

Tribhuvan University

Reclassification of Tragedy in
Mourning Becomes Electra

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Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
1. General Introduction	
Eugene O'Neill and his Works	1
Historical Background of American Drama	7
Revival of Classical Art Form	9
2. Tragedy: A Theoretical Modality	
Theory of Tragedy	18
Theories of Tragedy till O'Neill	19
Tragic Vision	30
Tragic Life	30
3. Tragedy Reclassified	
Imitation of Action	33
Language in the Play	36
Tragic Plot	39
Tragic Hero	40
4. Conclusion	46
Works Cited	50

Chapter One

Introduction

Eugene O'Neill

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was a Nobel-prize winning American playwright. More than any other dramatist, O'Neill introduced American drama to the dramatic realism pioneered by Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, and Swedish playwright August Strindberg, and was the first to use true American vernacular speeches. His plays involve characters who inhabit the fringes of society, engaging in depraved behavior, where they struggle to maintain their hopes and aspirations but ultimately slide into disillusionment and despair.

After being suspended from Princeton University, O'Neill spent several years at sea, during which he suffered from depression and alcoholism. O'Neill turned to writing as a form of escape. Despite his depression he had a deep love for the sea, and it became a prominent theme in most of his plays, several of which are set onboard ships like the ones that he worked on.

While he was associated with the Provincetown Players and the Provincetown Playhouse, several of his early plays were put on by that group. O'Neill had previously been employed by the *New London Telegraph*, writing poetry as well as reporting. It wasn't until his experience in 1912–13 at a sanatorium that he decided to devote himself full time to writing plays. During the 1910s O'Neill was a regular on the Greenwich Village literary scene, where he also befriended many radicals, most notably Communist Party USA founder John Reed.

O'Neill's first published play, *Beyond the Horizon*, opened on Broadway in 1920 to great acclaim, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. His best-known plays include Anna Christie (Pulitzer Prize 1922), *Desire Under the Elms* 1924,

Strange Interlude (Pulitzer Prize 1928), *Mourning Becomes Electra* 1931, and his only comedy *Ah, Wilderness!*, a wistful re-imagining of his own youth as he wished it had been. In 1936 he received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Artiness invades a good many of the experimental palsy, *The Hairy Ape*, *The Great God Brown*, *Dynamo*, but in his best vein this tendency is rigidly brought under control. In his best moments his dialogue is the stuff of life, but it never rises to the poetic Sophoclean heights, with perhaps the exception of parts of *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

With *Beyond the Horizon* in 1920 O'Neill scored a hit that made his reputation and earned him the first of four Pulitzer Prizes. In 1936 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In the early thirties he has conceived a cycle of nine plays about the continuity of family life over a period of over 175 years. Two additional plays were to be worked into this cycle. On account of illness in the last years of his life, O'Neill did not complete this cycle which was to be called *A Tale of Possessors Self-Disposed*. He sketched another cycle of eight plays to be titled *By Way of Obit*, of which only *Hughie*, a one-act play, first produced in Sweden in 1958, had reached the public. *More Stately Mansions* exists in manuscripts. It was to have been part of the original giant cycle.

The various styles, his experiments in naturalism, symbolism, expressionism, etc., are easy enough to understand: they indicate an artist needing a more personalized mode of expression than the conventional styles supply. But unhappily, it is difficult to determine whether he ever achieved this goal. The modified "Slice-of-life" technique of the *Iceman* or *Long Day's Journey* would appear to be his most distinctive solution of this problem. He produced master piece in other molds, as in the case of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, where a classic form is revived, or in *The*

Emperor Jones. The same vacillation occurs with his thinking. He does not possess a philosophy that remains constant through the years, although it is true that a few principles remain the same. These would indicate a desire to present the truth, a distrust of the no-natural man, and an acceptance of Freudian psychology. With these exceptions, his thinking shifts with the seasons. By and large, his thinking is “Safe” and somewhat naïve.

He was also part of the modern movement to revive the classical heroic mask from ancient Greek theatre and Japanese Noh theatre in some of his plays. O'Neill was very interested in the Faust theme, especially in the 1920s. He is also known for the very poetic names of many of his plays.

It is not so much by his philosophy that O'Neill interests us as by his understating of human beings and his control of technique. The writers Thomas Cahalan and Paul Doyle say that:

As to the first, understanding of human beings, he was blessed with a sure insight into human motives, an ear for the literal rhythms of everyday speech, and a rich compassion for all the weaknesses of man. In regard to control of technique, his production was more uneven. For instance, his plots, at the worst, become too loose and haphazard, marked by needless violence and leaning too heavily on Freudian motivations; at the best, he weaves a seemingly uncontrived tread of events that holds our interest and that seems inevitable. (17)

O'Neill has a vast range of very different characters to his credit he has taken peoples from all levels of life, and has drawn effective portraits of both sexes. He seems at his best in depicting older men, and he has a fondness for the new England stock, which he, nevertheless, does not perfectly understand. Although his people are

extremely varied and have many types of violence and guilt in their lives, they are “normal” people subjected to special stress. Thus we can feel from them and consider our kinship with them in a way that would be difficult to do in the case of some of Williams’s characters.

Most of O’Neill’s innovations, and there were many, derive from standard literary sources. One sometimes forgets that O’Neill is an educated playwright, a sophisticate of literature, when one’s view is obscured by the primitivistic aspects of his life. Yet he worked a substitute for the “well-made play,” not quite a perfect substitute, but one which in a work such as *Long Day’s Journey into Night* gives the theater a new kind of play. He gave expressionism a fling, but tried to wed it to the naturalistic material of the sea plays in *The Hairy Ape*. He was plagued by the problem of turning symbolism to the playwright’s advantage, and only imperfectly worked out a solution, as in *The Great God Brown* and *Lazarus Laughed*. He sought a more effective way to handle the Freudian concepts and resurrected old devices, the aside and the soliloquy, and fused them with Joycean streams of consciousness in *Strange Interlude*. he then took the great outline of classic drama and added a new dimension of scientific psychology in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. No other American dramatist can point to so varied an achievement.

This study intends to explore the techniques employed by Eugene O’Neill in *Mourning Becomes Electra* with special reference to reclassification of classical art form, namely that of tragedy. Basically, the ideas, principles and style of ancient Greek tragedy, that inspired O’Neill, will be studied.

From the modern reader’s point of view, it is impossible to claim that *Mourning Becomes Electra* has reclassified the classical spirit of art. Because it is obviously interpreted as a modern psychological drama as it dramatizes the conflict

between conscious motives and unconscious desires of modern man. And how does a modern psychological drama-no matter how tragic it is – revive the spirit of classical Greek tragedy?

O'Neill has reclassified the dramatic spirit of tragedies by employing classical dramatic techniques in conjunction with the insights of Freudian psychology. He takes the human beings as an integral part of society. He does not go beyond the human being as far as subject matter is concerned. His creations rather have always depicted human instincts, their attitude, feelings and thoughts, in a highly expressionistic way. The use of 'expressionism'; however, is only a technique. He has always been interested in the basic reality of human nature and 'reality of situation'; the real people and their problems. In this sense he has brought out the true sense of the common phrase 'imitation of life'.

Moreover, O'Neill has reintroduced the Aristotelian concept of presenting complete action in certain magnitude in a language embellished with highly imaginative power in the form of action. In other words, he takes great care of the needs of the serious plot. His aim has always been to purge 'pity and fear' to attain the proper aim of tragedy, that is, to effect a 'Catharsis' of these emotions. In this sense, he revives the classical art form by providing dramatic justice to the modern American plot.

This study intends to minutely study the implication of the classical dramatic technique in *Mourning Becomes Electra* to support the thesis that the classical art form has been revived. In Greek tragedy, fate is believed to be a prominent determinant that leads to the tragic hero's wrong judgment of action and to his tragic down fall. These are replaced by the psychological force which leads the protagonist to disastrous end. O'Neill has used not only Freudian psychology but enlarged the

awareness of conscious and subconscious realities, as the modern substitute of fate, is a powerful force, that the modern mind can easily identify with. This, however, does not take away the grandeur of classical tragedy.

Like classical writers, he takes the art as a guideline to portray humanity in the modern fragmented age. For him, art should sustain humanitarian values, morals and ethics. So, *Mourning Becomes Electra* is concerned with aesthetic values, and the moral purpose of ordering human life. Its didactic purpose is to sustain balance in modern society in the absence of the 'power of gods' and also scientific failure. It portrays human passion as the source of sufferings and also a strong force which shakes human being to the bottom of their soul.

