

Subversive Sexuality  
in  
Four Eugene O'Neill Plays  
of  
His Middle Period

by

Birk Ernest Sproxton

submitted  
to

The Department of English  
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SUBVERSIVE SEXUALITY  
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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of  
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## Introduction

### "Those Profound Hidden Conflicts"

#### I

Sexuality is a main theme in the plays of Eugene O'Neill. The consequences of a suspected infidelity is the burden of his very first attempt at dramatic work, a sketch called "A Wife for a Life," and the conflicts a virginal young woman creates for herself by posing as promiscuous are central to the last work he completed in his lifetime, A Moon for the Misbegotten. In the three decades between these works (1913 to 1943), O'Neill wrote a number of plays which won him critical and popular success and extended the experiences of his audiences into the emotionally charged subject of sexuality. O'Neill was part of that generation of literary rebels who came to prominence in the United States in the 1920's and initiated what has been described as the "sexual revolution" in modern American literature.<sup>1</sup> Like his contemporaries, O'Neill was inclined to "explore the full potentialities of the sexual theme"<sup>2</sup> in his work.

O'Neill and his fellow writers gained impetus in their literary explorations of the sexual theme from the insights of the new psychologies, especially Freudian psychoanalysis. The exact nature of that impetus is difficult to assess: as any reader will acknowledge, there are great differences between discursive psychological treatises and the concentrated language structures we call literature. The nature of the relationships between psychology and literature is further complicated by that the fact that these psychologies were themselves in a state of evolution: the relationships were dynamic, rather than static,

a shifting interplay of new ideas, changing attitudes and values.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time that these difficulties are recognized, it is possible to generalize about the relations between literature and psychology. Writing in the 1960's, Paul Goodman observes that "as a writer I do not 'apply' the findings of psychology; but I write as I experience, and I have been brought up to experience 'psychologically.'"<sup>4</sup> And Goodman acknowledges that one of the areas of experience that he is able to treat with "diminished superstitiousness and prejudice" because of a revolution of attitudes is the sexual part of life.

The contemporary tendency, like the ancient, is to portray the sexual scene just as it is whatever it is, and in the good writers, to go on from there. What is often very problematic and difficult, but it does not help to have romantic conventions or anti-romantic conventions, nor again moral prejudices, nor anatomizing indifference. Because of the psychological revolution, it is easier for the contemporary writer (and reader) to accept sexual behavior as it is and to proceed to cope with the problematic.<sup>5</sup>

The substance of Goodman's first remark that I have quoted—that an author works from experience—is the position that O'Neill took when he was pressed, as he often was, to answer the charge that his work was directly influenced by psychoanalysis. But because O'Neill was himself engrossed in the dynamics of the changes that Goodman is able to look back upon and describe from a distance, the playwright was not able or willing to say that he had been brought up psychologically. He came very close to it, however, and the weight of biographical evidence shows that psychological experience was indeed a significant part of O'Neill's life and had a shaping influence on his treatment of sexuality in his plays and his more discursive statements about style and technique in dramatic characterization and construction.

## II

O'Neill's middle period, especially the years between 1926 and 1933, offers itself as a focus for reevaluation of his sexual themes. By 1926 O'Neill was established as a major playwright. The Great God Brown, opening in January of that year, was well-received, and showed that O'Neill still had more to offer after the earlier success of Beyond the Horizon, The Emperor Jones, Anna Christie, The Hairy Ape, and Desire Under the Elms.<sup>6</sup> Yet the next few years marked a new stage in his career: it was a period of great achievement in O'Neill's public life and great change in his private life. As a brief sketch will show, the personal transformations are linked to his treatment of sexuality in his published writings.

In his work diary for December 1925 O'Neill wrote a cryptic note, "New era begins."<sup>7</sup> At this time O'Neill had decided that he needed help to curb his drinking—which was threatening to destroy his ability to write. As a young man he had resolved to be "an artist or nothing."<sup>8</sup> Now he had to choose: "write, or drink and die."<sup>9</sup> O'Neill's friend and co-worker, Kenneth Macgowan, made an appointment for the playwright with psychiatrist Dr. G.V. Hamilton. O'Neill saw this date as "A ray of hope amid general sick despair."<sup>10</sup>

At this time Hamilton was conducting a series of interviews with married people on sex in marriage. For participation in the survey Hamilton offered advice on personal problems. O'Neill began meeting with Hamilton early in 1926, and though both the interviews for the research study and the private consultations were concluded in a matter

of six weeks, O'Neill was able to stop drinking, and with only a few lapses, remained "abstinent the rest of his days." O'Neill later referred to these sessions (incorrectly) as his "analysis."<sup>11</sup>

These sessions not only helped O'Neill in his resolve to stop drinking, they also prompted him to make an examination of his personal life and family past which he recorded in two private papers. These papers have been brought into the public domain by O'Neill's biographer, Louis Sheaffer.<sup>12</sup> One document is a diagram which charts O'Neill's life from birth to adolescence. The second document is a prose summary of his family's life before his birth. The latter, written in fragmentary sentences, records O'Neill's perceptions of circumstances attendant upon his birth. Vexing problems of sexual behavior and the consequent disruption of family life are noted explicitly. "E" stands for Eugene in this summary, "M" for his mother.

. . . husband talks of large family but she knows his stinginess would make this difficult for her—series of brought-on abortions—(defiance of husband?—how did she justify this with religion (?) [as Roman Catholic] did this mark beginning of break with religion which was to leave her eventually entirely without solace?) Finally pregnant this child, E, not wanted at first (?) then desire on both parents' parts it should be a girl.

E born with difficulty—M sick but nurses child—starts treatment with Doc, which eventually winds up in start of nervousness, drinking & drug-addiction. No signs of those before.<sup>13</sup>

As any reader of O'Neill will recognize, this is the raw material for what became, fifteen years later, Long Day's Journey into Night, O'Neill's autobiographical masterpiece.

What is more, these documents provide an essential context of the plays O'Neill was working on at that time, or immediately after—Lazarus Laughed, Strange Interlude, Dynamo, and Mourning Becomes Electra.<sup>14</sup>



And the experience of working with Hamilton seems to have stimulated O'Neill's imagination to formulate ideas for new plays and to develop new methods for those he was working on.

In March of 1926, O'Neill noted with excitement "new ideas on everything crowding up—think I've got hold of the right method for doing "Strange Interlude" when I come to it"; and on May 17 he began working with what he called "speech-thought method" for the plays.<sup>15</sup> In April, meanwhile, he recorded his "germ idea" for "Greek tragedy plot in modern setting"<sup>16</sup>—Mourning Becomes Electra. O'Neill continued to work on Lazarus Laughed (completing it for publication late in 1927).

1926 marked another beginning for O'Neill. That summer he met Carlotta Monterey whom he had not seen since 1923 during rehearsals for The Hairy Ape. O'Neill continued to see her, and eventually left his second wife, Agnes Boulton O'Neill, and their two children, Shane and Oona, and eloped to Europe with Carlotta in February 1928. While in Europe O'Neill completed Dynamo, using a variation of his Strange Interlude method, and the masterpiece of this period in his career, Mourning Becomes Electra.

When O'Neill returned to America, he began a new relationship with his public inasmuch as he permitted publication of excerpts from his working notes for Mourning Becomes Electra.<sup>17</sup> The first note links the play to the early months of 1926. These excerpts are important for the light they shed on the process of writing Electra, a play of "murderous love and hate,"<sup>18</sup> and for O'Neill's concept of "psychological fate—fate springing from the family."<sup>19</sup> This concept, one of the few aesthetic ideas O'Neill left us, links the play to the

period of "analysis."

One other group of published pieces is intimately linked to the period immediately following O'Neill's "reformation."<sup>20</sup> These are the American Spectator essays published in 1932 and 1933.<sup>21</sup> In the first of these short sketches O'Neill describes problems which he had in fact been dealing with for some years. He says that the task of the modern dramatist is how to "express those profound hidden conflicts which the probings of psychology continue to disclose to us."<sup>22</sup> O'Neill asserts that the dramatist "must find some method to present this inner drama in his work, or confess himself incapable of portraying one of the most characteristic preoccupations and uniquely significant spiritual impulses of his time." O'Neill sees the use of masks as the best method, since the mask is the main link between drama and psychology. "For what, at bottom, is the new psychological insight into human cause and effect but a study in masks, an exercise in unmasking?" The use of masks would allow "a new and truer characterization" for a new drama which would move beyond the limits of mere representational realism.<sup>23</sup> The sketches are retrospective even though two of them are cast in such a way as to suggest that O'Neill was broaching a new problem. He refers to a series of his own earlier masked plays, argues that such classics as Hamlet and Faust should be revived with masks, and ends with the notion that theatre somehow can revive the religious spirit in modern man.

O'Neill's work diary entries suggest the basic ideas for his American Spectator sketches also come from the "new" era beginning in 1926. In a note for 17 August 1932, O'Neill records his work on

the notes: "'Notes on Masks' for Nathan literary newspaper 1st issue—expanding old notes—which I don't want to bother doing, damn it!"<sup>24</sup> These notes may have been a reworking of "long-cherished ideas & ideals about the theatre"<sup>25</sup> which O'Neill had worked on in 1927, but did not publish, for an introduction to Lazarus Laughed. The American Spectator series, therefore, can be seen as a summing up of ideas essentially worked out shortly after his reformation.

To this point in the chapter I have been reviewing the material which argues for a reevaluation of O'Neill's sexual themes in the plays issuing from the period 1926 to 1932. What we have are (1) private documents which show O'Neill as subject and analyst attempting to understand himself and the forces which made him, (2) publication of working notes outlining a concept of "psychological fate," and (3) public assertions about the necessity for the dramatist to deal with hidden conflicts revealed to us by modern psychology. I have suggested that there is an "inner continuity"<sup>26</sup> to these documents, that the published statements are resonant with the themes of the autobiographical documents. Furthermore, I have suggested that the four plays completed during this period also resonate with each other, and with the autobiographical papers and the published theoretical pieces. Since the play is the thing, a word is in order on these works.

All four plays attest to the critical commonplaces that the twenties was a time of technical experimentation for O'Neill and that his work is markedly uneven.<sup>27</sup> In fact the plays make an incongruous group at first glance. Lazarus Laughed and Dynamo were both dismal failures in production. On the other hand, Strange Interlude was an

striking popular success and Mourning Becomes Electra won great critical acclaim.<sup>28</sup> Lazarus, O'Neill's most complete statement of mystical themes, remained a favorite of his despite its failure in production,<sup>29</sup> whereas the other three plays belong to the tradition of iconoclastic works assaulting the values of American culture, the smiling aspects of life, with a vengeance.

Yet this very diversity makes the plays particularly valuable. Taken together, they show the playwright in crisis, struggling to find an appropriate artistic vehicle for his vision of life. They are therefore also especially valuable for an examination of his treatment of sexual themes. Elements which are fully integrated into the texture and design of the late masterpieces are here obvious, often painfully so, and therefore more amenable to analysis and discussion. At the same time, they are not the works of a tyro—O'Neill was plainly an accomplished dramatist—and these plays show him moving into a new maturity.<sup>30</sup>

These four plays show two important strands of O'Neill's vision. On the one hand, there is a strand of idealistic mysticism, a drive to discover (or recover) a world in which man can be at peace, a world where he can belong. In his autobiographical diagram O'Neill labelled this state "Nirvana"<sup>31</sup>; in the plays it is a peace "beyond desire"<sup>32</sup> (Strange Interlude), the knowledge that there is death for men but not for Man (Lazarus Laughed), the bliss of union with the Mother (Dynamo), an island of Edenic innocence (Mourning Becomes Electra). On the other hand, opposed to this idealistic strand and always in tension with it, there is a strand which acknowledges that man is a creature

of the flesh, fated to love sexually, limited by space and time.

In this dissertation I contend that in his fragmentary theoretical statements and his plays completed during the period 1926-32 O'Neill projects a subversive vision. In the plays the subversive force is the power of sexuality. In the theoretical pieces, O'Neill generalizes his notion of subversion in the idea of unmasking. The "profound hidden conflicts" to which O'Neill alluded in his "Memoranda on Masks" are the conflicts between sexuality and idealistic values. The theoretical concept and dramatic constructs will be shown to be extensions of personal and family experiences described in O'Neill's autobiographical papers. This dissertation will therefore advance O'Neill studies (1) by showing the autobiographical roots and dramatic correlations of the theoretical fragments and (2) by evaluating the four plays in light of the theme of subversive sexuality. This dissertation will show that O'Neill's artistic success is dependent upon the richness of his exploration of the theme. Strange Interlude will be shown to be partly successful, and the failures of Lazarus Laughed and Dynamo will be shown to result from an inadequate presentation of the sexual life of the characters. The most satisfying play, Mourning Becomes Electra, most fully acknowledges the subversive power of sexuality, its capacity to call into question the idealistic self-concept of the characters, the value of marriage and family life, and the morality of the larger culture embodied in the play.

"Sexuality" is here used in the extended sense to signify behavior which seeks pleasure from any zone of the body. "Sexuality" includes, but is not limited to, adult sexual intercourse or genital sexuality.

This enlarged sense of the term is consistent with psychoanalytic usage which describes a continuum of behavior from infantile through adult phases and in different modes of expression (as in oral and anal sexuality). "Sex," "sexual," and "sexuality" therefore include "phenomena which are manifestly non-sexual but are latently (or inferentially) derivatives or analogues of sexual phenomena . . . ." <sup>33</sup>

"Subversive" is used in the sense defined in Webster's Third New International Dictionary: "having a tendency to overthrow, upset, or destroy . . . ." To subvert connotes the power of a force within, under, beneath, or below a given body (physical, social, political) to emerge through or surface or turn over that body.

