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WAR THEMES AND MYTHS IN MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA BY EUGENE O'NEILL

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Abstract: Preoccupied with the theme of war in *Mourning Becomes Electra* Eugene O'Neill wondered "what war" to use and chose the American Civil War, as the only possibility that fits as the background for drama of murderous family love and hate. The Trojan War was rather unfamiliar to the American audience, the American Revolution too far off and associated with romantic school history. The Civil War satisfied a need for distance and perspective and served a double extension back to the past, the nineteenth century New England (a region appealing for its historicity and historical guilt) into the timeless realm of Greek myth. The story focuses on episodes of the lives of the Mannons, an eminent and wealthy New England family, the members of which try to come to terms with the fact of death and the forces surrounding human life. The titles of the three Parts refer to Ezra Mannon's "homecoming" from the Civil War and the physical and/or psychological worlds of the rest of the family who, either as "hunted", or «haunted, in vain try to survive after his death that ends Part One. The conflicts of the Mannons, in the entire trilogy, are portrayed through an admirable dramatization of their remote or recent past, which is continuously reenacted in the present. Although O'Neill's insistence on following the classical prototypes throughout the work is undeniable, he seems to depart from the classical influence as the trilogy progresses, and, while "Homecoming" is patterned closely to its Greek prototypes and *The Hunted* follows their essential outlines, the myth of a different modernized *Electra* is created in *The Haunted*.

Eugene O'Neill's views on war are undoubtedly manifested in his most magnificent play *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), where "the Greek Attic tragedy is revisited in a great synthetic manner" (Koutsoudaki 101). The themes, the myths, even the masks of his previous plays are revisited, but the playwright's scope here is definitely enlarged and a trilogy which holds a unique position in the theatre of the twentieth century has been created. More specifically, in the play there exists a series of wonderful Greek myths associated with the legendary Trojan War, as they are rehandled – mainly, but not only – in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (458 B.C.), the *Electras* of Sophocles (410 B.C.) and Euripides (413 B.C.), and the *Orestes* (408 B.C.) of the latter.

O'Neill's trilogy consciously patterned on the *Oresteia* follows the parts of the Greek work (*Agamemnon*, *Choephoroi* or *The Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides*, as

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“Homecoming”, “The Hunted” and “The Haunted”) quite faithfully with the obvious transgression of the famous “gothic” ending, in which Lavinia (the O’Neillian Electra) imprisons herself for life in somber company of the ancestral guilt and denies the light of life and form of catharsis that Greek myth and tragedy had bestowed on her character/prototype. Aeschylus himself, among other issues, had revised the moral question of the justification of war, which he looked upon as a destructive evil that, independently of the family curse of the Atreides, made Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek warriors, liable to retribution.

However, O’Neill wondered “what war” to use in his own work, as the Greek audience, who viewed Aeschylus’s trilogy, had been quite familiar with the Trojan War and the Siege of Troy, as chanted in the Homeric epics, *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. He had considered the American Revolution (1755-1783) “too far off and too clogged in people’s minds with romantic grammar – school – history associations”, whereas World War One was “too near and recognizable in its obstructing minor aspects” (O’Neill 1981b: 394), and incontestably subject matter of his early plays [*The Sniper*, *Shell Shock*, *In the Zone* (1917-18)], in which “his reaction to the war was apparent” (Shafer 82). As a result, it was the American Civil War (1861-1865) that satisfied his need for distance and perspective as a “period not too distant for audience to associate itself, yet possessing costume etc. – possessing sufficient mask of time and space” for the spectators to “unconsciously grasp at once” (idem). Henry Raleigh, who discusses O’Neill as a historical dramatist (with preference to the 19th century), interestingly notes that the playwright’s “wisdom” in choosing the Civil War over the Revolutionary War was also “borne out by the collective experience of the American film industry”, which “has found over the years that Civil War movies tended to be more successful at the box office” (Raleigh 69).

Therefore O’Neill decided on a so-called “double extension back to the past”, the 19th century New England setting (1865) into “the timeless world of Greek myth”, as he had previously done in *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), with the stories of Pheadra and Hippolytus predominantly, and to a lesser extent those of Medea and Oedipus. Moreover, New England, as the homecoming place, highly appealed as a region for its historicity and heritage of historical guilt. Its “conscience-plagued” history, as the land of continuous manifestations of repression, went back to the extermination of the Indians, the slave trade, the witch-burning of Puritan morality, and “the war between Protestant Anglos, the Yanks, and the Irish Catholic emigrants, the Micks”, which in that “historical cockpit” was carried “with the most malice and hatred”(Raleigh 68). Bogard also discusses the importance of *Mourning Becomes Electra* as a history play, in which O’Neill succeeded to make his image of post-war New England “faithful in spirit and fact”: “Without much apparent research and with stringently economic means he has created the past: a song, cannon shots celebrating the surrender, a few names from history, lilacs, almost inevitably associated through Walt Whitman’s elegy with the death of Lincoln” (Bogard 1988a: 342-343).