O'Neill believes that literature is an imitation of action. It requires innate talent. It has to be perfected by long study and practice and that it consists mainly in the deliberate adaptation of style and thematic effect of the work on human beings.

For O'Neill, literary writing should follow certain rules to have an impact on social life. So, he revitalized the old classical art from of tragedy. He has reintroduced Aeschylean 'trilogy' as a 'form' after more than two thousand years. He also has reintroduced the masque, ghost, chorus, soliloquy and direct addresses to his audience. He employs stage lights and songs to convey inner emotions that usually are not expressed in undramatizable action, namely in the world of the mind, memories and fears.

O'Neill also seems to defend the distinctive quality of art, by ignoring the boundary of the play. However, he has to express the inner reality of human beings in an unreal way. He dramatizes undramatizable action of the unconscious world. His practical knowledge of the theater and vision of life and nature give to his works a solid quality. The general nature and shared values of humanity are the basic sources

and the basic test of art. Always and everywhere, the fact of universal human agreement is the test of moral and religious truth as well as aesthetic value. It deals with the general nature of human beings and truth that is always moral and at the same time, creates aesthetic value.

O'Neill also uses myth. Myth has to be conceived not as a collection of fixed and final stories but as an ongoing and ever-changing process. The classical myth of Electra undergoes changes according to its appropriateness in modern America. He has deliberately weaved modern materials into the pattern of ancient myths. He has not introduced the Electra myth to depict the position of man in relation to the Gods, but he has revived that classical manifestation and toured the general nature of human beings. He has used the myth, to give insights into the changing social environment.

O'Neill's respect for classical writers, the Greek tragedians who have achieved excellence and established enduring models in all major literary genres, so, it is not surprising. This explains their influences on O'Neill's art and perspective of life. It was from this deep respect for them that O'Neill saw the possibility of reclassifying the classical art from and merging the classical perspective to life with the modern contemporary times.

Historical Background of American Drama

Of all the genres of American writing, drama came to fruition late. It may be stated incontrovertibly that the greatness of the American theater rests on a foundation built in the last forty years. To be sure, there are some prior figures – such as Clyde Fitch, who are remembered in the history of American drama, but the importance of our theatre begins after the First World War. Truly, modern American Drama is the America drama.

In the twenties, Maxwell Anderson, Elmer Rice, George Kelly, Sidney Howard, and above all Eugene O'Neill, inaugurated a period of intense realism, experimentation, and penetration of characterization which was to bring the American theatre to world-wide attention. Sentimentalism, platitudes, easy optimism, and interest in mere spectacle, which had dominated American drama from its earliest times faded before a realism developed not only from the cruel realizations of World War I but also from the study and influence of such European masters as Ibsen and Strindberg. Much of the credit for the new type of American drama must also be given to the Provincetown Players, the Theatre Guild, and other acting groups who were willing to break with the often stultifying influence of commercialism and showmanship and give playwrights an opportunity to work for a serious, intellectual audience, an audience interested in genuine achievement, accuracy of detail, and experiment in form.

The blossoming of American drama in the 1920's is not without links to past drama. O'Neill's work, for example, evidences the influence of the Greek dramatists as well as the influence of the modern continental playwrights. Various styles of writing were being tried and developed. Thus, for example, naturalistic elements are present in O'Neill, and expressionistic style is the basis of *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones*, as well as of Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*.

As the reputation of American drama increased, new writers of merit and ability appeared. Among these figures were Robert Sherwood, Philip Barry, S. N. Behrman, Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman, Sidney Kingsley, Thornton Wilder and William Saroyan. These playwrights helped and perfected various types of drama; for example, high comedy (comedy of manners) in the work of Barry and Behrman, the drama of social criticism and protest in the work of Clifford Odets. The writers of the

thirties brought freshness and vibrant force to the American stage at a time when the economic depression gave a considerable impetus to serious social and political reflection.

Revival of Classical Art form

In Aristotelian terms, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, like the original Aeschylian tragedy treats human beings as limited agents, who fail to accept their limitations and aim for an inaccessible goal. Or O'Neill presents characters that refuse to accept that human achievements are restricted in the cosmic order. There are also characters who cannot resist their urges even though they may struggle against them, and as a result they meet their doom.

Because of moral strength, a tragic hero always seems greater than ordinary people. Thus, his tragedy leaves a very serious impression upon the audience. Certainly, this creates higher kind of pity and fear among the audience. But according to Aristotelian tragic theory, representation of suffering and defeat of protagonist does not leave an audience feeling depressed, but relieved and even exalted. This, O'Neill had reemployed in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. In this manner, he has helped revive the classical art form and to imbue it with dramatic justice in the classical sense.

Though O'Neill does not adhere strictly to the three unities, he has employed the unity of place and restricted action within a single location. The achievement of all illusion of reality requires that the action represented by a play must be close to the actual condition of life. Thus, the 'imitation of action' in classical term is appropriately employed by O'Neill in *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

He has used the form of trilogy in *Mourning Becomes Electra* to depict modern psychological problems. The form was used by Greek playwrights in depicting the relationship between man and his fate. O'Neill does not care about the

length of the play as long as it reveals the basic human nature. O'Neill has also reintroduced the chorus and song for the same purpose as the classical tragedians to give hints of the coming actions and to comment on the action of the protagonist. Commentary through the song of chorus is employed in an appropriate way as the Greek tragedians in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. He introduces the chorus as a character as his vehicle for commentary on the play, as well as an exposition of its subject, time, and description of the happening events. He uses the term 'Choral character' to refer to a group of gossiping villagers who stand apart from the action. Their comments provides the audience often an ironic perspective to view the other characters and events. He also uses the lyrical function to express traditional moral, religious and social attitudes.

The principles, ideas and style of art of ancient Greece and Rome are basically known as classical art today. It is this art which has become synonymous with excellence and artistic quality of high distinction. It is an art which imitates life instead of romanticizing it. Its purpose must be to state the condition of humanity. It must have clear didactic purpose, not in the medieval sense but in the sense of the Greeks. It deals with the suffering of human beings. Neither of the heroic past nor the speculated future, but the terrible present. So, the efforts to maintain artistic quality of high art is none other than its reclassification.

Tragedy is a dramatic representation of serious action, which eventuates in a disastrous conclusion for the protagonist. Deep discussion on tragedy started from Aristotle's classical analysis in his *Poetics* (400 B.C.). He based his theory on the examples available to him from the Greek tragedians –Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. He could not foresee the development of tragedy in the subsequent two thousand years. Though many attempts came from Aristotle to develop the theory of

tragedy, and later tragedies seemed very different, some aspects of his discussion apply to all of the many tragic plots.

The present research is the study of tragedy in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. It mainly focuses on the reclassification of tragedy in the modern materialistic American world. O'Neill has taken an American Civil War family and their sufferings as a presentation of contemporary society and has sketched a real picture of human nature. He has expressed the nature of an American family which represents the basic nature of all human beings with modern fragmented thoughts. *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a profound study of tragic relations represented by highly serious actions of the Mannon family. The tragic flaw in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is stretched to a certain magnitude, from happy to the reversal of tragic fortune of the hero. It suggests the struggle of modern man against the psychological force lurking beyond the conscious world.

Lavinia, the protagonist of the play, with her moral strength, her dignity and self-waning confidence, makes her end not pathetic but tragic and serious. Her duty to punish a mother who takes her lover away from her and kill her father to satisfy her passion, drives her mother and Orin to suicide when he realizes the fact that it was too late to punish her father and to protect the honor of the family. She shuts her self in a house as a pathetic creature. Lavinia does not lose her dignity and courage until her own doom. Lavinia, as a tragic hero, effectively evokes pity and fear because she is not thoroughly good or not thoroughly bad. She is also better than many ordinary humans.

O'Neill uses the techniques of classical tragedy art form in a new modern context. He doesn't use them as they were. These techniques are used with variations

to fit the new context. What can he achieve by reclassifying classical art form in modern context?