Sexuality becomes subversive when its claim to expression is at odds with an individual or social ideal. The concept may be seen in its most condensed form in notes O'Neill made for his plays. In preliminary notes for what became Dynamo, O'Neill writes of conflicts between husband and wife being rooted in their sexual desire for each other. On the one hand, the mother is frustrated in her life because she has married "against her better judgment, compelled by [her husband] masculinity . . . ." <sup>34</sup> In this instance it is her judgment which is undermined by her sexual response to her husband. He, in his turn, also senses that he has been betrayed by sexual drives. He loses a struggle with her to direct their son's future because of his sexual needs: he "blames her sex for triumphing—her feminine body betraying his will as it had when he first fell in love with her." <sup>35</sup> The father is also dissatisfied with his life and blames her sexual power: "Her body has remained in full control over his will." <sup>36</sup> These instances

show both people bound by the idea of marriage—their sexuality is illicit—and both feel that their self-images are undermined by sexuality. Discord in family life results from that inner frustration.

O'Neill's notes also show how illicit sexuality challenges the social institution of marriage and the cultural values related to it. In working notes for Mourning Becomes Electra O'Neill describes how the Christine figure lacks sexual satisfaction in marriage and therefore takes a lover. "A fierce tide of long repressed passion sweeps over her, overthrowing all the religious and social taboos of her training."<sup>37</sup> O'Neill also notes that she "bitterly questions all religion and morality where sex is concerned."<sup>38</sup> This illicit sexual behavior also has implications for the woman's daughter (the Lavinia figure). The daughter is thrown into turmoil when she learns of her mother's affair—"What filth passion is—and yet how it attracts her! She hates herself."<sup>39</sup> These brief notes demonstrate the clarity of the theme in O'Neill's mind. They show sex disrupting a marriage, "overthrowing" religious and social taboos, and undermining a young woman's sense of self.

O'Neill also conceived of the theme of subversive sexuality in a broad historical framework. In 1928 he recorded an idea for a play "of love and passion laid in Renaissance times or before" which contrasts past and contemporary attitudes toward adultery. This note comments on the fascination of illicit sexuality and its power to heighten pleasure:

. . . the idea that when the punishment for infidelity was torture and death in this life, adultery a mortal sin punished by an eternity of torture in the hereafter,

that illicit lovers reached heights of ecstasy of self-sacrifice and elation on giving their bodies and souls that is unknown today—that raised love to a higher spiritual and physical plane by the value they set upon it and the price paid for it.<sup>40</sup>

Here O'Neill contemplates the power of sex within a very broad historical and ethical framework. His notion of ecstatic heights of "self-sacrifice and elation" complements the description of characters who experience bitterness, disgust, and self-loathing.

These working notes show O'Neill's belief that sex whether or not sanctioned by marriage, has the power to take an individual into the heights of human experience or plunge him into the depths of despair.

### III

This present study of O'Neill's treatment of sexuality in his middle period extends existing criticism on the subject. Sheaffer's work, though indispensable, is limited in that his purpose is primarily biographical rather than critical. He considers O'Neill's autobiographical papers as the playwright's "first step towards writing Long Day's Journey into Night."<sup>41</sup> He published the life-chart in his 1968 volume and the family summary in his 1973 volume. In thus separating the documents, Sheaffer presents the chart in the context of O'Neill's life and career up to 1920 (the cut-off point for O'Neill: Son and Playwright) and the family summary in the context of the post-1920 period (substance for O'Neill: Son and Artist). Sheaffer does not deal with their significance for an understanding of O'Neill's



work during the period when they were composed. His two volume study, however, supports an analysis of O'Neill's sexual themes.

Some valuable interpretations nonetheless preceded Sheaffer, and these have the merit of bringing the sexual theme into the body of O'Neill criticism. A useful overview of O'Neill's sexual themes by Charles I. Glicksburg considers a number of O'Neill plays in the context of The Sexual Revolution in Modern American Literature.<sup>42</sup> However, since he assigns only a chapter to O'Neill, Glicksburg's discussions are necessarily cursory. Moreover, he subsumes O'Neill and sex under the rubric of a metaphysical concern with the "relations between man and God,"<sup>43</sup> to quote the playwright's own words, and thus blurs some of O'Neill's more searching insights into the relations among men. Glicksburg subtitles his chapter, "The Tragedy of Love without God" and concludes by asserting that "the heart" of O'Neill's "message as a playwright emerges in Welded, when Michael Cape voices his realization: To love the truth of life—to accept it and be exalted—that's the one faith left to us!"<sup>44</sup> But O'Neill's middle plays abundantly show that the truth of life is difficult to discern indeed and is probably not a single truth at all.

More specialized studies also broach the subject of O'Neill and sexuality. A detailed analysis of The Iceman Cometh argues that the theme of "love is death" is central to the language, setting, characters, and the structure of the action.<sup>45</sup> Though this work convincingly shows how in Iceman "love is man's undoing,"<sup>46</sup> it makes only brief references to the middle plays.

Critics with a psychological bent have attempted to trace patterns of influence between O'Neill's plays and psychological texts.<sup>47</sup> Here we find O'Neill being judged a "Freudian" dramatist and one who would have made a fine psychoanalyst,<sup>48</sup> but we do not find persuasive analysis of O'Neill's plays. Tracing influences can help establish a "literary biography," however, and thus provide information for subsequent critical analyses.<sup>49</sup>

O'Neill's plays have been read in the light of Jungian and neo-Freudian psychologies, and these studies touch on O'Neill's sexual themes.<sup>50</sup> One such study allows that O'Neill works from an eclectic background of psychological theories, but then makes analyses of individuals work within a broad frame to the effect that O'Neill's plays "are attempts to explain human suffering and, somehow, to justify it . . . ." <sup>51</sup> Such an approach allies O'Neill's concerns too closely with the Christianity he was always ready to criticize and understates the importance of sexual themes.

Psychoanalytic critics have been attracted to O'Neill's work. Studies done without benefit of the full biographical picture tend either to offer general psychobiography or to use O'Neill's plays as illustrative evidence for studies of psychological phenomena.<sup>52</sup> In the former case, the critic reads from the works to a reconstruction of the life; in the latter case, the critic focuses on the nature of the psychological phenomena under study rather than on the nature of O'Neill's artistic achievement. The most substantial and influential early psychobiography posits that Desire Under the Elms can be read as O'Neill's

unconscious autobiography and Long Day's Journey into Night as the complementary conscious autobiography.<sup>53</sup> Though this argument is very general and abstract, it has the merit of providing a reference point for this present interpretation of O'Neill's sexual themes.

This present study undertakes an analysis of a narrow but deep current in O'Neill's work, his treatment of sexuality in the middle plays. I have organized my study so as to emphasize the inner continuity between plays, the non-dramatic writings, and the autobiographic context. In Chapter One, I discuss in detail the autobiographic papers and O'Neill's psychological "experience" in his middle period and show how these are related to his public statements on the aesthetics of the drama. Here I demonstrate the connections between these pieces and the four plays under study, and present an abstract of O'Neill's aesthetic of what he called "modern psychological" drama. This chapter shows how O'Neill's sense of structure, his ideas of characterization, and an important cluster of images grow out of his personal experience and take conceptual shape in the theoretical pieces. Each of the subsequent chapters focuses on one of the four plays, with special attention being given to structure, characterization and image patterns. These analyses show how, with varying degrees of artistic success, O'Neill shows sexual impulses surfacing to frustrate and vex not only personal judgment and self-respect, but also religious and social values, the very foundations of what we call culture.

## Notes: Introduction

<sup>1</sup>Charles I. Glicksburg points out that "The sexual revolution in literature gained momentum during the twenties." See The Sexual Revolution in Modern American Literature (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of the impact of psychoanalysis on literature, see Glicksburg (esp. chapter II, pp. 11-22) and Frederick J. Hoffman, Freudianism and the Literary Mind (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957).

For a review of the impact of Freud on the Greenwich Village sub-culture (of which O'Neill was a part during his early years as a playwright) see Leslie Fishbein, "Freud and the Radicals: The Sexual Revolution Comes to Greenwich Village," The Canadian Review of American Studies, Vol. 12 no. 2 (Fall 1981), 173-189.

A biographical discussion of O'Neill in Greenwich Village is by Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), Chapter 20, pp. 325-41. This volume and its companion, O'Neill: Son and Artist (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973) comprise the most complete biographical study of O'Neill. Biographical data used in this chapter have been gleaned from these volumes by Sheaffer, hereafter cited as Son and Playwright and Son and Artist.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Goodman, "The Psychological Revolution and the Writer's Life-View," The Psychoanalytic Review, Vol. 50 no. 3 (Fall 1963), pp. 22-23.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>For performance dates and the length of run for each of these plays, see Jordan Y. Miller, Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic: A Bibliographical Checklist, Second Edition, Revised (Hamden: Archon Books, 1973), Chapter three, pp. 44-61.

<sup>7</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Work Diary, 1924-43, transcribed by Donald Gallup; Preliminary Edition (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1981) Vol. 1 (entry for December, 1925), p. 20. Hereafter cited as Work Diary with volume indicated by Roman numeral.

<sup>8</sup>Eugene O'Neill to George Pierce Baker, 16 July 1914; reprinted in O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism, ed. Oscar Cargill et. al., (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 20.

<sup>9</sup>Travis Bogard, "The Theatre We Worked For": The Letters of Eugene O'Neill to Kenneth Macgowan, ed. Jackson R. Bryer, with introductory essays by Travis Bogard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 82.

<sup>10</sup>Eugene O'Neill, "Scribbling Diary" for 1925, in Work Diary, Vol. II (entry for 27 December), p. 495.

<sup>11</sup>Son and Artist, p. 190.

<sup>12</sup>The diagram is reproduced in Son and Playwright, pp. 505-596; the family summary is quoted in Son and Artist, pp. 510-12.

<sup>13</sup>Son and Artist, p. 511.

<sup>14</sup>The plays were published or produced or both within a relatively well-defined time span. The chart below is based upon Jordan Y. Miller's listing in Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic: A Bibliographic Checklist, Second Edition, Revised (Hamden: Archon Books, 1973); chapters two and three; pp. 15-43 and 44-88.

	Copyrighted	Published	First Production
<u>Strange Interlude</u>	1 July 1927	Feb. 1928	30 Jan. 1928
<u>Lazarus Laughed</u>	12 Nov. 1927	Nov. 1927	9 Apr. 1928
<u>Dynamo</u>	4 Oct. 1928	Oct. 1929	11 Feb. 1929
<u>Mourning Becomes Electra</u>	12 May 1931	Nov. 1931	26 Oct. 1931

Egil Törnqvist suggests the following composition dates for the plays (A Drama of Souls: Studies in O'Neill's Super-naturalistic Techniques [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969], pp. 261-262):

Strange Interlude: notes (Fall 1923), scenario (Summer 1925), first half (Spring Summer 1926), completed (Winter Spring Summer 1927).

Lazarus Laughed: scenario (Summer 1925), half of first draft (Fall 1925), completed (Winter Summer 1926).

Dynamo: idea (Spring 1926), completed (Spring Summer 1928).

Mourning Becomes Electra: idea (Spring 1926), idea (Fall 1928), notes and scenarios (Spring Summer 1929), first draft (Fall 1929), first draft (Winter 1930), second draft (Spring Summer 1930), first and second rewrite (Summer Fall 1930), completed (Winter Spring Fall 1931).

For detailed discussion of the composition process of these plays, see Eugene O'Neill at Work: Newly Released Ideas for Plays, ed. and annotated by Virginia Floyd (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981): Strange Interlude, pp. 68-80; Lazarus Laughed, pp. 92-113; Dynamo, pp. 125-148; Mourning Becomes Electra, pp. 185-209. Hereafter cited as O'Neill at Work.

O'Neill's own cryptic comments on writing these plays may be sampled in his Work Diary, I, March 1925 through November 1931, pp. 16-112; and in his 1925 "Scribbling Diary," in Work Diary, II, esp. June 15-16 (p. 488); September 1-15 (p. 490); October 12 through November 20 (pp. 492-93). The "Scribbling Diary" provides a particularly interesting glimpse of O'Neill's life-style before he gave up drinking.

<sup>15</sup>Work Diary, I (entry for 13 March) p. 23 and entry for May 17, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., entry for 26 April, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes and Extracts from a Fragmentary Work Diary," in American Playwrights on Drama ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), pp. 3-15. (These notes were first published as "O'Neill's Own Story of Electra in the Making" in the New York Herald-Tribune of 3 November 1931.) Hereafter cited as Frenz.

<sup>18</sup> O'Neill's description in his Introduction to the Wilderness Edition of Electra; see The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1935), Wilderness Edition, Vol. 2, p. xiii.

<sup>19</sup> In Frenz, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> See Son and Artist, pp. 188-205, for a discussion of O'Neill's giving up alcohol.

<sup>21</sup> First published in The American Spectator: "Memoranda on Masks," November 1932; "Second Thoughts," December 1932; January "A Dramatist's Notebook," January 1933; reprinted in O'Neill and His Plays, ed. Oscar Cargill, pp. 116-122. Subsequent references are to the latter source hereinafter cited as Cargill.

<sup>22</sup> Cargill, p. 116.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Work Diary, I, entry for 17 August, p. 137.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., entry for 8 August, p. 44. See also p. 45 (17 August) where O'Neill notes, "Introduction (no go—will have to abandon this idea for the present—too many things—needs a book which I ought to write sometime)."

<sup>26</sup> Richard Dana Skinner, Eugene O'Neill: A Poet's Quest (first published 1935; reprinted New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), p. xi. Skinner was the first to develop, with O'Neill's assistance, a chronology of composition; this was subsequently revised, corrected, and updated to include the entire O'Neill canon by Egil Törnqvist in A Drama of Souls. See footnote 14 above.