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For his setting he decided on a small seaport in New England [...] because Calvinist New England, life-fearing, life-denying, was the “best possible dramatically for Greek plot of crime and retribution, chain of fate”. Here ready-made, were a place and a climate of morality where frozen silences masked violent passions, where old families decade behind patrician facades and flagellated themselves with, in the playwright’s words, “a Puritan conviction of man born to sin and punishment”. Had historic conscience – plagued New England never existed, O’Neill, for his new drama would have to invent it. Even the period architecture of the region suited his purpose, for neo-Grecian mansions, inspired by the ancient temples were the vogue in mid-nineteenth century New England (Sheaffer 336).

And the terrible tomb-like Mansion of the Mannon dynasty – well placed on this land – becomes the symbol of Puritan aristocracy “passing into decadence”, fittingly integrated on the N. England land to be revisited in later O’Neill plays *Touch of the Poet* (1939) and *More Stately Mansions* (1939). There arrives Ezra Mannon, the father of the family, dressed in the uniform of a Brigadier General, in Act III of “Homecoming”, “his movements exact and wooden and he has a mannerism of standing and sitting in stiff, posed attitudes that suggest the statues of military heroes” (O’Neill 1993a: 701). The war has made him reconsider his relationship with his wife Christine/Clytemnestra, but also “seeing death all the time in this war” has freed him to think of life (unavoidably the O’Neillian touch):

MANNON: It was seeing death all the time in this war got me to thinking these things. Death was so common, it didn’t mean anything. That freed me to think of life. Queer, isn’t it? Death made me think of life. Before that life had only made me think of death (O’Neill 1993a: 708).

However, in the context of this anti-war theme, Ezra is depicted as a quite helpless victim of fate, unlike Agamemnon, who had returned as conqueror-king, accompanied by the famous Cassandra, whom Clytemnestra murdered as well. But although Ezra’s appearance in the play is brief, he remains a monumental archetypal figure, whom the other Mannons resemble. It is noticeable that in the dialogue O’Neill does not use his first name of biblical connotation, as he also did with the father figure Ephraim Cabot in *Desire under the Elms*, but refers to him as “Mannon”, possibly derived from “Agamemnon” (Agamemnon, “very resolute”), signifying in particular the Greek hero’s prowess in defensive battle. Moorton maintains that the epithet “mennon-steadfast” is applicable to all Mannons since they persist in their tragic destiny and remain “steadfast in their collective doom”, even when “they attempt to repudiate the hateful Mannon legacy” (Moorton 44). In “The Hunted”, after Christine/Clytemnestra has poisoned him, the chorus-townfolk, “as a human background for the drama of the Mannons”, spell out the tragic irony of his death, “to be taken his first night home after passing unharmed through the whole war!” (O’Neill 1993a: 725).

His son (Orin /Orestes)’s homecoming that follows is also populated with war images, as he appears “in a baggy, ill-fitting uniform – that of a first lieutenant of infantry

in the Union Army”, and later bursts out on death and war, and their repercussions on his father’s murder.

ORIN: Who are you? Another corpse! (*he exclaims addressing the dead*) You and I have seen fields and hillsides sown with them – and they meant nothing! – nothing but a dirty joke life plays on life! Death sits so naturally on you! Death becomes the Mannons! You were always like a statue of an eminent dead man – sitting on a chair in a park or straddling a horse in a town square – looking over the head of life without a sign of recognition – cutting it dead for the impropriety of living!

