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# A Woman's Quest for Happiness: O'Neill's "Private Myth"

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A Woman's Quest for Happiness:

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O'Neill's "Private Myth"

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(TITLE)

BY

Andrea Ximena Campana Garcia

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1992

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YEAR

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## ABSTRACT

Following the approach used by James Hurt in his book Catiline's Dream to determine Henrik Ibsen's "private myth" which he retold in play after play, I have delineated O'Neill's "private myth" in a narrower way concentrating on his female characters. Examining parallel motifs in the lives of the dominant women in Desire Under the Elms, Strange Interlude, and Mourning Becomes Electra, I have detected this mythic pattern involving the O'Neillian woman: She goes through an early innocent and submissive state guided by an initial vision of happiness which can be regarded as fairly conventional. But when her happiness is shattered through her suffering of a loss, the heroine decides to leave her passive behavior behind and undertake a struggle that in her eyes will give her happiness. However, she experiences repeated failures during her search brought about by numerous obstacles, such as the death of a beloved; a haunting past; her interrelatedness with characters suffering Oedipus Complexes, a haunting sense of guilt, biological curses and repressive Puritan behavior; or simply another character's pursuit of happiness obstructs hers. These impediments generate intensity in the heroine's feelings, bring about her increasing urgency to achieve

happiness, and push her into adopting manipulative behavior in order to achieve her goals. Attaining at last a modicum of happiness, she consequently tries to hold on to it by any means--including even murder. But once again her happiness is obstructed, and consequently the heroine chooses to end her days in an attitude of renunciation, which may become, in the end, a kind of happiness.

Additionally I have illustrated how this "private myth" relates to O'Neill's personal life and experience as a playwright. His desire to give his characters tragic stature similar to the Greek tragic figures and his vision of women derived from his personal experience with his mother's suffering serve as the basis for his tragic portrayal of women in his plays.

I dedicate this thesis  
to my parents  
Antonio Campana and Nelba Garcia  
and my brother  
Antonio Campana Garcia.

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## I

## INTRODUCTION

In his book Catiline's Dream, James Hurt examines Ibsen's plays as revealing the playwright's "private myth." He concludes, on the basis of parallel plot motifs or developments and of parallel changing relationships among the different characters, that Ibsen tells essentially the same schematic story again and again. Hurt provides this outline of its mythic pattern: First, the Ibsen protagonist finds himself in a polluted and stifling home, which he leaves so as to settle in a place of detachment and perspective (the heights). Once on the heights, the hero adopts a project of the will. However, precisely at this point, a first child-death occurs, and two women appear in the protagonist's life: a fascinating woman who tempts him into fatal actions and a gentle woman with whom the hero unites and establishes a second home. The hero's relationship with the latter, however, gradually deteriorates, ending in her death. Consequently, the hero's project of the will collapses. At this point, a second child-death occurs, and the hero ascends to the peaks and dies in the company of the fascinating woman (7-8). These are the motifs that recur in Ibsen's plays as Hurt demonstrates in his later chapters. But he also

makes clear that some of these elements can be transformed or even omitted, though "the general sequence of events is remarkably stable" (8). Hurt finds also that the Ibsen protagonist goes through some mental states that accompany these plot developments: namely, "his preoccupation with his inner world, his aloofness and detachment from others, his conspirational secretiveness, his secret feelings of omnipotence, and his pervasive guilt and anxiety" (21).

Additionally, he maintains that the myth will help us understand Ibsen's work not only as a "continuous and coherent whole" (3), but also as the author's private response to his experience in this world.

In Eugene O'Neill's work we can also detect the emergence of a "private myth," specifically concerning women. In the present study, I will use Hurt's approach--in a limited way--to delineate O'Neill's private myth relative to his female characters in three of his major plays of the middle period: Desire Under the Elms (1924), Strange Interlude (1926), and Mourning Becomes Electra (1931). Although there are minor variations in the way O'Neill presents his female characters throughout his writing, the way he portrays women in these three plays represents his portrayal of female characters in general.

O'Neill wrote these plays in a time of experimen-

tation and discovery, not only in his professional life but also in his personal life. Always concerned with giving his plays a tragic sense similar to the Greek tragic intensity, O'Neill undertook longer and more ambitious projects. He tried new techniques to overcome the limitations of realism and get beneath the surface of his characters, particularly a use of thoughts aside (similar to a novelist's stream of consciousness) in Strange Interlude and a mask-like exterior in Mourning Becomes Electra. Around this time O'Neill also began to give women prominent roles in his writing. O'Neill in Desire Under the Elms moved away from the plays in which men were the central characters and gave a woman, Abbie, major importance in the plot. Thus, in Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra we find that women become the agents of the action, moving the plot along. This increased importance of women in these plays corresponds to his discoveries regarding the importance women--specifically his mother--had had in his formative years and in his tragic vision of life. During the period he wrote these three plays, O'Neill was undergoing psychoanalytic therapy, which helped him cope with his drinking problem and the haunting double image of his mother--that of saint and drug addict--and made him aware that he suffered from an Oedipus complex himself (Gelb 595-597). His personal discoveries at the

time could have influenced his desire to portray a woman's life in depth as he does in these three different plays. The dominant roles that Abbie Putnam, Nina Leeds, Christine Mannon, and Lavinia Mannon hold in these plays, then, become essential in illuminating the nature of O'Neill's women--their fears, limitations, strengths and weaknesses--as well as their role in O'Neill's "private myth."

O'Neill's female characters have been subjected to abundant criticism. Mostly they have been treated in isolation, each in her individual role in a particular play. But some critics have noted characteristics O'Neill's women seem to share; their mother-like qualities, their sensuality and sexuality, their cruelty, their destructiveness, and their envisioning of a conventional life dependent on men. Even so, there is a great deal yet to be explored. The existence of significant parallels among O'Neill's female characters in these three plays has not been touched upon as far as I can ascertain. Questions like what women's nature seems to be, what women seek, what women mean by happiness, how they act in seeking it, what kind of obstacles stand in their way, and what extremes they go to have not yet been addressed in depth.

By answering these questions I hope to discover

what plot motifs are to be found in these characters' lives, what stages these women go through, and thereby to delineate, if possible, a composite picture reflecting the status and nature of the O'Neillian woman, outlining this "private myth" concerning her, and like Hurt to offer a few speculations as to the sources of the myth in O'Neill's own experience, as well as the psychological importance of this "myth" to the playwright.

## I

## DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS

Most of the criticism of Desire Under the Elms has focused on the two male figures in the play, Ephraim Cabot and his son Eben. Much has been written about Ephraim's Puritan ethic and Eben's Oedipus Complex; however, very little attention has been given to the character of Abbie. Criticism of her character has touched on her affinity with nature, her fertility and sensuality, her identification with the elms, and her mother-like qualities. But it has also restrictively treated her in her relation to the two men, Ephraim and Eben. In the present study I am interested in unveiling the character of Abbie Putnam, in exploring those aspects of her inner life that in my opinion have not been examined by the critics. I intend to discover the twists and turns in Abbie's life that will enable us to perceive her character as part of O'Neill's "private myth" concerning his female characters.

Soon after Abbie appears in Act I, she recollects her past life, before she became Ephraim's wife. Instead of showing us Abbie's childhood, O'Neill makes her tell another character, Eben, of her earlier experiences in life. She describes how painful her

childhood was and how her dreams of happiness were shattered for the first time:

oceans o' trouble an' nuthin' but wuk fur reward. I was a orphan early an' had t' wuk fur others in other folks' hums. Then I married an' he turned out a drunken spreer an' so he had to wuk fur others an' me too agen in other folks' hums, an' the baby died, an' my husband got sick an' died too, an' I was glad sayin' now I'm free fur once, on'y I diskivered right away all I was free fur was t' wuk agen in other folks' hums, doing other folks' wuk till I'd most give up o' ever doin' my own wuk in my own hum, an' then your Paw come. (I 177-78)

This retrospective account introduces us to Abbie as a younger inexperienced woman. The first incident that struck at her naivete and forced a change in her, in the way she had to face life, was her parents' deaths. This incident obliged her to work for others in order to be able to provide for herself. At this point Abbie envisioned a fairly conventional, happy life for herself totally dependent on men. It consisted of getting married and having her own home, a normal expectation for a woman in New England during the first half of the 1800's.



In spite of achieving her dream, Abbie experiences trouble once again: her vision of happiness is shattered by disillusionment. However, she is able to regain a vision of happiness through the timely arrival of Ephraim Cabot. At this point, then, Abbie makes a decision that will influence her future. By accepting Cabot's offer of marriage, she hopes to improve her dreary life and to fulfill her dream of having her own home.

Her decision to marry Ephraim--a man whom she does not love and who is considerably older than she--reveals the intensity of her desire to fulfill her dream. But more importantly, her choice discloses that she has left her submissive behavior behind and has decided to depart from what could be considered conventional behavior at the time and try to shape her own destiny. As she explains to Eben, Ephraim's son, "I hain't bad nor mean--'ceptin' fur an enemy--but I got t' fight fur what's due me out o' life, if I ever 'spect t' git it" (I 178). The disillusionments she has experienced up to this point have brought about her awareness that she cannot remain passive and expect to achieve what she wants; she now understands that she has to fight for what she think she deserves in life. We learn, then, that she is willing to undertake a struggle and obtain happiness by independent means.

However, we will find that her capacity to shape her own destiny is illusory. Abbie's conviction that through her marriage to Ephraim she will obtain her "hum," and therefore her happiness, is only an unrealizable dream. Abbie's behavior, immediately after her arrival at the farm, exemplifies how sure she is of being able to achieve her dream: she refers to the farm in possessive terms. When she arrives, she states, "(with the conqueror's conscious superiority) I'll go in an' look at my house" (I 175). Abbie seems completely sure that she can manipulate not only Ephraim but also his son Eben in order to achieve what she wants. However, Eben's materialism, together with Abbie's unexpected sexual attraction to him and Ephraim's Puritanism and materialism as opposed to her affinity with nature, will thwart her dreams.

Abbie is aware of Eben's existence before arriving at the house. When she first meets him she states, "Yer Paw's spoke a lot o'yew" (I 177). But her knowledge is restricted to what Ephraim has told her, and that is probably that Eben is soft and has a strong attachment to his mother. We do not know if Abbie is conscious of Eben's hatred of his father for working his mother to death, or of his intention to take the farm away from Ephraim to satisfy his claim to the farm as a rightful inheritance from his mother. All we know is

that she is not ignorant of his existence and the possibility of his being an obstacle to her plans. As she says to Eben, "I'm all prepared to have ye agin me--at fust" (I 177). Abbie thinks that she can handle Eben's rivalry for the farm. However, she is not prepared for the sexual attraction that she feels for Eben and that Eben feels for her. This unexpected ingredient in the situation complicates her struggle.

Ephraim also becomes an obstacle for Abbie. Just as she thinks she can handle Eben, she is convinced that she can manipulate Ephraim as she wishes. As she explains to Eben, "I calc'late I kin git him t' do most anythin' fur me" (I 177). Abbie, however, has underestimated Ephraim's personality. She has overlooked the differences in their natures which portend failure in their marriage. Whereas Abbie is pure Nature--she "possesses enormous animal vitality and sensuality" (Flexner 157)--Ephraim rules his life by a hard Puritan code of values, together with excessive materialism. Ephraim worships the existence of a hard God which is associated with his ascetic Puritanism (Bogard 219). He has a repressive attitude towards life: he is hard, rigid, and incapable of feeling tender emotions for those who are close to him. This hardness, something he is proud of, has led him to enslave his wives and sons and to demonstrate no

consideration for them at all.

O'Neill makes the opposition quite clear in the play's setting. Ephraim's house, which he has proudly built by himself, is a temple of Puritanism: "the sickly grayish stone color of the house stands for somber, hard puritanism, and the green of the elms for the vegetative, life-affirming forces denied in the Cabot house since the death of Eben's mother" (Tornqvist 59). The elms, associated with maternity and womanhood from the very first stage directions in the play, as Edwin A. Engel points out, symbolize Abbie (129), as well as Eben's dead mother.