<sup>27</sup> See Frederick J. Hoffman's remarks on O'Neill's experimentation in The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade, Revised Edition (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 257. Louis Sheaffer entitles Chapter Three of Son and Artist "Uneven Playwright."

<sup>28</sup> Jordan Y. Miller comments that O'Neill had difficulty finding "the key to consistency"; see Playwright's Progress: O'Neill and the Critics (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1965), p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> O'Neill included Lazarus Laughed among those selected for publication in Nine Plays (New York: Horace Liveright, 1932). Jordan Y. Miller, in Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic, Second Edition, notes that the 1932 edition of Nine Plays "later became the Modern Library Giant. . . ." (p. 30), a volume still in print in 1973.

<sup>30</sup> Travis Bogard calls Strange Interlude "the first work of O'Neill's full maturity . . . "; Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 300.

<sup>31</sup> Son and Playwright, p. 506.

<sup>32</sup> The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1955), Vol. I, p. 200. Hereafter references to this three-volume edition will be cited as Plays, followed by the volume number and page number.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Rycroft, A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 152.

<sup>34</sup> O'Neill at Work, p. 134.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 188.



<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 196

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>41</sup> Son and Artist, p. 191.

<sup>42</sup> The Sexual Revolution, pp. 68-81.

<sup>43</sup> O'Neill first made the remark in conversation with Joseph Wood Krutch; the comment is reprinted in O'Neill and His Plays, ed. Cargill, p. 116. Compare O'Neill's statement to the New York Herald-Tribune (16 March 1924) about The Hairy Ape: "The subject here is the same ancient one that always was and 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 it is now with himself, his own past, his attempts 'to belong.'" Quoted in Cargill, p. 111. O'Neill obviously was not afraid to contradict himself. He typically makes categorical pronouncements which have a ring of authenticity and sincerity.

<sup>44</sup> The Sexual Revolution, p. 81.

<sup>45</sup> Winifred Frazer, Love as Death in "The Iceman Cometh": A Modern Treatment of an Ancient Theme (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1967), p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>47</sup> See Arthur H. Nethercot, "The Psychoanalyzing of Eugene O'Neill, Part I," Modern Drama, Vol. 3 no. 3 (December 1960), pp. 242-256; "The Psychoanalyzing of Eugene O'Neill, Part II," Modern Drama, Vol. 3 no. 4 (February 1961), pp. 357-72; "The Psychoanalyzing of Eugene O'Neill: Postscript," Modern Drama, Vol. 8 no. 2 (September 1965), pp. 150-155; "The Psychoanalyzing of Eugene O'Neill, P.P.S.," Modern Drama, Vol. 16 no. 1 (June 1973), pp. 35-48.

<sup>48</sup> W. David Sievers, in Freud on Broadway: A History of Psychoanalysis and the American Drama (New York: Cooper Square, 1970), says O'Neill "epitomizes the Freudian period" in American drama (p. 97). Nethercot concludes his last article in his series (see note 47 above) with the remark that O'Neill, with proper training, would have made "an excellent psychoanalyst himself" (p. 47).

<sup>49</sup> The phrase is used by Jean Chothia in her Forging a Language: A Study of the Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Appendix I, pp. 198-206.

<sup>50</sup> Irwin Jay Koplik, "Jung's Psychology in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill," (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1966); N. Bryllion Fagin briefly alludes to similarities between The Iceman Cometh and the theories of Karen Horney in "Freud on the American Stage," Educational Theatre Journal, Vol. II no. 4 (December 1950), pp. 296-305.

<sup>51</sup> Doris V. Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> J.D. Lichtenberg and Charlotte Lichtenberg write an interesting article on the psychosexual themes in O'Neill's life and three plays written in succession, Mourning Becomes Electra, Ah, Wilderness!, and Days Without End ("Eugene O'Neill and Falling in Love," Psychoanalytic Quarterly, Vol. 41 [1972], pp. 63-89), but work only with the biographical information available in the Gelbs' 1962 study, O'Neill (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962).

George R. Krupp refers briefly to Mourning Becomes Electra for illustrative purposes in his "Identification as a Defense against Anxiety in Coping with Loss," (International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, Vol. 46 [1965], pp. 303-314); L.H. Rubinstein in "The Theme of Electra and Orestes: A Contribution to the Psychopathology of Matricide," (British Journal of Medical Psychology, Vol. 42 [1969], pp. 99-108) makes more extensive analysis of O'Neill's Electra, but, as his title indicates, is concerned essentially with psychopathology rather than literary analysis.

For a more complete listing of psychoanalytic articles on O'Neill, see Albert Rothenberg and Bette Greenberg, The Index of Scientific Creativity: Creative Men and Woman (Hamden: Archon Books, 1974), p. 63; items 1906-1920.

<sup>53</sup> Phillip Weissman, Creativity in the Theatre: A Psychoanalytic Study (New York: Dell Publishing, 1965), Chapters 8 and 12. The psychobiographical Chapter 8 is based on Weissman's earlier article, "Conscious and Unconscious Autobiographical Dramas of Eugene O'Neill," Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, Vol. 5 (1957), pp. 432-460. Chapter 12, on Electra and the psychology of mourning, develops from an earlier article also: "Mourning Becomes Electra and The Prodigal," Modern Drama, Vol. 3 no. 3 (December 1960), pp. 257-259.

For a critique of Weissman and an analysis more sensitive to formal aesthetic matters, see Albert Rothenberg, "Autobiographical Drama: Strindberg and O'Neill," Literature and Psychology, Vol. 17 (1967), pp. 95-114.

## Chapter One

### O'Neill's Modern Psychological Drama

The two most important statements O'Neill made on the aesthetics of the drama were published early in the 1930's, and both are intimately linked to the plays of the middle period. From his "Fragmentary Diary" O'Neill chose excerpts showing the evolution of Mourning Becomes Electra and published them early in November 1931, immediately after the opening of his trilogy.<sup>1</sup> Later, in the summer of 1932, he took up some "old notes"<sup>2</sup> he had made on masks and began to shape them into a series of three articles for the American Spectator;<sup>3</sup> this series was the closest he ever came to a formal presentation of his aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> A close reading of these statements in the context of O'Neill's personal life shows them to have a significant autobiographical quality. They in fact on a theoretical plane parallel O'Neill's quest for understanding on the personal plane. The principal connection between the two levels of exploration is O'Neill's understanding of family dynamics. On the personal level, O'Neill explores his own life within a family context, guided in his exploration by an understanding of contemporary psychology. On the theoretical level, O'Neill outlines a "modern psychological drama," central to which is his notion of fate being shaped by family experience.<sup>5</sup> The theme of subversive sexuality thus has both personal

and aesthetic theoretical dimensions: O'Neill's sense of the power of sexuality is evident in his personal papers; his attempt to find an appropriate form for that knowledge shapes his theoretical position.

This chapter is organized in two main parts. The first focuses on O'Neill's personal contacts with psychology and its relationships to his life and work; here I analyse the autobiographical papers. The second part focuses on O'Neill's public theoretical statements; here I analyse the key documents and present in abstract form O'Neill's principles of a modern psychological drama. In both parts, brief reference will be made to published plays in order to demonstrate inner connections among the completed plays, the autobiographical pieces, and the aesthetic position.

## I

The question of O'Neill's awareness and use of modern psychology has been a matter of much controversy.<sup>6</sup> O'Neill persisted in denying an explicit deliberate use of psychoanalysis, though his position grew more strained as time went on and the evidence of the plays and his own statements began to contradict him. In denying that he drew on psychoanalysis, O'Neill seems to have wanted to avoid inaccurate assessments of his achievements; yet at the same time, when pressed to explain his position, he drew inevitably on the language of his time, and this was colored by the new psychological theories. Finally, in the American Spectator pieces, he announced the importance of psychology for the modern dramatist.

O'Neill's reading and personal correspondence from the early

months of 1925 shows how he became immersed in discussions about literature and psychology.<sup>7</sup> Late in January of that year O'Neill read Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle and found it "interesting but dully written—or translated."<sup>8</sup> At this time, in answer to questions about his use of psychoanalysis, O'Neill typically played down his knowledge of theory. On 25 February 1925 O'Neill wrote to one correspondent:

Playwrights are either intuitively keen analytical psychologists or they aren't good playwrights. I'm trying to be one. To me, Freud only means uncertain conjectures and explanations about truths of the emotional past of mankind that every dramatist has clearly sensed ever since real drama began. I respect Freud's work tremendously—but I'm not an addict! Whatever of Freudianism is in Desire must have walked in "through my unconscious."

Although O'Neill here seems to play down his theoretical knowledge, it is clear that he is exploring the connections between psychology and literature.

With his closer associates O'Neill was less guarded and more open to learning about these connections. On 25 March, O'Neill notes in his personal diary that he attempted to listen to a radio broadcast on "Psychology of Playwriting" delivered by Dr. Louis Bisch, a psychiatrist with whom O'Neill was to spend a considerable amount of time during the summer and fall of that year. Transmission of the broadcast was faulty, according to O'Neill's "Scribbling Diary": "Nothing but noise with only the words 'Eugene O'Neill' distinguishable."<sup>10</sup> No doubt O'Neill pursued the topic of psychology and playwriting with Bisch later in conversation.<sup>11</sup>

Equally important is a letter O'Neill writes to George Jean Nathan on 26 March 1925. O'Neill had been associated with Nathan for some

years now and speaks quite openly about his aims as a playwright, asserting that he wishes to reveal the inner life of New England:

What I think everyone missed in "Desire" is the quality in it I set most store by—the attempt to give an epic tinge to New England's inhibited life—but, to make its inexpressiveness practically expressive, to release it. It's just that—the poetical (in the broadest and deepest sense) vision illuminating even the most sordid and mean blind alleys of life—which I'm convinced is, and is<sup>12</sup> to be, my concern and justification as a dramatist.

O'Neill is beginning to find a language to articulate his aesthetic aims and this language bears traces of the new psychologies. Personal experience clearly helped O'Neill to formulate this brief general statement; his statement of purpose becomes more detailed in his published notes on Electra and in the Spectator essays.

As he made the first steps toward working out an aesthetic, O'Neill was also working on plays and trying to sort out personal problems in his life. June 1925 saw O'Neill begin work on Strange Interlude; in September he wrote the first scenario for Lazarus Laughed. His personal problems also absorbed his energies; he received medical advice from Louis Bisch during this summer and talked with him about divorce.<sup>13</sup> O'Neill also struggled with his drinking and smoking habits: his "Scribbling Diary" shows him meticulously numbering the days in which he is able to go without alcohol and cigarettes. At the end of this year O'Neill met with Dr. Gilbert Hamilton; these meetings led to a dramatic change in O'Neill's life style and gave him personal experience in the therapeutic aspects of psychiatry. This experience requires detailed analysis.

O'Neill was steered by Kenneth Macgowan to Dr. Hamilton who was, at that time, conducting a study of marriage and sex. Macgowan and his wife were participants in the survey, and they thought O'Neill might benefit from the free consultations made available to the participants. For some time, O'Neill and his wife had been fighting bitterly, and Eugene had been drinking so much that his health and work were threatened. The results of O'Neill's meetings with Hamilton were surprising:

In all, for both the sex-research interviews and the consultations afterward, Eugene saw the psychiatrist over a period of only six weeks; yet in this time he arrived, almost miraculously, at a major turning point in his life: he resolved never to drink again. Except for several isolated falls from grace, he was to remain abstinent the rest of his days. Unquestionably, Hamilton played some part in his reformation, but it is difficult to estimate both the nature and the extent of Hamilton's contribution. Authorities on alcoholism agree generally that the afflicted are rarely cured by psychoanalysis, even by years of treatment, yet here was O'Neill taking the pledge while in therapy just a few weeks.

Dr. Hamilton, who told him that he had an Oedipus complex (according to both Macgowan and Jimmy Light), apparently believed that O'Neill was able to reform once he had accepted that oedipal impulses, with consequent guilt feelings, were at the root of his self-destructive drinking. Hamilton seems to have been alone, however, in his view. "Gene kidded about it," Jimmy Light recalls, "when he told me that after much probing and questioning, Hamilton found he had this complex. 'Why, <sup>14</sup>all he had to do,' Gene said, 'was read my play.'"

The change in lifestyle prompted O'Neill to begin to write in a new vein: he sets out explicitly and deliberately to explore ideas for a modern psychological drama. And his consultations with Hamilton led him to write down his personal analysis of his life. Thus we have three important documents issuing from the early months of 1926:



the autobiographical papers, and the first notes for Mourning Becomes Electra.

O'Neill began to work with enthusiasm on Lazarus Laughed and Strange Interlude. He records in his Work Diary for March 13, 1926; "new ideas on everything crowding up—think I've got hold of the right method for doing "Strange Interlude" when I come to it. . . . "<sup>15</sup> For April 26 he writes: "Germ idea use Greek tragedy plot in modern setting—made note. . . . "<sup>16</sup> And then in May he started working on Strange Interlude using a "speech-thought method."<sup>17</sup> Within a few months, he began to shape the great psychological plays, Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra. Because of the importance of the consultations with Hamilton, a detailed analysis of the autobiographical documents is in order.

