

Realism and symbols in *Mourning Becomes Electra*

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Abstract

The present research paper has been attempted to explore the last phase of Eugene O'Neill. He started his career and expressed his talent with one-act plays. After One-Act plays his career can be divided into three phases. In the first phase 'The Naturalistic and Realistic phase' he used naturalism in his dramatic creations. In the next phase 'the Expressionistic Symbolic phase' he wrote plays of psychological study expressing man's loss of earlier identity with soul or belongingness of faith in religious or social institutions. In the last phase, he again wrote on realism but included it with auto-biographical and psycho-realism in *Ah, Wilderness!*, *Morning Becomes Electra*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. The plays of this period can be put under two separate parts of realism—the psychological realism and autobiographical realism. *Mourning Becomes Electra* and the cycle plays can be put under psychological realism and the last two plays under autobiographical realism.

Keywords: realism, symbols, *mourning becomes electra*

Introduction

Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1936, the monument figure of American drama, Eugene O'Neill, born on October 16, 1888 in a Broadway hotel situated at the corner of what is now Times Square in New York, was the third son of James O'Neill, a tall and handsome, but uneducated romantic actor and Ella Quinlan, a quiet, beautiful, educated, sophisticated and a gold medalist for piano playing Catholic lady. Their different temperaments resulted in a destructive marital incompatibility which formed the theme of O'Neill's several important plays. He wrote his first play 'The Web' at twenty four. On April 12, 1918, he married Agnes Boulton. There were two children a boy and a girl. After his divorce he married Carlotta Monterey on July 22, 1929 in Paris. Against him, his daughter Oona married with Charlie Chaplin who was at the age of O'Neill. Both his sons commit suicide. So, his personal life is the reason of his pessimistic dramas. On November 24, 1953 he became critically ill. During this time he clenched his fists, raised himself slightly in his bed and gasped: "Born in a hotel room-and God damn it-died in a hotel room." He remained in coma for thirty six hours and died on November 27, 1953.

Use of Symbols

Mourning Becomes Electra (1931) is a long work with structural unity. The 'house' is a symbol of Mannon family. The indoor life in the house reveals hypocrisy, selfishness and isolation and it is a symbol of evil, jealousy and death and the outside life is quite attractive but terrifying. Christine hates it because it is a reason of her separation with her lover, Adam. Lavinia loves it and would like to live and die in it. Ezra died in his bed room, Christine died in the house and Orin kills himself. So this house is a living symbol of graveyard. 'Sea' is another important symbol in the play. On one hand, it is a symbol of money and good luck for Mannons and on the other hand it is a destructive force. Another symbol 'Islands' stand for peace, harmony, beauty and security. The characters become symbols. Ezra symbolizes Puritanism and Christine symbolizes incest and revolt against Puritanism. Orin represents modern man's escape through suicide. Lavinia means lightning or

electricity and it is a symbol of mankind to face the curse of existence.

Mourning Becomes Electra is divided into three parts. It is a thirteen act trilogy—first and third parts each have four acts and the second part has five. This is a trilogy and this trilogy is sub-divided as 'Homecoming', 'The Haunted' and 'The Haunted'. The first is homecoming for Ezra, made for 'a new beginning-new love' (O'Neill, 61) Similarly The Haunted sees Orin's return from the war. Hazel says, "And poor Orin! What a terrible homecoming this is for him!" (O'Neill, 80) He commits suicide. The Haunted is homecoming for Lavinia and it is home confinement for her. In the words of Carpenter:

The logical perfection of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and the sustained psychological intensity of its feeling, produced an artistic work of great power.

First part of the play *Homecoming* shows that General Ezra Mannon looks very happy and is busy making preparation for his departure to his New England home. He is sure that everyone will be happy to see him. But in the absence of Ezra, his wife Christine has fallen in love with Captain Adam Brant and she usually goes to New York to meet her lover. Lavinia is disturbed because of the love-affair of Christine and Adam that she has decided not to marry Captain Peter Niles because she thinks that her father needs her more than any one else. Peter's sister Hazel is in confusion about her love for Orin. In this part, the past history of Mannon's family is also revealed. Lavinia is reminded of David, the brother of her grand-father, who had married with a poor Canadian nurse, Marie Brantome. Abe Mannon was against this marriage and he turned them out of the house to save the reputation of the family. After sometime David committed suicide and Marie died because of poverty and starvation. O'Neill shows the harsh reality of society through these characters.

Christine feels that her marriage with Ezra was unfortunate and there was actually nothing common in them. She also warns Lavinia not to reveal her relationship with Adam to Ezra because it will spoil their family reputation and she also reveals that she loved Orin and hated her. After Ezra's return from war, he informed Christine that Orin received

head injuries and suffered from brain fever in the war, but Christine did not take interest in all this. First time Ezra confesses that her hate and indifferent nature compelled him to join the Mexican War. Ezra was ill and at that time she tells him about her love-affair with Adam. All this horrifies Ezra and he requests Christine to give him his painkiller medicine. She gives him poisonous pills; Ezra becomes restless and passes away. Lavinia is sure that it is not a natural death; she calls Christine a whore and threatens her by saying that she will expose her publically.

In *The Haunted*, the second part of the play, Christine is mortally afraid of Lavinia. Orin is curious to meet Christine because he missed her during his absence from home. Both Christine and Lavinia try to poison Orin's mind against the other. Ultimately Orin convinces Christine and promises to give no attention to Lavinia. He also tells her that he will not marry Hazel because it would mean the separation from her. He ignores Lavinia and asks her not to create any misunderstanding between him and Christine. When Christine goes to meet Captain Adam and both of them were busy in preparing their future plans, they have been closely watched by Orin and Lavinia. When Christine leaves the deck, Orin shoots Adam. When Christine heard the news of Adam's death, she kills herself with Ezra's pistol. Orin was shocked and his eyes were full of tears.

The Haunted, the third part of the play shows the mental condition of the surviving members of Mannon's family. Lavinia acts like mother to Orin and tries to forget the past and to develop a more meaningful relationship with the present. Orin resembles his father and has grown dreadfully thin. Ultimately, he commits suicide in order to meet with his dead mother. Now Lavinia is the only member in the house to bear the guilt of the Mannons. Lavinia is not coward like Orin and Christine. She does not seek any mercy, "I am not asking God or anybody for forgiveness. I forgive myself.... I hope there is a hell for the good soul where!" Lavinia moves woodenly into the house and she remains unmarried and spends the rest of her life in the company of dead Mannons.

Mourning Becomes Electra ends on a pessimistic note where no joy, desire or peace exists. In the words of Brooks Atkinson:

In sustained thought and workmanship it is his finest tragedy. (Brooks 103)

The title is meaningful. Electra is left to mourn in spite of her romantic spirits. O'Neill language lacks poetic grandeur. But he achieved his purpose with the simple language and its dynamic use with authority. He used realistic dialogues, symbolic images and musical effects.

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