In Ephraim's eyes no one has a right to the farm, because he has made it what it is. If it were not for him, the land would still be a pile of stones. Abbie becomes aware of the extremity of Ephraim's attachment to the house and of his excessive materialism as Ephraim discloses to her the intensity of his feelings for the farm, and that he is not willing to give it up:

Cabot I hain't a-givin it t' no one! . . . .  
 if I could, in my dyin' hour, I'd set it  
 afire an' watch it burn--this house an' every  
 ear o' corn an' tree down t' the last blade  
 o' hay! I'd sit an' know it was all a-dying  
 with me an' no one else'd ever own what was  
 mine, what I'd made of nothin' with my own

sweat n' blood! (II 184)

Ephraim's unwillingness to give up, not even after his death, what he has worked for all these years presents a complication for Abbie. She sees her control slipping away and senses that she will likely neither achieve the home she has wanted nor receive the love, affection, and sexual gratification that she naturally needs.

In view of this possible defeat, Abbie is forced to find another way to achieve her desired goals.

Ephraim's announced intention of not giving the farm to anyone that does not have his blood gives Abbie an idea: she will be able to inherit the farm if she gives Ephraim a son. We see the idea dawning, as well as Abbie's degree of calculation beneath it, in this conversation:

Cabot A son is me--my blood--mine. Mine  
ought t' git mine . . .

Abbie (giving him a look of hatred) Ay--eh. I  
see. (She becomes very thoughtful, her face  
growing shrewd, her eyes studying Cabot  
craftily)

Cabot I'm gittin' old--ripe on the bough.

(Then with a sudden forced reassurance) Not  
but what I hain't a hard nut t' crack even  
yet--an' fur many a year t' come! . . .

Abbie (suddenly) Mebbe the Lord'll give us a

son.

Cabot (turns and stares at her eagerly) Ye mean--a son--t'me 'n' yew?

Abbie (with a cajoling smile) Ye're a strong man yet, hain't ye? . . . .I been thinkin' o' it all along. Ay--eh--an' I been prayin' it'd happen, too . . . .

Cabot (excitedly clutching both of her hands in his) It'd be the blessin' o' God, Abbie--the blessin' o' God A'mighty on me--in my old age--in my lonesomeness! They hain't nothin' I wouldn't do fur ye then, Abbie. Ye'd hev on'y t' ask it--anythin' ye'd a mind t'!

Abbie (interrupting) Would ye will the farm t' me an' it. . . ?

Cabot (vehemently) I'd do anythin' ye axed. I tell ye! I swar it! (II 185-86)

The passage discloses Abbie's only possibility to inherit the farm--her giving Ephraim a son. But more importantly, it reveals Abbie's capacity to manipulate Ephraim--she studies him calculatingly and intelligently to the point that he envisions the possibility of having a son at his age. Abbie reassures him about his weakest point--his concern about his age--and implies that he still remains as hard and as strong

as before; she thereby obtains Ephraim's promise that he will do whatever she wants him to do. Once again, we witness that Abbie, once she has a vision of happiness, does not give it up easily. She continues her struggle by resourcefully searching for ways to achieve what she wants. Nonetheless, we cannot fail to notice at the same time the increasing complexity that Abbie's situation has acquired. Contrary to what she expected, her undertakings until this point have failed to give her her intensely desired "hum"; therefore, her struggle becomes more and more extreme. Abbie increasingly adopts a manipulative and calculating behavior in the process of finding new solutions to her problems, and, together with this, her choices become each time more questionable ethically.

In her decision to give Ephraim a baby, she goes one step further in adding complexity to her future: she decides to use Eben, her stepson, to father the baby. These two choices of hers--giving Ephraim a son just to possess the farm and choosing Eben to father her baby--disclose not only how much she has changed, but also her end-justifies-the-means morality. She is no longer the naive and submissive girl that dreamed of having her own "hum," but a woman that is willing to go to any extremes in order to achieve her dream. Her decision to commit adultery for purposes of procreation

reveals her rejection of a conventional morality and her adoption of a more pragmatic approach to life. We never even see her doubting whether her decision to have a child by her stepson is ethically correct or not. She acts amorally in accord with Nature.

At this point, then, the sexual attraction existing between Eben and Abbie plays an important role in the development of her plans. Abbie's choosing of Eben to father her baby results from the extreme sexual attraction that has existed between them and has been growing since the very first time they saw each other. O'Neill's stage directions are very revealing in this respect. When Abbie first sees Eben, "her desire is dimly awakened by his youth and good looks" (I 177). Likewise, Eben is "obscurely moved, physically attracted to her" (I 177). O'Neill's choice of the word "obscurely" discloses that their mutual attraction is something that they can neither resist nor control: "they stare into each other's eyes, his held by hers in spite of himself, hers glowingly possessive. Their physical attraction becomes a palpable force quivering in the hot air." As Abbie tells Eben when he tries to fight her seduction, "It's agin nature, Eben. Ye been fightin' yer nature ever since the day I come" (II 181). Abbie, then, sees how to use Eben's sexual desire for her as a means to fulfill her plans. However, she does



not take into consideration the complexity of the situation she is getting into and the further complications that will emerge as a consequence of her decision making.

Abbie's resolution to use Eben gives us insight into another aspect of her interests. There is no evidence in the play that Ephraim cannot father a baby apart from the fact that he is seventy-six years old. Abbie's seduction of Eben, then, emerges as a combination of her lust for him and of her necessity to give Ephraim a son as soon as possible. As she feels that she is still in control of her strategy, she is working with Nature. Her idea of happiness has clearly gone beyond merely possessing the farm; it now includes sexual gratification as a means to that end.

However, in spite of the fact that Eben is extremely attracted to Abbie, he is not willing to give in to her seduction so easily. Because Abbie has taken his mother's place and has become a threat to his possession of the farm, he resents her intrusion. Eben's seeming distrust and hatred towards Abbie will constitute another obstacle in her plans. Yet once again Abbie is able to come up with a solution, which will enable their union to take place anyway. As Edgar F. Racey points out in his article "Myth as Tragic Structure in Desire Under the Elms," Abbie and Eben are

"locally" (psychologically, dramatically) motivated: Eben by the Oedipus Complex and the desire for revenge, Abbie by her desire to provide Ephraim with an heir, thus assuring chances of retaining the farm, and both of them by a strong sexual urge. (60)

Racey's observation brings to mind the importance of inevitability and relationships in the unfolding of the events in the play. Abbie's tempting of Eben is not enough for her to get him to yield and thus fulfill her plans. Abbie is only able to succeed because of the specific conditions and circumstances existing in her relationship with Eben at this point. Eben's Oedipus Complex--his hatred of his father and his tender love for his dead mother--and his sexual desire for Abbie leave the door open for Abbie to find a solution to overcome Eben's distrust, which has prevented her from achieving what she wants. In order to satisfy Eben's three different longings and therefore give him the necessary impetus to yield to her seduction, Abbie is forced into acting out two roles--Mother and Temptress.

Before the scene in the parlor takes place, in which Abbie's acting as Eben's mother will eventually lead Eben to submit to her wishes, Abbie uses all her seductive powers to get Eben to enter the parlor--the only place in the house that has not been open since the

death of Eben's mother, because she was laid out there.

Abbie Ye want me, don't ye? Yes, ye do! . . .

. Look at yer eyes! They's lust fur me in 'em, burnin' 'em up! Look at yer lips now! They're tremblin' an' longin' t' kiss me, an' yer teeth t' bite (He is watching her now with a horrible fascination. She laughs a crazy triumphant laugh) I'm a--goin' t' make all o' this hum my hum! They's one room hain't mine yet, but it's a--goin' t' be tonight. I'm a-goin' down now an' light up! (She makes him a mocking bow) Won't ye come courtin' me in the best parlor, Mister Cabot?

Eben (staring at her--horribly confused--dully) Don't ye dare! It hain't been open since Maw died an' was laid out thar! Don't ye. . . ! (But her eyes are fixed on his so burningly that his will seems to wither before hers. He stands swaying toward her helplessly)

Abbie (holding his eyes and putting all her will into her words as she backs out the door) I'll expect ye afore long, Eben.

Eben In the parlor? (This seems to arouse connotations for he comes back and puts on

his white shirt, collar, half ties the tie mechanically, puts on coat, takes his hat, stands barefooted looking about him in bewilderment, mutters wonderingly) Maw! Whar air yew? (Then goes slowly toward the door in rear). (II 190-191)

O'Neill's stage directions clearly reveal Eben's incapacity to resist Abbie's seduction. Abbie's sensual talk hypnotizes him totally. Moreover, it weakens him and makes him vulnerable. However, her sexual temptation of him is not enough to make him yield to her wishes. What finally defeats his resistance is the memory of his mother. We notice, then, how important Abbie's choosing the parlor is for the right place to seduce him: she knows that there Eben will be more sensitive to his mother's memory, and this will facilitate Abbie's plans.

Once in the parlor, Eben seems in a trance: he feels the presence of his mother and constantly questions where he is. Abbie, perceiving his childlike helplessness, takes advantage of the situation: she acts with the same tender compassion that a mother would and seduces him. In spite of her adopting a calculating and manipulative behavior throughout this scene, as O'Neill points out in the stage directions, "there is a sincere maternal love in her manner and voice--a

horrible mixture of lust and mother love" (II 193). In her seduction she becomes the Eternal Mother and the Eternal Temptress. The emergence of this maternal love in Abbie's character brings about insight into another aspect of Abbie's character. We realize that in spite of Abbie's adopting an increasingly calculating and manipulative behavior to achieve what she wants in life, she still experiences unexpectedly strong feelings. Moreover, her maternal instinct is still alive in her, and maybe she needs to channel that instinct before she achieves complete fulfilment as a woman.

The mood of the parlor scene is also characterized by "the condition Nietzsche called Dionysian" (Bogard 216). An understanding of Nietzsche's influence on O'Neill in this particular scene will help us explain why Abbie and Eben undergo a change after they yield to their sexual need for each other. But more importantly, it will reveal why Abbie's vision of happiness--her possession of the home--now changes into a more positive objective. Bogard explains that O'Neill understood well that consciousness can be subdued by a kind of rapturous apprehension . . . . and that through that intoxication, truths can be reached that are dimly to be known through cognitive, structured perception (216).

In Abbie and Eben's case, their immersion into this Dionysian rapture--their giving in to their sexual desire--changes the quality of their relationship. It helps each to evolve from a selfish state in which their sole concern was possession of the land to a selfless state in which their love for each constitutes their new truth and source of happiness.

After approximately a year has gone by Abbie's vision of happiness has completely changed. She is in love with Eben and no longer desires the farm. At this point her love for Eben and their baby constitute her happiness. With Eben, Abbie has found love as well as sexual gratification, and the baby has enabled her to channel her mother love that she had not been able to do since the death of her first-born. For the first time, then, we are convinced that Abbie is happy.

Abbie's happiness, though, lasts only a short while. She soon confronts another obstacle to the achievement of her personal happiness. And ironically enough, it is not someone or something else that obstructs her felicity now, but she herself. Her saying something to Ephraim a long time ago has now turned against her, adding to her life, once again, a sense of fatality. Just when she has started to enjoy a taste of happiness, she encounters an impediment that leaves her once more totally empty. Ephraim and Eben have a

discussion over the possession of the land and Ephraim decides to relate to Eben what Abbie told him on that earlier occasion:

CABOT ye won't git 'round her--she knows yer tricks . . . . she told me ye was sneakin' 'round tryin' t' make love t' her t' git her on yer side . . . .

An' I says, I'll blow his brains t' the top o'them elums--an' she says no, that hain't sense, who'll ye git t' help ye on the farm in his place--an' then she says yew'n me ought to have a son--I know we kin, she says--an' I says, if we do, ye kin have anythin' I've got ye've a mind' t'. An' she says, I wants Eben cut off so's this farm'll be mine when ye die! (III 204).

Even though Ephraim's anger towards Eben makes him exaggerate what Abbie told him--she never told him that she wanted Eben cut off from the farm--Abbie did say the rest of it. However, she said it out of jealousy because Eben, rejecting her, had gone to seek sexual pleasure with Minnie. Abbie's words have come back to her: she has lost Eben's trust and therefore she sees her happiness threatened once again.

At this point Abbie is once again compelled to make a choice. If she wants to regain her happiness with

Eben, she has to take some kind of action. However, before Abbie can come up with a solution to regain Eben's trust, she has a dramatic discussion with Eben that impels her to act in a way that will thwart her happiness forever.