These papers are of value for a number of reasons. First, they show O'Neill striving to discover the past and to show its relatedness to the present. Such an effort obviously is related to the structure of many of his plays. Second, they show O'Neill thinking explicitly about his family life while freed from the need to find an appropriate aesthetic form. The diagram outlines the life of a single "character"—O'Neill himself—and provides a reference point for his concern with characterization in the plays. Third, in both substance and style the papers illuminate key themes in a number of major plays. Sheaffer in fact treats them as O'Neill's "first step toward writing, some fifteen years later, Long Day's Journey Into Night."<sup>18</sup> More immediately, however, the documents are steps toward the concept of "psychological fate" which O'Neill began to flesh out in Spring 1926 and which took

completed form in his trilogy Mourning Becomes Electra. The documents also provide the context for O'Neill's experimentation with a stream-of-consciousness technique in Strange Interlude. The family summary is written in fragmentary sentences similar to those O'Neill used to reveal the inner thoughts of his character in Interlude. When O'Neill came to work on the play in the spring and summer of 1926, he had some experience in discovering what the associative technique might lead to. And at least one key word from the diagram—"Nirvana"—becomes a key word in a number of subsequent plays. We might say that in the plays of this period O'Neill created dramatic statements out of his maxim: psychological fate means "fate springing out of the family." This concept took fuller and more consequential aesthetic shape in the plays.

The first thing to be said about the diagram and the summary<sup>19</sup> is that they deal with different time spans. The summary discusses the O'Neill family history, its origins and circumstances until the birth of Eugene. O'Neill occasionally glances at later developments and makes connections between early and later events and attitudes. For the main part, the summary focuses on O'Neill's parents and develops a picture of the emotional environment in which Eugene was reared. The diagram, on the other hand, charts Eugene's life from birth into post-adolescence.

A good deal of the family summary must have been based on family conversations. The paper is organized in chronological sequence beginning with O'Neill's parents and their early relationship as it was shaped by their own family backgrounds and by the birth of Jaimie.

Here lies the root of future family conflicts: O'Neill emphasizes the differing social background of his parents. His mother ("M" in the summary) was a "fashionable convent girl—religious and naive" married to a "man's man" a "heavy drinker" who spent "little time with her." She suffered social "ostracism due to husband's profession."

Her father

spoiled her with generous gifts—she always remembers him as contrast to husband's stinginess—also as 'gentleman,' educated, in contrast to husband who is self-educated peasant. M always a bit of snob in reaction to world which finally becomes altogether her husband's world since she has little contact with reality except through him. (510-511)

The second paragraph of the history notes the birth of the "second child" (Edmund) and the circumstances of his death from measles contracted from Jaimie. O'Neill notes the guilt and recrimination between the parents; Mrs. O'Neill is "prostrated by grief—blames herself—husband for keeping her away, bitterly [sic] at mother for lack of care—elder boy as direct cause, unconsciously (?)" (511).

The third paragraph deals with changes in family life following the death of Edmund. Jaimie was sent to school at his father's "command" causing further anxiety for Ella O'Neill, though this was offset in part by his attending the same school as Ella had—"she does not feel this separation as keenly as afterward with E [i.e. Eugene]." At this time Ella's mother dies, her father had already died, and she was "now absolutely alone except for husband and a brother, no good shiftless, whom she despises and never sees . . ." (511).

Then follow two short paragraphs detailing the circumstances of Eugene's birth and his mother's subsequent drug addiction. I quote

these in full, for they show the family base of the theme of subversive sexuality and the concept of psychological fate. Rooted here is the complex of emotional experience that O'Neill tapped so often in his plays. "M" is O'Neill's mother; "E" is Eugene himself.

M evidently shuns idea of another child—guilty about second—husband talks of large family but she knows his stinginess would make this difficult for her—series of brought-on abortions—(defiance of husband?—how did she justify this with religion (?) did this mark beginning of break with religion which was to leave her eventually entirely without solace?) Finally pregnant—this child, E, not wanted at first (?) then desire on both parents' parts it should be a girl.

E born with difficulty—M sick but nurses child—starts treatment with Doc, which eventually winds up in start of nervousness, drinking and drug-addiction. No signs of these before. (511)

Sheaffer points out, rightly, that O'Neill here begins to work towards the writing of Long Day's Journey; it should be added that in this intensely personal summary O'Neill was also working through aspects of the plays he had started to write and which occupied him at the time he composed the summary: Lazarus Laughed and Strange Interlude. The process of recalling the past, of rooting adult life in childhood, is the basic substance of the penultimate scene of Lazarus Laughed (as we shall see below in Chapter Three); while the abortion theme and questions about the authority of religion form an important part of the plot and image patterns in Interlude. And the fixed family base in the summary anticipates the conflicts and struggles—actuated by sexual needs—of Dynamo and Mourning Becomes Electra.

O'Neill's summary also records that his parents felt joy at his birth, but as always it was not unalloyed pleasure.

E spoiled from birth—concentration of all M's love on him in her loneliness—she shares him reluctantly with nurse but makes friend and confidant out of nurse to further compensate for loneliness. Husband very proud of his birth (confirmed by stories to me)—44 years old at time. (511)

The elder O'Neills were at odds about having a home, and Eugene speculates that his mother deliberately hired an English nurse to spite the elder O'Neill, who hated the English. Eugene wonders if his mother was "actuated by revenge motives on husband in this choice—to get reliable ally in war with husband (?)" (512).

O'Neill speculates that tension between his parents intensified the bond between mother and child:

Absolute loneliness of M at this time except for nurse and few loyal friends scattered over country—(most of whom husband resented as social superiors)—logically points to what must have been her fierce concentration of affection on the child, E. This must have been intensified by the fact that at age of 2 he nearly dies from typhoid. (512)

This statement of a mother-son bond again anticipates relationships in the plays. This image of a mother's concentration of affection on her child parallels O'Neill's description of Miriam in Lazarus Laughed whose mask shows her eyes to be "oblivious to the life outside, as they dream down on the child forever in memory at her breast."<sup>20</sup>

Given such an intense family climate, there is little wonder that Eugene O'Neill again and again dramatized families caught in bitter struggles about sex, fidelity, and possession. Each of these themes was freighted with emotional significance for O'Neill and his characters. "Do I seem queer?" asks Nina in Strange Interlude. "It's because I've suddenly seen the lies in the sounds our lips make

and our hands write."<sup>21</sup> Words became emotional triggers for the O'Neill fictional families—"sickness" and "dope," "love" and "possession," "house" and "insanity," "birth" and "death"—the combinations and connections vary from play to play, but love is always central, sexuality assumes an enormous power to subvert, destroy and even, sometimes, to liberate from the overwhelming climate of guilt, the overriding emotional quality that informs so many of his plays.<sup>22</sup> We turn now to the diagram.

The summary provides a sketch of the O'Neill family's emotional climate preceding and during Eugene's early childhood, while the diagram focuses more sharply on the course of Eugene's life from birth to post-adolescence. Family relationships are again significant; and to a representation of family feelings O'Neill adds notes on the importance of fantasy stories and nightmares in his childhood. The chart therefore offers connections between personal fantasy and those fantasies O'Neill elaborated and made public in his plays.

The diagram pictures the course of O'Neill's life as moving downward from "Nirvana" at birth towards a line on the right labelled "reality." There are three horizontal lines evidently depicting three life crises: (1) "birth"; (2) "7 years old/: complete break—/ school"; (3) "adolescence," which involved—"discovery of mother's inadequacy" and "breaking away from nurse as mother value." O'Neill does not give a specific date for his discovery of his mother's "inadequacy" (her drug addiction) but this occurred when he was fourteen.<sup>23</sup> The age is important for we see rooted here in the diagram a pattern of seven-year cycles which O'Neill later used to chart his personal and creative

life.<sup>24</sup> In his work on Lazarus Laughed, O'Neill also developed a scheme for seven character types and seven ages of man, each age comprising seven years.<sup>25</sup> Again we see a striking congruence between the personal autobiographical paper and a play in process at the time the paper was being composed.

Each of the three stages of his life O'Neill presents in his diagram requires brief analysis. In each phase O'Neill describes the themes of love, heroism, and the relationship with reality.

The phase from birth to age seven is presented in detail. "Mother love" has only a short history; it comes to mean "nurse love," with the latter being somewhat closer to reality. The father is felt to be an "indefinite hero—not dangerous rival"; presumably he is an indefinite hero because of his frequent prolonged absences. A sequence of increasingly specific aspects of the boy's inner life is illustrated:

- (1) "world of reality practically unrealized in background"
- (2) "terror of it [reality] emphasized by nurse's murder stories"
- (3) "terror of dark alone but delight in it when feeling protecting influence (mother-nurse-nuns) about"
- (4) "nightmares" too were part of his early childhood. O'Neill included an elaboration: "At early childhood father would give child whisky and water to soothe child's nightmares caused by terror of dark. This whisky is connected with protection of mother—drink of hero father."

This fourth level of associations brings to the surface Eugene's childhood experiences with the source of his adult drinking problem—whisky is associated with the positive qualities of a protecting mother and an heroic father. The drunkenness, dope dreams, and nightmares of the plays are rooted in O'Neill's early childhood. Stories, darkness and

nightmares are potential sources of terror, but they are also implicitly fascinating and delightful for they lead to the nurturing attention of significant adults. The power of stories to terrorize and delight no doubt motivated O'Neill as a writer. (In his adult life he spoke of art as affording emotional experience, a quality he valued as essential to art.) In this chart we see O'Neill searching for the child in himself.<sup>26</sup>

The school-years phase of the diagram manifests similar ambiguities about parents and reality. At the level of fantasy the father is a "hero" but there is also "resentment and hatred of father as cause of school" which involves a "break with Mother." The nurse/mother-love lines move slightly closer to the reality line but the outer world remains charged with ambivalent feelings: "reality found and fled from in fear—life of fantasy and religion in school—inability to belong to reality."

The third stage of development after the crisis of adolescence is probably the most startling of all because the feelings manifested here carry into adulthood. There is a cumulative effect involved. The emotions in adulthood are "overdetermined" and have exceptional power deriving from their long history in the life of the individual. Significantly, O'Neill breaks off the mother-nurse lines (running in parallel) as if his mother had no effectual presence in his life after his discovery of her "inadequacy" (drug addiction) and as if he no longer felt baffled by his need for her. In his infancy, he suggests in the summary, he had been the centre of her affections. The "inadequacy" he discovered in his adolescence may be seen as his complaint



that she did not love him as she once had, that she did not love him the way she loved his father, that she did not even love him the way she then "loved" drugs.

O'Neill's representation of his relationship with his father is similarly striking. The fantasy of father as hero begins to change; what was earlier felt as "resentment and hatred" of father becomes in adolescence "hatred and defiance of father." Again the diagram shows remarkable congruence with a play of the period. As we shall see below, this picture of turbulent adolescent—hatred for the father and a sense of being betrayed by the mother—finds dramatic treatment in Dynamo.

The diagram also gives us an autobiographical context for O'Neill's concept of "Nirvana." O'Neill presents his life as a descent from this state, a picture that speaks of a Wordsworthian conception of life in which our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting and in which the child is father of the man. The Nirvana concept informs virtually all of O'Neill's middle and later works.

"Nirvana" is used first in Marco Millions by a Buddhist merchant encountered by Marco Polo and his father and uncle as they journey eastward to Xanadu and the renowned Kublai Kaan. They are nominally Christian, but burdened with the mental baggage of capitalistic profiteering. Their journey takes them into contact with other religions; they meet the Buddhist merchant in India and he tells them of Buddha:

He was immaculately conceived. The light passed into the womb of Maya, and she bore a son who, when he came to manhood, renounced wife and child, riches and power, and went out as a beggar on the roads to seek the supreme

enlightenment which would conquer birth and death; and at last he attained the wisdom where all desire has ended and experienced the heaven of peace, Nirvana. And when he died he became a God again.<sup>27</sup>

O'Neill's purpose here is satirical—the Polos are smugly dismissive of the Buddhist ("They're all crazy, like the Mohammedans")—but the description of Nirvana as the goal of Buddha's questing "where all desire has ended," a "heaven of peace," anticipates the ending of Strange Interlude. There Nina looks forward to a future of bliss with the fatherly Charlie Marsden:

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!  
 . . . to die in peace!<sup>28</sup>

From this perspective they can look back on their life, says Marsden, "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." He thinks of their future bliss as a life beyond the demands of sexuality and bodily cravings; the play ends on a note of thoughtful revery: "God bless dear old Charlie . . . who, passed beyond desire, has all the luck at last! . . . ." <sup>29</sup>

This blissful state of quiescence is also related to the utopian dream of Mourning Becomes Electra symbolized by the Blessed Isles. In his notes for the play, O'Neill described the symbolic significance of the Isles:

Develop South Sea Island motive—its appeal for them all (in various aspects)—release, peace, security, beauty, freedom of conscience, sinlessness, etc.—longing for the primitive—and mother symbol—yearning for prenatal non-competitive freedom from fear . . .<sup>30</sup>

In Electra, Nirvana becomes connected again with the life in the womb, a paradise which has been lost.

The concept of Nirvana appears explicitly in a later play. In a stage note to Hughie O'Neill describes the Night Clerk's mind as functioning in a state of reverie such that the sound of a train soothes him.

The Clerk's mind remains in the street to greet the noise of a far-off El train. Its approach is pleasantly like a memory of hope; then it roars and rocks and rattles past the nearby corner, and the noise pleasantly deafens memory; then it recedes and dies, and there is something melancholy about that. But there is hope. Only so many El trains pass in one night, and each one passing leaves one less to pass, so the night recedes, too, until at last it must die and join all the other long nights in Nirvana, the Big Night of Nights. And that's life.

For O'Neill, therefore, this state of perfect peace exists outside of time, either before consciousness attendant upon birth or after the obliteration of awareness at death.<sup>32</sup> In the words from Marco Millions it is "the supreme enlightenment which would conquer birth and death."