John Patrick Diggins somewhat answers the above question when he says:

Classicists see O'Neill as adapting the ancient themes of Aeschylus to and for an America unsophisticated about classical tragedy. When O'Neill was asked why he returned to classical antiquity to deal with modern democracy, he responded that the Greek stage allows us to look into ourselves. Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle held up reason as the highest human faculty. Rational reflection was, they taught, the key to discovering life's meaning. By grasping eternal and immutable truths, we could fathom who we are and why we exist, they believed. But ancient playwrights dealt with the emotions and passions that their protagonists themselves could barely understand or explain. Carrying forward that ancient tradition, *O'Neill* dealt not with the theater of truth, but with the drama of doubt, uncertainty, and questioning. (129)

By following classical art form, Eugene O'Neill is trying to remold it to fit in the modern context. He shows us that modern man is as vulnerable as his ancient counterpart at the hands of fate. When the classical techniques are used to deal with the themes of contemporary times, the old techniques get a new spirit, vigor and vitality.

O'Neill has a vast range of very different characters to his credit. He has taken his people from all levels of life, and has drawn effective portraits of both sexes. He seems at his best in depicting older men, and he has a fondness for the New England stock, which he, nevertheless, does not perfectly understand. Although his people are

extremely varied and have many types of violence and guilt in their lives, they are 'normal' people subjected to special stress. We can feel for them and consider our kingship in a way that would be difficult for us to do in the case of some of Williams' characters.

Most of O'Neill's innovations derive from standard literary sources. One sometimes forgets that O'Neill is an educated playwright, a sophisticate of literature, when one's view is obscured by the primitivistic aspects of his life. He gave expressionism a fling, but tried to wed it to the naturalistic material of the sea plays in *The Hairy Ape*. He took the great outlines of classic drama and added a new dimension of scientific psychology in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. No other American dramatist can point to so varied an achievement.

Mourning Becomes Electra is a reworking of the Oresteian trilogy with the setting in the United States just after the Civil War. The three plays are entitled *The Homecoming*, *The Hunted* and *The Haunted*.

Talking about neurotics in the play, Shirley Fleming says:

It would be hard indeed to find a more disagreeable collection of neurotics than those who make up the Mannon family of Eugene O'Neill's trilogy. The literary descendants of Aeschylus's haunted self-destructors, transplanted by O'Neill to post-Civil War New England, have very few moments of internal peace. (14)

General Ezra Mannon (Agamemnon) is returning from the Civil War. His wife, Christine (Clytemnestra), has become the mistress of Adam Brant (Aegisthus), who is in actuality Ezra's nephew. Lavinia (Electra), the daughter, is strongly attached to her father and jealous of her mother. She learns of her mother's affair and hints at it in letters to her brother Orin (Orestes). Christine and Adam plot to keel Ezra, and

Adam buys poison which Christine gives Ezra on his return. Lavinia discovers the poison box, suspects the truth and vows revenge.

In Part II Orin, torn by his devotion to his mother and the demands made on him by Lavinia to avenge their father, goes to Brant's ship and shoots Adam. Christine, in horror over the loss of Adam, and guilt-stricken over Ezra's murder, commits suicide. In a sub-plot in this play, Orin has been desultorily courting Hazel Niles, whose brother is in love with Lavinia.

Lavinia and Orin take a long trip to forget their problems. While he is away from home, he acts like his old self. Once they return home, Orin becomes very depressed about his mother's death. His mind becomes unhinged. He needs constant attention as he threatens suicide. He forces Lavinia to break her engagement to Peter Niles by threatening to reveal the details of Adam's death. Orin writes a history of their crimes. This is to be read on his death. Lavinia destroys the document and Orin commits suicide. Lavinia, feeling that she cannot take the easy way out, determines to expiate her sins by living out her life with her guilt. She refuses a reconciliation with her fiancé and shuts herself up in the family mansion.

The majority of critics, including Joshep W. Krutch, Oscar Cargill, Barrett Clark and Clayton Hamilton, award to O'Neill the possession of greatest American dramatist. There are some dissenters, Eric Bentley being one. There is little doubt that he is the best-known American playwright. His output is impressive, more than thirty plays. Moreover the scale of their conception is vast. They are tremendously varied in style, subject matter, and techniques. Thus, he is an artist difficult to evaluate.

O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a modern psychological drama which dramatizes the popular myth of Electra on the basis of modern psychological theory.

Joseph Wood Krutch talks about unconscious desires becoming more powerful than conscious motives as:

It is no more an exposition or defense of a modern psychological conception than Aeschylus is an exposition or defense of the tenets of Greek religion. It is on the other hand, like all great literatures, mean the same thing that human beings are great and terrible creatures when they are in the grip of great passion. (112-113)

Similarly, Arthur Hobson Quinn has quoted O'Neill's own statement as:

I did not follow consciously anyone of the Greek dramatists, on the contrary I tried my best to forget all about their differing *Electra* etc.. All I wanted to borrow was the theme pattern of Aeschylus and to reinterpret it in modern psychological terms with fate and furies working from within the individual soul. (255)

Thomas E. Porter talks about the Freudian psychology in *Mourning Becomes Electra* and says, "The Freudian motivation in *Mourning Becomes Electra* moves Orin and Lavinia to a fate consistent with psychological theory" (212).

However remote the origin of the drama, it has brought the traditional research of dramatic art. As T. R. Henn states:

It can question the unconscious, of the immediate and the traditional, in a medium of the utmost complexity; yet which continues at a number of levels because it, and it alone, can use the traditional resource of dramatic art with a consciousness, however remote, of its ritual beginnings. (292)

About the theme of America in O'Neill's works, John Patrick Diggins writes:

Searching for an overarching rubric, one might conclude that O'Neill's theme was America. A teacher, for example, could very well have students read one of O'Neill's plays, especially *Desire Under the Elms*, *A Touch of the Poet*, or *More Stately Mansions*, together with Alexis de Tocqueville's classic *Democracy in America*, published in the 1830s, the time frame of those plays. (158)

It is evident from the review of the existing literatures on the play that they have not dealt with how the play has reflected the remolding of classical art form and how it stands as a landmark of tragedy. This study on the remolding of classical art form in the play will focus on the dramatic tradition and theory of tragedy.

The various styles, his experiments in naturalism, symbolism, expressionism, etc., are easy enough to understand. They indicate an artist needing a more personalized mode of expression than the conventional styles supply. But unhappily, it is difficult to determine whether he ever achieved this goal. He produced masterpieces in other molds, as in the case of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, where a classical form is revived. He does not possess a philosophy that remains constant through the years, although it is true that of few principles remain the same. These would indicate a desire to present the truth, a distrust of the know-natural man, and an acceptance of Freudian psychology.

It is not as much by his philosophy that O'Neill interests us as by his understanding of human beings and his control of technique. As to the first, understanding of human beings, he was blessed with a sure insight into human motives, an ear for the literary rhythms of everyday speech, and a rich compassion for all the weaknesses of man. In regard to control of technique, his production was more uneven. For instance, his plots, at the worst, become too loose and haphazard, marked

by needless violence and leaning too heavily on Freudian motivations. At the best, he weaves a seemingly uncontrived thread of events that holds our interest and that seems inevitable.

This study will explore the classical techniques of dramatic writing which are employed in O'Neill's play *Mourning Becomes Electra*. It will not claim that *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a classical drama nor has it adopted the classical vision of human beings. It is only an effort to identify the classical dramatic techniques, for remolding the spirit of the classical art form, by reinterpreting the ancient myth in the modern context.

The identification of psychological realities which has replaced the Greek concept of 'fatalism' to bind human beings is not the subject matter of this research, but rather it accepts that the causes of human suffering in the modern times is as intense as the suffering of man inflicted by fate.

Chapter Two

Textual Analysis

Theory of Tragedy

Tragedy is a dramatic representation of serious action, which eventuates in a disastrous conclusion for the protagonist. But deep discussion of tragedy started from Aristotle's classical analysis in the *Poetics* (400BC). He based his theory on the examples available to him from the Greek tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. He could not foresee the development of tragedies, in the subsequent two thousand years. Though many attempts came after Aristotle to develop the theory of tragedy, and later tragedies seemed very different, some aspects of his discussion apply to all of the many tragic plots. His theory has become the starting point for all theories of tragedy, even the non-Aristotelian tragic plot construction. So, his theory of tragedy is a milestone in the evolution of tragedy as a genre.

Basically, Aristotle focused on two things in his discussion of tragedy. The tragic representation of suffering and defeat do not leave the audience feeling depressed but relieved or they even undergo purgation, and the 'pleasure of pity and fear' remains the basic way of distinguishing the tragic form.

