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A STUDY OF THE DETERMINISM OF EUGENE O'NEILL AS
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LIVINGSTON

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A STUDY OF THE DETERMINISM OF EUGENE O'NEILL AS SEEN
IN THE EMPEROR JONES, STRANGE INTERLUDE,
AND MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA

By

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DEDICATION

To Freddie Griffin, Jr., a dear friend, whose
faith and inspiration made possible this ac-
complishment, I dedicate this paper.

G. P. L.

A STUDY OF THE DETERMINISM OF EUGENE O'NEILL AS SEEN
IN THE EMPEROR JONES, STRANGE INTERLUDE,
AND MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA

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HYPOTHESIS

In The Emperor Jones, Strange Interlude, and Mourning Becomes Electra, Eugene O'Neill expounds his deterministic belief that life is an unsuccessful struggle with fate.

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PREFACE

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the light of the research which seems positively to support the concept that Eugene O'Neill believed in the philosophy of determinism, the writer was led to pursue this study of selected plays in an effort to establish through careful analysis, if, in the exposition of his plays, Eugene Gladstone O'Neill subscribed to a concept of determinism.

DEFINITION OF TERM

"Determinism" in this study means the philosophical doctrine that man struggles, even though he may struggle against what may seem to be his own fate; even though taught by his own past, he is incapable of avoiding his ultimate end. His struggle may provide him with hope, but despite his efforts, the inevitable occurs--death, and too often mortal or moral defeat.

DELIMITATION OF STUDY

This study does not attempt to consider all of O'Neill's work. It is limited to a detailed analysis of three selected plays that seem deterministic in philosophy: The Emperor Jones, Strange Interlude, and Mourning Becomes Electra.

NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

This study of determinism as seen in Eugene O'Neill's plays is an

analysis of the philosophy of determinism as well as O'Neill's personal interpretation of this philosophy

An oblique result of this study is that it shows that there is biographical material that indicates some events that may have influenced O'Neill and contributed to his embracing the philosophy of determinism.

This investigation finally analyzes determinism as seen in three plays by Eugene O'Neill.

RELATED STUDIES

To avoid unnecessary duplication in the treatment of this information, the author surveyed studies related to the problem. The writer examined A Study of Eugene O'Neill's Contribution to the American Drama, an unpublished thesis by Mrs. Mable Bradley at Prairie View A&M College. This thesis, written in 1948, discussed O'Neill's contribution to American drama by analyzing the plots, mechanical devices, and characterizations in his plays.

In her unpublished master's thesis, A Critical Analysis of Eugene O'Neill's Treatment of the Negro in Four of His Plays (1948), Mrs. Larutha Clay analyzed the roles of the characters. This study was also made at Prairie View A&M College.

In an unpublished master's thesis (1965) at Texas A&M University, Barbara Lynn McMullan focused on the tension between illusion and reality in O'Neill's plays. Her thesis is titled The Theme of Illusion in Plays by Eugene O'Neill. In it, she discussed the theme of illusion in O'Neill's work as a whole and gave detailed analyses of the theme of illusion in The Great God Brown and The Iceman Cometh.

In Elements of Greek Tragedy in Three Eugene O'Neill Plays (1963), an unpublished master's thesis at Texas A&M University, Albert Koinm discussed several elements of Greek tragedy, basing his discussion on the works of scholars who tried to discover what tragedy meant to the Greeks. This discussion formed a framework which was applied to Mourning Becomes Electra, Desire Under the Elms, and The Iceman Cometh to illustrate how O'Neill interprets Greek tragedy in twentieth century terms and symbols.

BASIC ASSUMPTION

The writer's basic assumption is that in The Emperor Jones, Strange Interlude, and Mourning Becomes Electra, Eugene O'Neill applied a theory of determinism to life and in each case he portrays man in an unsuccessful struggle with fate.

METHOD OF PROCEDURE

Those published plays of O'Neill which seemed best to exemplify the deterministic philosophy were read and selected as the basis for this study. Secondary data have been procured from analytic studies of these plays, from books on or related to the subject, and from periodicals and related studies.

VALUE OF INVESTIGATION

It is hoped that this investigation will prove valuable to students of literature and will add significantly to O'Neill research by revealing how one of the tools used by the author can substantially be validated in the world he creates and even may be applicable to the recognizable worlds

of everyday life.

INTRODUCTION

Determinism is the philosophical doctrine that human action is not free to attain desired ends, but resultant conditions are the outcome of what may be regarded as external forces acting upon the individual to such an extent that he has no power on the final outcome.¹ Everything that happens, at any time and place, even in its most minute features, is held to be completely necessitated by its spatio-temporal context. There is no accident, no chance, no element of formless "matter" in nature itself. Events are "accidental" or due to chance only in the sense that individuals are ignorant of their causes and powerless to control these. Perfect knowledge would see everything in nature to be wholly necessitated, and therefore completely intelligible.² Determinism holds that the will in any seeming choice is determined by preceding psychical states, as antecedents and mechanical sequences of the physical world may be found in analogous relations in the mental world. Volition is held to be the result of motives which determine the course of action, both as to its nature and direction.³

¹The Oxford English Dictionary, Volume III (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), p. 271.

²Hugh Miller, An Historical Introduction to Modern Philosophy (New York: Macmillan Company, 1947), p. 247.

³John Hibler, The Problem of Philosophy (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), pp. 152-153.

Although the preceding is a summation of the general theory of determinism as propounded by the Greek philosopher Democritus, Eugene O'Neill's concept of determinism is basically different. While the orthodox determinist arrived at his conclusion on the grounds of man's lack of omniscience, O'Neill formulated his deterministic philosophy on the strength of man's psychological nature and on the bases of Oriental influences. The two philosophers that influenced O'Neill were Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. It has been said that the philosophical tenet of Schopenhauer that influenced O'Neill was his theory that, "All love, however ethereally it may bear itself, is rooted in the sexual impulse alone."⁴

Frederick Carpenter in his book, Eugene O'Neill, pointed out that Terry Carlin influenced O'Neill's philosophy. Carlin was a worshipper of Dionysus and had met O'Neill about 1915 in the literary circle of the "Hell Hole." He introduced O'Neill to a book of mystical theosophy entitled Light on the Path. It combined Oriental wisdom with Occidental psychology. The philosophy was not formal, and certainly its mysticism was vague; but it helped O'Neill to formulate a theory of tragedy which was to become both distinctive and modern. This theory of tragedy can be summarized in this sentence: "Through tragedy salvation may be achieved."⁵ O'Neill came to feel, then, that all life was tragic but not futile, since man, in experiencing the painfulness of hopes shattered, of

⁴Croswell Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), p. 168.

⁵Frederick I. Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), pp. 33-34.

love lost, and of resolutions ending in poor achievements, should realize that the beauty in life was in the attempt to live, more than in the success at living.

O'Neill combined the poetic exhortations of the imaginary prophet Zarathustra with the more sober philosophy of Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy to achieve his understanding sense and grasp of the tragic. When Zarathustra proclaimed, "You must have Chaos in you to give birth to a dancing star. I tell you that you still have chaos in you," he spoke of the young man's present condition in terms of future prophecy. And when Nietzsche traced the birth of the Greek tragedy to the pagan rites of the god Dionysus, he seemed to combine history with prophecy. For the young playwright was indeed a worshipper of Dionysus, and he felt chaos within himself. But he also felt within himself the potential "birth of a dancing star," and he dreamed of the drunken laughter of Lazarus. To O'Neill, Nietzsche suggested the element of transcendence implicit in all tragedy.⁶

O'Neill was psychoanalyzed by ^Kenneth MacGowan and Dr. George Hamilton. He also read their book What Is Wrong With Marriage? He was overcome with their immense pessimism, which was "despair," over the way in which the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. In this respect the family circle seems a vicious circle. It seems indeed the greatest vicious circle ever conceived, for its circumference has become the straight line of descent from parent to child, world without end.⁷

Drawing from his reading, literary comrades, and the paradoxes of

⁶Ibid., p. 33.

⁷Bowen, op. cit., p. 241.

his father's and mother's strange and inexplicable love relations, O'Neill leaned toward the comforts of a deterministic theory that does not rob man of his will to seek the highest in life, but does not grant him any substantial degree of victory in his struggle to be moral and godly. This study is based on the premise that specific plays of O'Neill strongly develop his theory of determinism. The writer attempts to prove this assumption by applying the theory to specific plays and finally formulating opinions or conclusions.