The concept of Nirvana comes from Buddhist thought. O'Neill would have encountered the concept in Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle in his earlier reading of that book. Freud postulates a Nirvana principle (it includes the death instinct) which may be briefly described as "the notion that the organism seeks to discharge its energies in order to return to a state of quiescence."<sup>33</sup> Philip Rieff's description of this principle's place in Freud's view of psychological man sheds light on O'Neill's understanding of the concept:

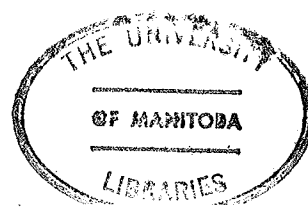
Freud's is a theory of equilibrium toward which the emotional life tends after every disturbance. Sexuality is subject no less completely to Freud's first law of the emotions than any other element of human existence. Only one way lies open to escape the dissatisfaction inherent in every satisfaction, and that is to grow equable. When the inner life is not easily disturbed it has achieved what is to Freud as nearly an ideal condition as he can imagine. There is something Oriental in the Freudian ethic. The "Nirvana principle" crops up, now and again, in his later writings, intimating<sup>34</sup> what is entailed in mastering the balance of nature.

This notion of equable quiescence is what O'Neill attempts to project in his portrait of Lazarus, his ending of Strange Interlude, and in his symbols of the dynamo and of the South Sea Islands.

The style of the diagram also has correlations in the plays of the period. Just as the fragmentary sentences of the family summary call to mind O'Neill's stream-of-consciousness technique in Strange Interlude and Dynamo, so the "style" of the diagram with its series of parallel lines calls to mind the splitting and fragmentation of characters. O'Neill uses the "thought-aside" technique to suggest splits within characters; he also creates characters who embody only aspects of a complete human being. In Strange Interlude Nina needs all four men in her life to complete her sense of herself: Sam her husband; Darrell, her lover; Marsden, her father figure; Gordon, her son, all love her in different ways. Together they represent the kinds of love of man for woman (including, as Nina acknowledges, a kind of incest). This kind of splitting and fragmentation is summed up by O'Neill's aphoristic slogan for the "new masked" drama: "One's outer life passes in a solitude haunted by the masks of others; one's inner life passes in a solitude hounded by the masks of oneself."<sup>35</sup>

The problem of reality-fantasy apparent in the diagram figures prominently in many of O'Neill's plays but most urgently in Strange Interlude in which all the central characters are "creative" in one sense or another and all suffer blocking of their creativity as a consequence of their problems in love. The play works with the creativity-procreativity connection that is latent in the summary and chart. Sam cannot write his advertisements unless he feels secure in Nina's love. He gains that security, and becomes productive, in his fashion, once Nina becomes pregnant. Darrell, the research scientist, goes all to pieces once he falls in love and experiences sex with Nina. Marsden, the professional novelist, flees from reality in his fiction because he is afraid to face questions about his own love for his mother. He does not stir love or hate in his readers, but rather creates mere "liking." Nina is the procreative one whom the others all worship, but she is also the biographer of Gordon, at least for a time, as she tries to relieve herself of the ghost of her unconsummated love.

Taken together, the summary and diagram represent O'Neill's personal picture of an individual's fate shaped by his family background. What the documents do now show, however, is the familial support which made O'Neill a writer and not a mere neurotic. The urgency of his emotions is apparent; the enormous strength and determination which made him a great writer do not appear. No doubt a great deal of his resolve to give up drinking came from his own drive to write, "to be an artist or nothing."<sup>36</sup> Perhaps something of his strength also derived from the self-analysis and the consultations



with Hamilton.

After his work with Hamilton and the publication of Lazarus and Interlude O'Neill begins to modify his defensive posture about the relationship between his works and psychoanalysis. To an inquiry in 1929 about his use of psychoanalysis, O'Neill makes the same categorical disclaimers as he had in 1925, yet qualifies his assertions by referring to his personal experience and his knowledge of Greek drama (which of course Freud drew on to outline his concept of the Oedipus complex):

There is no conscious use of psychoanalytical material in any of my plays. All of them could easily be written by a dramatist who had never heard of the Freudian theory and was simply guided by an intuitive psychological insight into human beings and their life impulses that is as old as Greek drama. It is true that I am enough of a student of modern psychology to be fairly familiar with the Freudian implications inherent in the actions of some of my characters while I was portraying them; but this was always an afterthought and never consciously was I for a moment influenced to shape my material along the lines of any psychological theory. It was my dramatic instinct and my personal experience with human life that alone guided me.

O'Neill then goes on in the same letter to assert that he had read only two books of Freud (Totem and Taboo and Beyond the Pleasure Principle; he omits Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego) and that Jung's Psychology of the Unconscious interested him the most of any psychological works. He adds in the same exclamatory tone:

I would say that what has influenced my plays the most is my knowledge of the drama of all time—particularly

Greek tragedy—and not any books on psychology.

I am familiar with Behavioristic theory, too, and if one were to go digging for it in my plays, I'm sure a lot of conclusive examples of its influence could be detected—particularly, I imagine, from those plays<sup>38</sup> that were written before I knew anything of psychoanalysis!

Here O'Neill plays freely with the facts of his reading knowledge, but the spirit of his defence is consistent. He wishes to be seen as an artist working out of personal experience and knowledge of dramatic tradition. (His impatience with source hunting and with influence pointing was at this time probably exacerbated by his disgust with a law suit charging that Strange Interlude was plagiarized.)<sup>39</sup>

After Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill continues to find fault with critics who read Freud into his plays. Again O'Neill underplays specialized knowledge, but he gives new emphasis to family relationships and his own experience:

After all, every human complication of love and hate in my trilogy is as old as literature, and the interpretations I suggest are such as might have occurred to any author in any time with a deep curiosity about the underlying motives that actuate human interrelationships in the family. In short, I think I know enough about men and women to have written Mourning Becomes Electra almost exactly as it is if I had never heard of Freud or Jung or the others. Authors were psychologists, you know, and profound ones, before psychology was invented. And I am no deep student of psychoanalysis. As far as I can remember, of all the books written by Freud, Jung, etc., I have read only four, and Jung is the only one of the lot who interests me. Some of his suggestions I find extraordinarily illuminating<sup>40</sup> in the light of my own experience with hidden human motives.

O'Neill had by this time the opportunity to see his consultations with Hamilton in perspective, and it may be that the last sentence quoted refers to O'Neill's self-analysis and his work with Hamilton. By this time, too, O'Neill had released the excerpts from his Fragmentary Work

Diary in which he wrote about the "unconscious" of the audience, "death wish" as a theme, "sexual frustration" in marriage, and repeated several times his determination to write a "modern psychological play."

Whether or not they acknowledge the quality of his achievement, critics persisted in drawing attention to O'Neill's use of psychoanalysis.<sup>41</sup>

Given this background, it is understandable that in his first piece for the American Spectator, "Memoranda on Masks," O'Neill should describe the task of the modern dramatist in psychological terms. The task, O'Neill writes, is for the playwright to find how

he can express those profound hidden conflicts of the mind which the probings of psychology continue to disclose to us. He must find some method to present this inner drama in his work, or confess himself incapable of portraying one of the most characteristic pre-occupations and uniquely significant spiritual impulses of his time.<sup>42</sup>

O'Neill now has only slightly shifted his position: he simply acknowledges in positive terms what he had earlier acknowledged in a negative way. The probings of psychology are indeed a stamp of the times and cannot be ignored by the contemporary author.

There is an inner logic to these shifts and turns: O'Neill's ideas coalesce around family, inner conflict, and fate. A biographical-critical essay in 1927 by Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant (which pleased O'Neill very much; he called it "the best thing ever done about me"<sup>43</sup>) succinctly describes O'Neill's central themes:

. . . this man who in youth passed as a vagabond and a social rebel is, as revealed by his works and his own mature life, deeply bound to that human family which the psychologists find the base of human existence. The themes of the stern father, the sheltering earth mother, the sons who fight for freedom are, like the theme of marriage, recurrent in the plays. From the fixed family base O'Neill departed on his wild adventures.<sup>44</sup>



This "fixed family base" links O'Neill's plays to his theoretical pieces, his plays to his autobiography, his autobiography to his theory. And since he came to understand family dynamics in the light of contemporary psychology, it is understandable that he cast his most important theoretical statements around the idea of a modern psychological drama. O'Neill might well have said, with Paul Goodman, "I write as I experience, and I have been brought up to experience 'psychologically.'"<sup>45</sup> We must now turn to a detailed examination of O'Neill's Notes on Electra and his American Spectator essays, which when considered together project O'Neill's vision of the modern dramatist's task.

## II

O'Neill's "Fragmentary Diary Notes" on Mourning Becomes Electra<sup>46</sup> contain essential principles of his aesthetic for a modern psychological drama. The Notes centre on the theme of psychological fate and stand as the theoretical counterpart to O'Neill's working from a fixed family base. In these Notes O'Neill gives us a description of psychological drama which has more general import than its immediate connection with the Electra trilogy.

O'Neill's motives for publishing his working Notes suggest the range of their significance. In one sense his motives can be seen as serving the play's public success: the first dramatist of America admits the general public to his study, as it were, where they discover something about the creative process. The Notes exploit the interest generated by the enormously successful Strange Interlude and by psychological theories. The Notes prepare the audience to receive the play

in a certain framework: O'Neill links his work to two traditions, Greek tragedy and American literary history. He thereby gives the play an aura of intellectual authority deriving from these traditions, and serves his professional critics with tantalizing leads. Another motive may well have arisen from the Interlude plagiarism suit: in the Notes O'Neill gives a picture of the making of the play from its germ idea, through its drafts, and into its final revisions. Publication of the Notes speaks of O'Neill's artistic integrity. And the Notes have, as a kind of added seasoning, the exotic appeal of personal notes written in faraway places—the Arabian Sea; the China Sea; Cap d'Ail, France; Paris; the Canary Islands; Casablanca; Tangiers.

In spanning the years from 1926 to 1931 the Notes reach out toward the plays produced during the period: Lazarus Laughed, Strange Interlude, and Dynamo. This span of reference is underlined by specific comparisons of techniques in the group of plays. These references create a frame of values for cross comparisons. In his note of 27 March, 1930, O'Neill determines to "write second draft using half masks and an Interlude technique (combination Lazarus and Interlude) and see what can be gotten out of that . . ." (8). As a result of that draft O'Neill changed his conception of Electra: "thought asides now seem entirely unnecessary . . ." O'Neill went so far as to note for himself a "Warning!":

. . . always hereafter regard with suspicion hangover inclination to use "Interlude" technique regardless—that was what principally hurt "Dynamo," being forced into thought-asides method which was quite alien to essential psychological form of its characters—did not ring true—only clogged up play arbitrarily with obvious author's mannerisms—saw this aside technique is special expression for special type of modern

neurotic, disintegrated soul—when dealing with simple direct folk or characters of strong will and intense passions, it is superfluous show-shop "business." (10)

Rather than rely on masks or thought-asides to reveal interrelationships within the family, O'Neill resolved to aim for a rhythmic prose to create an insistent beat throbbing through the plays like the "tom-tom from 'Jones' in thought repetition—" (11). In August of 1931 O'Neill assessed the galley proofs and allowed himself to judge the overall impact of the trilogy:

—moved by it—has power and drive and the strange quality of unreal reality I wanted—main purpose seems to me soundly achieved—there is a feeling of fate in it, or I am a fool—a psychological modern approximation of the fate in the Greek tragedies on this theme—attained without benefit of supernatural— . . . . (14)

At that time O'Neill also spoke positively of his technical achievement—which he described as "of minor importance"—and made another retrospective allusion to Strange Interlude:

(Interlude never got credit for this technical virtue —without which its successful production would have been impossible—that the first part rounded out a complete section of Nina's life with a definite beginning and end and yet contained the suspense at its end which called for Part Two—otherwise dinner interval would have wrecked it—no other two-part play, as far as I know, has accomplished this synthesis of end and beginning—) (14-15)

Because of its length, range of reference, and specific detail—there is no windy mysticism here puffing up O'Neill's statements—the "Working Notes" document stands as O'Neill's most concise statement on his aesthetics. As O'Neill recognized, the more discursive forms of writing were not his strength, and in choosing to publish these notes for his play-going audience and to attach the photostat of the original

manuscript to the 1931 "Special Edition" of Electra he was giving these "germ" thoughts a special status.<sup>47</sup> It is important, therefore, to review his principal themes.

The first and crucial point the notes embody is that O'Neill was concerned to appeal to his audience's emotions. This concern is evident in the concluding evaluative assessment he gave to the play and appeared in the first note he made:

Is it possible to get modern psychological approximation of Greek sense of fate into such a play, which an intelligent audience of today, possessed of no belief in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by? (3)

By moving his audience O'Neill did not mean simply to titillate them with superficial sentimentality or violent action. He aimed to create a work of scope and power, "sufficient mask of space and time" was how he phrased it, "so that audiences will unconsciously grasp at once, it is primarily drawn of hidden life forces—fate—behind lives of characters" (4).

To appeal to the audience's unconscious, O'Neill concentrated on working with family dynamics, the quality of the Greek tragedies which led Freud to his concept of the Oedipus complex. O'Neill's emphasis was not on Oedipus but Electra and aimed at an audience which would not accept supernatural intervention. Therefore, he had to create a modern psychological drama of "murderous family love and hate."<sup>48</sup> To this end he had to emphasize the past of his characters, action alone would not be enough: "the unavoidable entire melodramatic action must be felt as working out of psychic fate from past . . ." (9).

Characterization would have to reveal this past ("let them reveal themselves—in spite of (or because of!) their long locked-up passions" [11-12]); so would visual qualities ("I can visualize the death-mask-like expression of characters' faces in repose suddenly being torn open by passion" [12]). Language, too, would have to be consistent—"try for simple forceful repeating accent and rhythm which will express driving insistent compulsion of passions engendered in family past . . . " (10). To create a sense of psychological fate, O'Neill aimed to engage the sensibilities of his audience fully, and he spent a good deal of creative energy attempting to find appropriate methods to realize his aims.

