married Eben's mother in order to possess her land; Eben has bought his brothers' shares of the land to be the sole owner and Abbie has married Ephraim with the same reason, to possess the land. Ironically, at the end of the play, none of them can take hold of it; even Ephraim, who is left with the land, decides in his fierce possessiveness to burn down the

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[18]Tavis Bogard, "O'Neill Versus Shaw," in T.W. Craik, ed., The Revels History of Drama in English, Vol. 8: American Drama (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1977), p. 68.

farm, and everything on it, except the cows, so that it would not pass on to anyone else, and he then goes away from it.

Apart from the land, Puritanism also appears in many of O'Neill's plays as one of the forces in the environment that shapes the characters. In Desire Under the Elms and Mourning Becomes Electra, both the Cabots and the Mannons are brought up in a Puritan community and in a Puritan family. According to Puritanism, God is wrathful, tyrannical, ascetic, restrictive, and retributive. He is, like Ephraim, not easy but hard and lonesome and old. "He is a God whom Ephraim identifies with the farm itself, from the rocky soil of which he has by sheer doggedness won a living"[19]--"God's in the stones!" (Desire Under the Elms, II.ii, p. 31). Ephraim has dedicated his whole life to this God. He has sacrificed his sons by enslaving them to the farm, and his second wife, whom he married not for love but for land, by overworking her until she died. This makes his sons hate him and long for his death.

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[19]Doris V. Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension: An Interpretive Study of the Plays (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 95.

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In Mourning Becomes Electra, Puritanism is also the prominent feature which shapes the Mannons' fate, especially its attitude toward life and sex which is handed down from generation to generation. The Puritan thinks of life in terms of death; they deny life, as seen in Ezra Mannon's remark to his wife:

> That's always been the Mannons' way of thinking. They went to the white meeting-house on Sabbaths and meditated on death. Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born.
> (Homecoming, III, p. 269)

Another prominent feature of the Mannons' Puritanism is their attitude toward love or sex. Thomas E. Porter explains:

> For O'Neill's generation, Puritanism was associated, first and foremost, with a repressive attitude toward sexual impulses. This appetite posed the greatest problem for the Calvinist; it exercised the strongest pull and thus had to be most zealously guarded against. The "fall from grace" gradually assimilated sexual overtones; the fallen woman fell only in one direction. . . . The Puritan attitude is summed up most succinctly in the diction: sex is "dirty."[20]

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[20]Thomas E. Porter, "Puritan Ego and Freudian Unconscious: Mourning Becomes Electra," in Myth and Modern American Drama (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), p. 36.

This Puritan attitude is primarily the origin of the family "curse" which began with David Mannon's seduction of Marrie Brantome. Abe Mannon, Ezra's father, hated his brother, David, because of his sinful deed. He drove the couple out of the house and went so far as to destroy the house in which the seduction took place. This hatred is implicitly accepted in the Puritan way--"no association of the elect with the reprobate."[21] Thus, he bequeathed his righteous hatred to the family. The Mannons completely refuse to support their disgraced relatives even when Marie is dying. This causes the son, Adam Brant, to seek revenge against the Mannons.

In addition, Ezra Mannon's attitude toward sex can also be seen in his exclamation to his wife, saying, "What are bodies to me. . . . Ashes to ashes, dirt to dirt! Is that your notion of love? Do you think I married a body?" (Homecoming, IV, p. 275). This kind of attitude toward love makes him, when sleeping with his wife, turn love into lust which frustrates her. Being disappointed with his wife, he devoted himself to business, as a good Puritan would, and then went to serve the community because diligence and industry are parts of the traditional Puritan ethic. Doing so estranges them even more. It is even worse when he jealously takes the son, to whom his wife had turned all her love, away from her,

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[21]Ibid.

which subsequently leads to her adultery and to her murder of Ezra. Lavinia, too, has a negative attitude toward love as seen in her answer to Peter's question about whether Orin really loves Hazel: "I don't know anything about love! I don't want to know anything! . . . I hate love!" (Homecoming, I, p. 234). She can accept love only in terms of brotherly love as seen in her rejection of Peter's proposal, saying: "I do love you as a brother, Peter. I wouldn't lose you as a brother for anything" (Homecoming, I, p. 235). She, like all Mannons, also thinks that love is dirty. She equates it with "naked women and sin":