CHAPTER I

EUGENE O'NEILL'S CONCEPT OF DETERMINISM

Eugene O'Neill, like every significant writer, was not the product of merely theatrical developments or impulses but a subscriber to a philosophical school. He was, above all, a sensitive personality, and despite conventional critics who often see a playwright merely as an accessory to the fact of the theatre or the facts of economics, a dramatist is a personality who conceives of a world in which a principle or principles operate. O'Neill was a veritable seismograph of the ideas, viewpoints, and promptings of an age in which the standards of the past were brought into sharp opposition with that of the present. He reflected a general discontent with a materialistic America and also, like many of the younger creative sons of the age, a sense of frustration in the flow of America's development and a general need for her to break with the mundane. He turned to an assimilation of European thought and dramatic art as a vehicle to express his point of view. He responded to these underground stirrings and rumblings with crude but impressive intensity. His impressiveness resides, in fact, not in the discovery of unique ideas, but in his absorption of these ideas and even more importantly in the raw personal passionateness with which he employed them on the stage.

In him Europe and America interbred, the one providing the chromosomes of thought and experiment, the other the genes of grappling vitality. In other words, O'Neill brought the depth of the European intellectual reservoir against the vigorous American society and saw America as a

child that strayed too far from a guiding parent.

Gassner contends that O'Neill spoke generally in a somber and sardonic tone, and critics spoke of his demoniac possession and writhings, and of reality honestly caught, intense hatred and of sacred institutions and areas passionately defied by him. His realism has indeed neglected reality as a phenomenon that might be clarified or ameliorated by social analyses and action. O'Neill has been extravagantly acclaimed as a mystic by the Catholic critic, Richard Dana Skinner, in his book Eugene O'Neill: A Poet's Quest, when as a matter of fact many of his perceptions have caught and appraised realistically and psychologically while his visions have passed that sense of eternity or kinship with nature, which is any poet's prerogative.

On the other hand, O'Neill has been severely criticized by some of his critics for treating the social realities of his time only tangentially or without awareness of their existence as a social problem. The fact is that he has rarely regarded social causes as worth treating artistically, except as manifestations of the struggle between man's will and fate, between passion and circumstances, and between forces of the inner self.

O'Neill painted in sociologically acceptable terms the reality of common people living on sea or land (Ile), presented humanity struggling against inherited or acquired limitations (Desire Under the Elms), and faced racial prejudice, poverty, the hardness of a strong soil, the frustrations of puritanism, and the effects of the materialistic world which thwart or pervert the spirit.⁸

But in these portraits, O'Neill's real interest was not sociology,

⁸John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York: Dover Publications, 1940), pp. 640-641.

on the one hand; nor was it any specifically modern approach to moral problems on the other; he merely used sociological accuracy as a backdrop against which he brought into view the eternal problem of man's paradoxical nature and his predicament in a universe which seemed alien, but to which he desired, nonetheless, to be related.

O'Neill's characters are divided into two classes: those who feel that they do and those who feel that they do not "belong," and as he himself finally got around to saying, the only problems which interested him were those which arise, not out of man's relation to man, but out of man's relation to God.

Thus the Hairy Ape is about a man who, however brutalized, remains a man until he loses his sense of "belonging," and inevitably becomes an animal; ole Ephraim in Desire Under the Elms is a man who pays the penalty (and achieves the stature) of those who identify themselves with God; Nina in Strange Interlude is a woman who pays the opposite penalty, and shrinks into futile insignificance because, like so many moderns, she can find nothing to belong to, nothing to justify for her the irrational elements in human life, except that last attenuation of God, which is now known as "the complex." Like the great tragic writers of the past, O'Neill is concerned, as he says himself, with those "sorrows of our proud and angry dust" which "are from eternity and shall not fail."⁹

The central assumption in O'Neill's plays has always been that the tameness and rationality of modern life are an illusion--that man is as much concerned as he ever was with the problem of his relation to God and

⁹Joseph Wood Krutch, "O'Neill's Tragic Sense," American Scholar, 16 (Summer, 1947), pp. 283-286.

as much as ever the victim of the darkest and most violent passions.

O'Neill expressed his concept of determinism in this way: Life is a struggle, especially to a goal-oriented individual, and it is an unsuccessful struggle against something which prevents one from accomplishing what was dreamed of and sought after.¹⁰ In his voluminous works, O'Neill repeatedly propounds this idea. His characters battle what finally becomes insurmountable odds, and they lose to the inevitable. With few exceptions, the end of his characters is foreshadowed at the beginning. They begin with a "curse" from which they cannot escape.¹¹ It is often left for the reader to decide whether the curse is placed on them by society or by their inheritance. An example of this is in the late play Long Day's Journey Into Night.

As O'Neill saw it, life was full of despair. This despair was the result of sickness which could be traced to the death of the old God, and the failure of Science and Materialism to provide any satisfying replacements so that the surviving religious instinct could find a meaning for life and any comfort over its fears of death.¹²

O'Neill was always conscious of life and tried to interpret it in relation to the force behind it. In a letter to Arthur Hobson he said, "I'm always acutely conscious of the force behind--fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it--mystery certain-

¹⁰Oscar Cargill, et al., O'Neill and His Plays (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1961). E. O'Neill, "What the Theatre Means to Me," p. 107.

¹¹Harry Slochower, "Eugene O'Neill's Lost Moderns," p. 388.

¹²Edwin Engel, "O'Neill, 1960," Modern Drama, 3 (December, 1960, No. 3), p. 219.

ly--and of the one external tragedy of man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression."¹³

In his plays O'Neill attempted to explain the forces behind life. In a letter to Barrett Clark, O'Neill wrote, "Perhaps I can explain the nature of my feeling for the impelling inscrutable forces behind life which it is my ambition to at least faintly shadow at their work in my plays."¹⁴ Of the Hairy Ape he said, "The subject here is the same ancient one that always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt to belong."¹⁵

Time after time, O'Neill stated the basic thesis that life is an unsuccessful struggle with fate. He believed that man envisioned the perfect, struggled vainly to achieve it, and eventually in dismay must learn to accept inevitable defeat.¹⁶

O'Neill's plays, both autobiographical and symbolic, seem to suggest his continuing search for salvation, or for meaning.¹⁷ Very often he used the concept of an "Ideal" to set into motion man's pursuit of a self-imposed goal and the tragic outcome he approaches. In Lazarus Langed,

¹³Cargill, op. cit., Eugene O'Neill, "Neglected Poet," A Letter to Arthur Hobson, pp. 125-126.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 127-128.

¹⁵Ibid., "O'Neill Talks About His Plays," p. 111.

¹⁶Ibid., "What the Theatre Means to Me," p. 107.

¹⁷Ibid.

Lazarus realized the paradisaic beauty of an impossible ideal. In Strange Interlude, Nina Leeds struggled through a purgatorial compromise between the ideal and the actual. Finally, in Mourning Becomes Electra, Lavinia Mannon recognized the impossibility of achieving the ideal and symbolically accepted damnation for man's materialism. Written in this order and moving down these steps of logic, these three dramas describe the tragedy of man who envisions the perfect, struggles vainly to achieve it, and finally accepts inevitable defeat.¹⁸ O'Neill was not hopeful for the future. His was a philosophy of despair in which man had no choice but to seek the unattainable, since he was by nature and by culture incapable of accepting spiritual immobility. He had no illusions about happy endings, because he argued that no ending is happy.¹⁹

Talking about what people call the "tragedy" in his plays, O'Neill expressed his philosophy in this way:

People...call it 'sordid,' 'depressing,' 'pessimistic,'--the words usually applied to anything of a nature. But tragedy, I think has the meaning the Greeks gave it. To them it brought exhaltation, an urge toward life and ever more life. It roused them to deeper spiritual understandings and released them from the petty greeds of every day existence. When they saw a tragedy on the stage they felt their own hopeless hopes ennobled in art. They are hopeless hopes because any victory we may win is never the one we dream of winning. The point is that life in itself is nothing. It is the dream that keeps us fighting, willing--living! Achievement, in the narrow sense of possession, is a stale finale. The dreams that can be completely realized are not worth dreaming. The higher the dream, the more impossible it is to realize it fully. But you should not say, since this is true, that we should dream only of the easily attained. A man wills his own defeat when he pursues the