Style in the notes confirms the central themes. A sequential logic of associations pervades the notes in such a way that key ideas and their emotional or affective qualities form a series of clusters. Key themes then take on metaphoric dimensions. O'Neill's central conception for his modern psychological drama is "fate springing out of the family" (9). "Springing" suggests a number of dynamic qualities: it connotes surprise, quickness, a kind of mechanical inevitability in response to pressure from without. On one level "springing" means simply issuing from, originating in. It also connotes a leap as force transfers from one family situation to another, from one personal contact to another. In this sense it carries organic animal-like association. "Springing" also implies fluidity, a flowing, a continuity; O'Neill also speaks in the notes of the "flow of dramatic development" (11).

The theme of continuity is also evident in one of O'Neill's metaphors for a play. O'Neill found that the thought-asides method in his second draft

of Electra "get in the way of the play's drive, make the line waver, cause action to halt and limp . . . (10). He conceives the play to have a central thrust, and O'Neill was concerned to maintain that drive by creating "simple direct folk" or "characters of strong will and intense passion" (10). The paralleling of spoken dialogue with thought-asides is appropriate for a "modern neurotic disintegrated soul," (10) such as we find in Strange Interlude and Dynamo. The line theme appears also in the metaphor of a chain of "recurrent love and hatred and revenge" (9). O'Neill wished to project a sense of the continuity of human experience in a linear sense; in Dynamo and Interlude he sought to show depths or layers of experience. These metaphors suggest that for O'Neill, subject matter dictates form and language.

To suggest the depth dimension which he wished to explore, O'Neill used the metaphor of the mask and the theatrical conception of background-foreground. O'Neill used both concepts in a metaphoric way. Background refers in part to elements of history conveyed by stage design and costume. O'Neill's sequence of association connects the symbol of the house with the idea of fate: "New England background best possible dramatically for Greek plot of crime and retribution; chain of fate—Puritan conviction of man born to sin and punishment—O'Neill's furies within him, his conscience—etc." (4). Background, then, includes a body of traditional values, and in this context is not literally a stage metaphor.

Also part of background is "sea background" or history of the Mannon family and the "prying, commenting, curious town as an ever-

present background for the drama of the Mannon family" (8). In these conceptions, background refers to historical and social relationships.

The concept of masking has a number of dimensions in the Notes. First O'Neill means "masks" literally to refer to masks as theatrical props. However, O'Neill felt the literal use of masks would not be appropriate for Electra, and opted for make-up to create the desired visual effect. A more directly metaphoric use of the term is evident in his choice of a time period removed from the present to create "sufficient mask of time and space" so as to appeal directly to the audience's unconscious (4). O'Neill thus spatializes a psychological idea; he strives for depth by presenting a discrepancy between what appears on the surface and what lies behind it.

O'Neill also describes his general aesthetic aims in terms of masking. He aims to reveal the "unreal behind what we call reality" and this unreal behind is "the real reality!" (8). Truth then must be felt as residing behind the appearance or beneath the surface: "The unrealistic truth wearing the mask of lying reality, that is the right feeling for this trilogy . . . !" (8). Again as in his life-diagram, "reality" serves as a reference point for O'Neill's imaginative conception; the heart of the matter, though, lies in the inner life, in the fantasies, dreams, desires, and emotions. What he aimed for in his play was to unmask the hidden, to make manifest the latent. He sees the potential power of unmasking "the death mask-like expression of characters' faces in repose suddenly being torn open by passion . . . ." (12). In his letter to George Jean Nathan O'Neill spoke of his determination

"to give an epic tinge to New England's inhibited life—but, to make its inexpressiveness practically expressive, to release it."<sup>49</sup>

Implicit in both statements is a vision of the depths of human experience, the layers of reality that the artist must fathom and analyze in order to create a modern psychological drama. O'Neill's remarks on specific techniques in his Notes to Electra are geared to realizing the primary aim of projecting continuity and depth.

In the American Spectator series,<sup>50</sup> O'Neill expands and generalizes his vision of what a modern psychological play is and what it might achieve. He presents the psychological play as the essential type of modern drama and imagines that such plays can re-establish a Dionysian spirit in the theatre. Yet, at the same time, O'Neill narrows his conception of how such a modern drama might be established. He asserts that the mask is the essential device and that, through the mask, theatre and drama can regenerate themselves. Without the concrete tasks of a specific play design to anchor his ideas, O'Neill seems to drift into metaphysics. Nonetheless, in the midst of speculative and oracular pronouncements, there are a number of finely-stated ideas about a modern psychological drama, especially in the first essay.

His first essay is remarkable for its formulation of the problems of a new modern drama; here O'Neill insists on the importance of psychology as essential both to the dramatist and to the spirit of the time:

. . . I hold more and more surely to the conviction that the use of masks will be discovered eventually to be the freest solution of the modern dramatist's problem as to how—with the greatest possible dramatic clarity and economy of means—he can express those profound hidden



conflicts of the mind which the probings of psychology continue to disclose to us. He must find some method to present this inner drama in his work, or confess himself incapable of portraying one of the most characteristic preoccupations and uniquely significant, spiritual impulses of his time. (116)

What is crucial in this statement is O'Neill's explicit concern with dramatic problems in the context of the cultural impact of the new psychologies. He is defining, in short, the essence of a psychological play:

A comprehensive expression is demanded here, a chance for eloquent presentation, a new form of drama projected from a fresh insight into the inner forces motivating the actions and reactions of men and women (a new and truer characterization, in other words), a drama of souls, and the adventures of "Free wills," with the masks that govern them and constitute their fates.

In this opening paragraph, O'Neill interprets the dramatist's problems in terms of his ability to make play with the insights afforded by psychology.

In his second paragraph O'Neill goes so far as to interpret psychology in the light of drama, and to extend the earlier assertion that the "inner drama" is of immediately recognizable importance to the modern audience. What is interesting is the clarity of O'Neill's conception of the problems for a dramatist:

For what, at bottom, is the new psychological insight into human cause and effect but a study in masks, an exercise in unmasking? Whether we think the attempted unmasking has been successful, or has only created for itself new masks, is of no importance here. What is valid, what is unquestionable, is that this insight has uncovered the mask, has impressed the idea of mask as a symbol of inner reality upon all intelligent people of today; and I know they would welcome the use of masks in the theatre as a necessary, dramatically revealing new convention, and not regard them as a "stunty" resurrection of archaic props. (116-17)

These few sentences, despite reservations critics have about O'Neill's dexterity as a writer, strike straight to the heart of issues about which he had been thinking and writing for at least half a decade.

O'Neill here presents the dramatist as a critic of his world charged with the task not of mirroring his society but striking through its overlay of false conventions to an inner reality. The mask "is dramatic in itself, is a proven weapon of attack" (117) because it extinguishes the face of the actor and emphasizes his role as a player in the imaginative world of the play; the mask therefore allows the profound hidden conflicts to issue forth without being subsumed by the individual personality of the actor.

At the same time, the mask itself communicates the plight of modern man. O'Neill sums up this idea in his epigram on masks. This epigram condenses much of the argument about drama that O'Neill has been making in these "Memoranda" and his Notes to Electra. It shows an assurance of tone and clarity he did not often achieve in his non-dramatic prose. The epigram can be traced to O'Neill's personal experiences: he had in the preceding years, especially at the time of his reformation, spent a good deal of thought and energy in attempting to get behind his own masks. But nowhere does O'Neill speak of drama as a vehicle for self-therapy or audience therapy. He presents drama as a vehicle for discovering truth and the modern dramatists needs the assistance of psychology to discover the truth of this time, the drift of his larger culture.<sup>51</sup>

The concluding notes in "Memoranda on Masks" elaborate on the possibilities of masks for dealing with mobs (a way to present the facelessness of modern democracy) and for revitalizing the classics. Again O'Neill's sardonic tone emerges. He asks rhetorically "For is not the whole of Goethe's truth for our time just that Mephistopheles and Faust are one and the same—are Faust?" (118). O'Neill's concern with the truth of his time echoes his earlier remark: to discover the reality of the present era, the dramatist must come to terms with contemporary psychology.

O'Neill's second piece in the series, "Second Thoughts," comprises an overview of his completed plays which use masks. O'Neill tells us he would scrap some of his early plays as "too painfully bungled in their present form to be worth producing at all" (118). He would retain his use of masks in The Hairy Ape, his adaption of Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner," All God's Children Got Wings, The Great God Brown and Lazarus Laughed. In all of these O'Neill believes the use of masks to have been "uniformly successful" (119). In fact, were he to make changes he would use more masks.

The most interesting parts of this sketch are O'Neill's comments on Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra. He now sees Interlude, "an attempt at the new masked psychological drama . . . without masks," as only a partial success: "a successful attempt, perhaps, in so far as it concerns only surfaces and their immediate subsurfaces, but not where, occasionally, it tries to probe deeper" (119). (O'Neill does not pursue his ideas about Strange Interlude, but as we shall see below [Chapter Three] he has captured a partial truth about the play.)

More important to our present concern is O'Neill's identification of masking as the key distinguishing feature of modern psychological drama.

This same identification (virtually an equation: masks = psychological play) appears in his observations on his trilogy:

I should like to see Mourning Becomes Electra done entirely with masks, now that I can view it solely as a psychological play, quite removed from the confusing preoccupations the classical derivation of its plot once caused me. Masks would emphasize the drama of the life and death impulses that drive the characters on to their fates and put more in its proper secondary place, as a frame, the story of the New England family. (120)

O'Neill seems to understate his achievement in Mourning Becomes Electra.

He laments that he does not have the "great language" (120) necessary to write a play in a classical mode with masks, but considering the years he spent on the composition of the play one cannot take very seriously his idea of having it done with masks.

In sum, the second piece in the series is essentially retrospective. O'Neill does not advance any new ideas about the aesthetics of a modern psychological drama, but centres his observations essentially on the use of masks in his own plays. O'Neill's seeming identification of modern psychological drama with the use of masks represents a too-narrow conception in light of his earlier remarks in "Memoranda on Masks" and his published Notes for Electra where masking/unmasking is presented as an integral part of the dynamics of theatre. The mask is a weapon in "Memoranda on Masks"; in the Electra Notes masking/unmasking serves as a metaphor for the depth of historical elements presented in the play, for the emergence of submerged passions, indeed

as a metaphor for the structure of the whole trilogy. The continuous prose of "Second Thoughts" is not as incisive as the fragmentary sentences of the Electra Notes or the epigrams of "Memoranda on Masks."

In the third essay, "A Dramatist's Notebook," O'Neill sums up his aims in terms of the audience's participation. "Most important of all," he wrote, "from the standpoint of future American culture, I am hoping for added imaginative scope for the audience, a chance for a public I know is growing yearly more numerous and more hungry in its spiritual need to participate in imaginative interpretations of life rather than merely identify itself with faithful surface resemblances of living" (121). O'Neill then goes on to describe, in inflated terms perhaps, what he understands by "imaginative" theatre:

I mean the one true theatre, the age-old theatre, the theatre of the Greeks and Elizabethans, a theatre that could dare to boast . . . that it is a legitimate descendant of the first theatre that sprang, by virtue of man's imaginative interpretation of life, out of his worship of Dionysus. I mean a theatre returned to its highest and sole significant function as a Temple where the religion of a poetical interpretation and symbolical celebration of life is communicated to human beings, starved in spirit by their soul-stifling daily struggle to exist as masks among the masks of the living! (121-22)

There are a number of ironies implicit in this comment. In a sense this statement is an advertisement for Lazarus Laughed, subtitled "A Play for an Imaginative Theatre," which had not found a place in the affections of an audience. Moreover, it is something of a strain to accept O'Neill as priest of a new theatre-temple in the face of his own avoidance of the theatre and his pronouncement that

"I don't go to the theatre because I can always do better production in my mind than the one on the stage."<sup>52</sup> A further irony, noted by Travis Bogard, is that by the time O'Neill wrote his Memoranda he had virtually given up all experimentation with masks;<sup>53</sup> indeed in the notes to Electra, O'Neill associated masks with the show-shop business he had come to loathe. O'Neill's straining for significance through rhetorical repetition—"I mean" "I mean"—and his insistence on the absolute one true quality of the theatre he posits, invites skepticism. This is a borrowed rhetoric, partly from George Cram Cook and partly from Nietzsche, and sounds hollow at the centre.<sup>54</sup>

However, O'Neill's vision of a great orgasmic merging in the theatre has its correlatives in the Nirvana concept of his chart and in the symbol of the Blessed Isles. The experience that O'Neill imagines for his new theatre lies beyond the negative and limiting; it is an affirmation of "the dialectical unity of the great instinctual opposites: Dionysus reunifies male and female, self and other, life and death."<sup>55</sup> It is a release which lies beyond the impulses of life and death that drive us in this life.

But here O'Neill ventures into metaphysics and does not tell us much about aesthetics. The most cogent statements on modern psychological drama are in the first of his three pieces in the American Spectator series and in his Notes for Electra, and these contain the core of O'Neill's aesthetic.

To this point in the chapter, we have established that O'Neill's vision of a modern psychological drama emerges from a history of personal family conflicts, broad reading and reflection, and the creative activity of writing itself. Amidst his great creative surge during the later 1920's and early 1930's he was prompted to give shape to that vision. His personal analysis coincided with his continuing creative work: analysis and creation mutually informed and reinforced each other. There is a subtle, discernable development or maturation of O'Neill's aesthetic views evident in the body of documents from his analysis to his "Memoranda on Masks." This development manifests itself in a growing willingness to make outright pronouncements about a modern psychological drama. Though the statements on the art of the drama are suggestive, rather than definitive of an aesthetic, they show an inner imaginative continuity which centres on several key principles.