Eben Ye've made a fool o' me--a sick, dumb fool--a--purpose! Ye've been on'y playin' yer sneakin', stealin' game all along--gittin' me t' lie with ye so's ye'd hev a son he'd think was his'n, an makin' him promise he'd give ye the farm and let me eat dust, if ye'd git him a son! . . . .

Abbie (pleadingly) Eben, listen--ye must listen--it was long ago--afore we done nothin'--yew was scornin' me goin' t' see Min--when I was lovin' ye--an I said it t' him t' git vengeance on ye! . . . .

Eben I'll git squar' with the old skunk--an' yew! I'll tell him the truth`bout the son he's so proud o'! Then I'll leave ye here t' pizen each other . . . . an' I'll go t' the gold fields o' Californi--a whar Simeon and Peter be . . . .

I wish he never was born! I wish he'd die this minit! I wish I'd never sot eyes on him! It's him--yew havin' him--a purpose t'



steal--that's changed everythin'!

Abbie (gently) Did ye believe I loved ye--  
afore he come?

Eben Ay--eh--like a dumb ox!

Abbie An' ye don't believe no more?

Eben B'lieve a lyin' thief! Ha!

Abbie (shudders--then humbly) An' did ye  
r'ally love me afore?

Eben (brokenly) Ay--eh--an' ye was trickin'  
me!

Abbie An ye don't love me now!

Eben (violently) I hate ye, I tell ye! . . . .

Abbie (after a pause--with dreadful cold  
intensity--slowly) If that's what his  
comin's done t' me--killin' yewr love--  
takin'yew away--my on'y joy--the on'y joy I  
ever knowed--like heaven t' me--purtier'n  
heaven--then I hate him, too, even if I be  
his Maw! . . . .

(distractedly) He won't steal! I'd kill him  
fust! I do love ye! I'll prove t'ye

. . . . ! (III 205-206)

Abbie's intense love for Eben--the only person who has  
ever given her happiness--together with her awareness  
now of Eben's jealousy and distrust, and--worse--his  
wish that the baby was dead or had never been born,

motivates Abbie to make the decision to kill her baby. In a desperate attempt to revive Eben's love, she seeks reaffirmation:

Abbie (clinging to his arm--with passionate earnestness) If I could make it--'s if he'd never come up between us--if I could prove t' ye I wa'n't schemin' t' steal from ye--so's everythin' could be jest the same with us, lovin' each other jest the same, kissin' an' happy the same we've been happy afore he come--if I could do it--ye'd love me agen, wouldn't ye? Ye'd kiss me agen? Ye wouldn't never leave me, would ye?

Eben (moved) I calc'late not. (III 207)

Abbie's feelings for Eben are so strong and her fear of losing him so great that she does not consider any other options to regain his trust and love. His stating that the baby has changed everything between them is reason enough for Abbie to want to get rid of it. Abbie's decision, then, reveals to us that she does have priorities. We learn that Abbie's relationship with Eben is the most precious aspect of her life, more important than her baby. She goes as far as to state that Eben is her only joy, and that if he hates the baby, she hates it too. In Abbie's eyes killing the

baby will make Eben believe that he is more important than the farm to her.

Abbie's illusion of regaining happiness with Eben, however, is soon destroyed. And once again Abbie's actions and her solutions to her problems turn against her. The immediate consequences of her murder are disastrous to Abbie, since they just add complexity to her situation--Eben's hatred for Abbie becomes even greater and leads him to report her crime to the sheriff. In addition, the irony of the situation immediately following her murder brings about Abbie's horrible realization that--contrary to what she thought--the killing of her own son was not necessary. After she kills the baby, Abbie goes to Eben to inform him about her action. She says, "I done it!, Eben! I told ye I'd do it! I've proved I love ye--better'n everythin'--so's ye can't never doubt me no more!" and then states, "I--I killed him, Eben" (III 208). Eben, however, misunderstands and thinks that Abbie has killed Ephraim. Abbie then realizes that she did not consider the existence of another option that could have enabled her to regain her happiness with Eben: "Laughing distractedly) that's what I ought t' done, hain't it? I oughter killed him instead!" (III 208). She then realizes that she has made a mistake--that though the killing of her beloved child will never bring back her

happiness, the killing of Ephraim might have done so. This horrible realization brings insight once again into Abbie's moral condition at this point. We learn that she can go to any extremes in order to achieve her dream of happiness with Eben: she not only murdered her baby but also makes clear that if she had realized that murdering Ephraim constituted an option of hers, she would have performed the deed as well.

Ironically enough, Patrick J. Nolan, who takes a Jungian approach in examining the play, sees Abbie's infanticide as her achievement of "spiritual totality" and as a way of "disavowing herself from greed in her love for Eben" (8). I cannot fail to agree with Nolan's observation, since Abbie's killing of her baby is a selfless sacrifice. It is the act in the play that proves that she has left her desire of possession of material things behind. As she explains to Eben, in an effort to erase his hatred for her,

Abbie (slowly and brokenly) I didn't want t'  
do it. I hated myself for doin' it. I  
loved him. He was so purty--dead spit 'n'  
image o' yew. But I loved yew more--an' yew  
was goin' away--far off whar I'd never see  
ye again, never kiss ye, never feel ye  
pressed agin me agen--an'ye said ye hated me  
fur havin' him--ye said ye hated him an'

wished he was dead--ye said if it hadn't  
 been fur him comin' it'd be the same's afore  
 between us . . . . Eben, don't ye look at  
 me like that--hatin' me--not after what I  
 done fur ye--fur us--so's we could be happy  
 agen--(III 209)

As Nolan accurately points out, Abbie's killing of her baby proves to Eben that to her he is more important than the farm and their baby. Moreover, it is ultimately the act that brings Eben and Abbie together, since Eben eventually realizes not only Abbie's motivation for killing the baby but also his responsibility and forgives her. However, she finds herself again incapable of finally fulfilling her dream of sharing a life with Eben. This time it is her choice: she decides to take punishment for her actions. When Eben asks her to run away with him, she says, "(shaking her head) I got t'take my punishment--t' pay fur my sin" (III 213). This is the last instance in the play where Abbie makes a decision. Her hasty but "well-intentioned" killing of the baby brings about her realization that no matter what she does she cannot win. She therefore decides to adopt an attitude of renunciation and give herself up to the sheriff to be punished.

Although she willingly surrenders in order to be

punished and acknowledges that her adultery and murder were sins, Abbie neither repents nor experiences remorse: she only regrets killing the wrong person, Ephraim. When Eben mentions that the baby was the child of their sin, she says, "(lifting her head as if defying God) I don't repent that sin! I hain't askin' God t' fergive that"! (III 213). Abbie seems to feel that what she did considering the specific circumstances in which her actions took place was right. She believes that her struggle was legitimate and she had the right to try and hold on by any means to the little happiness that she knew. Eben, likewise, neither judges her nor condemns her. He expresses his unconditional love for Abbie at the end, and he decides to share her punishment.

Her final reunion with Eben could represent for Abbie an achievement of a different kind of happiness. Just knowing that Eben loves her and that they might be able to share prison or death together is in its own way a source of happiness for Abbie. As she states, "I hain't beat--s' long's I got ye!" (214)

Throughout the play we witness Abbie's pragmatic undertakings, dishonest manipulations, and even her murdering of her own baby. However, this is not the only side of the character of Abbie that we are exposed

to. O'Neill makes sure that we understand why she behaves the way that she does; in other words, what her motivations are for taking these actions. Therefore, when we witness Abbie's evolution from a submissive and pure girl in her earlier years to a woman that is willing to go to any extremes in order to achieve her happiness, we cannot condemn her but understand why she has been forced into living a life tainted by a continuous encounter with destructiveness and fatality.

We learn through Abbie's recollection of her childhood that she once possessed an original innocence, submissiveness, and naivete and that it was shattered by the troubles she experienced early in life. We are also exposed to the fact that she is able to regain a vision of happiness and that she encounters numerous obstacles that thwart her dreams over and over again--Ephraim's Puritanism and materialism; Eben's Oedipus Complex, which emerges as a psychological fate; the strong sexual attraction existing between Eben and Abbie; and her actions and words that come back to her, adding not only more complications to her life but also a touch of irony as well.

O'Neill's inclusion of these obstacles brings out the real dimensions of Abbie's character. Abbie's adoption of a more pragmatic, less naive strategy in order to achieve happiness results from the limitations

she confronts in her life. She is forced to make choices that exemplify her departure from the expected social norms for women and to become increasingly destructive, falling into a pattern of behavior that is morally questionable.

We also learn about the greatness of her drive to achieve happiness. In spite of Abbie's adopting an attitude of resignation at the end of the play because she sees that no sacrifices can insure her happiness, she maintains all through the play an intensity in her struggle that earns our admiration.



## II

## STRANGE INTERLUDE

The complex character of Nina Leeds, the female protagonist of Strange Interlude, presents a quite complicated panorama. Engel's use of the adjectives "wistful, philosophical, [and] neurotic" (201) suggests this complexity. O'Neill's use of thoughts aside, however, which allow us to delve deeply into Nina's mind, successfully disclose what could be the root of Nina's intricate character: she has a turbulent inner life stemming from her obsession with Gordon Shaw, her troubling relationship with her father, and her motivations for her amoral behavior.

Perhaps the most appealing side of Nina's character, and the main concern of this study, is the intensity of her feelings and the greatness of her desire to achieve happiness. In fact, her life could be defined as a series of frustrated attempts to achieve her intensely desired happiness. Nina, as a girl and even as a woman, was always submissive and obedient to her father. However, due to a disillusionment in her life that frustrates her achievement of happiness, she decides to lay all passivity and convention aside and fight for her happiness. In her search, Nina encounters several obstacles--deaths, a biological fate (the family

"curse" on the Evanses), and restrictive Puritanical notions. And to overcome them, she seems forced to depart from what, according to the moral standards prevailing in O'Neill's time, would be considered morally acceptable behavior. Her constant and painful struggle leads her to a philosophical rebellion of sorts, resulting in formulation of her own ideologies: she not only develops her own concept of deity--God the Mother--throughout the play, but she also possesses her own vision of life. Her dialogues with her novelist friend Charles Marsden concerning the falsity of words and therefore of life exemplify her philosophical struggle. Moreover, her dialogues with Mrs. Evans reveal that, from an ethical point of view, rigid conceptions of good and evil should be questioned.

Travis Bogard dismisses Nina's ethical struggles in his book Contour in Time thus:

as Nina's life is revealed, she reaches no point of development at which she must take a stand and in so doing offer herself to judgement. She makes no moral choice by which her character can be evaluated. As a result the only real development in Nina is physical, from youth to age. (305)

Yet Nina Leeds does make moral choices throughout the play, and these moral choices put her in situations that

force her to develop her own conceptions of life, and this in turn makes her develop as a character. The naive, obedient, submissive Nina Leeds of the beginning develops into a manipulative, cruel, calculating, pragmatic, philosophical (as Engel puts it) and wiser Nina Leeds towards the end. The obstacles that she encounters in her search limit her possibilities of achieving happiness. But they also force her into finding new ways to achieve happiness and into making painful, even cruel decisions that will help her attain her goals.

In order to understand the change Nina undergoes as a character and the reason for her acquisition of an increasing destructiveness, we need to comprehend first what Nina wants in life. Her struggle is directed towards obtaining a personal happiness and this drive seeks to channel her desire as a daughter, wife, lover and mother--into a loving relationship. The modesty and unambitious nature of her desire make her impossibility of achieving it profoundly tragic.

The event in Nina's life that first thwarts her happiness and forces her to change is the death of Gordon Shaw, her fiance. Before Gordon's death, Nina's life had been characterized by submissiveness and obedience to her father and conventional mores: "since

I was born I have been in his class, loving attentive, pupil daughter Nina . . . . listening because he is my cultured father" (I 296). Her vision of happiness at this point rested in her idealistic conception of becoming Gordon's wife . Her marriage to Gordon, the embodiment of collegiate success as a student and athlete, would supposedly have provided Nina with a possibility to let out her love potential as a lover and wife and eventually as a mother, but he is killed during World War I. His death, however, does not devastate her so much as her decision not to give herself before his departure--while still unmarried--despite her awareness that he might die in the war. This "conventional" decision of hers will bring about in Nina a tremendous sense of guilt and regret, which will haunt her in some way or another for the rest of the play.