¹⁸Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁹Norman Chaitain, "The Power of Daring," Modern Drama, 3 (December, 1960, No. 3), p. 234.

unattainable. But his struggle is his success. He is an example of the spiritual significance which life attains when it aims high enough, when the individual fights all the hostile forces within and without himself to achieve a future of nobler values. Such a figure is necessarily tragic. But to me he is not depressing; he is exhilarating! He may be a failure in our materialistic sense. His treasures are in other kingdoms. Yet, isn't he the most inspiring of all successes.²⁰

O'Neill further believed that man's success is realized in his struggle for the unattainable, that life is a tragedy, and if tragedy brings physical defeat, it also brings spiritual exaltation, through the recognition that man's tragic struggle is like that of Prometheus--although destined to defeat by the nature of things, it gives greatness to man's effort to learn the secrets of life.²¹

In Anna Christie O'Neill stated positively what other plays state by negative implication--that men are, by a quality in their blood, united with a vital force which is their origin and their end. This vital force impells men to strive for a place, position, or state beyond them. "None of us can help the things life has done, they make us do other things until at last everything comes between us and what we would like to be, and we have lost our true self forever." It is thus that Mary Tyrone describes O'Neill's philosophy, and it is this philosophy that O'Neill confirmed all his life.²²

²⁰Bowen, op. cit., pp. 143-144.

²¹Carpenter, op. cit., p. 176.

²²Ibid.

CHAPTER II

EUGENE O'NEILL'S TREATMENT OF DETERMINISM IN THE EMPEROR JONES

In 1920, The Emperor Jones was produced with Charles Gilpin, the Negro actor, in the title role. O'Neill based the story, according to an interview, on an anecdote told him by a circus man about the "late" President Sam of Haiti, who swore he would never die of a lead bullet, but would take his own life first with a silver one. The elaboration of this theme in the play, during which the half-civilized Negro emperor wastes both five lead slugs and his silver bullet, and the gradual reversion to type of the man, are elements which suggest Jack London and The Call of the Wild, though a vague resemblance to Kipling's The Man Who Would Be King should be noted. With the murders of a Negro porter and a white prison guard back in Georgia on his conscience and with all the subtle stirrings of savage superstition aggravating his condition, Jones is a convincing victim of the hallucinations which terrify him in the island jungle. The emotional conviction is heightened by the use of a monotonous, rhythmic drumbeat with which the heartbeat of Jones is identified and the tempo of which is accelerated as the Negro's fear approaches hysteria.²³ O'Neill uses the drums as a means to place Jones on the path that leads to his destruction.

One of O'Neill's earlier and most artistically rounded plays, The Emperor Jones, though its expressionistic style is worlds away from what we know of the Greek Theatre, brings its protagonist to a tragic end

²³Oscar Cargill, Intellectual America (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1941), p. 336.

(foreseen from the start, like a doom), not to illustrate a flaw in his character or retributive justice, but to show the inescapable working of racial heritage under the pressure of fear.²⁴

O'Neill solved the problem of emphasis and focus more than adequately in The Emperor Jones. It is a one-man play, and in Brutus Jones we have a powerful dramatic characterization of an individual destroyed by two conflicting impulses in his nature. There is on the one hand the arrogant, flamboyant, self-confident Emperor, contemptuous of the servility and superstitiousness of his own race, his head filled with the conviction that "for de big stealin' day makes you Emperor and puts you in de Hall O' Fame when you croaks," a lesson learned "in ten years on de Pullman Ca's listenin' to de white quality talk" (III, 78); on the other hand is the bewildered, frightened Negro, victim of his past, both racial and personal.

The Emperor Jones is the first of O'Neill's frankly experimental plays, and while his exploration of expressionistic techniques can probably be attributed to several factors, one of the most important is certainly that it permitted him to explore inner conflicts with greater flexibility and clarity. The essential realism of the early plays allowed for the use of symbolism; but, such "inanimate actors" as the sea and the fog, or visual symbols in the setting, such as the dark ring of hills, too much throw the emphasis on a struggle between the individual and some element in life outside himself. The "visions" in The Emperor Jones, which are neither hallucinations nor projections of Jones' "thoughts,"

²⁴Walter Eaton, "O'Neill--New Risen Attic Stream," The American Scholar, 6 (Summer, 1937, No. 3), p. 308.

reveal the inner springs of his nature as they come in conflict with his assumed outward character. But the role is not consciously "put on" (Jones thinks of himself as a bold and unscrupulous exploiter, albeit a fraudulent emperor; nor is he at all aware of the impulses which finally destroy him. Since he is dealing with hidden, subconscious elements in man's nature, O'Neill doesn't slip sly hints into a "realistic" medium, but presents them directly and dramatically.)

There are in the play several dramatic devices, almost inanimate actors, which are external to Jones and which do not pertain directly to his nature. But the pulsating rhythm of the native drums, which dominates the action, rapidly becomes a tangible projection of Jones' rising panic-- a fact that has led some commentators to see the play simply as a study in the effect of fear on a half civilized Negro. There is the brooding, mysterious Great Forest in which Jones loses himself--to find himself. It is not just a place where something happens to Jones; it is part of what happens to him, a primeval, elemental force which literally and figuratively strips him of the superficialities of civilization, and from which at the incident of his birth he could not escape.²⁵

Charles Gilpin, an American Negro, probably resented the play's atavism, whereby the terrors of the jungle might reduce the proud Jones to a crawling African savage, just before his end. But this was precisely the point of O'Neill, who was himself an atavist and who therefore thought that the real cultural roots of the Negro lay in Africa where, in fact, in the nineteenth century the Negro had been an aboriginal, who, to reverse the order of the sequence of the play, had come from the primeval

²⁵John Gassner, O'Neill (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), pp. 148-149.

jungle (Scene VII), across the Atlantic Ocean in slave ships (VI), to the United States (V), to, later on, prison gangs (IV), to subjobs as Pullman porters and to orgiastic outlets, such as gambling, for his intolerable situation (III), and, to, therefore, a kind of built-in psychic instability (II), and to advancing himself in anyway he could, if strong enough and clever enough, like Jones (I), but to go to his death if his power weakened (VIII).²⁶

A shaping power that dominates the will is race. In O'Neill's plays The Emperor Jones and All God's Chillun Got Wings the racial characteristics of the main figures have a decisive effect on their behavior and fate.²⁷ When The Emperor Jones was first produced, the usually caustic Alexander Woollcott wrote in the Times that the Provincetown Players had launched their new season "with the impetus of a new play by the as yet unbridled Eugene O'Neill, an extraordinarily striking and dramatic study of 'panic fear.'"²⁸

The Emperor Jones was in its day recognized as a highly original and imaginative treatment of those hidden forces that determine the fate of man, forces which are too apt to be dismissed as primitive or barbaric, but which after all, are latent even in so-called civilized man.²⁹ In more mature dramas the characters are conceived as a part of their environment, shaped and conditioned by their past experiences, and reacting

²⁶John H. Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 109.

²⁷Rudolph Stamm, "The Dramatic Experiments of Eugene O'Neill," English Studies, 28 (February, 1947), p. 6.

²⁸Bowen, op. cit., p. 132.

²⁹Barrett H. Clark, and George Freedly, A History of Modern Drama (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1947), p. 685.

to the situations that confront them in their own way, not the way of theatrical tradition.³⁰

O'Neill gradually came to regard the single soul as a complicated dramatic operation, which so long as it functioned on an automatic level worked almost silently, but upon entering any crisis its true nature is disclosed.³¹

The characteristic structure of O'Neill's plays is determined by a movement toward unmasking, which is often also a movement of the principal characters toward discovery of the stance they must take toward the fundamental problems of existence. In many of the early plays O'Neill chose an episodic form in which he could show the stages by which, in the course of time, the final discovery was reached.