These basic principles may be presented in abstract form under the headings of (1) theme, (2) structure, (3) character, (4) language, and (5) audience. I present them in this sequence deliberately; as Paul Voelker has shown, O'Neill's aesthetic implies a hierarchy of values in which "character is subordinate to plot which is subordinate to theme."<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, this hierarchy "is complemented and reinforced by O'Neill's process of creation—from idea to plot to scenario to dialogue draft."<sup>57</sup> My description of O'Neill's aesthetic of modern psychological drama therefore will be consistent with the broader frame outlined by Voelker with two exceptions. O'Neill is more concerned in his psychological dramas with an overriding framework for his plays

(structure) than with plot (considered as a sequence of events); therefore I use the heading "structure." And I add a description of O'Neill's ideas of the relationship of a play to its audience, since this, too, is one of his concerns in both the Notes to Electra and his American Spectator series. These are the principles informing the plays of O'Neill's middle period.

Theme: O'Neill's basic conception of the theme of a modern psychological play is expressed in his epigram on our masking of both the outer and inner aspects of our lives. As I have shown above, O'Neill identifies the interplay of masking and unmasking as the main theme of a psychological play.

Structure: A psychological play involves an unfolding of both inner and outer reality. The course of this unfolding shows the power of the past to inform and shape life in the present. The past shaping the present is psychological fate.

Character: Characterization in a modern psychological play must manifest a depth dimension which is created by a blend of theatrical and verbal devices. The modern verbal device for character revelation is an extension of the soliloquy: the stream of consciousness or thought-aside method.

Language: Language must be consistent with character. Fragmentary sentences and thought-asides fit the modern neurotic fragmented



character; more elemental characters require a simple driving rhythm of speech established by repetition with variations.

Audience: These elements of structure, characterization, and language create a sense of the vertical dimension of time. There is an emphasis upon gradual revelation which serves to develop emotion cumulatively. The masking/unmasking amounts to an attack on the sensibilities of the audience. (The mask "is a proven weapon of attack" O'Neill says in "Memoranda on Masks.") The appeal of a psychological play is to the unconscious as well as to the emotions and intellect. The genuine artist seeks to strike through the layers of false conventions to reveal an inner truth. He differs from the craftsman who concerns himself with the display of surface.

Implicit, then, in O'Neill's notions of a modern psychological drama is the concept that art is subversive. He does not develop the theme of subversive sexuality as such, but there is a significant parallel between his notion of art as subversive and the power of sexuality. This appears most clearly in the novelist character Marsden in Strange Interlude who, though an entertainer who does not present in his words a depth-dimension, understands what makes art. Marsden says:

I'm going to give an honest healthy yell—turn on the sun into the shadows of lies—shout "This is life and this is sex, and here are passion and hatred and regret and joy and pain and ecstasy, and these are men and women and sons and daughters whose hearts are weak and strong, whose blood is blood and not a soothing syrup!" Oh, I can do it, Nina! I can write the truth!

This vision of a genuine "truthful" novel is consistent with O'Neill's determination to express and illuminate "even the most sordid and mean

blind alleys of life"<sup>59</sup> and these alleys include men and women of flesh and blood acting out of bodily impulses.<sup>60</sup> In Marsden's view (and O'Neill's) one who does not express the life of sexual drives as part of his fictive world is a "whisperer of lies."<sup>61</sup>

In his best plays, O'Neill invests his characters with mixed motives, bodily drives, dreams and fantasies; he infuses them with instinctual, emotional, and rational qualities so as to make them alive. Passions of love mix with hate; the characters evince a sexual charge. The assertion that O'Neill put everything down to sex carries an essential truth,<sup>62</sup> and there seems to be no reason to lament that fact. One penitentiary prisoner described his reading of O'Neill's sea plays as follows: "'Gee, it's great. There ain't a character in it that don't walk around like he had a pair of nuts and a pecker like a regular man.'"<sup>63</sup> And such vital recreation in the mind of his audience or reader makes O'Neill a significant artist, and not simply a member of the subintelligentsia who does not understand ideas.

O'Neill knew well how sexuality could throw a life into crisis. In his family summary O'Neill reflects upon his parents' conflict over the size of their family and alludes to a "series of brought-on abortions."<sup>64</sup> He asks himself of his mother "how did she justify this with religion . . . did this mark beginning of break with religion which was to leave her eventually entirely without solace?"<sup>65</sup> In the diagram he pictures an oedipal rivalry with his father for the love of

his mother. And most importantly for his emotional life, he saw his own birth as triggering his mother's drug-addiction. In his early adult life O'Neill married Kathleen Jenkins when they learned she was pregnant. Again this led to a transformation of his life, for he left her, with his father's aid, and embarked on a gold-hunting expedition to the Honduras.<sup>66</sup> Later in life, when his accomplishments as a writer made his biography of interest to an ever-growing audience, he saw fit to omit reference to Kathleen and their son Eugene Junior.<sup>67</sup> O'Neill's personal life, plays and statements on modern psychological drama turn again and again to the family base of his experience, to his sense of psychological fate—fate springing from the family.

In her review of the Sheaffer biography of O'Neill, Diana Trilling has written, partly with tongue in cheek, that "Had Freud never existed, we conclude from Mr. Sheaffer's astute reading of the bibliographical and literary evidence he has gathered, O'Neill would have had to invent him."<sup>68</sup> In O'Neill's world man is fated to love sexually and that is the emotional source and driving power of the plays. That principle O'Neill shares with Freud and with the poets and philosophers, especially Nietzsche and Strindberg, as O'Neill himself insisted. But there is more to the case than that. In O'Neill's plays sex gives the lie to the best laid plans of men, whether they be preachers or prophets, artists or businessmen, or even, as we see in Strange Interlude, supposedly rational objective practitioners of the psychological sciences.

## Notes: Chapter One

<sup>1</sup>First published as "O'Neill's Own Story of Electra in the Making" in the New York Herald Tribune for 3 November 1931; reprinted as "Working Notes and Extracts from a Fragmentary Work Diary," in American Playwrights on Drama (New York: Hill & Wang, 1965), pp. 3-15. Subsequent references are to the latter, cited as Frenz. In the body of this chapter these Notes are designated as his "Fragmentary Diary" or "Notes to Electra" in order to distinguish them from notes in his two volume Work Diary transcribed by Donald Gallup (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1981).

<sup>2</sup>Work Diary, I, entry for 17 August 1932, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup>First published in November 1932, December 1932, and January 1933; reprinted in O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism ed. Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin, and William J. Fisher (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 116-122. Subsequent references are to the latter, cited as Cargill.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Voelker, "Eugene O'Neill's Aesthetic of the Drama," Modern Drama 21 (March, 1978), p. 87.

<sup>5</sup>Frenz, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup>For a survey of O'Neill's relationship with psychoanalysis see Arthur H. Nethercot's series of articles: "The Psychoanalyzing of Eugene O'Neill, Part 1," Modern Drama 3 (December, 1960) pp. 242-256; "Part Two," Modern Drama 3 (February, 1961), pp. 357-372; "The Psychoanalyzing of Eugene O'Neill: Postscript," Modern Drama 8 (September, 1965), pp. 150-155; "The Psychoanalyzing of Eugene O'Neill, P.P.S.," Modern Drama 16 (June, 1973), pp. 35-48. This is an interesting though eccentric series; Nethercot ends by belaboring other critics for not confining themselves to tracing influence in terms of the books we know O'Neill read. Nethercot's is a curious limitation: O'Neill, after all, was no doubt stimulated by psychoanalytic books, but he certainly was not limited by them. In any case, as O'Neill and his circle continue to be studied, more information is bound to surface. Nethercot's last article was written without benefit of the new knowledge available in Sheaffer's second volume of his O'Neill biography O'Neill: Son and Artist (1973). There Sheaffer includes the family summary written by O'Neill during his consultations with Dr. Hamilton.

Another piece of information that belongs in this context is a letter from O'Neill to his friend and editor, Saxe Commins, written sometime shortly before publication of Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill in 1931. The contents of the proposed volume is the main subject of the letter; O'Neill outlines a scheme to include critical commentaries to complement the selection of plays. He proposes that a variety of view points would stir up some interesting controversy:

. . . I suggest choice of plays to be made from consensus opinion of one poet (Robinson Jeffers, say) one novelist: (Dreiser or Lewis), one historian (Beard or Adams), one dramatic critic (Krutch or Altmore or Young or—endless list of possibilities), and one psychologist (White or Jelliffe or—another endless list) and our publisher (?)  
And Nathan do the foreword.

Commins shared O'Neill's interest in psychoanalysis; he collaborated with Lloyd Ring Coleman in writing Psychology: A Simplification, published by Boni and Liveright in 1927. See Dorothy Berliner Commins, What is an Editor? Saxe Commins at Work (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 6. The letter from O'Neill to Commins appears on pp. 40-42; the quotation is from p. 41. Clearly O'Neill's psychological knowledge was not limited to what he could gain from reading.

<sup>7</sup> For a review of the climate of ideas during O'Neill's earlier years as a playwright, see Nethercot's essays (cited in footnote 12 above) and Leslie Fishbein, "Freud and the Radicals: The Sexual Revolution Comes to Greenwich Village," The Canadian Review of American Studies 12 (Fall, 1981), pp. 173-189.

<sup>8</sup> Work Diary, II, entry for 21 January 1925, p. 474. Also see entries for 22 January, p. 474; and for 24-27 January, pp. 475-476. O'Neill was also reading a medical journal on alcohol.

<sup>9</sup> O'Neill to Mr. Perlman, 25 February 1925; quoted by Sheaffer in Son and Artist, p. 174.

<sup>10</sup> In Work Diary, II, entry for 25 March 1925, p. 486. O'Neill notes that he liked Bisch "very much"; see Work Diary, II, entry for 28 May, p. 488.

<sup>11</sup> Sheaffer discusses O'Neill's relationship with Dr. Bisch in Son and Artist, pp. 179-180. Bisch treated O'Neill but this was "medical rather than psychiatric . . ." (Son and Artist, p. 180).

<sup>12</sup> Eugene O'Neill to George Jean Nathan, in Isaac Goldberg, The Theatre of George Jean Nathan (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), p. 158.

<sup>13</sup>O'Neill records talking about divorce in Work Diary, II, entry for 16 October 1925, p. 492.

<sup>14</sup>Son and Artist, p. 190.

<sup>15</sup>Work Diary, I, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., entry for 17 May, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup>Son and Artist, p. 191.

<sup>19</sup>Available, respectively, in Louis Sheaffer O'Neill: Son And Playwright (Boston: Little Brown, 1968), pp. 505-506; and O'Neill: Son and Artist (Boston: Little Brown, 1973), pp. 510-512. Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>20</sup>The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1954), 1, p. 274. Hereafter cited as Plays followed by volume and page number.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>22</sup>Doris Alexander says O'Neill's treatment of oedipal conflicts lacks ambivalence, but the weight of evidence suggests O'Neill was always ambivalent. See "Psychological Fate in Mourning Becomes Electra," PMLA 68 (December, 1953), p. 927.

<sup>23</sup>Son and Playwright, pp. 88-89.

<sup>24</sup>O'Neill at Work, pp. 385-87.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>26</sup>Hamilton notes in his Preface to A Research in Marriage that his study, because it relates adult attitudes to childhood experiences, is "a study of the child in the adult . . ." (p. vi).

<sup>27</sup>Plays, 2, p. 372.

<sup>28</sup>Plays, 1, p. 200.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 199-200.

<sup>30</sup>Frenz, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup>The Later Plays of Eugene O'Neill ed. Travis Bogard (New York: The Modern Library, 1967), p. 274.

<sup>32</sup>Arnold Goldman includes the mystical experience described by Edmund in Long Day's Journey into Night (p. 153) as part of the spectrum of meaning implied by the concept of Nirvana. See Goldman, "The Vanity of Personality: the Development of Eugene O'Neill," in American Theatre ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (London: Edward Arnold, 1967), pp. 29-51; esp. pp. 47-51.

<sup>33</sup>Daniel Yankelovich and William Barrett, Ego and Instinct: The Psychoanalytic View of Human Nature—Revised (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 81.

<sup>34</sup>Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1961), pp. 375-376.

<sup>35</sup>Cargill, p. 117.

<sup>36</sup>O'Neill to George Pierce Baker 16 July 1914, in Cargill, p. 20.

<sup>37</sup>Quoted by Arthur H. Nethercot, "The Psychoanalyzing of Eugene O'Neill," Modern Drama 3 (December, 1960), p. 248.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

O'Neill's knowledge of behaviorism may in part derive from his association with Dr. Hamilton who was not always comfortable with Freud. See Hamilton's comment in A Research in Marriage (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1929): "It has long been my belief that if Watson were to undertake a behavioristic paraphrase of Freud's insights and explanatory formulations he would not only find the task an easy one, but would thereby greatly improve the morals of all of us who are engaged in psychiatric research", p. 50n. Hamilton acknowledges both reliance on Freud and hesitation to accept the latter's meta-psychology, pp. xi-xii. Watson wrote an Introduction to the popularized version of the research study; see What Is Wrong with Marriage? (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1930), pp. xiii-xxi.

<sup>39</sup> Sheaffer discusses the plagiarism suit in Son and Artist, pp. 340-341; 366-369. The suit was filed on March 27, 1929. Judgment was delivered in O'Neill's favor by Federal Judge John W. Woolsey in April 1931. None of the defendants—O'Neill, the Theatre Guild, Horace Liveright the publisher—received the money awarded them by the court as the plaintiff filed for bankruptcy soon after the trial.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to Barrett H. Clark. Reprinted without date, by Clark his Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., Revised version, 1947), p. 136.