Aristotle further said, a tragic hero equally evokes both 'pity and fear'. It will be more effective if the hero is better than real life. Because the tragic hero is higher than ordinary mortals, his happiness and pride changes into suffering and even death because his 'hubris' of overweening self-confidence compels him to hamartia error of judgment. It leads the protagonist to disregard the divine warning or mortal code and compels him to meet a tragic fate.

It moves the audience to pity because the hero is not evil. Thus, his misfortune is greater than his punishment. Such a state of affairs moves the audience to fear

because the audience recognize possibilities of the same fate among themselves. But in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill has not borrowed 'divine warning' instead he has substituted it with psychology. Because of passion a modern man goes to disregard the law of nature. This is a mysterious force behind human life, which lies unconsciously in the human body. It creates tragedy of high artistic quality and rouses 'pity and fear'.

Thus, when it comes to tragedy, Greek tragedies are always taken as the epitome or zenith. However, these Greek tragedies are different from modern tragedies or Shakespearean tragedies because:

The stories were well known (as the dramatist used the old stories of Gods, Kings and Heroes)

All great classical tragedies were based on a strong religious belief.

Violence was always an off-stage action.

Few actors were included in the drama.

Characters in a tragedy were above the level of ordinary men- they were Kings, Queens, Princes or Heroes.

Tragedy and comedy were never mixed together. Dramatists never included comic characters and scenes in serious plays.

Theories of Tragedy till O'Neill

Tragedy, simple terms, is a dramatic representation of serious actions which leads to a disastrous conclusion for the protagonist. The beginning of tragedy is to be found in ancient Greece. During 5th century, Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus wrote powerful tragedies.

Regarding the Greek tragedies, Aristotle in his *Poetics* pointed out that the tragic, hero or heroine should be more magnanimous, more daring, larger in spirit

than the average person. He also put forward the term ‘Catharsis’ (i.e., purgation or purification). According to Aristotle, tragedies give the pleasure of pity and fear. So, to watch a tragedy is a sort of psychological medicine. Along with ‘Catharsis’, Aristotle came up with a term ‘hamartia’, that is, the genuine weakness of flaw found in the tragic character that eventually leads him towards his suffering and even death. In addition, the concept of ‘peripeteia’ is also the contribution of Aristotle, according to which the progress of the tragic characters sometimes leads them to the reversal: they get what they want, but what they want turns to be destructive.

Hence, ‘catharsis’, ‘hamartia’ and to some extent, ‘peripeteia’ are relevant to all tragedies. Therefore, Aristotle’s thoughts about tragedies are highly intelligent and sophisticated.

This classical Greek tragedy was followed by Senecan tragedies (Seneca-the most important tragedian of Rome) and medieval tragedies (Chaucer). Then, it was Christopher Marlowe (*Doctor Faustus*) and Shakespeare (*Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Anthony and Cleopatra* etc.) who came up with great tragedies of the age. Similarly, Ben Jonson and John Webster are equally important for tragedies. Ben Jonson is famous for his tragedy *Sejanus*; and John Webster’s *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are highly appreciated. However, John Milton stands aloof because he wrote strictly in the style of classical Greek tragedy. Besides, other famous tragedians are John Dryden (*All for love*), P.B. Shelley (*The Cenci*) and Henrik Ibsen (*A Doll’s House*).

Likewise, American dramatists like John Millington Synge, Eugene O’Neill and Arthur Miller are also well known for their tragedies. Though these tragedians depend upon Aristotelian concepts, they have shown that in a modern society (where

it is hard to differentiate between noble and peasant), even the life of an ordinary man can be tragic just as Oedipus's life can be tragic.

Greek tragedy originated from religious festivals dedicated to Dionysius. Even before the dramatic form developed, the festivals often told the story of a protagonist who was trapped in a cyclic doom and produced the sensation of a complicated and mysterious personal as well as collective guilt. The rituals that culminated in the genre that we commonly know as tragedy showed the sufferings of Dionysus, whereas those rituals that celebrated his revelries developed into comedy.

The Greek dramatists have obeyed the same instinct as the early Greek philosophers. They contemplated the innumerable phenomena of the universe. They assumed instinctively that these were the ultimate realities of the universe. The mind of Greek dramatists had only one focus. There is the one area of illumination, and, outside that, a darkness tempts us to explode. The action is played out within a strictly defined area of illumination. Therefore Greek drama does not have detailed reality. But they have explored the reality of the gods, the laws, and universal principles.

Greek tragedians are constructive rather than representational. They were interested in human character above all things. They use all the subtle resources of their art for the purpose of representing a nobly idealized type of human character in action because conditions of their theatre did not allow for lively and representational drama.

Aeschylus was a religious dramatist. He deals with the evolution of civilization. The establishment of moral and social order out of chaos is an essential part of his religious thinking. Sophocles is much more naturalistic. Personal relation and appearance are studied much in his drama. He contemplates rather upon the human condition, which is fixed and governed by laws which are inherent in the

nature of the universe and of man, they are eternal. It includes the known laws of morality and the mysterious regions of human experience in which innocent action can have terrible results.

The circumstances of the Greeks changed the rules of the 'single character'. They changed the number of actors twice within a generation. Aeschylus found himself increasingly hampered by the one actor rule. As it was impossible to say things within the existing framework, therefore he introduced a second actor. A generation later, Sophocles developed his dramatic possibilities with a third actor by finding two actors insufficient to perform.

How Greek tragedian's work has been recorded in the comments of Aristotle is given in his critical treatise *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, the protagonist is morally admirable but not a complete man. He is confronted by hostile forces both inside and outside. He is divided between imperative and impulse, between morality and passion. He had to make a difficult and ethical choice in order to solve the conflict. He searches for meaningful existence by struggling with those forces. But his destiny lead him to a tragic end

Seneca's tragedies were lessons on the inconsistency of fortune. The theme of fortune's inconsistency is often linked with that of murder. Seneca delighted in dramatizing the great crimes of antiquity. He took only those subjects which would yield psychological development and permitted detailed study of passion: love, hate and jealousy. So, Seneca is convinced that man has liberty of choice between good and evil. The will is all-powerful. Seneca's tragedy strongly emphasizes blood revenge for murder or a serious revenge from motives of jealousy. His tragedies were populated by ghosts and filled with revenge and blood. But he had relegated such

materials to off-stage action that was narrated, while Elizabethan tragedies brought them on to the stage.

The tragedy of revenge has been classified as a definite Elizabethan tragedy of blood, more obviously plays like Spanish Tragedy. Tragedy of blood is a cluster of plays which work according to a rigid dramatic formula, blood revenge for murder as the central tragic fact. On the other hand, it is amorphous with no such definite characteristics, linked by a delight in blood and sensationalism. Thus, set apart artificially, the revenge tragedy of the Hamlet school has a distinct species of the tragedy of blood. A tragedy whose leading motive is revenge, leading to the death of the murderer and often the death of the avenger himself. Such distinction was very usefully employed for a small group of early plays written almost under the influence of the Kydian formula of tragedy.

Elizabethan tragedians presented revenge and bloody actions on stage to satisfy the appetite of the contemporary audience for violence and horror. They have brought suicide, ghosts, sensational incidents and bloody endings in their tragedies. The central action of Elizabethan tragedy presents both the tragic and comic sense of life. It is not merely a matter of the tragic and the comic but also the high and low, the dignified and humble. Elizabethan drama combined these humanitarian and social aspects of life. These matters were sometimes treated with some degree of realism. The slaves, the watchman and grave diggers are brought into the same context as the Kings and Queens. They also speak much the same language. This dramatic justice of presenting humble life gives the feeling that Elizabethan plays are true to life. There is tragic action surrounded by life.

Most Shakespearean tragedies also depart from the basic concept of tragedy. Though his tragedies introduce humorous characters and actions for comic-relief, it is

relevant to the tragic plot in various ways. There develops such a mixed mode of tragic plot named 'tragi-comedy'. It is a popular dramatic form. It produced one of the greatest dramatic successes in non-Aristotelian form.

Generally, with regard to the tragic protagonist, Shakespeare does not depart from the outer trappings of the Aristotelian tragic hero. He is larger than life and comes from high social status. But some minor tragedies have protagonists from the middle class and even from the lower class. Such protagonists are more to be found in eighteenth and nineteenth century tragedies. But in the seventeenth century, restoration playwrights produced new and original tragedy called 'Heroic tragedy'.