It becomes evident that her father's repressive conservatism and the society's mores strongly influence her decision. As Engel states, "Fulfillment had been inhibited by conceptions of chivalry and morality and by a conscience that was permeated with her father's censoriousness" (212). Nina is torn between acting according to her nature--her instincts--and acting according to the behavior expected from her by society. Her "duties" as a woman and as a daughter restrain her from following her instincts and pressure her to

"please" everyone else but herself. Society's impositions, together with Mr. Leeds' "puritanical upbringing" of Nina work against her natural desire to give herself to Gordon for love. But this is not the only obstacle that her father puts in the way of Nina's achievement of her felicity: he is also jealously possessive of her. And for this reason he decides (in action prior to the events dramatized) to interfere in Gordon's decision to marry Nina, by convincing him that he cannot provide Nina with the kind of future she deserves.

Nina's first failure in her search for happiness is caused by an external force. Nina is faced with the fact that having adopted a behavior reflecting her moral upbringing has not led her to happiness. Moreover, the trusted man who inculcated this morality has selfishly manipulated her life and therefore destroyed her happiness. The event teaches Nina that she had free will to embrace happiness but made a wrong decision by being conventional and obedient to her father. The dream lay within her reach, but she did not reach out because at this point she could not yet depart from her conventional upbringing. Her reaction, then, is disillusionment. However, she acts on it: she rejects her submissive past behavior and decides to leave her father's house:

at that point she ceases to think of herself as the girl who is his daughter, thinking instead only of the need to fulfill herself as the woman who should have been Gordon's wife and the mother of his children. (134)

Nina takes up a struggle, deciding to depart from that "lawful" search for happiness and from the moral principles taught by her father in order to rule her own life.

After Gordon's death, Nina cannot conceive of happiness. Nevertheless, she does undertake to punish herself for not having given herself to Gordon before he went to the war. She sees this punishment as a way to "become herself" and also as a way to give the soldiers some momentary happiness--through sexual gratification--as she had failed to give Gordon happiness. What she perceives as expiation we readers see as her rejection of her father's authority and as her first step in her rebellion against the "life-denying" codes ingrained in society. We also notice in her a lingering sense of necessity to please others--in this case the soldiers; she is not ready to please only herself.

To think that by giving her body to soldiers she will be able to expiate her guilt over the Gordon Shaw incident turns out to be another mistake. As Dr. Ned Darrell, Nina's friend, points out, her giving

"happiness to various fellow war-victims by pretending to love them. . . . has only left her more a prey to a guilty conscience than before" (I 312). She cannot withdraw so easily from the code of morality she was brought up by. Eventually she is gradually able to depart from her upbringing, but at this point it is irrational for her to think that she can. Giving her body without love is still perceived by her, maybe unconsciously, as sinful. Hers, then, is only a frustrated attempt to bring some order into her life, since it just contributes to her being more psychologically wounded than before.

After this failed attempt and, more importantly, after her father dies, Nina develops an original idea concerning life in a conversation with Marsden:

NINA Do I seem queer? It's because I've suddenly seen the lies called words. You know--grief, sorrow, love, father--those sounds our lips make and our hands write. You ought to know what I mean. You work with them. Have you written another novel lately? But, stop to think, you're just the one who couldn't know what I mean. With you the lies have become the only truthful things. And I suppose that's the logical conclusion to the whole evasive mess, isn't

it? Do you understand me, Charlie? Say lie-(She says it drawing it out) L-i-i-e! Now say L-i-i-f-e! You see! Life is just a long drawn out lie with a sniffling sigh at the end! (I 316)

The cynical view that Nina has developed proves once more how much she has changed--from being her father's "obedient pupil" to a woman now aware of a lack of honesty in people's lives. Her father's death has made her meditate on the past. She can now weigh the consequences of her father's lying to her; and even though she can forgive him, she cannot feel either grief or sorrow over his death. The normal reaction of a daughter after her father's death would be to feel pain and sorrow; however, Nina cannot express any feeling for her father's death. If she did, it would be just a lie.

We also wonder whether Nina has recognized her living a life-lie herself, and whether this possible awareness has helped her develop this view. Just as her father had lied to her with respect to Gordon, she had also lied by telling the soldiers words of love and by her trying to convince herself that this was the way to find herself.

Moreover, her lingering resentment towards her father, together with her lacking the tenderness and comprehension of a mother who could have understood



better her feelings for Gordon, contributes to her development of her own concept of deity--God the Mother:

NINA The mistake began when God was created in a male image. Of course, women would see Him that way, but men should have been gentlemen enough, remembering their mothers, to make God a woman! But the God of Gods--the Boss--has always been a man. That makes life so perverted and death so unnatural. We should have imagined life as created in the birth-pain of God the Mother. Then we would understand why we, Her children, have inherited pain, for we would know that our life's rhythm beats from Her great heart, torn with the agony of love and birth . . . . Now wouldn't that be more logical and satisfying than having God a male whose chest thunders with egotism and is too hard for tired heads and thoroughly comfortless?  
(I 318)

When Nina speaks of God the Father, her words are full of bitterness. She presents him as a "a possessive deity . . . one who is essentially indifferent" (Bogard 312) in order to justify the existence of so many obstacles to her achievement of happiness. She can accept the concept of God the Mother, which enables her

to understand why she suffers this pain and cruelty and therefore to accept it. As Carpenter says, it "will give meaning to her life" (122).

In spite of her past failures Nina does not give up her pursuit of happiness, although she continues her struggle in a somewhat conventional way, since it is characterized by her willingness to please men. Her decision to marry Evans--a good-hearted man who admired Gordon and completely loves Nina--is strongly influenced by Darrell and Marsden. Concerned about Nina's welfare, Darrell and Marsden try to decide what is better for Nina at this point. Although their motivations are well-intentioned, the conversation has some tinges of a cold, manipulative plotting of her life, which, in turn, reveals these men's inner conviction that they truly know what is better for Nina. She follows their advice and acts on the premise that by helping Evans find a career she will at the same time find a purpose in her life. She fits the thought of Evans' giving her a baby into her somewhat narrow vision of happiness. It is the conventional sort of fulfillment that she would have had with Gordon, except that it involves marrying a man that she does not love. She settles herself as a Mother and Wife, denying her original ideal of a great love.

Nina's decision, however, makes us skeptical. Her vision of happiness at this point is characterized by

her over-reliance on reasoning, which brings us to a very interesting observation by Doris Alexander in her article "Strange Interlude and Schopenhauer." She states that for Freud and Schopenhauer, who both influenced O'Neill, "life is impelled by forces outside man's reason" and that "for Schopenhauer the impelling force behind human action is the will" (225). At this point Nina's will to happiness is so intense, and her willingness to fight for it so strong, that she cannot doubt that this baby will bring her joy. On the other hand, we fear that her decision to give up the hope of a great love and marry a man whom she does not love will constitute another failure on her part.

Later, during her pregnancy, she undergoes physical and emotional changes. Her physical appearance differs completely from before: "her whole personality seems changed, her face has a contented expression, there is an inner calm about her" (I 323). The joy of anticipating the baby's birth allows her to regain the capacity to feel: "I do feel happy when I think . . . and I love Sam now . . ." She has escaped the "numbness" which she experienced after Gordon's death and in her encounters with the soldiers and when her father died; she now is able to feel loving emotions for Sam and the baby.

However, once again something happens to cancel her

joy. Ironically, it is not--as perhaps foreshadowed--the fact that she married without being in love that takes away her felicity. This time O'Neill incorporates an external element in the play--a kind of fate in the form of a biological curse on the Evans family--that acts as a barrier to Nina's happiness and adds to her life a new sense of fatality. O'Neill seems to put Nina in torturing situations, the obstacles becoming each time bigger and bigger and more unexpected, each one further limiting Nina's alternatives. He appears to be cornering her in order to show to what extent she will go to achieve her dream.

The biological curse, which has long affected the Evanses, is a hereditary taint of insanity. Mrs. Evans relates to Nina the magnitude of Sam's father's suffering: his constant worrying about going insane one day and about his son's living under the same curse seems to have brought about his own early insanity. The news leaves Nina in a deeply distressing situation. She can decide to have the baby knowing that it might become insane some day, or she may choose to abort and follow Mrs. Evans' advice to provide Sam with all her love so that he has a chance of not becoming insane.

Carpenter regards this motif of insanity as "the weakest part of the play" (123). Although this episode can be regarded as an arbitrary inclusion, it emerges as

extremely important in understanding a different side to Nina's character. The complication of threatened insanity brings to the surface a positive characteristic of Nina. For the only time in the play we see Nina rationally putting another person's happiness before hers. Although Sam's mother implores her to think about Sam first and therefore please both Mrs. Evans and Sam, Nina transcends the mere fact of her trying to please others. Earlier we have witnessed Nina pleasing others but not so willingly, when, as a daughter and as a woman, she yielded to the pressures of society or when she acted on self-interest, seeing the possibility of gaining something. Nina's abortion of the baby, unlike her previous actions, is a conscious and noble act of hers, since it neither results from her seeking her own self-interest nor from her fear to go against society's moral codes. She is in total liberty to reject Mrs. Evans' pleadings; nevertheless, she opts to abort her longed-for child and give up her happiness for someone else. This provides us with insight into her true capacity at certain moments to give unselfish love when her decision actually hurts her. This capacity, however, is slowly killed by her past deceptions and frustrations.

The family curse on the Evanses also symbolizes a modern sort of malign fate operating in the play. Just

when the complication of insanity appears, Nina was starting to enjoy her happiness; even as earlier, when she thought she was going to marry Gordon Shaw, he was killed in the war. O'Neill creates a sense of inevitability surrounding Nina's life, since every time she achieves a moment of happiness, an obstacle arises and deprives her of this chance.

Yet another complication arises when Nina adopts Mrs. Evans' suggestion that she find another person to father a second child. Mrs. Evans, herself a victim of the curse through having witnessed her husband's torture and insanity and through having to send Sam away, has developed her own philosophy concerning life: "Being happy, that's the nearest we can ever come to knowing what's good! Being happy, that's good! The rest is just talk" (III 336). This advice accords perfectly well with Nina's views and experiences; she eagerly adopts Mrs. Evans' philosophy that happiness, not how one achieves it, is all that matters. These ethical reflections make us question whether we can define the concepts of good and evil so confidently. O'Neill seems to invite us to substitute pragmatism for accepted concepts of good and evil: What is the purpose of living a moral life if it will not lead to happiness? On the other hand, Is it so terribly wrong to depart from conventional mores in order to fulfill oneself by

pursuing and perhaps attaining happiness?

Having experienced the happiness that pregnancy brings, Nina has identified happiness with her ability to become a mother; yet she cannot have Sam's child or divorce him, since in doing either of the two she would be putting her child's or Sam's sanity at risk. Therefore, she seems to have only one alternative: to commit adultery for purposes of procreation. Once again this alternative is morally questionable: "Please, Doctor, you must give her strength to do this right thing that seems to her so right and then so wrong!" (I 355). Nina doubts that she can reconcile these two opposites: it seems wrong to her because it is adultery and socially unacceptable; however, it seems right because it will bring her and Sam happiness and that is all that matters now.

Committing adultery with Darrell enables Nina to regain her happiness, because she is able to conceive a son, but it also traps her in an inescapable relationship with Darrell--they fall in love. The nature of her love for him, though, is not absolutely clear. When she was expecting Sam's baby, Nina also stated her love for Evans, which rapidly disappeared after the abortion took place. It seems, then, that her joy of motherhood is so immense that it carries with it, as a reflection, the falling in love with the

progenitor.

Nina's maternal state brings her once again peace and joy. Precisely this sense of completeness gained through maternity makes her further develop her concept of deity--God the Mother:

NINA There . . . again . . . his child!  
 . . . my child moving in my life . . . my  
 life moving in my child . . . the world is  
 whole and perfect . . . all things are each  
 other's. . . life is . . . and this is  
 beyond reason . . . questions die in the  
 silence of this peace . . . . I feel life  
 move in me, suspended in me . . . no whys  
 matter . . . there is no why . . . I am a  
 mother . . . God is a Mother . . . (I 358)

After all her disillusionments, Nina is able to say that the world is perfect. It seems as if her maternal state has erased all her suffering. And this perfection leads her to reaffirm to herself that God is a mother.

