

Interpretation of the Puritan Heritage through Mourning Becomes Electra

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Abstract: *Modern American drama, by common critical consent, begins with Eugene O'Neill. His work so firmly limits our dramatic horizons that anyone but the expert has difficulty recalling the best-known plays, or even the names, of his immediate predecessors. When Jig Cook's amateur company performed Bound East for Cardiff in a converted fish-house on Cape Cod, the mainstream of American dramatic tradition was a melodramatic romanticism. Even the "big names" of the period before O'Neill – Augustus Thomas, William Vaughan Moody, William Gillette, Percy MacKay, Clyde Fitch – were bound to a formula which now seems as remote as gaslight. This melodramatic formula was eminently simple; as George M. Cohan put it: in the first act you get your man up a tree, in the second act you throw stones at him, in the third act you get him down again. It enshrined an equally simple and orthodox set of American attitudes: virtue was always properly rewarded and vice punished; when the hero got down from his perch, he got the girl and a pot of gold for his trouble. A pure heart and dogged industry always triumphed over adversity, an even-handed Deity helped those who helped themselves, evildoers inevitably came to no good. These were the rules, and they reflected a semi-official attitude toward life and human nature.*

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Introduction

Modern American drama, by common critical consent, begins with Eugene O'Neill. His work so firmly limits our dramatic horizons that anyone but the expert has difficulty recalling the best-known plays, or even the names, of his immediate predecessors. When Jig Cook's amateur company performed *Bound East for Cardiff* in a converted fish-house on Cape Cod, the mainstream of American dramatic tradition was a melodramatic romanticism. Even the "big names" of the period before O'Neill – Augustus Thomas, William Vaughan Moody, William Gillette, Percy MacKay and Clyde Fitch – were bound to a formula which now seems as remote as gaslight. This melodramatic formula was eminently simple; as George M. Cohan put it: in the first act you get your man up a tree, in the second act you throw stones at him, in the third act you get him down again. It enshrined an equally simple and orthodox set of American attitudes: virtue was always properly rewarded and vice punished; when the hero got down from his perch, he got the girl and a pot of gold for his trouble. A pure heart and dogged industry always triumphed over adversity, an even-handed Deity helped those who helped themselves, evildoers inevitably came to no good. These were the rules, and they reflected a semi-official attitude toward life and human nature. Bronson Howard said in a Harvard lecture:

In England and America, the death of a pure woman on the stage is not "satisfactory", except when the play rises to the dignity of tragedy. The death, in an ordinary play, of a woman who is not pure...is perfectly satisfactory, for the reason that it is inevitable. Human nature always bows gracefully to the inevitable.¹

The wages of sin is death, as everyone knew, and therefore frou-frou the cabaret girl did not survive Act III. These attitudes and the dramatic formula that expressed them served popular playwright for a century-and-a-half, from *The Contrast* through *Secret Service* and *The Heart of Maryland*.

Even after the public had begun to suspect that these rules did not apply to practical, everyday life, the playwright kept to the traditional formulae. What had been the representation of a firmly held faith became a vehicle for fantasy and escape. The melodrama still offered its audiences sentiment, excitement, moral aphorisms and personalities; most of all, it offered a glimpse of a simpler world the audience had lost – a world of naïve virtue and immediate rewards which they piously believed their forefathers had inhabited. As belief in the rules declined, the playwrights dressed the formula in the finery of earlier ages – the Civil War and Revolutionary eras, period plays and costume drama – where these attitudes seemed less incredible. Lavish stage settings, richly

costumed leading actors, the perspective of historical drama conspired to keep the audience from noticing how little drama had to do with life.