The Emperor Jones remains one of O'Neill's more expressionistic plays. When Brutus Jones, the former Pullman porter, who has made himself emperor of an island in the West Indies, is faced with rebellion, he starts immediately on an escape he has planned through the great forest to the coast, where he is to be met by a ship. But what was planned as an escape turns into a retreat from the symbols of civilized success which he has won for himself to fantasies of primitive terror which lie deep within him. The flight through the forest is a fine theatrical symbol for the psychological regression brought about by panic as Jones loses his way in the darkness and hears the drums of the rebelling natives.³²

³⁰Alan S. Downer, Fifty Years of American Drama (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1951), p. 44.

³¹Stamm, op. cit., p. 11.

³²Gassner, O'Neill, op. cit., pp. 34-35.

O'Neill uncovers Jones's subconscious being layer by layer, so to speak. In doing this he employs the methods of expressionistic staging to which he frequently returned. The illusions of the fugitive become real on the stage, and they appear in a series of short scenes. They do not only spring from his own past existence, but also from a racial memory of the sort postulated by C. G. Jung. The figure and fate of Jones have a symbolic value. O'Neill may see in Jones the black peoples that barter away their traditions and their style of life for the technical side of the white man's civilization. Besides, he represents a psychological type: the person that suppresses and betrays vital elements of his being for the sake of success, and is destroyed in the end by the revolt of what he has suppressed.³³

In expressionistic visions the buried strata of past generations are laid bare through the activities of a Negro swindler.³⁴ In The Emperor Jones, as Brutus Jones stumbles through the jungle, his personality disintegrating, the fantasy interludes of each scene carry one back through Jones' life; by Scene V this retrospective account has passed over into a history of Jones's race. Just before Jones is killed, the reader arrives at his ultimate origin, the savagery of Africa.³⁵

Each element of the past asserts its hold upon Jones more firmly, until in the final scene he is writhing in insane terror before a primitive

³³Stamm, op. cit., p. 12.

³⁴Heinrich Staumann, "The Philosophical Background of the Modern American Drama," English Studies, 26 (June, 1944), p. 76.

³⁵Raleigh, op. cit., p. 195.

god, naked, hardly able to speak or reason. The whole action is an allegory of man's inability to escape from his past--not just the immediate past, his own experience, but from the heritage of all man, the "little nameless fears," the primitive urges that overpower reason, civilization, sophistication, in moments of crisis.³⁶

If psychological principle could be inferred from O'Neill's plays, it would be that behind the frustration and stasis of the present is a protean past that continues to well up and spill out into the present. For this reason the past is never done or finished or put away. Its passions never lose their potency; its tears never cease to flow. Like mankind itself, these characters are condemned forever to sorrow over their lost innocence, and to contemplate their "might-have-beens:" "Look in my face. My name is Might-Have-Been: I am called No More, Too Late, Farewell."³⁷

This play then is about the ways of memory, and a great deal of its power and complexity arises from the powers and complexities of memory itself. In the first place, memory is omnipotent and implacable. In his Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud said that nothing can perish "once formed in the mind...everything survives in some way or other, and is capable under certain conditions of being brought to light again, as for instance, when regression extends back far enough, and Memory is the conveyor of guilt, the great problem of civilized man."³⁸ Freud also

³⁶Downer, op. cit., p. 94.

³⁷Ibid., p. 95.

³⁸Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, Translated by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1952), p. 7.

calls "the sense of guilt...the most important problem in the evolution of culture."³⁹ Thus O'Neill's characters, standing by proxy for mankind itself, are haunted by their sins, mistakes, wrong doings, betrayals. This sense of guilt forges a chain, link by link, that binds them forever to the terrible things they have done or, equally terrible, what they have not done. An inescapable determinism prevails, and the past, "sleepless with pale commemorative eyes," stands watch on the present. Since it is a fact of human life that it is often more harrowing to relive by memory a painful experience than it was to have actually undergone that experience itself in the first place, memory becomes a kind of avenging Fate or Force that drives the characters back on themselves by its insatiable, never satisfied demands to make them continually relive the agonies of their experience. The play itself cannot end until the agony is complete and total.⁴⁰

The effectiveness of O'Neill's tragedies arises out of this consistent application of the deterministic principle. It gives clearness and almost classic tone to his dramas. O'Neill has given an objective, artistic interpretation to the deterministic principles of modern science, or at least to the science that has dominated the thought of our modern world up to the days of Sir Arthur Eddington, and Sir James H. Jeans, early twentieth century scientists.

It is a deterministic philosophy that makes The Emperor Jones convincing. With relentless imagination O'Neill has followed through the life history of his strange Emperor. As long as Jones held sway from his

³⁹Ibid., p. 70.

⁴⁰Raleigh, op. cit., pp. 200-201.

throne, no power could touch him. His past, for all that appearances might reveal could have been that of genuine nobility. He acts the part, and the social environment is in perfect harmony. Gradually a sinister note of rebellion trembles faintly through his realm. His work is over; and with his gain secured, he plans to leave.

It is only when he enters the dark forest that his past, the irrevocable past which he has so long concealed, begins to assert itself. No iron law enforced by physical power could have been more relentless than was Emperor Jones's past. His social heritage of slave tradition, the debasing work of the Negro as the white man's servant, his crimes, his childhood superstitions, including his biological heritage--all these forces which he thought were forgotten reasserted their power over him. They were transmitted into the beatings of his heart by the native tomtom as it echoed in the depth of the forest. With perfect regularity, these forces of heredity and environment crowd in upon the consciousness of the Emperor until he loses his regal nature and tears away the trappings of his assumed grandeur. One by one they disappear, and as he becomes more and more a Negro criminal tortured by primitive fears of the dark. In the end he loses the battle, conquered, but not by the physical strength of the natives, for they did not even change their position. All they did while Jones circled wildly through the forest was to beat their drums. He was destroyed by the forces of his past. It was not the natives that barred his way to freedom; it was the "strong medicine" of his Negro heritage.⁴¹

⁴¹Sophus Winther, Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), pp. 170-172.

CHAPTER III

EUGENE O'NEILL'S TREATMENT OF DETERMINISM IN STRANGE INTERLUDE

Strange Interlude is a veritable psycho-analytical Odyssey. In it O'Neill showed the conflicts between an individual and his surroundings as well as those occurring within the individual soul, and he studied the interaction of the two.⁴²

Doris Alexander, an O'Neill critic, has said that Strange Interlude is based squarely on the philosophy of Schopenhauer, who believed that "all love, however ethereally it may bear itself, is rooted in the sexual impulse alone." In O'Neill's Strange Interlude, the characters are not motivated, according to the Freudian rationale, but, as Alexander points out, they "are at the mercy of irrational forces and the libido." The ending of Strange Interlude, "an ending of sheer exhaustion," as John Gassner has said, is the perfect expression of the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer.⁴³

O'Neill dwelt on the psychological fate of a curse on the misbegotten members of a family. He had talked about such a curse in Strange Interlude when he said to Bowen that "a romantic imagination has ruined more lives than all the diseases--other diseases, I should say! It's a form of insanity." When it was noted that this depicted a man who looked beyond the horizon, a dreamer of dreams, who courted the black vultures of negativism and that they would claw him to death, O'Neill comment was

⁴²Stamm, op. cit., p. 12.

⁴³Bowen, op. cit., p. 168.

"that such a man optimistically would have a touch of the poet."⁴⁴

Strange Interlude illustrates the principles of determinism. If each character is studied in the light of his own desires, in each case, forces beyond the individual's power to control would bring each attempt to the opposite of what was hoped for or desired. Professor Leeds wanted his daughter to be happy, but he was held in the vise-like grip of New England tradition, thus providing the inescapable opposition to her attempt to obtain the freedom of action necessary for her well-being.⁴⁵

Thus Strange Interlude pointed to the conclusion toward which O'Neill's thought had steadily been moving. Because man's dream is impossible and because man by nature is materialistic and sinful, his very attempt to realize his dream in this world must lead him into the evil which he seeks to escape. The very nature of his dream dooms him. That same romantic dream of human perfection, which at first seemed so beautiful, has actually become the source of all evil.⁴⁶

Strange Interlude (1928) deals with a clinical psycho-pathological case and attempts a psychoanalytic interpretation of human life, applying the aside as a device for making the thought processes on the stage audible to the spectator alone.

With O'Neill the human element is always part of his innermost experience. He is essentially the child of his own time, the highly sensitive artist whose inner being participates in the widespread spiritual disunion arising from one crucial dilemma. That this is in

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 242.