In spite of the fact that her baby has brought happiness, Nina still envisions an even higher degree of happiness. Just as she once imagined a family with Gordon and then with Sam, Nina now envisions sharing a life with Darrell and their baby. All the pain she has experienced in order to enjoy her maternity makes it impossible for her to be satisfied with having Darrell



as just a lover and not be able to start a family with him. Nina is now trapped, torn between being a wife and a mistress. She is once again faced with a difficult decision in her life, tempted to leave Sam but also unable to break the promise she has made to Mrs. Evans and to herself. Nina remembers Mrs. Evans telling her, "being happy is the nearest we can come to knowing what good is" (368). And therefore she tells Darrell,

NINA I'm going to be happy! I've lost everything in my life because I didn't have the courage to take it--and I've hurt everyone around me. There's no use in trying to think of others. One human being cannot think of another. It's impossible . . . But this time I'm going to think of my own happiness--and that means you--and our child! . . . . I've given Sam enough of my life! and it hasn't made him happy, not the least bit! So what's the good? And how can we really know that his thinking our child was his would do him any good? We can't! It's all guesswork. The only thing sure is that we love each other. (I 368)

Nina's frustration and impotence are obvious. The decisions she has made in her life she regards as cowardly. She blames herself for not achieving

happiness: she feels that she has not had enough determination or bravery to act. She feels that she has not sufficiently defied the existing conventionalisms and that by trying to please others and herself at the same time, she has only hurt the ones that she loves. Nina thinks she is faced with only one possibility--to leave all moral scruples behind and think only about her own happiness. In Nina's eyes, this final liberation from all conventional behavior--to leave her husband and run away with her lover and their baby--will bring her happiness at last.

Her dream, however, does not last long. In this case it is thwarted by another kind of fatality affecting Nina's life--other people's actions. Darrell does not consent to her leaving Sam and therefore tells Sam that Nina is expecting a baby. Darrell suffers from a sense of guilt--he can no longer continue betraying his friend Sam--that Nina does not experience at this point, and his sense of guilt obstructs her attainment of happiness once again. When faced with Sam and the truth that Darrell has revealed to him, Nina thinks, "I'll make Sam hate him! . . . I'll make Sam kill him! . . . I'll promise to love Sam if he kills him!" (I 372). Nina's crudity results from her deep sense of helplessness at this point: her dreams of happiness are hindered by the very same person she thought would give

her happiness at last.

Her adulterous behavior with Darrell, though, does not end with this incident; it continues for years after Gordon Evans is born. To maintain this relationship is clearly Nina's choice, and a mistake on her part. However, she is sustained by the happiness she receives from Darrell. One year after the baby is born, we see that Nina has achieved a complete sense of fulfilment. Her father's betrayal and Gordon's death prevented Nina, at first, from experiencing an integration of all the ways a woman can presumably achieve happiness (as daughter, wife, mistress, and mother). So now Nina is a wife to Sam, a lover to Darrell, a mother to little Gordon, and "daughter" to Marsden, who has become her father substitute. In order to attain a total fulfilment as a woman, Nina needs to maintain relationships with four different men. Carpenter attributes her need to seek self-realization through several men rather than one to the complication of insanity (123). However, it was first her father's betrayal and Gordon's death, then the family curse on the Evanses, and finally Darrell's sense of guilt, that forced her into this arrangement, about which she muses:

Nina (more and more strangely triumphant)

My three men! . . . I feel their desires  
converge in me! . . . to form one complete

beautiful male desire which I absorb . . .  
 and am whole . . . they dissolve in me,  
 their life is my life . . . . husband!  
 . . . lover! . . . father! . . . and the  
 fourth man! . . . little man! . . . little  
 Gordon! . . . he is mine too! . . . that  
 makes it perfect! . . .

(With an extravagant suppressed exultance)

Why, I should be the proudest woman on  
 earth! I should be the happiest woman in the  
 world! (II 395)

To Nina, Sam now seems the "perfect" husband, Darrell  
 the "perfect" lover, Charlie the "perfect father" and  
 little Gordon the "perfect" son.

At this point Nina seems to be at the peak of her  
 happiness; however, we can guess it will not last. Once  
 again fatality in the form of other people prevents her  
 from enjoying her ideal situation. Gordon Evans, the  
 child of Nina's adulterous relationship with Darrell,  
 suffers from an ironically twisted Oedipus Complex,  
 which constitutes the last element of fatality that Nina  
 encounters. The characteristic Oedipal condition of  
 feeling love toward the mother and hate toward the  
 father is masterfully handled by O'Neill. In this case  
 the father figure is split between Darrell--Gordon's  
 real father--and Sam. Gordon only feels hatred toward

his biological father, without knowing of Darrell's actual paternity. Gordon's love for his mother is of course a source of happiness to Nina; nevertheless, Gordon's hatred of Darrell and suspicion of his relationship with Nina slowly separate the boy from Nina's love and attract him more towards Sam. As Darrell explains to Nina, "Children have sure intuitions. He feels cheated of your love--by me. So he's concentrating his affections on Sam whose love he knows is secure, and withdrawing from you" (II 402). Nina cannot allow this to happen because it will mean that she loses what she most loves in life. Her possession of her four men, which has made her completely happy until now, will be completely destroyed if she loses Gordon. Losing Gordon's love will disturb the balance she has achieved in her life.

With the passing of the years Nina's happiness becomes more and more dependent on Gordon, while Gordon becomes even more attached to his father. Consequently, Nina's jealousy of Sam increases, leading her at one point to wish that Evans might die--which she regrets immediately after. This wish results from her unconscious desire to remove one of the obstacles that prevent her from enjoying happiness.

O'Neill incorporates another twist in his handling of the Oedipus Complex: Gordon's falling in love with

Madeline, which could be defined as a projection of his love for his mother, since she is physically similar to Nina. Madeline constitutes the insurmountable obstacle that will deprive Nina of complete and final happiness. Gordon is no longer Nina's, but "Madeline's Gordon! Sam's . . . Gordon! . . ." (II 425)

Agonizing over her distressing situation, Nina decides to "reclaim" Gordon by plotting against Sam. Her plotting consists in telling Sam of Darrell's paternity, and Gordon too, if Sam does not break Gordon's engagement. She is now willing to expose what her manipulations have hidden for years, her deceit and her adultery. The one act of compassion that she has exercised in her life--aborting her baby for Sam's happiness--has resulted in an ironic reversal, because Sam has stolen her only love and happiness, Gordon. She rationalizes the injustice of this whole situation: "the thanks I get for saving Sam at the sacrifice of my own happiness! . . ." (II 425)

Realizing that Darrell will be reluctant to cooperate in her plan to manipulate Sam because he will be afraid of Sam's becoming insane, Nina makes a desperate attempt to convince Darrell that the curse was all a lie, not counting on the fact that Darrell had certified years before that it was not. Discovering that her attempt has failed, she turns to her

sensuality, which has always served as a tool for persuading Darrell to do what she wants. But, when Darrell is about to yield, their conversation is interrupted by Marsden, and Darrell comes back to his senses. Nina's striving in these last instances emerges as extremely calculating and selfishly manipulative.

Nina's last attempt to keep Gordon by her side, which constitutes a decision of hers but not an accomplishment, involves the telling of a lie. She decides to tell Madeline about the curse and make her think that she cannot marry Gordon. Nina's last resource is atrocious, since it implies depriving not only Madeline but also Gordon of happiness. It becomes more cruel if we think how Nina suffered when she learned about the curse, and now we recognize her willingness to make others go through that same pain. In spite of her efforts, the plan does not succeed, since Darrell interrupts her. This last failure to achieve happiness will finally bring about her awareness that she cannot shape her own destiny. In her own words she "can no longer imagine happiness" (II 447).

At the age of forty-four, Nina can no longer envision love or desire. Moreover, she can no longer envision a reason to continue fighting. She adopts an attitude of resignation and just wants to experience peace alongside Charlie, now evidently a sexless and

harmless father figure. The loss of Gordon brings about Nina's awareness of her failure and could be regarded as largely responsible for Nina's adopting an attitude of resignation at the end, although there is another possible explanation for her behavior.

Alexander attributes Nina's attitude of renunciation to her experiencing menopause, assuming that Nina "identifies life and the struggle for happiness with the sex life of the individual" (221). Along these same lines, the title of the play seems to give new insight concerning Nina's motivations for giving up her struggle:

the distressing experiences which befall her between adolescence and menopause are part of a dream-like strange interlude whose intrusion temporarily disturbs the reality which once again restores her peace of mind and reintegrates her personality. (Engel 202)

Like Alexander, Engel links Nina's undertaking and her resignation of it to her age. We have witnessed Nina's struggle over twenty-five years and we have witnessed how many obstacles appeared on her way and never saw her giving up; on the contrary, she always resourcefully found ways to achieve what she wanted. So we must ask why can she no longer sustain her struggle and envision a possible happiness. O'Neill's use of menopause could



be regarded as his inclusion of another limitation for Nina, since Nina cannot produce another child to replace Gordon and therefore renew her struggle and begin the cycle again.

Without disregarding the legitimacy of Alexander's and Engel's observations, I would like to offer another possible explanation for her adopting an attitude of resignation at the end. Nina's words to Marsden, when her son leaves her, reveal that Nina's resignation results from her understanding of her past failures and not just from her biological state:

NINA My having a son was a failure, wasn't it? He couldn't give me happiness. Sons are always their fathers. They pass through the mother to become their father again. The sons of the Father have all been failures! Failures they died for us, they flew away to other lives, they could not stay with us, they could not give us happiness! (II 449)

Nina's inability to keep Gordon by her side makes her acknowledge the power of God the Father and also brings about her realization that her strivings have been fruitless. She also longs for her lost innocence. When she thinks about her future with Charlie, she says,

Charlie will come in every day to visit . . .

he'll comfort and amuse me . . . we can talk together of the old days . . . when I was a girl . . . when I was happy . . . before I fell in love with Gordon Shaw and all this tangled mess of love and hate and birth began.

(II 442)

Unlike Engel, who maintains that after the "Strange Interlude" is over Nina is able to go back to the mental state she was in before the struggle began, I contend that the Nina we see at the end is not the same as the Nina we see at the beginning. The mere fact that Nina longs for her innocent days reveals that she has thought over all that she has gone through and understands that she has undergone a personal change. Nina is much wiser at the end. Her sufferings impelled her into developing her own original ideas concerning life, communication, God, and what can be regarded as good or as evil and brought about her awareness that the only time when she experienced happiness was before her struggle even began. Only then could she enjoy an ideal state.

Finally, we could see her achievement of peace with Charlie as a different kind of happiness for Nina, not necessarily one that fulfills her sexual drive and her passion but one that brings her stability, security, and peace.

Frederick Carpenter, in his book Eugene O'Neill, states that the characters of Strange Interlude are men of good will who try to do what is right, but who find that the world of experience does not correspond to the moral idealism in which they have been educated. They compromise, they commit venial sins, but they all feel (in the words of Nina to Marsden) that "I haven't been such an awfully wicked girl, have I father?" (121).

Carpenter's observation regarding the male characters in the play could well include Nina; indeed, it seems especially accurate for her. What Nina wants most in life is to be able to achieve happiness. While she was still an obedient and submissive daughter, her vision of happiness consisted of marrying Gordon Shaw, within the realm of conventionalism and morality. Nevertheless, that she does not give herself to Gordon even knowing that he may die in the war--that she does not want to go against the existing codes of morality--brings about all her frustration. Nina tries, at first, to achieve happiness by adopting a morally acceptable behavior. This "lawful" failure of hers brings about, later on, the audience's understanding of her future actions and their pity for her instead of condemnation.

As the plot develops we witness Nina encountering

more and more obstacles--sometimes they seem unfair, like Gordon's death and the biological curse. Nina has to violate the existing conventions in order to achieve happiness: she is required to become destructive and to depart from ethical behavior. However, because she does not deserve life being so hard on her, we understand the reasons for her acting destructively.

Although we can condemn Nina because of her amoral choices in life--she gives herself to the soldiers, marries without love, commits adultery, and tries to prevent her son's wedding--we do have to admire her power of striving. Her vision of happiness is always there; it is part of her. She possesses an enormous strength of character; moreover, she is driven by her inner conviction that she does possess the right to be happy.