Restoration tragedy, where the hero is a noble born, is typically represented in a situation in which his passionate love conflicts with patriotic duty to his nation. It is a specific dramatic form called 'Heroic tragedy'. It is a heroic play which imitates heroic poetry. Consequently love and valor are its subject matter.

Recent tragedies are not the tragedy in the purist because they do not follow the form and content of classical tragedy. The protagonists of modern tragedy depart from the classical concept of the 'tragic hero'. They are pathetic, passive and ineffectual instead of manifesting largeness, dignity and heroism. But they struggle for meaningful existence. The struggle between 'external authority' and personal integrity is one of the themes. The struggle within a person as in psychological drama is also one of the tragic themes. Can the common man not be the subject of tragedy? Arthur Miller answered – "the common person is not ordinary in spirit." They have also the fear factor in their tragic end, though they seem 'anti heroic' in the eyes of the audience.

Tragedy tells of the fall of a worthwhile, usually noble, character. Greek and Elizabethan tragedies relied on a protagonist, who was of high station, but modern

tragedies also use protagonists of low or middle station as a means of exploring their worthiness. Traditionally, tragic heroes or heroines faced an unexpected fate. Fate, or destiny, dominates tragedy, and the plot reveals the protagonist resisting fate before finally yielding to it. Fate in classical tragedy was determined by the will of the gods; in modern tragedy it is sometimes determined by inherent characteristics of the heroes; by the force of the environment, or by both. Tragic heroes and heroines face their fate with determination, courage and bravery. Thus, they are worthy of our respect. Tragedy is, above all, serious in tone and importance. It focuses on a hero or heroine, whose potential is great but whose efforts to realize that potential are thwarted by fate: circumstances beyond his or her control. Tragedies also need to invoke the emotions of pity and terror.

Tragedy is generally an event which ends in sorrow. Tragedians supposed the principle of tragedy independently as the system of explaining and analyzing, in the different ages. But the norms of Aristotle's theory of tragedy imparted a never ending impression upon them and even on those non-Aristotelian tragedians. So, Aristotle's analysis of tragedy is the source of all theories of tragedy in the western dramatic world.

Aristotle defined tragedy as :

Tragedy is an imitation of action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude, in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornaments in the form of action, not narrative incidents arousing pity and fear, where with to accomplish the catharsis of emotions. (53)

Aristotle, mainly focused on two issues with which most of the commentators agree. The first is that the tragic representation of suffering and defeat leaves the audience feeling not depressed but relieved and even exalted. Second, the pleasure

derived from the purgation of 'pity and fear'—as the basic distinction of tragedy from comedy and other dramatic forms. Aristotle regards the tragedian's aim to produce 'pity and fear' in the highest degree as the principle that determines the choices and moral quality of the tragic hero and the organization of tragic plot construction.

Seneca believed that tragedy should make moral and cultural crisis its subject matter, because the 'shock' of moral and cultural crisis is the style of tragedy. He says that 'self' control is the way of resolving the probability of 'shock'. It is relevant to the morality of King or ruler, because morality creates a stable kingdom, but tyranny is supremely unstable.

He brought the vision of relation between morality and power to depict the reality of his time. If one crosses the restriction of moral law on the basis of power, it will invite revenge and blood. In a sense, Seneca seems nearer to the concept of classical Greek theory of tragedy but he never seemed to expect the catharsis of emotions from tragedy.

Besides Aristotle some other renowned thinkers have offered alternative, definitions of tragedy. The 19th century philosopher, Hegel described the tragic situation as the collision of mutual exclusive but equally legitimate causes: both Antigone and Creon stand for principles-loyalty to family and obedience to the state – which are morally justifiable if taken by themselves, but when these ethical positions conflict, tragedy results for both side.

John Patrick Diggins in his article says that Friedrich Nietzsche represented the origins of tragedy symbolically represented in the confrontation between Apollo and Dionysos, the Greek gods of order, form and impulse and instinct respectively. The tragic hero is divided between imperative and impulse, between moral ordinance

and unruly passion, between law and lust. Dr. Faustus rejects the limits of science (imperatives) to seek diabolic knowledge and power (evil impulse). So, both Hegel's and Nietzsche's views are helpful to describe the tragedy in non-Aristotelian terms.

On Nietzsche's reading by O'Neill, John Patrick Diggins writes:

O'Neill's Nietzschean reading of American history spans the age of exploration from the 15th century to the 19th century of Jackson and Lincoln (from Juan Ponce de Leon in *The Fountain* to the murderous Mannon family in *Mourning Becomes Electra*). O'Neill depicts history as expanding, conquering, appropriating, "the taking possession of things," whether land as property or people as slaves. Since the 1960s, Marxist professors have taught many students to see history as the study of capitalism and imperialism, but from the Nietzschean-O'Neillian perspective, no solution can be found in socialism and the abolition of private property, for the will to power and domination persists regardless of the political nature of a regime--a timely perspective for the post communist world in which we now find ourselves. (135)

The tragic vision does not assume the hero's ultimate downfall. Rather, it explores the possible ways to extend free will in the world. Human beings are creatures existing in the universe with the power to change themselves and the world itself. The will decides and then acts on its decision and calls out its own destiny. The hero remains his own master even though the gods appear to have a hand in his destruction. So, the hero's determination leads him to a disastrous end. This is the test of the basic substance of humanity and its meaning.

Jean-Paul Satre asserts that existence precedes essence. Human liberty is coexist with human existence. To be is to act; not to act is to cease to be. So, we attempt often to fill up our free will ourselves by drawing the goodness of the world. But the eternal reality is human action often leads toward 'nothingness'. Man who is ever conscious of this nothingness is subject to fear and anxiety. T.R Henn writes:

In Satre's world there is a curious strain of brutality which is at once the result of and justification for, despair. Characters appear to be determined by events; and the protagonists are confronted by simplified systems of conflicting claims, each of which demands a sacrifice. (238)

Like Satre, Albert Camus concludes after reading two tragedies that the tragic hero is determined neither by heredity nor his environment, but is molded by the tremendous pressure of events.

T. R. Henn, explained thus, "Tragedy communicates, through suffering, a supreme sense of harmony with the universe" (232). Because a tragedy projects the personal and collective values which are potentially put in danger, at the same time the danger of these values evokes a positive response from the audience. Therefore Henn define: "The harvest of tragedy is the freedom and enrichment of the human spirit"(237).

George Steiner says that the triumph of rationalism and a secular world have removed the metaphysical ground for tragedy in the modern world. The Greeks saw themselves as a part of larger reality. Steiner argues: "In Greek tragedy as in Shakespeare, mortal actions are encompassed by forces which transcend man. We cannot conceive of Oedipus without a Sphinx nor of Hamlet without a ghost"(193). These tragedies depict life as 'a great mystery beyond human understanding by

instructing how small the world belongs to man'. So, he emphasizes , that by banishing divinity from the universe, humanity has decreased its significance.

After the successful opening of *Death of Salesman* (1949), Arthur Miller published an article in *The New York Time* entitled "Tragedy and the Common Man". In this essay, he admits that few tragedies are written in the modern times due to lack of heroes among them, because of skepticism of science. However, he states, "I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were". He then gives his definition of modern tragic hero, "The tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character, who is ready to lay down his life."

Arthur Miller defined:

Tragedy, bewildered by fate by life, is representative of the ordinary man whose aspirations reflect the false values of a society, the effect on the audience is one of the compassionate understanding rather than of tragic pity and fear. (324)

He sees the tragic vision demonstrating 'the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity.' The tragic hero could have such a belief in himself and in the rightness of his consciences that he would give up his life rather than say what he thought was false.

On the marginalized role of women characters in tragedies, Steve Wilmer says:

Greek tragedies were written by men and for men in a patriarchal society and that the plays are misogynistic and should be ignored by feminists. The author also explores how female directors and writers

have continued to use characters to make a powerful statement about contemporary society. (108)

Despite the changing times and pronouncement of critics in different era, the Aristotelian principles of criticisms are still relevant even in today's world.

Tragic Vision

It has always been a fact that men are moved by force whose reason and influence can not be justified. But O'Neill has a vision on the force which is almost proved tragic in human life. The force of individual desires or secret passion is the source of conflict which takes the human beings to the bottom of their soul. The height and depth of the human passion and meanness of deeds are the basic causes of human sufferings which leads the human being to the divine redistribution.