O'Neill spent his boyhood and early youth with one of the most successful versions of this formula. *The count of Monte Cristo* had all the clichés: the historical setting, spectacular and thrilling episodes, the hero's rise through adversity to fame and fortune, poetic justice at the denouement, and, in production, a leading "classical" actor. For the young O'Neill, the contrast between the *Monte Cristo* world and the real world was sharp and well-defined. From his vantage point in the wings the rolling surf was only canvas and the crag, nothing but painted burlap. Each time Edmund Dantes emerged dripping from the canvas sea to proclaim the world his, O'Neill saw his hail-fellow, pinch-penny "Irish peasant" father. His later insistence, when he turned his hand to playwriting, that "life" was the only thing worth writing about may have stemmed in part from his prolonged contact with *Monte Cristo*.² This resolve initiated a revolution in American drama.

In order to destroy one tradition, the playwright must create another. When O'Neill rejected the conventional formula, he had to forge his own form. So his dramatic career is a series of experimental efforts to find a satisfactory vehicle for "life". The autographical bias of his plays, which has been extensively documented by biographers and critics, is not so much an instance of narcissistic preoccupation as it is evidence of dissatisfaction with a dramatic tradition. O'Neill wanted to write about contemporary life. The life he knew best was his own. His experimental method consisted in casting about for ways to embody his experience, in trying various approaches that range from stern "realism" in *Desire Under the Elms* and *Beyond the Horizon*, to expressionism in *The Hairy Ape* and *Emperor Jones*, to adaptations of Greek and Renaissance stage conventions like the mask and chorus or the aside. He was never satisfied; he would not settle for forms that did not encompass the whole of life. Drama, he said, had to deal with life: "fate, God, our biological past creating our present, Mystery, certainly"; this was the only subject worth writing about.³

One of his most interesting, and for our purposes, most informative experiments in his adaptation of the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus to an American situation. In the light of his search for form, it is understandable that O'Neill should be attracted to Greek tragedy. After a century of puritanism, sentimentality and scientific attack, the Christian tradition that had served Renaissance drama to well was – at least for the time – defunct. Greek tragedy dealt with "the Mystery" within a conventional structure; it came out of a relatively homogeneous culture and was well supplied with legendary themes. In short, the Greek playwrights had a form at hand; they needed only to shape their material to it. O'Neill set out to borrow both form and content from Aeschylus. In 1926 he noted in his work diary his intention to create a modern psychological drama based on Greek legend.⁴ This entry began a five-year progress toward the Broadway production of *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

Because O'Neill followed the plot of the *Oresteia* so closely, his modifications of Aeschylus' plot stand out very clearly. He used the sequence of events point for point; he adopted character-types and relationships that the plot required. In borrowing these components from the Greek play, he perforce accepted the conventional ritual structure of conflict (agon), suffering (pathos) and revelation (epiphany) that influenced the Greek tragedian in the construction of his plot.⁵ What O'Neill could not adapt from the Greek play were the culturally determined attitudes that the *Oresteia* expressed, the of history as a providential development from a code of private vengeance to a system of trial by jury. By changing the situation of the drama from Athens to New England, O'Neill changed the cultural milieu and so had to find a comparable set of American cultural attitudes with which to motivate his personae. By looking at the Greek model and studying O'Neill's version, we can determine the contributions made by the Greek plot and structure as contrasted with the contributions of American situation and motivation to the over-all meaning of *Mourning Became Electra*.

Mourning Became Electra follows the general outlines of the Aeschylean trilogy very closely. The playwright borrows the three-play division, the sequence of events and the climatic order. In *Homecoming*, the first play, Ezra Mannon (Agamemnon) returns from war and is poisoned by his wife Christie (Clytemnestra) who is carrying on an affair with Adam Brant (Aegisthus). In the second play *The Hunted*, Orin (Orestes and Lavinia (Electra) avenge their father's death by murdering Brant and driving Christine to suicide. The Haunted culminates with a judgment on Orin and Lavinia for their part in the destruction of their mother. This point-for-point parallelism in the plots makes the divergence in the conclusions more striking. O'Neill and Aeschylus both include a "judgment" in the last play. But O'Neill's does not open out into a social revolution and a theophany. The difference between Aeschylus' ending and O'Neill's is all the more important because the American playwright borrows his structure from the Greek. The epiphany of the *Oresteia* vindicates, on three levels, those teleological processes by which suffering leads to a new life for the individual and the community.

