

ANALYSIS

Mourning Becomes Electra (1931)

Eugene O'Neill

(1888-1953)

“For...*Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), O'Neill needed no new methods of representation; he told the story of his New England aristocrats, the Mannons, without marked deviation from Realism or much formal embellishment. The play could be accepted on the level of psychological melodrama as the story of hereditary evil and hate, adultery, murder, incestuous drives, and suicide. Nevertheless, this drama possessed greater depth and scope than any American play written before or after it. This Freudian transcription of the Oresteian trilogy of Aeschylus and of the other Greek *Electra* plays was a trilogy in thirteen acts. Although the treatment took into consideration the influence of puritanical religion and possessiveness in a New England mercantile family, its chief accomplishment was the unearthing of the complexes that psychoanalysis had brought to the attention of the age.

The effect of the play was that of tragic catharsis on an almost epic scale. O'Neill defined his masterpiece perhaps better than any of his critics when he framed this question in his first note on *Mourning Becomes Electra*, five years before the play's completion: 'Is it possible to get modern psychological approximation of the Greek sense of fate into such a play which an intelligent audience of today, possessed by no belief in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by?' This play appears to have provided purgation even for its author, since it was followed, in 1933, by a genial comedy of adolescence and small-town life, *Ah, Wilderness!*"

John Gassner

A Treasury of the Theatre: From Henrik Ibsen to Arthur Miller
(Simon & Schuster 1935-57) 787-88

“In *Mourning Becomes Electra* even this device [soliloquies], used in two immediate predecessors, is abandoned in favor of a method which is, outwardly, at least, essentially realism of the most familiar sort. The story, told in what is really three plays intended for performance on three different evenings, follows very closely the Greek story of *Electra*, *Orestes*, and *Clytemnestra*; but the scene is shifted to the time of the American Civil War, and the motives as well as the names of the central characters are so completely modernized that a naïve spectator might never suspect that the fable was not newly invented....*Mourning Becomes Electra*...also presented unmistakably Freudian motifs....

Unwilling to accept finally the negative answer which his own previous work seemed to furnish, O'Neill posed the question again [can modern characters be tragic?] in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Here is a series of events which become great tragedy when Aeschylus represents them. So far as the incidents are concerned, they might have occurred as easily during the American Civil War as during the Trojan War. Suppose, then, we give them the local habitation and the names of our civilization. Suppose we avoid all the implications which depend upon the ancient ethos, and assume that whatever appears irrational has its source, not in the will of the gods, but in that layer of the human mind which lies below its consciousness. How close can we then come to achieving a tragedy, modern in the sense that it asks no suspension of disbelief in the gods, classic in the sense that its figures will seem large enough, and its catastrophe thrilling enough to stir real terror and pity? To what extent can we judge how much of any disproportion between Aeschylus and O'Neill is due to the disproportion between their respective poetic gifts, how much to the possible fact that tragedy cannot happen in a world in which there is not supernatural moral order to be disturbed and then reestablished?

In so far as the play achieves a genuinely tragic effect, it not only vindicates the claim of O'Neill to importance as a writer, but at the same time tends to dispose of what has seemed to be his own conviction—namely that contemporary man's failure to 'belong' puts an insurmountable difficulty in the way of the dramatist who would make a tragic hero out of him. And without suggesting any weighing of the balance

between Aeschylus and O'Neill, it must at least be said that *Mourning Becomes Electra* was astonishingly powerful in the theater, to which it held large audiences through a second and a third part. By virtue of nothing except the passion with which he was able to endow them, the characters assume great stature. They come to seem important because those passions somehow make them important to themselves. And the catastrophe achieves...the finality as well as the magnitude which genuine tragedy requires."

Joseph Wood Krutch
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1245

"*Mourning Becomes Electra* is usually considered O'Neill's most important work. The story is based on the Agamemnon myth as found in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy, but the classic situation is bodily transferred to a modern setting and details of the plot are altered to conform to the new environment. The clan of the Atrides are reincarnated in the Mannons, the leading family in a small American town at the close of the Civil War.