So, O'Neill has philosophized tragedy instead of sympathizing on it. He says that human nature is greater than the conscious mind. There is always conflict between conscious motives and unconscious desires. Unconscious desires is the force behind the life which is more powerful and mysterious than the conscious mind. And it makes human being a great and terrible creature when it grasps the situation. Consequently human being or a tragic hero is compelled to have a wrong judgment in action and face the tragic end. O'Neill further said that the novelist is eternally the most tragic and tragedy alone had that significant beauty which is truth. It is the meaning of life and the hope and only one source of knowledge.

Tragic Life

O'Neill's main concern is to enter into the human nature and find out the main source of human sufferings which lies mysteriously in human body and gives the true sense of beauty, truth and knowledge. In a sense he invites not only the human life but

also the forces behind life in an expressive way. For that purpose his own tragic life experiences become the resourceful guideline for him.

O'Neill was born after American civil war (1878) and lived a pathetic childhood because of his father's theatrical profession. He used to live in a train box, third class apartment during journey where he did not get freedom as he wished. The whole family disappointed with his father because he did not have time for family. His mother became drugs addict, he himself became drunkard and nearly died of tuberculosis. He joined a series of different occupations and wondering because of his varied and interrupted education. His job as a sea man on a merchants ship to south America and his unhappy married life led him towards the confusion about finding himself, was bound to have a profound effect on his philosophical outlook and nature of his play.

It was the time of First World War, when O'Neill had started his career as a playwright. Everybody has extreme ego of superiority, there were declining of humanitarian values and respect. He witnessed the predicament of the world war, and this added more torture to his thoughts. So, O'Neill is compelled to see the dark side as a source of making a track in human civilization. For that he has no other options to use for didactic purpose in modern time. Hence, he has borrowed the old story of *Agamemnon*, *Clytemnestra*, *Orestes* and *Electra* and attempted to reinterpret it in terms of modern psychology. He has taken a further step in philosophical disillusionment, concerned for the moment not with the inhumanity of God but with the mystery of human soul. He attempts to depict inner reality in an unreal way by using abstraction, symbolism and distortion, known as expressionism. It was an excellent medium for satire and social comment. At the sometime he had offered an excellent opportunity for imaginative stage designs and production.

The conflict between the conscious mind and unconscious desire is the source of suffering which shakes the human being to the bottom of their soul. The unconscious desires of human mind lie in a condensed form in a strong position rather than the conscious motives. So, it compels human beings to choose action against the law of nature and moral codes.

O'Neill's sense of human suffering is highly influential because human beings are fighting a terrible war with their own nature. Individual desire which goes against law of nature, goes against the law of 'cosmos.' It brings the conflict between inner self and body which is known as human suffering, and human beings themselves are responsible for it.

Chapter Three

Textual Analysis

O'Neill has reclassified the classical form of art with special reference to modern American tragedy, particularly with regard to *Mourning Becomes Electra*. This study adds a new perspective to the interpretation of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. It studies the major techniques employed by O'Neill in the play. He has given a particular direction to the tragic plot and the result is an American tragedy not particularly in Greek terms, but remarkably more effective and tragic. In true sense, it becomes a perfect tragedy by reclassifying the spirit of the classical art form.

Imitation of Action

Mourning Becomes Electra helped to establish O'Neill's position as a great dramatist of art theatre in America. It is impossible for the art theatre to divorce itself from the everyday world, its people and its problem. But, American drama was committed to the expression of poetry and imagination for the tragic plot. So, he has created the realism of situation where characters depict day to day problems of the modern materialistic American world.

In the play, O'Neill has expressed the nature of an American family which represents the basic nature of all human beings with modern fragmented thoughts. He does not go beyond the basic instinct of human beings, their attitude, feelings and thoughts, their nature and culture, morality and arrogance. He has brought subconscious reality into existence. In this sense, he has brought true sense of imitation of life. He has represented the action of humans in its basic sense by imitating the actions and representing them in a highly dramatic manner.

O'Neill has created a post-civil war situation and shown that people are directly or indirectly involved and victimized by it. In the play, Ezra Mannon is in the

battle field away from home along with his son. Being a patriot, he has left his wife at home along with her self-oriented daughter. Christine, the mother has extra marital affair with her daughter's boy friend. General Mannon has a good reputation in society but he does not have time for his wife. So, she is carrying on an affair with Mr. Brant, a ship captain. She murders her husband because of her passionate love for Brant. And the daughter wants to fulfil her duty by punishing her father's murderer. This leads to the tragic end of the entire Mannon family. In this way, O'Neill has imitated the action that takes place in the Mannon family to express the frustration and decay of the American society.

Mourning Becomes Electra is a dramatic representation of serious action which eventuates in a disastrous conclusion of the protagonist. It has a serious plot ending in a catastrophe in the classical sense. O'Neill has destroyed the stereotypes of the convention of the well-made play in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. He has substituted an essentially different dramatic imagination. He has not based his analysis of human nature upon Freudian analysis, but upon the conflict between conscious and the sub-conscious realities. The result is the new vitality, new spirit and a new depth of seriousness in the drama itself.

Mourning Becomes Electra is a profound study of tragic relation represented by highly serious actions of the Mannon family, a family of strong passion that is proud of their tradition. It is an analysis of the social environment of family members, their nature, and the conflict between their appearance and subconscious realities. The passionate love of daughter Lavinia for her father and the hatred of mother Christine for her husband lead the family to an unexpected tragic end. Christine's passion for Adam Brant leads her to murder General Mannon on the night of his homecoming from civil war.

Lavinia, who takes it as her duty to punish her father's murderer dominates the play because, it is Lavinia, who leads her brother Orin to kill Brant and drive her mother and Orin to suicide. Then judging the real ground of her position, she shuts herself in Mannon's house. The moral strength of Lavinia, her sense of duty and dignity makes her ending not pathetic but tragic. At least, subconsciously, Lavinia has to be punished by her own conscience after Orin's suicide. So, it seems a tragic and deeply serious plot and metaphorically reaches the mourning of Electra in the Greek myth.

The tragic flaw in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is from happy to the reversal of tragic fortune of the hero. It does not affect the protagonist only, but all the family members who contribute to creating the tragic end of the Mannon's on one hand, and on the other, the effect of the sufferings result in purgation or exaltation of the soul of the audience rather than depressing them. It begins from the highly passionate love of Lavinia and hatred of her mother toward her father and ends with the tragic disaster of the Mannon family. So, the play has a certain magnitude that it starts from the general instincts of human beings like love and hatred reaching a disastrous conclusion.

Mourning Becomes Electra grows from the nature of its own conflict of conscious and subconscious faculty which is different from person to person. One is the conflict within the individual's outside appearance and inside reality. The other is the conflict of subconscious level of different individuals. In the play, Lavinia is struggling with her outward appearance but she has not succeeded in dealing with the outside world. To do so, her dignity and sense of duty towards her father leads her to make a wrong judgment. So, the play is complete in itself and stretched to a certain magnitude with serious effect. O'Neill has been able to demonstrate the acute sense of

organic form about the mystery of life which made him a leader of American expressionism too.

Language in the Play

According to Aristotle, the language of tragedy should be poetic, it should be an imaginative language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament. It needs a great language to lift it beyond itself. But O'Neill does not have such language because he does not think that such language is possible in the discordant, faithless rhythm of modern society. So, he has used the language of the civil war society in an expressive manner. The poetry of classical tragedy is altered to a rather flat prose.

But the play illustrates O'Neill's adaptation of the language of poetic symbolism which has become associated with New European drama particularly of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. O'Neill is 'a bit poetic' although his plays are not written in verse; he recognized that the imagination and emotion of high drama are more nearly those of poetry rather than those of prose because poetic language is the language of serious matter. O'Neill's bold expression of sub-conscious reality helped to establish him as a great playwright of the art theatre and as a poet.

O'Neill, in the play, has dramatized the inexpressible. He has created a subconscious world with the vigor of imagination. With Christine accusing her daughter of trying to become the wife of her father and mother of Orin, O'Neill creates such a world that can exist only in the mind but not in reality. Although he has not written the play in verse, the effect of language is serious. So, because of his power of imagination and expression *Mourning Becomes Electra*, rises to excellent poetic expression for highly serious matter.