The epiphany of *Mourning Became Electra* depicts an isolation imposed by self-judgment that leads to death. Mourning becomes Electra; death becomes the Mannons. This epiphany, however, is not a simple, disconnected cry of despair; it proceeds from the cultural determinants with which O'Neill situates and motivates

his action: the Puritan heritage and Freudian psychology. The cultural attitudes that are formulated under these headings are as definite and describable as the dictates of tribal custom in the *Oresteia*. Each supplies a set of motivations for the personae and together they constitute an agon like the filial-piety and blood-revenge components in Aeschylus. They function in *Mourning* to determine the direction of the action and the overall meaning of the play.

The Puritan heritage of the personae in *Mourning* is established in a general way by the setting. O'Neill situates the action in New England. This locale – in literary convention at least – is rugged, cold, sea-bound. The thin-soiled, rock-strewn countryside with small, barren mountain-ranges and rivers running down to the gray Atlantic creates an atmosphere of severity, inflexibility, firmness. The people are like the landscape – tight, thrifty, joyless, merchant-class puritans, descendants of Anglo-Saxon non-conformists. The Mannons live in this setting; their attitudes are defined by the locale.

Within this general situation O'Neill specifies his Puritanism. It is not a careful historical approximation of New England attitudes vintage 1865; it is Puritanism as O'Neill understood it through the eyes of his own generation. And, in the early twentieth century, among the avant-garde of the literary world, it was the sum total of everything that was wrong with American society. The leaders of the 1912 "Renaissance", *duce* H. L. Mencken, took on what they called Puritanism" in a paper war. Mencken and his colleagues – George Jean Nathan and Ludwig Lewisohn among others – made the term a pejorative tag. The attitudes it stood for were, according to Mencken, universal: "What could be more erroneous than the common assumption that Puritanism is exclusively a Northern, a New England, madness? The truth is that it is as thoroughly national as the kindred belief in the devil".⁶ He set out to delineate and excoriate this feature of the American character wherever he found it. The Puritan, according to Mencken, was first and foremost a Pharisee, a hypocrite, for whom public morals, especially in the areas of sexual behaviour and consumption of alcohol, were the main concern. In these two sensitive areas, Mencken proclaimed, practice did not agree with preaching. Actually, the Puritan was "rather more prone to fornicate than other men, when he drinks, he is apt to make a hog of himself", but he would never consider relaxing the prevailing tabus. No matter what the private views of individuals, the official American posture was a hypocritical, righteously irreligious (or a-religious) Puritanism.

O'Neill moved in an atmosphere of rebellion against this type of Puritanism. He knew and admired Mencken and his magazine, *The Smart Set*. Three of the early plays were published in this journal, and the co-editor, George Jean Nathan, became a life-long friend. Moreover, the whole Provincetown group were allied in spirit with this rebellion against the genteel tradition. They were, in Lewisohn's words, "the rebellious children of the Puritans, nobly aware of the tradition of libertarianism which is the true tradition of America".⁷ Whether or not his view really fitted the fact, Mencken created an image of American society that gained wide credence among the emancipated. The Puritan background of *Mourning* comprises, along with broader classical elements, that complex of attitudes described and decried by Mencken and his associates. O'Neill weaves these attitudes into the background of his action.