I

In Part I of the trilogy Christine Mannon (representing Clytemnestra) awaits the homecoming of her husband Ezra (Agamemnon) from the war; during his absence she engaged in an illicit affair with a relative, the sea-captain Adam Brant (Aegisthus). Her daughter Lavinia (Electra), fervently loyal to her father, writes to him and to her brother Orin (Orestes) hinting to them of Christine's infidelity. When she warns her mother that Ezra is soon to return and that she must break with Adam, Christine resolves to murder Ezra and flee with her lover. On the night of Ezra's return Lavinia discovers the poison, and when Ezra dies she guesses the truth and secretly vows revenge.

II

In Part II Orin comes home from his father's funeral. Gentle and sensitive by nature, he has always been close to his other; now he becomes fiercely jealous of her relations with Adam. His mother tries to distract him by suggesting a marriage with a neighbor, Hazel Niles. But Orin, his jealousy prodded by Lavinia, is not to be deterred; he traces Christine and Adam to a rendezvous on the latter's ship and kills Adam with a revolver. Stricken with grief, horror, and shame, Christine commits suicide as atonement for her guilt.

III

In Part III Lavinia and Orin depart on a long sea voyage which they hope will help them forget the horrible incidents of the past. But the family tendencies toward suspicion, jealousy, and incest persist; Lavinia, growing into her maturity, comes to resemble her mother, and Orin develops an almost pathological jealousy toward her. He threatens to reveal the details of Adam's death if Lavinia marries Peter Niles, her fiancé. Then he gradually begins to comprehend that his affection for his sister is not a normal one; horrified at his guilt, he takes his own life. Eventually the family curse overtakes Lavinia too; she frightens her fiancé away through the impetuous and perverted violence of her passion. Then, gradually growing more morbid and withdrawn, she shuts herself up in the deserted mansion to live out the rest of her days in solitude.

This drama represents an ambitious attempt to recast the Greek tragedy into the terms of modern psychology, i.e., to convey the modern psychological equivalent of the Greek concept of fate. For the destiny of Greek tragedy is substituted the determinism of blood and heredity. Lavinia, the central character, comes to destruction basically through the bad blood bequeathed her by her father, but this hereditary taint operates through the medium of psychological obsessions and fixations which make her unfit for normal life."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 349-51

"Though not more ambitious, *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a much longer play than *Lazarus Laughed* and is ambitious enough to invite the comparison with Aeschylus. Some of the most respected critics of the

time, such as George Jean Nathan and Joseph Wood Krutch, thought it could sustain the comparison. For a time it was possible for many intelligent people to think of this play as at least one of the supreme American masterpieces like, say, *Moby-Dick* or *The Scarlet Letter*. Today there is no need to take issue with an opinion which is gone with the wind: It can serve only to educate us in the ways of the world. And there is an interesting human and historical problem: What was it about *Mourning Becomes Electra* that at first made a big impression and later did not?

The idea behind the play is that of an equivalent in terms of Freudian, or perhaps Jungian, psychology to the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus: an equivalent and, following the reasoning of the man in the street, an improvement. As O'Neill's latest biographer puts it: '*Electra* is based on sound modern concepts of psychological and biological cause and effect, not upon the inspiration of the Furies.' It is certainly based on concepts. That may be the main trouble. Whether these concepts are so much sounder than Aeschylus is also open to debate. They are certainly more depressing. The *Oresteia* celebrates the establishment of community: It shows the rule of law take the place of the vendetta. *Mourning Becomes Electra* shows the vendetta going on and on and on. In place of the liberating, creative, and inspiring ideas of Aeschylus come ideas that at best are sobering.

The key terms reverse their meanings. Where Aeschylus describes a curse that can be lifted in the name of a justice that is real and that can be assured by a human nature not wholly lacking in wisdom, for O'Neill living is itself a curse, death is a release, and justice is not the opposite of revenge but the same thing. The psychology of *Mourning Becomes Electra* runs as thin as the philosophy. One thing leads to another in all too naive and mechanical a way. It is as if a couple of psychoanalytic concepts, taken in ridiculously simple form, were held sufficient to demonstrate what tragic life is like. Daughters, for example, hate their mothers and love their fathers. This must have seemed a thrillingly novel idea in 1931, or how could anyone have thought O'Neill's presentation of it anything but monotonous? To do without the Furies is nothing but a loss if all you put in their place is the rhetoric of psychologism.