.....
You folks at home take death so solemnly! You would have soon learned at the front that it’s only a joke! [...] Do you know his nickname in the army? Old Stick – short for Stick-in-the-Mud. Grant himself started it – said Father was no good on an offensive but he’d thrust him to stick in the mud and hold a position until hell froze over! (O’Neill 1993a: 748-749)

These passages, along with Orin’s description of his own falsely heroic charge, owe to the anti-war literature of the late 1920s, and recall Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*: “It is perhaps less a matter of what the war really was than what men felt it to be. Crane defined a point of view toward the past; O’Neill related it to its present. Past or present, the sequence has imaginative authority” (Bogard 1988a: 343). Orin’s dramatic account of his “heroic” deed to Lavinia is among O’Neill’s best movements in the trilogy, by which death in the family microcosm is measured as insignificant against the large scale murders that take place in times of war:

ORIN: Before I’d gotten back I had to kill another in the same way. It was like murdering the same man twice. I had a queer feeling that war meant murdering the same man over and over, and that in the end I would discover the man was myself! Their faces keep coming back in dreams – and they change to Father’s face – or to mine – (O’Neill 1993a: 750).

Both homecomings of the male Mannons are inevitably dominated by the play’s death destiny: Orin kills Adam/Aegisthus (Christine’s lover) and she, in total despair, commits suicide.

In the last part of the trilogy, “The Haunted”, Orin and Lavinia, as the last Mannons, have remained to confront the family guilt, which haunts them with the same supernatural power that the Furies had persecuted their Greek prototypes. In vain they try to escape to the Blessed Islands, where the natives are able to enjoy life and love without any feelings of guilt. These islands inspired by Herman Melville’s novel *Typee* provide - throughout the trilogy – a colorful contrast to the death images of war and soldiering and signify the consistent effort of all couples and potential couples to escape death and pursue bliss. After the war, Ezra desired to go there with Christine who dreamt of escaping to the Isles with her lover, whereas Orin fantasizes of taking his mother to the same place, as she had always been his splendid dream-image island. When finally Orin and Lavinia do realize the voyage, the sinister fusion of identities with those of their

parents – along with the ever present war images and associations – make forgetfulness unattainable. Tension grows from the fear of life and the opposing fear of death and the questioning of what is true self, or an ideal first self, as the characters seem unable to exist independently, a favorite “doubling schema” of O’Neill’s.

Lavinia resembling Christine, even in outward appearance (voluptuous and dressed in green), manages to forget the past and envisions a rather impossible transfer of the Dionysiac islands of pagan happiness to the austere New England setting:

LAVINIA: I loved those Islands. They finished setting me free. There was something there mysterious and beautiful – a good spirit – of love – coming out of the land and sea. It made me forget death. There was no hereafter. There was only this world – the warm earth in the moonlight – the trade wind in the coco palms – the surf on the reef – the fires at night and the drum throbbing in my heart – the natives dancing naked and innocent – without knowledge of sin! (O’Neill 1993a: 799)

On the contrary, Orin continues to carry himself like a war soldier, his movements and attitudes having “the statue-like quality that was so marked in his father”, and the Mannon semblance of his face “is set in a blank lifeless expression”. Earlier he had said his mind was full of ghosts: “I can’t grasp anything but war, in which he was so alive. He was the war to me – the war that would never end until I died” (O’Neill 1993a: 731). So, he hides in the dark mansion and records the history of the Mannon dynasty – all family crimes and death. Lavinia may forget but not him as the war is never over: “Not inside us who killed!” (O’Neill 1993a: 750) ... “The love of guilt for guilt which breeds more guilt until you get so deep at the bottom of hell there is no lower you can sink and you rest there in peace” (O’Neill 1993a: 812). And as foretold in “The Hunted”, he kills himself with a pistol as he had shot so many others in the past.

In her turn, Lavinia, unavoidably “chained to the last Mannon”, returns to her previous state of mourning and incarcerates herself in the mansion performing an act of justice as Laodike (justice of people), the alternative name of the mythic Electra. The death images of war and the past burden her in a doomed fate *during* and *after* the war, all the wars of the trilogy: the Mexican War (1846-1848) and the Civil War Ezra fought in, Orin’s battles and the personal wars that constantly haunted all the Mannons.

LAVINIA: I’ll have the shutters nailed closed so no sunlight can ever get in. I’ll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die! It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born! (O’Neill 1993a: 829).

And “Lavinia pivots sharply on her heel and marches woodenly into the house, closing the door behind her” (O’Neill 1993a: 829).

O’Neill opted for a superb ending – a truly great theatrical moment in the history of theatre that becomes Lavinia’s personality unlike that of the Greek versions, in which Electra peters out into undramatic banality – marrying Orestes’s friend Pylades, for example.