⁴⁵Winther, op. cit., p. 172.

⁴⁶Carpenter, op. cit., pp. 73-74.

essence the conflict between the deterministic pragmatism of the majority on the one hand and ethico-religious tradition on the other is a fact following inevitably from the history of American thought. Two rival impulses are apparent in him, the primitive vital urge of instincts and desires and the promptings of ethico-religious or moral norms fixed by tradition. If he obeys his primitive impulses the norms will compass his doom; if he follows the dictates of the norms his repressed vital instincts will turn against him.⁴⁷

In Strange Interlude the cultural pattern of Professor Leeds's life made him strangely unfitted for an adviser to a young woman at the most crucial moment of her life. He referred her appeal for love in its fullest sense to the narrow principles of his Puritan faith--not because he believed implicitly in this doctrine, but because tradition made him helpless and unable to act in any other way as it did to the Emperor Jones.⁴⁸

The life of Nina follows the same deterministic pattern. She was bound by a convention that she hated and despised when she permitted Gordon to leave for the war without becoming her lover, at the cost of love. The dire consequences of this one act determine the tragedy which follows. It becomes convincing only when one realizes that Nina was the victim of circumstances that transcended her control. The death of her lover led to a violent nervous disturbance which manifested itself in a will for sexual expression. There is no freedom in this except the freedom that an undammed stream has to flow down hill. Nina behaved as the forces that

⁴⁷Staubmann, op. cit., pp. 76-77.

⁴⁸Winther, op. cit., p. 172.

dominated her life compelled her to act, despite her will to be conventional.⁴⁹

Nina's actions were not ridiculous but part of the everyday truth of modern psychology. Her fanatic idolizing of the dead Gordon, conceived in her mind as the perfect romantic image, prevented any normal life, and could easily be taken as a positive indication of the hideous destructive power of the romantic ideal. The fact is, however, that O'Neill once more denied his protagonist the privilege of fulfillment of a romantic dream. By allowing social taboos and moral teachings to keep Nina from her lover, and then killing him, O'Neill sent Nina to her own destruction. It is presumed that had Nina's love with Gordon been consummated, by the act of sexual love, had the body and mind had their ceremony of fulfillment, things would have been much different; for the better, because there was little that could have been worse.⁵⁰

It has been suggested that Nina Leeds is a replica of Hedda Gabler. It may be objected that Nina is more unconventional, less inhibited, more modern, than Ibsen's heroine. To be sure, there is a superficial difference, because the conduct in each case is conditioned by the conventions of the period. But in their attitude toward these conventions, the two women are remarkably similar. Internally both are free of moral scruples; but externally both are dominated by fear of conventional opinion, and can never bring themselves to defy conventions. Hedda sends a man to his death and burns his manuscript without a qualm of conscience;

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 174-175.

⁵⁰Jordan Miller, Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic (London: Archon Books, 1962), pp. 82-83.

but she is terrified of entering into a scandalous situation to keep it a secret. Nina has no conscience in pursuing her emotional needs, but she never has the courage to speak the truth and break her public image. Both have a strong desire for comfort and luxury, which motivates their acceptance of conventionality.⁵¹

The last act of Strange Interlude says that the eternal aim of life is to repeat the saga of emotion. But Nina's emotions are those of a woman to whom security and leisure are guaranteed. Her emotional life is dependent on the social structure. Everything which she feels or thinks is designed to preserve the permanence of her environment. This accounts for her intense conventionality, and for her conviction that deceit is socially necessary. Again and again, she says that all she seeks is happiness; her idea of happiness is erotic. She has no interest in other people, no desire to exert an influence on her environment. She pretends desperately to be a woman without an environment, because this is the only condition under which she can exist at all. If she came into contact with reality, her whole world of leisure and sentiment would fall to pieces. Her insistence on emotion is an insistence on a fixed social system.⁵²

From her days as a nurse to the end of the play Nina is dominated by her tragic love for Gordon. When happiness seems for a moment possible to her, it is blighted by the sad history of her husband's past as revealed to her by Mrs. Evans. The deterministic principle is easily apparent in this episode, though no more real than in any other situation

⁵¹Gassner, O'Neill, op. cit., p. 46.

⁵²Ibid., p. 49.

in the play. It is of no avail to appeal to justice; foresight, intelligence, or virtue, for no matter what may be said for or against Nina the simple and terrible truth remains that when she visited her mother-in-law, she discovered that she was pregnant with a child whose ancestors had been insane. Her will to love a baby, her desire to make her husband happy, and every other aspiration for a good life were thwarted in a single moment when she became aware of certain biological factors that were not within the scope of her control.

At this particular point it may be said that she exerted her will by defeating the purposes of nature. She destroyed the life within her in order that she might not bring forth a baby doomed to insanity. A moment's consideration is sufficient to sum up the evidence that led to this act. O'Neill has given it in the powerful scene between Nina and Mrs. Evans. The revelation in the upstairs room precipitated the action just as clearly as if some individual with the power had taken Nina prisoner, forced her to take an anaesthetic and then performed the abortion.⁵³

In Strange Interlude O'Neill's characters love the parent of the opposite sex and hate the parent of the same sex. This is the basis of his idea that man is the victim of incestuous loves.

Professor Leeds was the victim of a selfish love for his daughter which blocked every effort that he might have made to give her the freedom which his reason convinced him was right. Professor Leeds was in love with his daughter, and no matter how much he might try to make himself believe that she should live her own life, he could never admit her

⁵³Winther, op. cit., pp. 175-176.

right to any lover other than himself. This was the power that ruled his action, and its effectiveness was all the more complete because he would not recognize its presence. It was not Gordon that he hated; it was Nina's lover come to take his place, to force him into the position of father, which made him use every device he could invent to keep her to himself.

Under the stress of emotion he suddenly loses control of himself and when Nina says, "It's too late for lies," Professor Leeds replies:

Let us say that I persuaded myself it was for your sake. That may be true. You are young. You think one can live with truth. Very well. It is also true I was jealous of Gordon. I was alone and I wanted to keep your love. I hated him as one hates a thief one may not accuse nor punish. I did my best to prevent your marriage. I was glad when he died. There. Is that what you wish me to say?⁵⁴

Professor Leeds followed the only course that was possible for him even though it led to an end that meant the defeat of the thing he wished to achieve. As an aid to his motives, he used Marsden as a foil. He was willing to believe that he could tolerate Marsden, for subconsciously he knew that Marsden was in love with his own mother. His situation is the same as that of the professor, the only difference being mother-son instead of father-daughter love. Marsden had always believed himself in love with Nina, but this was only a disguise for his real love for his mother.

Marsden's work as a novelist, his friendships, his travels, every major act of his life was referred to his mother for justification and approval. She was the dominating influence in his life, governing all

⁵⁴Eugene O'Neill, Nine Plays (New York: Random House, Inc., 1959), pp. 502-503.

of his important decisions. Marsden was free to do the things he had to do, the things that were determined by his complex relationship with his mother. In neither his case nor that of Professor Leeds is there any suggestion of overt relationship, for tradition would not permit that; but the chains that bound their actions were none the less unbreakable. The prison in which they lived was securely barred. The only unique thing about it was that for the most part they refused to admit its existence. They lived in the belief that they were free, while every major act of their lives emphasized the fact that they were imprisoned.⁵⁵

It has been pointed out repeatedly that there is no drama of O'Neill's in which an intense love relationship between man and woman is presented as creative or satisfying.⁵⁶ The deepest emotional drive in his plays is always based on the father-daughter, mother-son relationship. His use of the Freudian formular serves to negate any conscious struggle on the part of his characters. Their passion is necessarily evil, because it is incestuous; yet it is unavoidable, because it is the condition upon which they are born.⁵⁷

Strange Interlude reaches no climax and no solution. But the final scene contains a fairly thorough summing up of the author's position:

Nina

(Looking up at the sky--strangely) 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! Failing they died for us, they flew away to other lives, they could not stay with us, they could not give happiness!

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 172-174.

⁵⁶Gassner, O'Neill, p. 43.

⁵⁷Ibid.