As the locale calls Puritanism to mind, O'Neill visualizes the tradition in his stage setting. The Mannon house characterizes the family. The façade of the mansion is fronted by a white Grecian-temple portico with six tall columns and a "gray stone wall behind". This portico, says a stage direction, is like an incongruous white mask fixed on the house to mark the significance of the setting, early in the first act it is called to their attention:

Christine. Every time I come back after being away it [the house] appears more like a sepulchre! The "whited" one of the Bible –pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray ugliness! It was just like old Abe Mannon to build such a monstrosity – as a temple for his hatred. (MBE, p. 31)

This interpretation of the Puritan heritage rests on a broad cultural base; the Mannon background also includes those features characteristic of the nineteenth-century New Englander. Grandfather Abe, whose Biblical name has dynastic implications, established a shipping business that made the family fortune. (The name Mannon, with resonances of *Agamemnon*, also has an appropriate resemblance to "Mammon") As a result of their dedication to business, the Mannons are the most prosperous family in the community. Ezra did not rest on his inheritance; like a good Puritan he went on to serve the community. After learning law, he became judge and mayor of the town. Devotion to business is part of the traditional Protestant mystique. Diligence and industry lead to financial success – and this success carries with it a debt to society.

God requires social achievement of the Christian because he wills that social life shall be organized according to his commandments, in accordance with that purpose. The social activity of the Christian in the world is solely activity in *majorem gloriam Dei*. This character is hence shared by labour in a calling expressed in the first place in the fulfilment of the daily tasks given by the *lex naturae*; and in the process

this fulfilment assumes a particularly objective and impersonal character, that of service in the interest of the rational organization of our social environment.⁸

To all outward appearances, the Mannons are “the elect”. Their prominence in the community and the lavishness of the mansion testify to their probity, according to the orthodox standard. Christine, whose adulterous union would hardly be explicable in a rigid Puritan, is set apart from the real Mannons; her ancestry is not New England or even Anglo-Saxon. She is “furring looking and queer, French and Dutch descended”. Her family has not been financially successful; “she didn’t bring no money when Ezra married her”. “She ain’t the Mannon kind” sums up the xenophobic reaction of the townspeople. (MBE, p. 21) This background is contrasted with the family’s – Anglo-Saxon stock, old settlers, successful merchants, in short Puritan “elect”.

Though the family has all the visible earmarks of the predestined, these are simply outward show. Like the mansion, their Puritanism is full of dead men’s bones, and their theology has no relish of salvation in it. “The Mannon way” is a preoccupation with death, the cold remnant of Calvinistic dogma.

According to the cultural analyses of historians like Weber, the virtues of the Puritan – industry, thrift, social responsibility, regular habits, careful avoidance of sensuality, all stemmed from a search for certainty about election. Somewhat oversimplifying Calvin’s theology, they depended on cautious organization and a clock-like regularity as protection against an irretrievable lapse – a fall whose implications extended out of time into the *illud tempus* of predestined election, that “moment” which melds the beginning with the end of time, the arche with the eschaton. No redemption is possible for the sinner within this system; once fallen, he is forever reprobate. The Mannon concern with death, however, does not relate it to grace, election and the after-life. There is no theological foundation to the Puritan code in *Mourning*. Like the Puritanism that Mencken describes, it is an appearance without a substance, an ethic without a dogma. These attitudes provide a basis for the motivation of the personae, but, unlike the tribal code of the *Oresteia*, they do not include an Olympian dimension.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the research paper I have discussed above suggest not regeneration, but isolation or despair. Because it is serious treatment of basic cultural problems, the conflict (agon) and the suffering in the action speak to the culture. But what is affirmed in the epiphany is either a personal vision that disregards the polar opposition dramatized in the action or a confrontation with the void. The interpretation of puritan heritage in *Mourning Becomes Electra* moves Orin and Lavinia to a fate consistent with psychological theory; both return to a “womb.” O’Neill tries to make a myth that involves a regeneration of sorts, but in his myth “rebirth” is simply a synonym for oblivion and entombment. In order to destroy one tradition, the playwright must create another. When O’Neill rejected the conventional formula, he had to forge his own form. So, his dramatic career is a series of experimental efforts to find a satisfactory vehicle for “life”. The autographical bias of his plays, which has been extensively documented by biographers and critics, is not so much an instance of narcissistic preoccupation as it is evidence of dissatisfaction with a dramatic tradition. O’Neill wanted to write about contemporary life. The life he knew best was his own.

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