One might argue that it is preferable to live unhappily than go to the extremes that Nina went to, but based on simple human needs, Nina's struggle can be judged more open-mindedly. As Bogard states, "O'Neill casts over her a veil of sympathy which removes the sharpness and the sting" (305). If we concentrate on the reasons that motivate her to make decisions and sometimes commit morally questionable actions, dig into the source of her motivations, and weigh the magnitude of the obstacles that she encounters and that finally

force her into adopting an attitude of renunciation, we will not fail to sympathize with her. On the contrary we will learn to appreciate her strength, her legitimate right to happiness, and understand the reasons for her choosing to find conformity or another type of happiness in the peace that her relationship with Charlie finally gives her.

## IV

## MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA

Criticism of Mourning Becomes Electra tends to concentrate on the Puritan and Freudian elements present in the play and the force that the dead Mannons exercise over those living. In this respect, we can find abundant criticism regarding Christine and Lavinia Mannon. Much has been written about Lavinia's Electra complex; about Christine's anti-Puritanism that differentiates her from the rest of the Mannons and from Lavinia at first; about Christine's motivations for her adultery; and about Lavinia's heroic infliction of self-punishment at the end of the play.

While I agree with most of the criticism regarding these two female characters, this study will focus on tracing the similarities which O'Neill has portrayed in the lives of Christine and Lavinia and on how these similarities help exemplify the existence of O'Neill's private myth concerning his female characters. Despite the fact that the persons and events that motivate Christine and Lavinia to action differ, their lives take almost the same tragic course.

Christine and Lavinia Mannon occupy preponderant roles in Mourning Becomes Electra; they act as agents of the action. Their passions and desires unchain the

events in the play and ultimately rule its action. In spite of Christine and Lavinia's differences, which give their relationship an antagonistic nature, both of them, deep inside, understand life in similar terms: they are both aware of their need and right to become happy. Moreover, Christine's and Lavinia's lives unfold similarly. Early in their lives, they both were innocent, trusting and naive. At this point they suffer a disillusionment that shatters their happiness. However, they are able to regain a vision of happiness and decide to undertake a struggle to attain that happiness. During their struggle they encounter insurmountable obstacles, which force them to give up their struggle and end their lives in an attitude of renunciation. The present study involves an examination of Christine's striving first and then proceeds with Lavinia's, since Lavinia's situation is certainly shaped in some way or another by the events taking place in Christine's life.

On several occasions Christine recalls her past life--her life prior to the beginning of the play. From her recollections we learn what she was like before marrying Ezra. In describing to Hazel, later on in the play, her earlier years, she reveals her original state of innocence as well as her longing for it:

Christine If I could only have stayed as I was then! Why can't all of us remain innocent and loving and trusting? But God won't leave us alone. He twists and wrings and tortures our lives with others' lives until we poison each other to death! (II 520).

Christine's remark discloses an anguished awareness of her loss of innocence.

But why does Christine's life take this turn? What twists in her life finally lead her to become calculating and cruel and undertake extreme actions? As Christine points out in her speech, the intertwining of lives--each individual's pursuit of happiness which hampers the other person's happiness--acquires special importance in understanding Christine's change. This intertwining of lives forces a change in her. Her relationship to her husband first taints her innocence and consequently changes the whole course of her existence.

In her innocent years, Christine's dream of happiness consisted in marrying Ezra Mannon; however, once she achieves her dream, she discovers that was only an illusion, since her marriage does not bring happiness to her life. Christine's love for Ezra Mannon was destroyed by him on their wedding night, by his incapacity to demonstrate his love for Christine, and



replaced by disgust. In spite of the love that once existed between them, their marriage failed because Christine's nature differed from that of the Mannons. As Louisa, wife to Amos Ames, the town's carpenter, says, "She ain't the Mannon kind" (I 461). She is sensual, and O'Neill projects this sensuality in the very first stage directions concerning Christine:

She has a fine, voluptuous figure and she moves with a flowing animal grace. She wears a green satin dress, smartly cut and expensive, which brings out the peculiar color of her thick curly hair. (I 462)

Christine is not afraid of showing her beauty; on the contrary, she wants to accentuate it by wearing audacious dresses. This sensuality is natural to her being; furthermore, her not being scared to appear sensual to others demonstrates her disposition towards giving and receiving love, which differentiates her so much from the Mannons. Tornqvist, referring to a scene in Act III that shows a contrast between Christine and her daughter Lavinia Mannon, states, "At no other point in the trilogy is the contrast between life-affirming paganism and life-denying Puritanism so clearly visualized"(133). This life-denying Puritanism in Lavinia is present in Ezra and Orin as well. Ezra, Lavinia, and Orin are opposites to Christine: they are

incapable of expressing their feelings. Christine's foreign blood makes her "uninhibited rather than repressed in the Puritan way of the Mannons" (Chabrowe 149) and provides us with an explanation for the irreconcilable differences that exist between her and the Mannons and destroy her love for Ezra.

Thomas E. Porter states that "For the Mannons, dirt and animality and abomination spell out the implications of sex" (37). Nevertheless, "the obverse of the coin is depicted also; their revulsion is attended by fascination" (36). Ezra is a clear illustration of this statement. He is attracted by Christine's sensuality, but he lacks the capacity of making Christine feel loved. As he later recognizes, right after he comes back from the war,

Something queer in me keeps me mum about  
the things I'd like most to say--keeps me  
hiding the things I'd like to show. Something  
keeps me sitting numb in my own heart--like a  
statue of a dead man in a town square. (I 502)

This "something" that Ezra refers to is the Mannons' Puritanism, which has been ingrained in the family for generations and is even embodied in the house where they live, built after David's affair with the Canuck girl, Marie Brantome. As Lavinia explains, for Lavinia's grandfather destroying the old house and building this

new one meant never having to "live where his brother had disgraced the family" (I 471). Having been brought up in this repressive Puritan atmosphere, Ezra is incapable of showing loving emotions. Ezra's inability to express his love for Christine, then, has as a consequence Christine's inability to give herself to him:

You've used, you've given me children, but  
I've never once been yours! I never could be!  
And whose fault is it? I loved you when I  
married you! I wanted to give myself! But  
you made me so I couldn't give! You filled me  
with disgust! (I 507)

In these lines we find the root of Christine's tragic condition. Giving herself to her husband constitutes a natural impulse in Christine; however, it is not so for Ezra. His incapacity to return Christine's love, then, shatters Christine's dream of a happy marriage. Christine, however, does not resign herself to continue living unhappily; she decides to fight for her happiness. She is faced with a choice:

she sees the oppressive nature of her  
Christian responsibilities; she sees her life  
slipping by--and she wants her freedom . . .  
she feels she has a "right to love." (Young  
16)

Because she feels disgust and hatred for her husband, and because deep inside a force impels her to strive for her happiness, she longs to obtain her freedom and happiness by finding someone who matches her sensuality and can demonstrate and also receive love. That someone will be Adam Brant. As Engel states, Adam is "gentle and tender, everything that Ezra has never been to Christine and what she has longed for all these years . . . --a lover" (248). Christine ends up engaged in an adulterous relationship with Adam Brant, yet she does not for a moment doubt whether this relationship will be successful or not. She leaves all conventional views aside and never reflects on whether her decision to become Adam's lover is morally acceptable or not. Her vision of happiness at this point is so compelling, and her desire of freedom so powerful, that she regards the question of morality irrelevant.

The son of David Mannon, Adam seems to have inherited his nature from the Canuck girl, Marie Brantome, his mother. Like his mother, he is not ruled by the Puritanical notions that define the Mannons' lives. He matches Christine's sensuality and passion. Moreover, he wishes to bury the Mannon element of his nature, to go against all that they represent, because he is despised by them. His parents conceived him without being married, so in the eyes of the Mannons, he

is just a child born of sinful lust. Nevertheless, he is Christine's only possibility of achieving freedom and happiness.

For the second time in her life Christine encounters an obstacle in her struggle. Ironically, the man who has brought her happiness until now also brings the seeds of its destruction. Adam acts on his own deep-seated Oedipal feelings in seeking revenge on the Mannons. His Oedipus Complex has a dual--good and evil--impact on Christine, bringing her happiness but eventually dooming her. It constitutes another of what Christine calls God's twistings in her life. Adam wants to punish Ezra for not helping his mother when she sought his financial help and thus contributing to her death. Adam is also irresistibly attracted to Christine, who strikingly resembles his dead mother; therefore, he is once again Oedipally motivated. Ezra's return from the war and the thought of losing Adam's love are so unbearable that Christine plots Ezra's murder in order to be free to continue her affair with Adam.

In trying to persuade Adam to take part in Ezra's murder, Christine reveals that her decision to poison was not sought but oddly came to her. She was mysteriously driven to look into a medical book in her father's library : "I saw it there one day a few weeks

ago--it was as if some fate in me forced me to see it" (I 489). Christine's words seem to convey that her plotting of Ezra's death was almost inevitable, since what she read in that book put in her mind the idea of his murder. Moreover, there are not only identifiable forces ruling her life, but also unknown ones, and her control of her destiny, at times, is minimal.

In her further attempts to secure Adam's help, Christine reveals the degree of calculation she has acquired. In trying to convince Adam to take part in Ezra's murder, she tells Adam that Ezra will take away his ship if he does not help her. To overcome his objection that to poison Ezra is cowardly and that they should give him a chance to fight, she replies, "Did he give your mother her chance?" (I 490). Finally she tells Adam that if they do not kill him, Ezra will be back with her, "back to my bed" (I 490). In short, she convinces Adam by bringing up those issues that are most important in his life: his ship, his mother, and Christine. Christine's strategy here arises from her realization that if she wants to achieve happiness, she cannot concern herself with morality or ethics.

Christine's efforts bring about another kind of fatality. During the scene in which Christine administers the poison to Ezra, Lavinia comes into the bedroom just in time to hear Ezra accuse Christine of

murdering him. From this point on, Lavinia will take a prominent role in the play, since the double dimension of her Electra Complex will work against Christine's pursuit of happiness. Lavinia has not only experienced an abnormal love for her father but has also strongly disliked her mother since very young. Lavinia's hatred of her mother results from seeing Christine as her rival for her father's affections: Lavinia's incestuous love for her father was threatened by Ezra's love of Christine and by his merely paternal feelings toward their daughter. Moreover, Lavinia has condemned Christine's adulterous relationship to Adam Brant, not only because Lavinia professes a secret love for Adam, who curiously enough has an enormous physical resemblance to her father, but also because her Puritanism sees the relationship as sinful. It seems impossible for Christine to achieve what she wants, since Lavinia's awareness of her killing her father will lead her to seek revenge in the name of all the love she feels for her father. Christine, who has always been aware of Lavinia's hatred towards her, finds herself now haunted by the fear that Lavinia will plot something against her. Lavinia's love for her father, together with her jealousy of her mother's adulterous relationship to Adam, leads her to plot Brant's murder and to lure her brother Orin into the plot in an attempt

to seek justice in the Mannons' name.

Ironically, Christine's defeat results partly from Orin's Oedipal attachment to her. Before he went to the war, Orin was Christine's only love. Christine even admits that she would have never taken up Adam if Orin had stayed with her (I 482). Her resentment and hatred of Ezra were accentuated by her feelings that he had "stolen" Orin from her when he took him to the war with him. After returning from the war, Orin announces his desire to spend the rest of his life with his mother, as well as his rejection of any other love except Christine's. Moreover, Orin feels jealousy of Adam, which renders him incapable of accepting their affair: "I could forgive anything--anything!--in my mother--except that other--that about Brant!" (II 533). When he overhears his mother declaring her love to Brant and expressing interest in traveling with Brant to the Islands that he had previously invited her to, he becomes enraged: "And my island I told her about--which was she and I--she wants to go there--with him!" (II 555). Orin cannot stand the idea that Christine will travel with another man to his dream islands--the islands which symbolize an escape from the restrictions that thwart the characters' natural inclinations to love freely, without being condemned. These Islands symbolize an Edenic paradise. After learning about his



mother's affair, Orin's intense jealousy leads him to kill Brant, Christine's only possibility for achieving happiness.

Realizing that her manipulation of her lover, Adam, and even of her own children throughout her struggle for happiness has failed, Christine commits suicide. This final choice constitutes renunciation of her struggle. Now at least she will no longer be subject to the forces that have obstructed her felicity, and perhaps the peace that death brings her will finally bring about her achievement of happiness.