Marsden

(Paternaly--in her father's tone) You had best forget the whole affair of your association with the Gordons. After all, dear Nina, there was something unreal in all that has happened since you first met Gordon Shaw, something extravagant and fantastic, the sort of thing that isn't done, really, in our afternoons. So let's you and me forget the whole distressing episode, regard it as an interlude, of trial and preparation, say, in which our souls have been scraped clean of impure flesh and made worthy to bleach in peace.

Nina

(With a strange smile) Strange interlude! Yes, our lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father! (Resting her head on his shoulder) You're so restful, Charlie. I feel as if I were a girl again and you were my father and the Charlie of those days made into one. I wonder is our old garden the same? We'll pick flowers together in the aging afternoons of spring and summer, won't we? It will be a comfort to get home--to be old and to be home again at last--to be in love with peace together--to love each other's peace--to sleep with peace together--! (She kisses him--then shuts her eyes with a deep sigh of requited weariness)--to die in peace! I'm so contentedly weary with life!

Marsden

(With a serene peace) Rest, dear Nina (Then tenderly) It has been a long day. Why don't you sleep now--as you used to, remember?--for a little while?

Nina

(Murmurs with drowsy gratitude) Thank you, Father--have I been wicked?--you're so good--dear old Charlie!

Marsden

(Reacting automatically and wincing with pain--thinking mechanically) God damn dear old...! (Then with a glance down at Nina's face, with a happy smile) No, God bless dear old Charlie...who passed beyond desire, has all the luck at last! (Nina has fallen asleep. He watches with contented eyes the evening shadows closing in around them).⁵⁸

It is not enough simply to point out that the play ends on a note of

⁵⁸O'Neill, *op. cit.*, pp. 681-682.

frustration. Frustration is negative, and tends to become merely poetic whimpering. The sense of frustration which we find in O'Neill is based on a complex system of ideas.

Thus the idea of life turns to the negation of life. In all this, O'Neill disregards one simple fact--that Nina has built her life on a lie, and that this accounts for all her troubles. And her son, as he leaves the stage, tells us that he is just as cowardly as his mother.

Gordon

(He hurries off around the corner of the house at left, rear, thinking troubledly) What does she think I am?... I've never thought that!.....I couldn't!...my own mother! I'd kill myself if I ever even caught myself thinking...!⁵⁹

Here we see the conception of an absolute fate as it concretely affects a dramatic situation. The fact that both mother and son evade the truth is not regarded as personal cowardice, but as destiny. Gordon does not face his mother and defeat her--as he would be forced to do in life. He coddles his illusion and goes away on his honeymoon. Since feeling transcends fact, it follows that one preserves the quality of one's feeling even when it means denying or avoiding reality.⁶⁰

O'Neill has made his characters the victims of circumstances over which they have no control. They move in a world of dark and sinister forces, which govern the destinies of men and women helpless and impotent before the workings of these unpredictable powers. This does not mean that his characters are weaklings whose lives are pathetic but tragic. Just the reverse is true. It is the great character whose life becomes

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 678.

⁶⁰Gassner, O'Neill, p. 48.

significant when it struggles against the inevitable. Darrell, Nina, and Marsden are all rebels against the despotism of facts, as these facts move slowly and inexorably to enmesh and destroy their hopes and their happiness. It is their defiant struggle against these facts that lends dignity to their lives, and it is at this point that their universality becomes apparent. Thus strife with adversity is a parallel to the life of all those who do not gracefully or supinely accept the inevitable. The development of character in O'Neill's drama is always typical and in a sense universal in that it is the common lot of man to feel the heavy power of those circumstances over which he has no control and against which his spirit rebels in bitterness and pain.

With age comes reconciliation, but not peace. The fire of protest burns low; exhaustion leads man to submit without protest, for he has learned that his rebellion is a cry in the night to which the only answer is the faint echo of his protest. So in Strange Interlude the intensity of the flame dies slowly to a mere glowing ember.⁶¹

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 176-177.

CHAPTER IV

EUGENE O'NEILL'S TREATMENT OF DETERMINISM IN MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA

In Mourning Becomes Electra O'Neill uses the format of the Greek trilogy as the structural basis of the play. But the philosophical basis on which the characters move grows out of the theory of determinism. One of the first questions O'Neill asked himself when he began searching for modern manner of treating the ancient Electra story is published in his notes.

Is it possible to get modern psychological approximation of Greek sense of fate into such a play, which an intelligent audience of today, possessed by no belief in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by?⁶²

His answer, as it may be inferred from the play, is that determinism is the modern substitute for the Greek sense of fate--in spite of the protest that has been made against O'Neill's assumption that the modern, intelligent audience is essentially skeptical of supernatural retribution. The Greek gods are dead as far as the theater is concerned, and O'Neill, in recognizing this fact at the outset, faced his problem squarely. He saw that the Electra theme, which could be handled with such convincing argument by the Greeks, because the Fates could bear the heavy burden of responsibility, must be treated by a far subtler psychological method if it were to appear valid to a modern audience.⁶³

In the modern setting O'Neill could not operate with the transcen-

⁶²Eugene O'Neill, Notes and Extracts From a Fragmentary Work Diary (New York: Horace Liveright, 1931), p. 1.

⁶³Winther, op. cit., pp. 177-178.

dental and hieratic determinism of the Greeks. For Greek determinism, which was a belief in Fate, he substituted what he considered the determinism of Freud.⁶⁴ He arrived at an interpretation of his characters in the light of modern science, which would give living reality to the poetic, but primitive, Greek Fates. That man is the victim of powers he cannot control is clearly stated in the Greek drama, but the modern explanation of what these powers are and how they work is far more complex than the solution offered by the Greeks.⁶⁵

O'Neill's answer was to treat his characters from the point of view of philosophic determinism. In working out the behavior of Orin, he cannot rely upon Fates, Furies, or Gods; he must find the cause elsewhere. For the Orestes furies he substitutes the "Puritan conviction of man born to sin and punishment."⁶⁶ Orin's furies are within him; they are his conscience. The development of the Abe Mannon character can be viewed as his "sexual frustration by his Puritan sense of guilt turning love to lust."⁶⁷ For the awful sense of fate in the Greek drama, he substitutes "a psychological fate"--in which the goal one seeks is outside the capacity attainment.

This conception of psychological fate is followed in a later note by a clear statement of the deterministic principle.⁶⁸

The unavoidable entire melodramatic action must be felt as working out a psychic fate from the past--thereby attaining

⁶⁴Victor E. Hanzeli, "The Progeny of Atreus," Modern Drama (May, 1960, No. 1), p. 80.

⁶⁵Winther, op. cit., p. 178.

⁶⁶O'Neill, Notes, p. 5.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 16.

⁶⁸Winther, op. cit., p. 178.

tragic significance--or else! A hell of a problem, a modern tragic interpretation of classic fate without benefit of gods--for it must, before everything, remain modern psychological play--fate springing out of the family.⁶⁹

In Mourning Becomes Electra, psychological fate or determinism has its roots in the parent-child relationship and Puritan conscience. It is not an exemplification of the Greek religious problem of fate, for O'Neill has reconceived the old doctrine of Nemesis in terms of the more or less modern biological and psychological doctrine of cause and effect.⁷⁰

It has been noted that O'Neill had stressed the internal and external conflicts between mind and body in Strange Interlude and, to a lesser extent, in The Emperor Jones. However, it was never expressed more strikingly than in Mourning Becomes Electra. The central motives of the play, the clash between milieu and man, between man and woman that do not fit together, are the source of the drama.⁷¹

O'Neill was aware of the catastrophe of civilization rotting and collapsing when he wrote the Electra. In the Greek drama the Erinyes are followed by the Eumendies which augur the beginning of a new age. But O'Neill lacks the faith of a new order. With few exceptions the end of his characters is foreshadowed at the beginning. They begin with a "curse" from which they cannot escape. Locked up in their original sin, they have no recourse to original faith.⁷²

⁶⁹O'Neill, Notes, p. 16.

⁷⁰Barrett Clark, Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays (New York: Dover Pub., Inc., 1947), p. 124.

⁷¹Stamm, op. cit., p. 10.

⁷²Slochower, op. cit., p. 388.