O'Neill has also included songs. Time and again he uses highly metaphoric language in the play like when Orin says, "I hate the day light it is like a accusing

eye” (134). “The breaking of the waves was your voice, the sky was the same color as your eyes. The sand was like your skin. The whole island was you” (79). He frequently expresses his poetic feelings throughout the play. Lavinia becomes romantic with Peter as , “There was only this world – the warm earth in the moon light – the trade wind in the coco palms – the surf in the reef-the fires at night and the drum throbbing in my heart – the native dancing naked and innocent – without knowledge of sin” (126).

In the last part of the play Orin says, “Death is an island of peace”(149).

Even about the topic of the play, O’Neill metaphorically expresses the suffering of the civil war American family as an excellent representation in comparison with Electra as a suffering character of the Greek myth. Though O’Neill has been depicting the real people and their problems, he has distorted the outside reality and expressed the subconscious reality of the characters’ nature without romanticizing it. So, he does not create poetic feeling and emotions in the play but excellently fuses expressionism and realism.

All the actions that have been taking place in the play are highly dramatic. Nothing in the actions of the play is narrated. It is presented dramatically. In the play, Home Coming of Ezra Mannon and his murder on his own bed by his own wife is unexpected. Likewise the murder of Brant, suicide of Christine are developing actions that makes a perfect tragic plot construction. Orin’s suicide and Lavinia’s self imprisonment are the climaxes which gives a perfect shape to the tragedy in a dramatic manner.

Different actions grow gradually and end disastrously. The curtain of the play goes up with the Mannon family gathering and closes with the tragic end of the family with high dramatic justice.

Mourning Becomes Electra shows incidents of arousing pity and fear in the mind of the audiences. This play is able to leave undeniable impressions of tragic representation of suffering upon the audiences, leaving them not depressed but relieved. He has followed this classical definition to make the plot more tragic. He has employed the principles of 'pity and fear' to produce the tragic effect in the highest degree to determine the choice and moral qualities of the 'tragic hero'.

The tragic hero like Lavinia in *Mourning Becomes Electra* moves us to pity because she is not evil by birth. But, because of her love for her father and her duty to punish her father's murderer and give him justice even after his death, Lavinia chooses the wrong path. Her moral strength is too powerful but as she misjudges the way of punishment she meets not only her doom but the end of the entire Mannon family.

She moves the audience to 'fear' because they recognize similar possibilities of error in their own life. They start to search for passion within themselves, which can make them terrible as well as tragic creatures in real life as Lavinia in the play. So, the play keeps the audience in illusion as do the classical plays. But O'Neill's intention is not to depress the audience but to create the 'pleasure of pity and fear' until the catharsis of emotion. When Lavinia shuts herself inside Mannon's house after the end of all family members, the audience feels catharsis. His intention is to create a healing force for suffering of the modern human beings.

It is a common phrase that the tragic plot ends in disaster of the protagonist to accomplish the catharsis of emotion. So, the tragic representation of suffering and defeat should not leave a feeling of depression. In O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Lavinia, the protagonist, because of her sense of duty, has such self-weaning confidence that she discards the divine warning or the moral law. She says to Orin just

after Christine's suicide, "It is justice! It is your justice Father!" (109). Lavinia just wants to give justice to her father, she does not have any interest in the remaining Mannon family members. Her absolute hatred for her mother and passionate love for her father makes her violate the moral law, which most effectively evokes tragic pity and fear.

It creates the 'pleasure of pity and fear' up to the end of the play. It was O'Neill's objective to produce the highest degree of tragic effect upon the modern audiences, because he understands the basic reality of human beings and their nature. The events of the play are developed through complication to the catastrophe; it releases their emotions which keeps them in the world of illusion of the stage. About the language in the play Shirley Fleming says:

The vocal writing is flowing, demanding, nicely tailored to the text, and almost unremittingly intense. A duet for Christine and her lover Adam Brant in Act I offer some lyric respite, and so does another for the same pair in Act II. Possibly the finest moment in the opera is the quartet for Adam, Christine, her daughter Lavinia and son Orin that precedes Orin's murder of Adam. When all is said and done, even though Levy's librettist, the late Henry Butler, hammered O'Neill's florid, overwrought dialogs into surprisingly concise verbal exchanges.

(15)

Tragic Plot

O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* is an excellent tragic plot. In this tragic plot, Aristotle's concepts serve as a suggestive starting point of the tragic construction.

The play is the organization of moral and natural qualities of the tragic hero. For instance, Lavinia's moral duty to punish her father's murderer and give him justice becomes an obsession for her. Though she is not evil, she assumes the role of the avenger filled with sexual jealousy. Her passion grips her and leads her to disregard the divine rules. As a result, she discovers the facts after Orin's suicide, leading to the sudden reversal of her fortune.

So, the plot, most effectively evokes tragic pity and fear which is developed through subconscious complication to catastrophe accompanied by obvious 'dramatic irony'. Neal Curtis comments about the situation and says, "The tragedy of this situation is that the search for foundations and a search for a home invariably bring differing worlds in conflict with each other as their paths to truth collide" (863).

Dramatic irony is the element which has the most crucial role for the tragic plot and tragic hero. Of course, Lavinia's tragic overweening self leads to her doom, but she does not know the facts and attempts perpetually to regain the love of her father by punishing her mother. But it is obvious for her audience that she is going to her end. So by reusing the tragic plot in the classical sense O'Neill reclassifies the spirit of classical art.

Tragic Hero

Lavinia, the protagonist of the play is a general's daughter. There is thus the sense of the noble in her family background. O'Neill has cast Lavinia as possessing dignity and courage, just like the classical heroes like Electra and Oedipus Rex. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Lavinia does not lose her dignity and courage until her own doom. At the very last moment of the play she expresses her dignity to her housekeeper, "Don't be afraid. I'm not going the way mother and Orin went. That's

escaping punishment” (126). She has such boldness until her doom; but she cannot sustain her defeat at the hands of destiny or any unseen force.

A tragic hero should effectively evoke both pity and fear. If the hero is not thoroughly good or not thoroughly bad, his tragic effect will be stronger if the hero is better than real life projection. But he does not have the acute tragic effect if he is an anti-hero. What happens to Lavinia is tragic. She has a good sense of duty and action, but she is unaware of the consequences of her action. She is heroic because she has a strong dignity and she is tragic because she could not bear the load of the conflict between her conscious and unconscious mind. So, O’Neill grasps the spirit of the tragic hero in a classical sense.

Lavinia is the protagonist of the play. She is a well known character, who ends her life to secure justice. She appeals to her father at the end of the play to tell her that she has guarded the Mannon family honor. She had loved Adam Brant, and crushed her love. She hates her mother for taking her lover away from her. Actually she has a mixture of motives for the action. O’Neill has given her such qualities that she has been animated by a fate stronger than herself, a powerful dignity which makes her doom tragic.

Christine is another important character of the play. She is not so unqualified. She is ruthless in pursuing her passion for Adam Brant and extreme hatred for her husband. So, she is weak before the moral strength of Lavinia. But she is not a lofty figure. Rather, she is like Aeschylus and Clytemnestra, who hates Agamemnon because he sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia. Christine hates Ezra Mannon, because of her passion for Brant and secondly because of her motives, her disgust at the implied brutality of her husband on their wedding night. So, she seems a serious woman with no instinctive repulsion towards passion.

But there is nothing in Ezra Mannon's character as he appears in *Home Coming*. He is described as brutal and proud of family tradition. Indeed he comes back home to break down the wall of misunderstanding between husband and wife. So, he reveals her feeling deeper than he can express on the day of this death. But his death has major importance to develop the play in this direction.

Orin, brother of Lavinia and son of a Mannon is a master representative character of a man, who is torn between love and duty. He is wounded during war and brought at home by his father. He is too weak to resist the dominance of strong nature. He is not a self-oriented character so he becomes the victim of Oedipus complex who transfers his incestuous love to Vinnie and becomes insanely jealous of her attentions to other men. And he is mentally depressed more after his mother's suicide. He thinks that he is responsible for her death. So, he shows the same behavior and takes the way of suicide. Adam Brant is a failure commander of his vessel at sea as well as in his love. He is a jealous character who wants to take revenge over Ezra Mannon by pursuing his wife.

Seth, an old gardener of the Mannon house, is the most important of the minor characters. O'Neill has employed the old servant as a eyewitness of all the events that take place in the Mannon household. And, the town people, who appear at the beginning of each part of the trilogy with lyrical functions and gossiping. O'Neill has attempted to revive in a modern way the ancient form of chorus.