Although Christine's extreme behavior may be regarded as amoral, we cannot fail to sympathize with her legitimate desire to achieve happiness. As Engel points out, "we appreciate her wish to remove obstacles that frustrate her desire for love and life" (Engel 255). Having lost her innocence, Christine becomes entirely dedicated to fight for her happiness, no matter how extreme her actions have to be, how unconventional, and how morally unacceptable. O'Neill's portrayal of Christine leads us to feel the intensity of her frustrations, an intensity that gives her larger-than-life dimensions.

Lavinia Mannon's life also traces the pattern of a woman who was once pure and innocent and who, after

suffering a disillusionment that shattered her happiness, undertakes a struggle that in her eyes will lead her to achieve that happiness. Unlike Christine, however, the obstacles that frustrate Lavinia's attempts at happiness become more complex and numerous. She suffers from an Electra Complex. Also she has inherited not only the Mannon name but what the Mannon name symbolizes: a Puritanism, which sees love as sinful and prevents them from expressing their feelings, their pride, their sense of guilt, their cruelty, and their lack of compassion. She feels the power of the Mannon dead who act as haunting ghosts in her life, thwarting her attempts at happiness by hindering a full break from the past.

Lavinia's Electra Complex is essentially tied to her loss of innocence, unintentionally destroyed by her own mother's attitude towards her. In childhood Lavinia was rejected by Christine because of her hatred of Ezra at the moment of Lavinia's conception. As an adult Lavinia acknowledges that she "was born out of [Christine's] disgust" (I 481). As a consequence of this rejection she in turn rejected her mother and sought her father's love, which consequently became her only parental love and the source of all her happiness: she wanted to share a life with her father and take care

of him. Her closeness to her father became also one of the reasons why Lavinia acquired more characteristics of her father--a Mannon--than of Christine.

However, with the appearance of Adam Brant--her distant cousin who is physically very similar to Ezra--Lavinia begins to transfer her love from Ezra to the younger man. At this point she does not know that her hopes to achieve happiness with either man will prove impossible, because of the intertwining of human lives, referred to by Christine (above), which becomes an element of fatality in Lavinia's life. In fact Christine's pursuit of her own happiness hinders Lavinia's achievement of her fulfilment. Christine emerges as her rival in her two loves, depriving her of both Ezra and Adam. Therefore, Lavinia's hatred of her becomes intense. When Lavinia loses her father and learns that her mother killed him, she is impelled to act against her. At this point Lavinia makes a choice--to leave any moral scruples behind, shape her own destiny and seek Justice in the Mannons' name. Also at this point, the Mannons' background begins to act in her: she rationalizes her desire for revenge as a desire to achieve Justice for the Mannons and therefore decides to punish Christine. Like her mother before her, Lavinia is forced to depart from a morally acceptable behavior by circumstances and act against someone--this

time her mother, who has unintentionally hurt her even as a child.

Lavinia's Puritanical background condemns Christine's adulterous situation with Adam. Moreover, before Christine's murder of Ezra, it impeded Lavinia's understanding of Christine's love for Adam--it blinded her. Thus her Puritanism, then, acts as an obstacle in her relationship with her mother. When Christine appeals for Lavinia's understanding, asking Lavinia to forget her filial relationship for a while and try to understand her as a woman, Lavinia does not respond to her. She cannot understand because she has, ingrained in her, the Mannon inability to understand a person's giving herself for love, yet subconsciously she wants to give herself. Lavinia only conceives, at this point in her life, the necessity to avenge her father's murder--this is her reason for living.

The Mannons' lack of compassion and their cruelty, embodied in Lavinia, are demonstrated in her plotting of revenge, done in the name of her duty towards the Mannons. She decides to seek Orin's help. However, she is faced with Orin's disbelief about Christine's adultery, and she is forced to make him "acknowledge his mother's guilt, and then, finding that that alone is not enough to move him to vengeance, plays upon his instant jealousy of Brant" (Skinner 220). Skinner's observation

addresses Lavinia's willingness to manipulate her own brother and demonstrates how calculating her actions have become. Knowing that Orin has an abnormal attachment to his mother and that he will not act against her, Lavinia convinces him to kill Adam, which for Christine would mean the killing of her happiness, despite Lavinia's awareness that she is giving up her chance of gaining Adam's love.

Lavinia makes her choice. The loss of her father has left her with only one goal in her life, to avenge his murder. It does not matter what she has to do, or what social and ethical norms she has to violate in order to achieve that goal. Lavinia experiences a growing cruelty, and as her mother did, she becomes calculating. We also witness that Lavinia's choices become each time more extreme. When she plots the murder of Adam, for example, she does not think about anyone's feelings, not even her own. She deprives her mother of her happiness, and she does not think about Orin's sanity. Moreover, she does not think about her own feelings, since she is plotting the murder of the man that she truly loved. In her desire to avenge her father's murder, she has blocked out all her other feelings, even to the point of sacrificing the object of her love. It is as if, together with the force that the dead Mannons exercise in her life, she is subject to an

unknown force that makes her unable to see things clearly.

Ironically after Adam's murder and Christine's suicide, Lavinia turns into a semblance of her hated mother. When she returns from the Islands, where she went with Orin after Adam's murder, we notice that she has experienced a big change in her appearance:

The feminine features of the environment bring out the feminine in Lavinia; she blossoms out into a replication of Christine. For the nonce, she loses her Puritan cast of mind, her New England inhibitions, because of the experience. As symbol, the Islands represent release from Puritan guilt, the hope of an escape to love and freedom. (Porter 48)

Lavinia now seems to possess the same sensuality that her mother had. In the Islands she observed the natives giving themselves for love without any restraints and learned from them to free herself from her repressed feelings and Puritanical notions about sex. As Chabrowe states, in the Islands there is no "consciousness of sin, only innocence and this world" (160). After her trip Lavinia has decided to break with the past, and this means freeing herself from the Mannons. She liberates herself from the dead, feeling free to experience love with Peter and claim her right to be

happy. Happiness for her now means not just sharing a life with Peter, but giving herself to someone, being able to feel love:

Lavinia (suddenly filled with grateful love for him, lets herself go and throws her arms around him) Oh, Peter, hold me close to you! Love is all beautiful! I never used to know that! I was a fool! (She kisses him passionately. He returns it, aroused and at the same time a little shocked by her boldness. She goes on longingly) We'll be married soon, won't we, and settle out in the country away from folks and their evil talk. We'll make an island for ourselves on land, and we'll have children and love them and teach them to love life so that they can never be possessed by hate and death! (III 585).

She has completely changed in that she is able to express her feelings and envision a future. She has left the Puritanical notion that love is evil, and now she wants to experience loving emotions. Evidently, she has inherited from Christine the capacity to love, but that capacity never flourished before. As Engel points out, after her trip to the Islands, "Lavinia's instincts . . . are directed towards love and life and are the

antithesis of all that her Mannon heritage represents" (244). She is now closer to Christine, to what Christine represented, than to her Mannon ancestors and their values, and for the second time in her life she has a vision of happiness.

It is the first time that Lavinia has been able to imagine a life for herself and not live for someone else. However, once again the complexity of human interrelationships works against her fulfilment. Orin, in search of his own mental peace, inadvertently obstructs Lavinia's achievement of happiness through his sense of guilt, his attempt to reveal the Mannons' past, and finally his Oedipal condition. While Lavinia has become closer to what her mother represented, Orin seems to have become closer to his father or to the Mannons. His haunting sense of guilt results from his belief that he drove his mother to commit suicide. He is convinced that neither he nor Lavinia has the right to be happy. Moreover, he is obsessed by the background of the Mannons, and with trying to "trace to its secret hiding place in the Mannon past the evil destiny behind [their] lives!" (III 590). He is now interested in writing "a true history of the family crimes" (590), which includes Lavinia, whom he finds "the most interesting criminal of us all!" (III 590). Orin's actions impede Lavinia's obtaining of happiness: he "becomes a living terror for



Lavinia. His increasing sense of guilt . . . makes him want to confess everything" (Skinner 22). In an effort to prevent Orin from disclosing to Hazel and Peter, neighbors to the Mannons, the secret truth of the Mannon family, Lavinia tells Orin that she loves him and will do anything for him. By this "anything" Lavinia means giving up Peter; nevertheless, Orin, who at this point has transferred his incestuous feelings from his mother to Lavinia, insinuates to Lavinia that what he really wants is her. He now sees Lavinia "as a woman" (Skinner 223). His desire for her arises from making up his mind that neither of the two deserves to be happy and that they should share the guilt for Christine's death:

Orin How else can I be sure you won't leave me? You would never dare leave me--then! You would feel as guilty then as I do! You would be as damned as I am! . . . Vinnie! For the love of God, let's go now and confess and pay the penalty for Mother's murder, and find peace together! (III 601)

O'Neill's use of this twisting of the Oedipus Complex adds a deep sense of tragedy to the play: Lavinia's vision of happiness is completely thwarted by Orin. Lavinia is at this moment trapped; she not only cannot enjoy Peter's love but she is also disgusted by Orin's insinuations and afraid of his revealing the history of

the Mannons. The cruelty of the Mannons then acts in Lavinia again and "in a burst of frantic hatred and rage" she states to Orin, "I hate you! I wish you were dead! You're too vile to live! You'd kill yourself if you weren't a coward!" (III 601). Orin, being in a trance-like state at this moment, sees Lavinia as his mother and his death as a reunion with her, so he commits suicide. Orin's death becomes another burden on Lavinia's conscience; she asks for his forgiveness. Nevertheless, she believes it was her duty to drive him to commit suicide--it was her duty to the Mannons. In spite of her undergoing a liberation from the Mannons as a result of the trip to the Islands, her duty towards the Mannons still haunts her:

Lavinia Orin! Forgive me! . . . . She turns to go and her eyes catch the eyes of the MANNONS in the portraits fixed accusingly on her--defiantly) Why do you look at me like that? Wasn't it the only way to keep your secret, too? But I'm through with you forever now, do you hear? I'm Mother's daughter--not one of you! I'll live in spite of you! (III 603)

Lavinia believes that having performed all these "acts of justice," she has buried the Mannon part in her. Now she perceives herself as Christine's daughter only,

which in turn means that she now desires to finally live a life of love--to be able to give herself for love. Yet, we learn that Lavinia is unable to overcome all that the Mannons represent--their Puritanical repressions, their sense of guilt, their living by a dead code, their greed, and finally their lust for power.

When sharing a moment alone with Peter, she expresses her deep desire to be loved and be able to enjoy "a little while of happiness" (III 610). However, she cannot. While desperately asking for Peter's love, she inadvertently calls him Adam. Then she realizes that it is impossible for her to break from the past--to break from the dead.

After all her struggle to achieve justice in the name of the Mannons, after all her desperate struggle to enjoy life and achieve happiness, she ends her days locked in the Mannon house. She decides to punish herself and live with the Mannons' ghosts:

Lavinia Don't be afraid. I'm not going the way Mother and Orin went. That's escaping punishment. And there's no one left to punish me. I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! . . . I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound until the curse is paid out

and the last Mannon is let die! . . . . I  
know they will see to it I live for a long  
time! It takes the Mannons to punish  
themselves for being born! (III 612)

Why does she adopt this attitude of renunciation? She no longer has a vision of happiness; the events in her life and the events in the Mannons' past are too much for her. Lavinia's last words reveal that she has a deep understanding of the forces working in the Mannon family and, therefore, in her life. As Carpenter states, Lavinia "triumphs over the evil of her heritage by recognizing it clearly, and by determining to live with it to the end" (128). Lavinia understands that she has not only inherited all of what the Mannons are, but also their guilt: she will have to pay for their crimes. She accepts the idea that she cannot be happy because of the Mannon need to be punished first. Once the dead Mannons are punished--who paradoxically have been alive exercising power over those that have inherited their cruelty and guilt--she will be able to die. In spite, then, of her attitude of renunciation, and giving up of her struggle to attain happiness, her punishment of herself and the Mannons could be considered happiness in itself, since it represents her conquering of those forces that thwarted her happiness in the first place.

Lavinia's contradictory phrase "I hope there is a hell for the good somewhere" (III 608) does not seem contradictory when it comes to defining Christine's and Lavinia's lives. These two women possessed at first an original innocence; in Christine's words they were "trusting." Earlier in their lives, they were submissive and conventional. However, at a given point in their lives, these two women undergo a change. Because of suffering that shatters their happiness, they decide to undertake a struggle, which may not be honorable but seems to promise happiness.