It is by a close adherence to determinism that O'Neill achieves a tragedy parallel to the Greek Electra theme. He cannot pass the responsibility for the behavior of his characters into the custody of capricious gods. He must make his audience realize that there is a sufficient and a human reason for their behavior. This he has done by tying the family's past history to its present state, following along the deterministic practice of Ibsen, where there is a fine parallel in Romersholtm.⁷³ O'Neill did not model after this play, but the technique of accounting for the behavior of the characters is similar--because Ibsen, like O'Neill was a determinist.⁷⁴ This method gave the needed modern interpretation to make the Electra story convincing to a contemporary audience.

Psychological forces determined the fate of the characters in Mourning Becomes Electra. They are products of their cultural and generic environment. In every instance the psychological symmetry of the characters in Mourning Becomes Electra is in itself an expression of the family fate.⁷⁵ It is as if each is a fragment of a rotten whole.

This drama, in which a patrician family of New England introverts suffers the fate of the descendants of Atreus, not because it is under the curse of the gods, but because of its peculiar late Puritan psychological disposition, has much more power over the feelings than Strange

⁷³Winther, op. cit., p. 183.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Doris Alexander, "Psychological Fate in Mourning Becomes Electra," Publications of the Modern Language Association, 68 (1953), p. 932.

Interlude. The psycho-analytical dissolution of the characters is less complete than in the case of Nina Leeds; they do not so much give the impression of being puppets going through movements dictated by a complicated machinery of inhibitions, fixations, and compensations. It is the definite historical setting that lends them reality and also the spectators' recollection of their Greek prototypes.

It does not seem to be an accident that so many modern dramatists attempt to write new versions of the great plays of antiquity. Their psycho-analytical methods do not permit them to create new dramatic characters, but they are capable of explaining in an interesting way characters created by somebody else and enjoying eternal life in the consciousness of mankind.

With consummate skill O'Neill treats one of the great themes of American literature: the tragedy of the Puritans who have kept an austere and exacting method of life after having lost the religious faith from which the method sprang. The minds of the Mannon family are perverted by the poisons bred by this very situation. They are impelled by their violent sympathies and antipathies to deeds of horror. Christine Mannon betrays and murders her husband; their children revenge their father, and suffer the consequences of their deed. In doing this they pass through a series of painful mental and physical changes that bring death to Orin, the son, and tearless solitude to Lavinia, the daughter.

Orin

(In a pitiful pleading whisper) Vinnie! (He stares at her with the lost stricken expression for a moment more--then the obsessed wild look returns to his eyes--with harsh mockery) Another act of justice, eh? You want to drive me to suicide as I drove Mother! An eye for an eye, is that it? But--(He stops abruptly and stares before him, as if this idea were suddenly taking hold of his tortured imagination

and speaks fascinatedly to himself) Yes! That would be justice--now you are Mother! She is speaking now through you! (More and more hypnotized by this train of thought) Yes! It's the way to peace--to find her again--my lost island--Death is an Island of Peace, too--Mother will be waiting for me there--(With excited eagerness now, speaking to the dead) Mother! Do you know what I'll do then? I'll get on my knees and ask your forgiveness--and say--(His mouth grows convulsed, as if he were retching up poison) I'll say, I'm glad you found love, Mother! I'll wish you happiness--you and Adam! (He laughs exultantly) You've heard me! You're here in the house now! You're calling me! You're waiting to take me home! (He turns and strides toward the door).

Lavinia

No, Orin! No!

Orin

Get out of my way, can't you? Mother's waiting!⁷⁶

.....

Lavinia

(Without looking at him, picking up the words of the chanty--with a grim writhen smile) I'm not bound away--not now, Seth. I'm bound here--to the Mannon dead!

Seth

Don't go in there, Vinnie!

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! Living alone here with the dead is a worst act of justice than death or prison! I'll never go out or see anyone!

Seth

Ayeh. And I ain't heard a word you've been saying, Vinnie.

Lavinia

You go now and close the shutters and nail them tight.⁷⁷

⁷⁶Neill, Nine Plays, pp. 854-855.

⁷⁷Ibid., pp. 866-67.

No ray of light enters the darkness of this tragedy. Its effect is one of unrelieved terror.⁷⁸

O'Neill contended that another determining factor which causes fate is heredity. Charles Patterson states that heredity is the most important factor in determining physical characteristics such as size, color of hair, color of eyes, length of forearm, mental ability or defect, susceptibility to certain types of disease, temperament, emotional tone, and various units of behavior including reflexes, impulses, and tendencies to act with reference to certain ends.⁷⁹

The Mannon women physically resemble Marie Brantome and all of the men have a family resemblance. The fatal likeness of the Mannon women to Marie Brantome coupled with the heredity traits of the men brings forth a flame of fury which makes possible the love and hatred that spread their deadly virus throughout the lives of the characters and determine their tragic destruction.

Orin looks like his father and Brant also bears the family resemblance inherited from his father, the grand uncle of Orin. Brant is attracted to Christine, because she resembles his mother, and he hates Ezra just as Orin hates his father, for he also is in love with his mother. The same thing holds true for Lavinia and accounts for her love for Brant, which turns to hatred when her affections are spurned. Orin recognized this, as is revealed by his comment on Lavinia's brief love

⁷⁸Stamm, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

⁷⁹Charles H. Patterson, Moral Standards: An Introduction to Ethics (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1957), p. 334.

affair in San Francisco.⁸⁰

Orin

Wilkins reminded you of Brant---

Lavinia

No!

Orin

And that's why you suddenly discarded mourning in Frisco and brought new clothes--in Mothers' colors.⁸¹

The determining factor of heredity influences all of the plays of O'Neill where parents and children appear. In the Puritan plays, of which Mourning Becomes Electra is one, and in Dynamo it is all powerful.⁸² In this direct transfer of attitudes from one generation to another lies a concept of fate.⁸³

O'Neill's two ideas for a psychological fate meet in his concept of the family, the original cause of all his causes. O'Neill, of course, was clearly aware that his fate was a family fate. In fact, he designed every aspect of Mourning Becomes Electra with a family fate in mind.⁸⁴

Among the social institutions that influence behavior, the home is probably the most important. The attitudes, moral standards, religious beliefs, cultural patterns, and social ideals of the home are bound to have a lasting effect on the lives of children who are reared under its

⁸¹O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. 841.

⁸²Stamm, op. cit., p. 841.

⁸³Alexander, op. cit., p. 932.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 933.

influence. When home conditions are favorable for the proper growth and development of the child, the probability is very high that he will become a happy and useful member of society. Unfavorable home conditions usually have the opposite effect.⁸⁵

As Lavinia says to Seth: "There's no rest in this house which Grandfather built as a temple of Hate and Death." This is a fact that Seth understood, for he had already said, "There's been evil in that house since it was first built in hate--and it's kept growin' there ever since, as what's happened there has proved." In this play it is not a supernatural power acting arbitrarily with a vision of the end desired that causes evil to flourish in the House of Mannon. Love, jealousy, hate and a puritanic conscience were the moving factors that laid the foundations for the tragic end of the Mannon family. The motivating forces are inward, psychological, complex, but not supernatural.

Marie Brantome became the type loved by the Mannons. David won her away from his brother Abe, who then forced David into poverty which ended in suicide. Abe and David were not the only ones in the family who had been attracted to Marie. Abe's son Ezra had also loved her.

Seth

He was only a boy then, but was crazy about her, too, like a youngster would be. His mother was stern with him, while Marie, she made a fuss over him and petted him.

Lavinia

Father, too!

⁸⁵Patterson, op. cit., p. 339.

Seth

Ayeh--but he hated her worse than anyone when it got found out she was his uncle David's fancy woman.⁸⁶

Ezra hated Marie Brantome, but when he married, the influence of his early love determined the type of woman that he chose for his wife. Marie had made "a fuss over him and petted him," and determined for him what his future destiny should be. Without his will and all unconscious to the powers at work, the child's mind and tastes were formed in the direction of a destiny he could not foresee and that he would have fled from in terror could he have known its tragic implications. Brant, the son of Marie, gives the clue to the deterministic chain. In speaking to Lavinia, Brant says:

You're so like your mother in some ways. Your face is the dead image of hers. And look at your hair. You won't meet hair like yours and hers again in a month of Sundays. I only know of one other woman who had it. You'll think it strange when I tell you. It was my mother.

.....

Yes, she had beautiful hair like your mother's, that hung down to her knees, and big, deep, sad eyes that were blue as the Caribbean Sea.⁸⁷

In an earlier passage Christine is described as having "deepest eyes, of a dark violet hue."