> I remember your [Brant's] admiration for the naked native women. You said they had found the secret of happiness because they had never heard that love can be sin.
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> (Homecoming, I, p. 242)

Love, for Lavinia, means only the physical act of love and Brant, like all men, dreams "dirty dreams--of love" (Homecoming, I, p. 243). Thus, sharing the same attitude of love as a dirty physical act, Lavinia and Orin cannot love Peter and Hazel respectively, and live a happy married life. Had they been able to love at the beginning of the play, they, perhaps, would not have been doomed.

In Greek tragedy, usually the hero is faced with a terrible dilemma between two fatal choices created by gods. However, in O'Neill's tragedies, the hero struggles

from the hidden conflicts in his own mind which O'Neill calls the "inner drama."[22] In the manuscript version of his foreword to The Great God Brown, O'Neill says that the theatre

> should give us what the church no longer gives us--a meaning. In brief, it should return to the spirit of Greek grandeur. And if we have no Gods, [sic] or heroes to portray we have the subconscious, the mother of all gods and heroes. . . .[23]

Thus, O'Neill replaces gods with the subconscious in his tragedies, and from this notion it is possible that O'Neill derives from both Freud and Jung "his basic model of human nature as fundamentally divided, as composed of warring instincts: ego and id; unconscious wish and

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

[23]Eugene O'Neill, The Manuscript found in the Yale University Library, quoted in Doris V. Falk, "The Searchers," in Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick: New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 26.

conscious repression; false surface and true depth."[24] Moreover, he also shares Freud's conviction that "the unconscious, the repository of our fundamental life drive, is almost wholly preoccupied with sex,"[25] and that this "instinctual drive contributes to the destruction of the organism."[26]

In Desire Under the Elms, Eben and Abbie are attracted to each other when they first meet but Eben tries to conceal his natural urge, which later is buried in his subconscious, because Abbie will be his rival in the possession of the farm. His conscious mind then makes him wear a "mask" of dislike toward Abbie. However, when Abbie identifies herself with his mother, his natural urge then expresses itself while his conscious mind tries to justify his deed as an act of revenge against his father.

In Mourning Becomes Electra, Lavinia's case is the best example. Lavinia is attracted to Brant on a subconscious level, despite the fact that Brant is

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[24]C. W. E. Bigsby, "Eugene O'Neill," in A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Vol. 1: 1900-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 111.

[25]Ibid, p. 111.

[26]Ibid.

cuckolding her father. She refuses to accept this when Christine points it out to her but she keeps on trying to convince her mother that her motive for separating Brant and Christine is not her jealous rage but her moral outrage at adultery. It is obvious that her urging Orin to kill Brant comes out of her jealous rage. If she could not have him, no one else could, either. However, in the final tragedy of the trilogy, her subconscious does express itself when she, in Peter's arms, calls him Adam. Thus, both Eben and Lavinia are doomed by this kind of psychological determinism.

Apart from the elements he derived from Greek tragedy, O'Neill also drew upon American culture and history and upon his profound personal and contemporary experience for writing material. That he did so was his intention, as he wrote:

> I intend to use whatever I can make my own, to write about anything under the sun in any manner that fits or can be invented to fit the subject. And I shall never be influenced by any consideration but one: Is it the truth as I know it or, better still, feel it?[27]

His successful merging of past and present, universal and personal, myth and reality constitutes the true beginning

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[27]Eugene O'Neill, quoted in Barrett H. Clark, _Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays_ (New York: McBride, 1929), p. 195.

of American drama. Before this, American drama was merely an adaptation of European drama. More than any other American dramatist, he has attracted the attention of critics around the world for O'Neill did more than adapt--he remolded ancient struggles, experimented with modern analyses of such struggles and drew upon personal struggles and experiences to create his own unique version of the universal struggle of man with himself and his environment. Through his drama, O'Neill skillfully reveals the complexities of modern times yet in his creation of something new and different, he makes us painfully aware of the fact that the complexities we now face are neither new nor different: only time and place have changed.

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