In Greek story she peters out into undramatic married banality. Such a character contained too much tragic fate within her soul to permit this – why should Furies have let Electra escape unpunished? Why did the chain of fated crime and retribution ignore her mother’s murderess? – a weakness in what remains to us of Greek tragedy is that there is no play about Electra’s life after the murder of Clytemnestra. Surely it possesses as imaginative tragic possibilities as any of their plots! (Bogard 1988b: 394)

The Greek Electra does not appear at all in Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*, but in Sophocles’s *Electra*, as she lives for nothing but vengeance and liberty, she naturally passes through the whole range of human emotions. Moreover, the interfusion of divine and human action has rendered to Sophocles’s characters a deeper significance, because the gods do not seem to intervene, in order to punish crime, and retribution comes in the natural order of events: his Orestes does not ask Apollo whether he should take revenge against his mother, but how to do it, and, although he receives approval, there is no divine interference. No supernatural intervention is observed in Euripides’s *Electra* either, where Orestes and Electra’s portraits have been of greater psychological insight. The former is torn apart between the natural love for his mother and the knowledge of her guilt, whereas the latter’s grief rather springs from her own humiliation, poverty, loneliness and frustrated womanhood. Electra’s personal misery and jealous hatred are the true motives against women who possess beauty, love and riches, that is Clytaemnestra and later Helen of Troy in Euripides’s *Orestes*. The psychological make-up of Euripides’s Electra is closer to O’Neill’s modern Electra, but the Greek tragedian’s protagonists are saved from death and their guilt is only atoned for with their exile that separates them.

Compared to the above, O’Neill’s ending has been described as more “gothic”; however, the American dramatist succeeded in creating a twentieth century heroine, torn between paganism and Puritanism, who, even though her motives bring her closer to Euripides’s Electra, her final decision to enter the Mannon house is a heroic act of dignity that restores her Aeschylean stature. Victimized by the Civil War – as the mythic Electra had been a victim of the Trojan War – O’Neill’s Lavinia is forced to stoically deny life, the ultimate atonement for the sins of her ancestors. Her presence also contributes to the “epic novelistic complexity” of the drama for she almost perfectly represents “both the updated psychology of the Civil War and the modernized Civil War of psychology” (Egri 50-52).

Modern drama after O’Neill has presented us with a variety of effective versions of the Electra story, like Jean Giraudoux’s *Electre* (1937), T.S. Eliot’s *The Family Reunion* (1939), or Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Les Mouches* (*The Flies*, 1942). In none of them the figure of Electra has surpassed Lavinia in the extraordinary manner she wears the mask of her mythic past, while at the same time she makes “a super-human effort to take part in a historical flow of the world” she moves in “by mere accident” (Chioles 1988: 55). Her incomparable creation, subjected to endless interpretations and readings, has remained the archetypal tragic figure of the American Theatre reflecting the heritage of the American Puritanism incessantly at war with the mythical forces of paganism.

But one cannot end on this note the reading of the play, without acknowledging that it was also the involvement with the war that places forth “a triumphant struggle for life and love, the heart impulse of *Mourning Becomes Electra*”, as Alexander affirms:

In this tragedy of the damned the Mannons have been defeated by the forces of hatred and death out of the family past. But O’Neill had won through to a “new era” of life with “my inner self freed from the dead, consciously alive in the new, liberated and reborn!” His triumphant struggle for life and love had been the heart impulse of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. His characters were defeated, but their struggle passionately affirmed life and love, and so they achieved the exhalation of the original Greek tragedies in celebration of Dionysus – of Life. (Alexander 166)

The female protagonists dressed in green and surrounded by desirable flowers in celebration of a floral Dionysiac epiphany are embraced by the three male protagonists, who wish to forget war or revenge. Ezra’s homecoming is the surrender of “a commander against hopeless odds”: “All right then, I came home to surrender to you (*Christine*) what’s inside me. I love you. I loved you then, and all the years between, and I love you now” (O’Neill 1993a: 710). Adam’s revenge plans altered, all for love, and even Orin before the end rejoices at the thought of his mother’s relationship with Adam: “I’ll say, I’m glad you found love, mother! I’ll wish you happiness – you and Adam” (O’Neill 1993a: 818).

And through the fusion of the identities of the beloved attractive female O’Neill dedicated the work to Carlotta Monterey, as “a victory of love-in-life”, in memory of the interminable days of its composition at the chateau of Le Plessis, and the gray land that surrounded it, “with the wet black trees still and dripping, and the mist wraiths mourning over drowned fields [...] days in which she collaborated as only deep love can, in this trilogy of the damned”, as “mother, and wife and mistress and friend”(O’Neill quoted in Sheaffer 365).

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