Orin grows to resemble his father, and Lavinia her mother. Such a development comes under the heading, in psychiatry, of 'psychotic identification,' and it seems that O'Neill has been 'confirmed' by recent medical writers.... Insofar as any big play can be summed up in a sentence, cannot *Mourning Becomes Electra* be summed up in this one: Eugene O'Neill feels that people wish to kill each other? O'Neill seems to have been imbued with hatred as St. Francis, say, or Ghandi was imbued with love; but how creative is mere hatred, even in art? Certainly, it is permissible for O'Neill to keep inventing people who kill each other or want to. But isn't it equally permissible for us to wonder that they don't have any other interests?

The question sounds like a jibe, and those who leap to O'Neill's defense might ask if one could not wonder the same about the frantic characters of Strindberg and Dostoevsky. I doubt it. The world of Dostoevsky's people, and even of Strindberg's, is a far larger one than that of O'Neill's. The Captain in Strindberg's *The Father* is a scientist and his intellectuality is made quite real to us... O'Neill sometimes presents an alternative—[to negative forces] but inadequately. The few characters not propelled downwards by the death wish are mere dummies. Peter and Hazel, in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, are examples.

For all his reading, O'Neill remained horrifyingly barbaric. Culture existed for him, it would seem, only as those books he lifted ideas from and in no degree as culture—the cultivation of the spirit and the tradition among men of such cultivation. In this respect, *Mourning Becomes Electra* stands at the opposite pole not only from the Greeks but from such characteristic attempts to revive Greek tragedy in modern times as Goethe's *Iphigenia in Tauris*. There, the poet's search was expressly for whatever in the myth might tend to the schooling of man and the taming of the beast in him—whatever might tend to the enhancement of life in possible sweetness and grace. Reading or seeing Goethe's play, we enter his mind and find it a spacious and truly edifying swelling place. The paradox of *Mourning Becomes Electra* is that O'Neill took up a great testament of humane culture in order to spit in the face of humanity.

How is it no one said so? People bring such charges against authors much less guilty of them. Obviously, if O'Neill's points got across at all they did not carry a sting—which is to say they did not carry conviction. For when all is said against O'Neill's ideas, it must yet be admitted that such ideas might have

gone to the making of very powerful drama. They did so when Wagner used them. (For is not the 'tragic philosophy' of *Mourning Becomes Electra* much less that of Nietzsche than of Nietzsche's archenemy, the author of *Tristan and Isolde* and *The Nibelung's Ring*? If initially one tends to reject this *Electra* because of the view of life it presents, one rejects it even more emphatically because it does not get this view across the footlights.

We are not perhaps in a position to answer the question as to what people were impressed by back in 1931: not by the nihilistic view of life, which did not come home to men's business and bosoms, but merely by the rhetoric of psychologism. One might not know exactly what the main intent was, but certainly much of the talk in scene after scene was close enough to the talk at the cocktail party before the show. Now even dead ideas can seem to come alive in a play when they happen to be alive in the current conversation of the public. And surely such ideas—though they may not be the main themes of the plays—come up in all the plays of O'Neill's middle period. They return to their graves as soon as they are no longer part of the current chatter, 'the new small talk'."

Eric Bentley
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 567-69

"A trilogy of plays by Eugene O'Neill; the parts are entitled *Homecoming*, *The Hunted*, and *The Haunted*. The playwright took his story from the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, giving it a setting in 19th-century New England and a generous interlarding of Freudian theory. Agamemnon is represented by Ezra Mannon, a general returning from the Civil War. His wife Christine corresponds to Clytemnestra, his daughter (Electra) is Lavinia, his son (Orestes) is Orin. The play takes its force from the deep-rooted conflict between Puritanism and romantic passion. Many critics believe it to be O'Neill's best work. It was made into a motion picture in 1947."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)