Dramatic Irony is employed, in the situation of the play in which the audience shares information of the protagonist's future circumstances with the playwright, of which the character is ignorant. In such a situation the character unknowingly acts in a way that the audience recognizes as generally inappropriate to the actual

circumstance. The character acts on his own but the result comes not at all the way he intends to.

O'Neill's, Lavinia for example presents a very complicated case of dramatic irony. She engages in a mission to gain justice for her father and punish his murderers. She suffers a complex conflict between her conscious mind and her subconscious reality. She wants an end to the murderers, and to protect the honor of the Mannon tradition but she finds herself as the cause of the end of the Mannon family. After attaining this, she shuts herself in the house.

O'Neill presents the reality, which was already known to the audience, but because of Lavinia's blind pride, she ignored the reality and followed wherever her wrong judgment led. Eventually it hits her and she realizes her fault but it's too late to alter the situation. This particular technique employed by O'Neill produces the vitality of classical tragedy in a modern play.

O'Neill also has reclassified the ancient myth, which is a prominent term in literary analysis and has to be conceived not as a collection of stories but as an ever changing process in a work of art. He has deliberately woven modern materials into the pattern of relation to God. He has reinterpreted classical manifestation to understand the general nature of human beings. He has reclassified the myth to attain the end of arousing 'pity and fear' in the classical sense.

The tragedy of 'fate' of classical tragedians is converted into a tragedy of psychological compulsions of a family trapped in a tangle of not only Freudian complexes, but also complication and conflict between conscious and subconscious reality. He has used, the modern version of fate and psychological forces to interpret the modern human problems.

All the characters struggle with their subconscious realities in the play.

Lavinia is victimized of her inner reality. She wants to deny the fact because of her self-weaning confidence and her actions are guided by the subconscious forces. But her faith is stronger than her, and dignity makes the end most tragic. Christine, by nature is a sensuous woman, without instinctive repulsion to passion, ends her life because of her passionate love, an undeniable power. Orin is a man torn between love and duty and becomes a victim of Oedipus complex. So all the characters meet a tragic fate because of their psychology, because their subconscious reality is more powerful than they are, and as a result become the slaves of their own fate.

O'Neill's play *Mourning Becomes Electra*, has more than aesthetic value, far it is concerned with moral and practical reason and cultural and natural experiences of human beings for ordering human life. It has the didactic purpose of striking a balance in the modern life fought with religions displacement and scientific failure. O'Neill depicts the experience of the lost generation in America by placing it in the backdrop of human suffering in the post-civil war setting.

The conflict between the conscious mind and unconscious motives is the source of suffering which shakes human beings to the bottom of their soul. Unconscious motives are stronger than the conscious mind. So, it compels human beings to chaos action against the law of nature and moral codes. Such heights and depths of human passion makes human beings tragic.

O'Neill concludes that passion is a strong force which blinds man and creates delusion. It changes the human being into great and terrible creatures and compels them to chaos and wrong action, which leads to defeat of the self. He sees humans fighting a terrible war with their own nature and being disastrously defeated.

Individual motives go against the law of nature and then the law of cosmos which bring the conflict between inner self and the mind.

Conclusion

Eugene O'Neill has reclassified the classical art form in *Mourning Becomes Electra* by employing techniques of classical writing to deal with a modern subject matter in the backdrop of the American civil war. For that purpose, he has returned to human beings, particularly to the root of human suffering. He intended to study human life and human action, their nature and sufferings. For him, human actions are guided by terrible passions and forces, which create a conflict between the subconscious, and the conscious mind. So that passion leads man to the grip of tragic fate. That tragic condition is the ultimate truth, which is the absolute source of knowledge.

As the human being is a limited agent confined to the great chain of natural law, one should accept the limitation. A tragic hero then becomes the symbol of mankind struggling against the force of evil in search of happiness. But the internal conflict in his mind between two opposite ideas, pulls him in different directions. So he is torn and divided and suffers the agonies of hell.

To create artistic quality of high distinction he employed the writing techniques of classical writers, thus creating the 'realism and situation'. On the basis of this theory, he has created human action that depicts the every day world, its people and their problems.

O'Neill has taken an American family as a representation of modern contemporary society, to represent the suffering of human beings because of their own nature. He has brought out their sub-conscious reality, their attitudes and thoughts and their morality and arrogance which are the root causes of their tragic end.

Mourning Becomes Electra is an acute dramatic representation of serious action which eventuates a disastrous conclusion, thereby accomplishing the catastrophe in a classical way because, O'Neill has destroyed the stereotypes of the well made play of his time, substituted it with an essentially different dramatic imagination, that is fundamentally liberating in the form of modern psychological problems. He has not based his analysis of human nature merely upon Freudian theory, but upon conflict between conscious mind and subconscious realities. The result is a new vitality, a new spirit, a new depth of seriousness and a new dramatic height.

Lavinia, the protagonist of the play, with her moral strength, her dignity and self weaning confidence, makes her end not pathetic but tragic and serious. Her duty to punish a mother who takes her lover away from her and kills her father to satisfy her passion, drives her mother and Orin to suicide when she realizes the fact that it was too late to punish her father and to protect the honor of the family. So, she shuts herself in the house as a pathetic creature.

O'Neill develops the concept of the tragic hero, a fundamental technique of classical tragedy. He has given his 'hero' an extreme form of dignity and courage like the classical heroes Electra, Oedipus etc. The protagonist, Lavinia, does not lose her dignity and courage until her own doom. She accused her mother and Orin because they went the way of escaping punishment. Though she has been alone in the Mannon house, she does not understand her tragic end.

Lavinia, as a tragic hero, effectively evokes both 'pity and fear' because she is not thoroughly good nor thoroughly bad. She is also better than ordinary humans, so she arouses the strong feelings of pity and fear. She is morally strong and better than we are because she has acute sense of duty, but she has one weakness, that the audience

knows, she is ironically ignorant about it. She does not know what will happen after completing her duty. Hence, she is more tragic because she could not be the objective facts, she is more heroic because she maintains her dignity until her tragic end.

The language of *Mourning Becomes Electra* is poetic, imaginative, and embellished artistically. Because tragedy has a serious plot, it needs the particular kind of language that lifts it beyond itself. But O'Neill has not such ornamental language because, elevated language is not possible in discordant, faithless rhythm of fragmented society.

But the play illustrates O'Neill's adaptation of the language of poetic symbolism associated with new European drama. Although his plays are not written in verse; he recognized that the imagination and emotion of high drama is near that of poetry rather than prose. He has used metaphoric language like, 'Death is an island of peace' and even the title of the play metaphorically expresses the suffering of modern people comparable to highly tragic characters of Greek tragedy. He has portrayed real people and their problems but he has distorted the outside reality and expressed the subconscious reality of people without romanticizing it. So, he has used highly artistic language creating excellent fusion of expressionism and realism, to uplift the dramatic action.

The concept of pleasure through evocation of 'pity and fear' is employed in the play to produce the tragic effect in the highest degree. This highlights the choices and moral qualities of the tragic hero as well as organization of the tragic plot. Lavinia, the tragic hero, moves us to pity because she is not an evil woman by birth. She is morally strong but she misjudges the way of punishment and justice because of the intense passions of love and hatred which leads not only to her own doom, but also the tragic end of entire Mannon family. She also rouses fear because we

recognize a similar possibility of error in our own life. So, the play is able to keep the audiences under illusion. But O'Neill's intention is not to depress audience but to rouse the pleasure of pity and fear and purge these emotions.

The tragic plot with a disastrous end for the protagonist accomplishes the catharsis of emotions. The events of the play, developed through complication to the catastrophe in which we are moved through empathy with the suffering of the tragic protagonists is an Aristotelian agenda which the play fulfills.

Of course, O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* is concerned with the moral experiences of human beings. This concern is presented as conflict between the conscious and subconscious realities which O'Neill sees as the source of human suffering. This shakes the human being to the bottom of their soul. It compels the hero to choose action against natural law and moral codes. Such height and depth of human passion makes a human being a great and terrible creature. The play is a picture of the human being in fighting a terrible war with his nature and being disastrously defeated.

Therefore, O'Neill has reclassified classical art form by employing the techniques of classical tragedians. O'Neill has also served the didactic aspect of art in *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

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