The kind of happiness Christine and Lavinia pursue is a personal happiness in their private lives. Their happiness is conditioned by what happens inside the Mannon family. All the forces embodied in this family prevent them from achieving their happiness, acting as obstacles. O'Neill presents the Mannon family as an example of those persons whose lives are ruled and shaped by a number of fatal forces. In the case of Christine Mannon these forces include a kind of psychological fate--Orin's, Lavinia's and Adam's Oedipus Complexes--and Puritan values. Moreover, unexplainable elements acting in Christine's life impel her to take actions that at times destroy her plans. Lavinia's struggle is not only thwarted by those forces operating in Christine's life but also by a haunting sense of

guilt--Orin's--which acts as an obstacle to her achievement of happiness. The elements that have been shaping the Mannons' destiny for years act as the force of the past that cannot be overcome and that finally doom her.

In spite of the obstacles, Lavinia's and Christine's searches are characterized by a strength in their convictions and the intense feelings that drive them to action--to strive for that what they think they deserve. As Peter Egri points out, "Lavinia's passionate striving for love and happiness inherited from her mother commands admiration" (56), because, no matter how unconventional and morally reproachable their actions are, and no matter how manipulative and calculating these two women become, they deserve to be happy. The event that shattered their purity and happiness in the first place was beyond their control. Even though, later on, they sometimes make selfish choices and their actions reflect their lack of moral scruples, we admire their fervent struggle, their willingness to fight for that happiness they think they deserve in life.

Lavinia's hope for "a hell for the good" discloses the existence of a dual--good and evil--side to her character. This duality is present in Christine as well. If we acknowledge the impotence of their

condition, we not only understand why they become so cruel and destructive, but also why they can finally accept the impossibility of their dream: Christine chooses to commit suicide and Lavinia decides to punish herself--the last of the Mannons--to destroy the forces that prevented her from achieving happiness. We discover some hope in their last actions and perhaps foresee their achievement of a different kind of happiness.

## V

## CONCLUSION

What then is O'Neill's "private myth" regarding women? The pattern first found in a limited way in Desire Under the Elms and fully developed by O'Neill in his longer plays Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra--in this last one it is even reduplicated--consists of the following parts: the O'Neillian woman has experienced an original innocence, submissiveness and naivete. At some point she recalls (through dialogue or in the case of Strange Interlude through thoughts aside), with anguished longing, the loss of her pristine innocent state. Beyond this early unthinking stage in her life she embraces an initial vision of a conventional type of happiness--a home, security in marriage, the love of a parent. Her happiness, however, is hampered by an irremediable loss: the person she loves is killed or dies or a person she trusted betrays or hurts her.

Consequently, the heroine makes a second attempt at happiness. This time, however, she rejects her submissive past behavior and challenges the existing conventions. She sets out to use her free will--which we learn is illusive--to try to determine her future: she decides to reach for happiness by adopting a



pragmatic view of life. But she encounters variations of a modern "fate": a biological "fate" (the family curse on the Evanses), the death of a beloved, the intertwining of human lives so that each person's pursuit of happiness hinders the other person's happiness, the haunting power of the past, conflicts with characters suffering from guilt or from Oedipus Complexes, and restrictive Puritan views. What always entices her is some version of one of the following: being a mother, being a help-mate, or engaging in a great love. Also having undergone a sexual awakening, she discovers that achieving sexual gratification constitutes part of her happiness.

These fateful complications and impediments bring repeated failures, each further limiting her scope of choice and action, generating more tension and increasing the intensity of her drive for happiness and pushing her to great extremism, involving cold calculation and crass manipulation. We see her trying to manipulate sons, lovers, husbands all to attain what she thinks will bring her happiness. If the manipulations fail, she attempts to escape from her present oppressive environment with the hope of achieving happiness in different surroundings. The desire to go to the South Sea Islands in Mourning Becomes Electra provides the best example of the

heroine's need to seek for an Edenic-like environment in which she can be free from obstacles, free to behave in accord with Nature.

Finally, at a climactic moment tinged with an ecstatic, perhaps Dionysian joy, she sees the possibility of attaining happiness only by murdering someone, committing adultery, driving someone to commit suicide, trying to escape with her love--in short, by making a complete break from conventional behavior--and she undertakes the action. Almost immediately afterward her happiness slips away. Consequently, she comes to a crushing realization of the futility of her struggle; and, abandoning her pursuit, she assumes an attitude of resignation, which can be regarded in itself as an attainment of a different kind of happiness.

Occasionally a subsidiary motif in the psychology of the O'Neillian woman emerges--the need for self-punishment. Although not seen in Christine, the motif is present in the rest of the heroines. The punishment the heroine inflicts on herself can take different forms, can occur at different stages in her life, and can be motivated by different reasons. However, common to it is the heroine's need to attain forgiveness for her manipulations. The most outstanding example is Lavinia's decision to lock herself in the Mannons' house to await death, so as to punish not only herself but the

dead Mannons for their transgressions.

It is interesting to note that the different plot developments and motifs that emerge in the life of the O'Neillian woman somewhat correspond to Carol Pearson's observation, in her book The Hero Within, regarding some of the archetypal patterns--Innocent/Orphan, Martyr, Wanderer, and Warrior--that govern the stages a woman goes through in her lifetime. The O'Neillian woman at an early stage shares the characteristic trust and need for security of the "innocent." She becomes a "martyr" in her necessity to be "repressed so as not to hurt others" (Pearson 20), in her willingness to please (Nina) and work for others (Abbie). She is a "wanderer" in her desire to break away, to escape from her distressing situation and search for a better life. And she becomes a "warrior" in her showing strength to struggle, willingness to "mold others to please [her]self" (20) and courage to persist in spite of so much adversity.

But why do O'Neill female characters encounter so many obstacles? Why are their dreams constantly shattered? Why is it impossible for them to achieve happiness? To what, apart from O'Neill's conscious attempt to embody a tragic view like that of the Greeks, can we attribute this tragic portrayal of these women's lives?

Turning to O'Neill's personal experience with women, especially his mother, Ella Quinlan O'Neill, we can see a possible model for the heroine. As Shaeffer states, in O'Neill's family "at last we find the matrix of his tragic outlook on life, the source of the anguish that throbs through much of his writing" (4). His mother's life was tinged with fatality much like O'Neill's females characters' lives. Curiously enough, Shaeffer refers to her innocence and naivete before her marriage took place (11) and to her dreams of a happy marriage with a man whom she could love. However, throughout her marriage, she suffered hurtful disillusionment after disillusionment. Not long after her marriage, she learned that James O'Neill had a special taste for drinking. In addition to this, only months after their marriage, James O'Neill was engaged in a scandal that brought her great distress: a woman publicly claimed that she was married to O'Neill and that they had a son. Moreover, the actor's wife could not cope well with her husband's profession--he was an actor, and the social class in which she had been brought up scorned the acting profession. Furthermore, the demands of constant travel caused her anguish because of her inability to possess the home that she so much desired. Instead, she had to live, as an actor's wife, in hotel after hotel.

Mrs. O'Neill experienced tragedy with the death of her son Edmund, who died when she was away with James on one of his tours. She could never fully recover from her loss. Not even Eugene's birth could appease her conscience. With Eugene's birth a greater tragedy came along--Ella's drug addiction. O'Neill was greatly affected by his mother's state to the point that he suffered from a sense of guilt: "he was convinced it was his birth that made her into a narcotics addict" (Gelb 55).

Mrs. O'Neill's constant encounter with fatality, then, finds its counterpart in O'Neill's female characters. Her illusion of happiness with her husband was only that, an illusion. For she could never fully enjoy it.

But O'Neill's portrait of women is not only limited by the influence and memory of his mother. His later acquaintance with less passive women in surroundings outside domestic life--with independent women, capable of choosing careers and leading independent lives--like Beatrice Ashe, Louise Bryant, Agnes Boulton, Dorothy Day, and Carlotta Monterey, could have influenced him to draw women who search and struggle in an active pursuit of happiness, characterized by fervent intensity of feelings. A mere imitation of his mother's passivity in his writing would have failed to generate the

necessary emotion that a tragic figure should generate. In order to convey a profound tragic sense through his female characters, O'Neill had to make them active pursuers and engage them in a struggle.

Thus the unfolded myth discloses the entire dimensions of this struggle as a composite of both sources. The different stages that the O'Neillian woman goes through in her life help us understand her condition better and O'Neill's intentions. The myth discloses O'Neill's need to present the causes, development, and intensity of the heroine's struggle. His choice of longer plays, which gave him the necessary space to include all the motifs and prolong the struggle, further exemplify O'Neill's wish to illustrate the heroine's repeated failures and the increasing tension resulting from these failures, all of which give tragic magnitude to her struggle.

The quality of the struggle she undertakes is what gives the O'Neillian woman tragic stature. As Nelson accurately points out, O'Neill's women "can be, like the men, dreamers, searchers after some unrealized goal" (3). O'Neill gives his female characters purpose: they exist in order to achieve the goals that they have set for themselves. In her struggle the O'Neillian woman emerges as fearless, limitless, intense, determined, and strong. Her former fear to go against the existing

conventions disappears after she decides to undertake a struggle even to the point that she defies God. If the O'Neillian woman experiences any fear it is fear of losing her happiness, but not of making the wrong decisions and taking the wrong actions. Her non-reliance on traditional religious values allows her to put no limitations to her actions. She is driven by her capacity to always regain an illusion of happiness. John Henry Raleigh tells us that in the world of O'Neill's characters "human integrity would consist of existing, or at least having the illusion of existing, on a plan that is purposive" (158). The O'Neillian woman's illusion that she can shape her own destiny in order to achieve happiness keeps her going in spite of the limitations she encounters throughout. Her intensity is such that when she foresees a possibility of attaining happiness she goes to any extremes to obtain it--including murder--with the hope that her action will bring about her happiness. Yet in spite of these actions we cannot condemn her, because we understand the motivations that have driven her to action.

O'Neill's private myth discloses the sense of fatality present in the O'Neillian woman's life. Once she envisions a possibility of happiness, she tries to grasp it by any means. However, she finds opposition

after opposition. We share the joy of those moments of fervent excitement when she feels that she has finally achieved happiness, only to see immediately after that something or someone obstructing her joy once again. This sense of inevitability in her life--when even good intentions fail to bring her happiness--and her willingness to persist in her struggle despite the great number of difficulties she encounters give the O'Neillian woman heroic qualities and also tragic dimensions and make her deserving of our admiration.

The myth also provides insight into the sociological condition of women in American society. In spite of these women being "imprisoned in a male structure" (Burr 39) and in their own dreams, being directed towards the "quest for the perfect marriage, the perfect love, the perfect son, " (Nelson 3), there is legitimate value in their struggle. These women, despite their entrapment in a domestic situation, and despite the limitations that society puts on them, though not capable of breaking through these obstacles totally, challenge the legitimacy of such restrictions and at times even overcome them. Unlike Nelson, who regrets that O'Neill does not give his women a profession and shows their "ultimate questions" to be related "to personal relationships like those in a marriage or a family" (3), I contend that there is



hidden value in O'Neill's portrayal. Nelson only recognizes that these women's "struggles have ideological content" (3); however, their struggles have sociological value as well. By portraying their limited social role and showing their incapacity to achieve their limited goals, contrasted with their strength and intensity to struggle O'Neill suggests that the limited role society imposes on them is not well balanced with their possibilities. O'Neill's "image of the imprisoned woman grew out of his personal experience with a mother that was locked in, trapped, and isolated," but he

transforms the Strindbergian motif of the trapped woman to represent not her baseness but her martyrdom, not her lack of worth but the unjust quality of her imprisonment and subjugation. (Burr 39)

Within this hampering environment, these women have a modicum of actual freedom and enough liberty of thought to envision a happy outcome of their exercise of free will. Eventually they learn that this notion of their capacity to shape their destiny was just an illusion. However, while their struggle lasts, they possess an incredible intensity of feelings and a tremendous capacity to fight for what they want in life, for what they think they deserve, and to make their own choices, which at times are dreadfully painful.

Behind O'Neill's portrayal of women, there is deep understanding of their condition. O'Neill's portrayals are at all times sympathetic towards the women's suffering. Moreover, there is an underlying sense of respect and admiration for these women's struggles in the sense that after reading these characters' lives, we are left with only their positive attributes. We admire their capacity to live according to their own dreams, their own values, their own desires, regardless of what society has imposed on them.

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