O'Neill makes it clear that it was Christine's likeness to Marie that determined Ezra's falling in love, and it was the peculiar movement and vital grace of her body that inspired his passion. Seth emphasizes this quality in his description of Marie. He says:

⁸⁶O'Neill, Nine Plays, pp. 728-729.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 704.

Marie? She was always laughin' and singin';--frisky and full of life--with something free and wild about her like an animile. Purty she was, too!...Hair just the color of your Maw's and yourn she had.⁸⁸

Compare this with the author's description of Christine and the fatal similarity is complete. "She has a fine, voluptuous figure and she moves with a flowing animal grace."

When old Abe Mannon brought Marie Brantome into his house as a servant he started a chain of events that moved with dread certainty to the destruction of the Mannon family.⁸⁹ O'Neill has not rested all of his argument upon so slight a chain of evidence, but has given his family history validity and power by revealing the social complex of New England Puritan heritage as the fit medium for nurturing this particular series of events.

The house which Lavinia recognized as a "temple of hate and death" was to Christine equally horrible in form and spirit. Christine gives expression to her horror as follows:

Each time I come back after being away it appears more like a sepulchre! The "whited" one of the Bible--pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray ugliness! It's just like old Abe Mannon to build such a monstrosity--as a temple for his hatred.⁹⁰

The house becomes a symbol of the conflict between love and the moral code. This particular moral code determines how the Mannons shall act in relation to each other, to the community, and to the state. It fixes the mask which passes for virtue to the casual observer. But

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 728.

⁸⁹Winther, op. cit., pp. 179-181.

⁹⁰O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. 699.

underneath the exterior calm there surges a deep, fiery, passionate life which may for a time be suppressed but is never subdued.⁹¹

The puritan conscience is destructive. It poisons love.⁹² In Mourning Becomes Electra the puritan conviction of the sinfulness of sex conquered whatever desire the characters had for love.

The Mannons inherited from their Puritan ancestors their moral code without the religious faith originally bound up with it. Cut off from its religious roots, the Puritan moral code retains its power over the Mannons because it is the basis of their self-respect and aristocratic family pride. Having lost all relation to their vital and expansive impulses, it becomes a power for death.⁹³

In Mourning Becomes Electra, man's unconscious sexual desire for his mother predetermines relationships with other women. Thus, Orin could never truly love a woman who was not like his mother. Lavinia, his sister, was the only woman like his mother. Therefore, he developed an incestuous love for her. O'Neill would have his character trapped psychologically, using the Freudian concept that man's adult relationship with a woman is in part predetermined by the development of his unconscious sexual strivings for his mother, and that a woman's relationship with a man is predetermined in complementary fashion.⁹⁴

⁹¹Winther, op. cit., pp. 181-182.

⁹²Alexander, op. cit., p. 932.

⁹³Rudolph Stamm, "The Orestes Theme in Three Plays by Eugene O'Neill, T. S. Eliot, and Jean Paul Sarte," English Studies, 30 (October, 1949), p. 246.

⁹⁴Bowen, op. cit., p. 168.

Lavinia loved her father. Because Brant and Wilkins reminded her of him, she was also attracted to them.

Mourning Becomes Electra is the drama of determinism. Human existence in it is a closed circle, in which there is no escape, no freedom possible from the working of natural and psychological laws of a mechanistic type. Orin struggles in the web of a malevolent spider. The possibility of expiation and purification, known to the Greeks and to Goethe, is gone. Thus O'Neill evokes in his spectators a terror that is colder and more hopeless than that excited by any classical tragedy.⁹⁵

⁹⁵Stamm, "The Orestes Theme in Three Plays," p. 247.

CONCLUSION

Eugene O'Neill's concept of determinism is that life is an unsuccessful struggle with fate as shown in The Emperor Jones, Strange Interlude, and Mourning Becomes Electra. O'Neill believed that there is a curse that man cannot escape. This curse is man's struggle with his own fate, his own past, for often unattainable goals. Man dreams of success--"beauty beyond the horizon," struggles vainly to achieve it, and suffers inevitable defeat. Although there is no answer to life but death, only through his struggle does man acquire any hope.

Each play reveals at some point that man realizes that he is not equal to his self-concept. The blame for this fault does not rest with man, but with the nature of humanity. Despite great variation in focus and interest, certain factors remain constant enough throughout O'Neill's plays to make his work appear as a continuous philosophic investigation of the riddle of falsehood at the core of life. His plays are eerie with the ghosts of terrible dissatisfactions and of desperate guilt; and their darkness is hardly relieved by a hovering conviction that there is power in love and that an ultimate beneficent grandeur exists beyond the groping and raging consciousness of man, for it is in tragedy itself that men are shown to have attained their desires. Jones, in death, preserves the magnificent isolation he had wanted; Lavinia Mannon, who has dedicated herself to the punishment of a wrong, shuts herself away from life as the final phase of her life work. In an ironic way, death and suffering are always the price of attainment, while back of this human scene is

"an infinite, insane energy which creates and destroys without other purpose than to pass eternity in avoiding thought," and is sometimes called God.⁹⁶

In The Emperor Jones, Brutus Jones tried to take on the actions and behavior of the white man. He attempted to escape from his past, not only his immediate past, but his racial past. In this, he necessarily failed and in failing he underwent a psychological regression. While undergoing this psychological regression he retreated into himself, but even more than that he reverted to the racial characteristics of his African heritage. His fate is to be inevitably destroyed by this heritage which he tries so desperately to escape.

Jones's goal was a fraudulent external success of position, of possession, and of security. He tried to achieve this by assuming for himself those advantages usually reserved for "de white quality" in any normal society. Jones attempted to become something he was not, a ruler of his own kingdom, using the methods and machinations of the white man's civilization to remain in power. It was, therefore, impossible for Jones to continually maintain this facade--the trappings of an alien civilization that he wrapped around himself.

Jones failed miserably to achieve his goal, not because of the natives (they never touched him), but because of the inner workings of his mind. The subconscious is much more powerful than the conscious and under the pressure of fear his true human nature was exposed. Jones's fraud is revealed not only to the audience but to himself and at that point his "primitiveness" asserted itself and reduced him to a groveling

⁹⁶Gassner, O'Neill, p. 106.

human that was little more than animal.

Strange Interlude shows Nina as she spends a lifetime searching for the happiness and contentment that she feels should be hers. She is destined to fail in making her life a successful one because of many factors. Her upbringing by a father who could not bear to let any other man dominate her was one cause. While, another was the necessity to abort the child that she felt would give her life the meaning that was necessary. Nina Leeds is a victim of social pressures and conventionality. She is an arrogant individual and this arrogance makes her blind to any wishes except her own. However, her conventionality makes it impossible for her to openly rebel against social amenities although she uses whatever devious methods necessary to achieve her goal. Because of this, she loses her sense of personal judgement, her soul, and in a sense becomes an automaton whose life is merely a "strange dark interlude in the electrical display of God the Father."

In Mourning Becomes Electra, the latest and most sophisticated of the three works studied in detail, there is a strange shifting of allegiances among the characters which indicates the unusual structure of the family. Although the play and its characters are much more sophisticated than in O'Neill's earlier works, this only means that their downfall is more complicated, not less certain.

The characters in this play are guided by a sense of damnation which overshadows the home and everyone in it. There is no escape from a heredity of hate and revenge, a home of shadowy darkness, and an inherited moral code of Puritan ancestry which refuses to let any, except those members of the Mannon family who are too involved to solve any problem concerning themselves without resorting to self-destruction,

know of or deal with the situation.

Eugene O'Neill's concept of man is that he is to a degree at odds with external forces, but even more than that his battle is egocentric. This self-centeredness makes him become a victim of his exalted concept of his place in a moral world. His inability to live up to his expectations leads to despair and an anxiety that life is meaningless. O'Neill offers a remedy for this anxiety. His plays declare that the meaning of life is its inevitable progression toward death. This is not, of course, an assertion which gives meaning to any of the particularities of life. In fact, it drains them of meaning. But it is a way of redeeming existence from meaningless anarchy by showing that its pattern is basically simple and imperturbable. The bleakest philosophy is preferable to chaos.⁹⁷

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 122.

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