<sup>41</sup> The O'Neill quotations are from his published Notes to Electra, in Frenz, p. 4, p. 12, p. 9.

Leon Edel, a sympathetic student of literature and psychology, laments O'Neill's reliance on psychoanalysis; see "Eugene O'Neill: The Face and the Mask," University of Toronto Quarterly 7 (October, 1937). pp. 18-34.

<sup>42</sup> Cargill, p. 116.

<sup>43</sup> Son and Artist, pp. 212-213.

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, "O'Neill: The Man with a Mask," The New Republic 50 (March 16, 1927), p. 92.

<sup>45</sup> "The Psychological Revolution and the Writer's Life-View," The Psychoanalytic Review 50 (Fall, 1963), pp. 22-23.

<sup>46</sup> Frenz, pp. 3-15. Subsequent references refer to this source and are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>47</sup> See Frenz, p. 3n.

<sup>48</sup> The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Wilderness Edition (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1934), p. xiii.

<sup>49</sup> The Theatre of George Jean Nathan, p. 158.



<sup>50</sup> Cargill, pp. 116-122. Subsequent references are to this source and will be cited in the text.

<sup>51</sup> Voelker discusses O'Neill's concern for "truth" in his "Eugene O'Neill's Aesthetic of the Drama," Modern Drama 21 (March, 1978), pp. 89-91.

<sup>52</sup> An interview originally published in the New York Herald-Tribune, 16 March 1924. Reprinted in Cargill, pp. 110-112. The quotation is from p. 112.

<sup>53</sup> Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 266.

<sup>54</sup> See Contour in Time pp. 266-67 for comments concerning sources for these ideas. Leonard Chabrowe in Ritual and Pathos—The Theatre of O'Neill (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976) argues that O'Neill's vision is essentially Nietzschean and gives Lazarus a pivotal place in the O'Neill canon.

<sup>55</sup> Norman O. Brown, Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), p. 175.

<sup>56</sup> Voelker, "O'Neill's Aesthetic," p. 92.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Plays, I, pp. 176-77.

<sup>59</sup> O'Neill to Nathan, The Theatre of George Jean Nathan, p. 158.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas P. Adler discusses Marsden's aesthetic but does not refer to these very important lines. See "'Through a Glass Darkly': O'Neill's Esthetic Theory as Seen Through his Writer Characters," Arizona Quarterly 32 (Summer, 1976), pp. 171-183.

<sup>61</sup> Plays, I, p. 176.

<sup>62</sup> Bentley, In Search of Theatre, p. 232.

<sup>63</sup> Son and Artist, p. 43.

<sup>64</sup> Son and Artist, p. 511.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> See Son and Playwright, pp. 144-159.

<sup>67</sup> See O'Neill's autobiographical note of 1919 sent to Barrett H. Clark and reprinted in Clark's O'Neill, pp. 9-11.

<sup>68</sup> Diana Trilling, "O'Neill," The New York Times Book Review, 25 November 1973, Section 7, p 1.

## Chapter Two

### "New Clean Lust": Sexuality in Lazarus Laughed

Indeed, this ego and the ego's contradiction and confusion still speak most honestly of its being—this creating, willing, valuing ego, which is the measure and value of things. And this most honest being, the ego, speaks of the body and still wants the body, even when it poetizes the raves and flutters with broken wings. It learns to speak ever more honestly, this ego: and the more it learns,<sup>1</sup> the more words and honors it finds for body and earth.

#### I

O'Neill wrote the scenario of Lazarus Laughed in the fall of 1925 and composed the play itself between February and May of 1926, in the months immediately following his consultations with Dr. Hamilton, and at a time when he made his first note for Mourning Becomes Electra.<sup>2</sup> O'Neill was excited at having the play completed, and he was eager to get on with his "lady play," Strange Interlude. He considered Lazarus at the time to be one of his best, although he knew it would be almost impossible to produce, and he knew of no actor who could play Lazarus. "Who can we get to laugh as one would laugh who had completely lost, even from the depths of the unconscious, all traces of the Fear of Death?"<sup>3</sup> O'Neill sensed that he had overshot the capacity of the theatre and performers, and the play's subsequent history has proved him correct, though he long remained fond of it.<sup>4</sup> Working at the time of composition under the excitement of collaboration with Robert Edmund

Jones and Kenneth Macgowan,<sup>5</sup> O'Neill aimed to project a drama built around the ultimate yea-sayer—Lazarus "the man who had been dead for three days and returned to life, knowing the secret."<sup>6</sup> He ended with a play on an epic scale which, though limited in time to a few months, ranges in space "half a circle around the Mediterranean . . . "<sup>7</sup> and involves a complex scheme of masks. At the centre of the play, shining through the turmoil surrounding the emergence of Christianity, the decadent culture of Greece and the corruption of Rome, is the laughter of Lazarus heralding the secret he has learned beyond the grave: there is no death for Man, men die but Man lives.

In formal terms Lazarus Laughed escapes categories. O'Neill subtitled it "A Play for an Imaginative Theatre," the kind of theatre he worked for with Macgowan and Jones. In a letter to Macgowan written just after completing the first draft, O'Neill said:

"Lazarus" is damned far from any category. It has no plot of any sort as one knows plot. And you had better read it and I had better stop getting more involved in explaining what I can't, for the present, explain to myself.<sup>8</sup>

This remark anticipates what has happened with criticism of the play. Formally the play has been called a "pagaent,"<sup>9</sup> "a Greek tragedy" whose meaning is "not unlike the mystery plays"<sup>10</sup> of the Middle Ages, a history play of the ancient past,<sup>11</sup> an analogue of Dante's Paradiso.<sup>12</sup> None of these descriptions is fully satisfactory (least of all the suggestion that it is a Greek tragedy).

What is clear in theatrical terms is an elaborate system of masking. Lazarus, possessed of the secret life, is unmasked. The individualized characters, or "inner" characters<sup>13</sup>—Miriam, Caligula,

Tiberius, Pompeia—wear half masks. The other characters are all types, "outer" characters,<sup>14</sup> and are either chorus or mob types. These group characters are subdivided by age, race, and character.<sup>15</sup> O'Neill's masking plan is described by Travis Bogard as follows:

O'Neill requires masks representing seven personality types, following a simplified Jungian scheme, for each of the traditional seven ages of man. He duplicates the scheme for women. Thus in the first scene, ninety-eight crowd masks, plus seven chorus masks are required. All of them are pronouncedly Semitic in character, and, as the play progresses from the Middle East through Greece to Rome, new masks are required, adhering to the same general scheme, but changing the racial characteristic of the face. It is a staggering technical requirement, not only in the building of the masks, but in the provision of the bodies to wear them. At the end of the second scene, for example, O'Neill calls for three crowds of forty-nine persons each, a chorus of seven, eight Roman soldiers, a Centurion, Lazarus, Miriam and a messenger—a total of 66 actors!<sup>16</sup>

Given the difficulty in staging such a plan (when performed in 1929, Bogard notes, one hundred and twenty-nine performers played four hundred and twenty roles) Lazarus is usually approached as a closet drama, a play to be read.

Accordingly, though one writer is so excited by the play's imaginative possibilities that he calls it "a theatrical masterpiece, one of the touchstones in dramatic art . . . ,"<sup>17</sup> most critics approach Lazarus in terms of its philosophy or structure of ideas. Thus it is described variously as "one of the finest dramas of pure mysticism in the language," as "a mythically cohesive force to partially heal the corrosive fragmentation that besets us all . . . " and most recently as a "secularized theology."<sup>18</sup> Other studies show how O'Neill has drawn from Eastern religions and from the writings of Nietzsche, especially Thus Spake Zarathustra.<sup>19</sup> Lazarus has been

shown to embody qualities of Dionysus, Jupiter, Buddha, and Christ; in his handling of major religions of the world "counting that of Nietzsche's Zarathustra as one—O'Neill is a syncretist."<sup>20</sup>

Others, less patient with the play, argue that it shows failure of both thought and language. O'Neill does not achieve synthesis in Lazarus; rather, he "fails to master his materials and is instead overwhelmed by them."<sup>21</sup> O'Neill's handling of language in Lazarus is seen as a sign of a major flaw in the plays of his middle period.

When O'Neill abandoned the kind of control that had been necessary to develop the low-colloquial style his own personality was thrust into an exposed position and we find that, in the middle plays, his inner confusion and self-doubt occasionally disrupt his more conscious intention. In many of the plays of these years, an undercurrent of feeling pulls against O'Neill's determined protestation of an affirmative philosophy and against the dramatic structures to which his missionary role has led him.<sup>22</sup>

Thus the play lacks dramatic conflict,<sup>23</sup> a criticism voiced also by those who praise the play.<sup>24</sup>

That critics disagree about the play's conflicts indicates a problem for interpretation. The power of sexuality to stimulate conflict has been acknowledged, but in one instance is acknowledged only to be dismissed. The problem centres on an interpretation of the role and function of Pompeia, mistress to Tiberius. She challenges Lazarus to kiss her, but he responds to her as Woman and kisses her chastely. She is insulted and calls him "neither a man nor a god but a dead thing without desire!" (361). The critic in question argues that Lazarus "is more sexual in the true sense of the word than she . . ." but does not tell us what the true sense of the word is

and concludes his argument by saying O'Neill "makes timeless our desire to become more aware, to grow ever more in time with a dynamically harmonious universe."<sup>25</sup> The place of the sexual body in the play therefore remains to be discussed.

The nature of conflicts in the play and the role of sexuality in those conflicts have been described as emerging very slowly: "the dramatic conflict reveals itself in an almost subversive fashion."<sup>26</sup> This idea I consider to be a more satisfactory interpretation, acknowledging as it does a triangular conflict:

In the action of the play, for all his yea-saying commitment to life, Lazarus becomes enmeshed in a triangle: who is the right mate for "the Superior Man"—Miriam who prays "silently with moving lips like a nun who asks mercy for the sins of the world" or Pompeia, the superbly proud and beautiful aristocratic mistress.

In the dramatic structure of the play, this interpretation runs, there seems to be an ambiguous resolution to the conflict:

In the first part of the last act, the "mother-nun" figure seems to be victorious. Miriam might even be the agent of an ultimate reconciliation, transcending Nietzsche in bringing a new sense of pity to God . . . . But apparently that is not quite it, because in the final scene Pompeia "ascends" with Lazarus: "Pompeia's laughter is heard for a moment rising clear and passionate with that of Lazarus." The only reconciliation for Lazarus seems to be that the merciful Mother Superior must unite with the aristocratic courtesan.<sup>27</sup> This strange union intrigued O'Neill in his later plays.

This writer does not develop his insight into the conflicts in Lazarus further, but he is one of the few critics to mention the unusual quality of conflict that O'Neill presents in the Lazarus-Miriam-Pompeia triangle.

This chapter argues that the play is less pure and less idealistic than critics have asserted, and that the central conflicts emerge from

the subversive power of sexuality. Lazarus Laughed may be in part "the expression of O'Neill's philosophy of the 'good life,'"<sup>28</sup> but it is shot through with paradoxes and the primary sticking point is the place of the body in the new life Lazarus teaches. O'Neill wants his Lazarus to project a new exuberance for life, yet the sexual body has its say and gives the lie to the dream of transcendence. Pompeia is the play's sexually alive character. More than an attractive courtesan, she is aware of her own desires, and speaks from that awareness. She offers the essential criticism of the teachings of Lazarus, and O'Neill so structures his play that this conflict emerges in the penultimate scene. O'Neill's handling of characters, his structuring of the scene in terms of a sequence of interviews, and his images prefigure the style of the psychological plays emerging from the same time period: Strange Interlude, Dynamo, and Mourning Becomes Electra. In this one scene O'Neill invests his central characters with the kind of personal history that makes them understandable as potential human beings. He poses the transcendent love of Lazarus against the earthy love of the mortal characters, and this conflict generates action. O'Neill as an artist wished to make an affirmative statement in Lazarus, but the tale points another way.

## II

The starting point of the play is the Biblical account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Against the terse "Jesus wept" of the Biblical story O'Neill poses his answer "Lazarus laughed." O'Neill



gives his account of the miracle in the initial scene of the play; this account introduces images of seeing and not seeing, looking and overlooking. The mystery of the miracle and the problems of knowing where life ends and death begins are thus introduced:

I found myself kneeling, but between my fingers I watched Jesus and Lazarus. Jesus looked into his face for what seemed a long time and suddenly Lazarus said "Yes" as if he were answering a question in Jesus' eyes. . . . Then Jesus smiled sadly but with tenderness, as one who at a distance of years of sorrow remembers happiness. (277)

As we shall see later, the eye images are used to good effect to present the theme of illumination. Here the mutual look establishes the kinship of Lazarus and Jesus,<sup>29</sup> even as it suggests their differences. Lazarus, the passage suggests, will teach a new happiness and joy, an affirmation of a good life beyond death. Jesus' memory of a past happiness prefigures later images showing characters attached to a spot of time which they recall with happiness. The sadness of Jesus arises perhaps from his fore-knowledge that men will forget his miracle and his teachings.

The eyewitness account of the miracle also introduces the power of Lazarus' laugh:

And then Lazarus knelt and kissed Jesus' feet and both of them smiled and Jesus blessed him and called him "My Brother" and went away; and Lazarus, looking after Him, began to laugh softly like a man in love with God! Such a laugh I never heard! (277)

Once Lazarus separates from Jesus, he begins his own mission, and the play traces his life in the Middle East, in Athens, and then Rome.

With a focus on Lazarus established in his opening, O'Neill develops two broad patterns held together by the figure of Lazarus.

One line of development shows the emergence of particularized characters and culminates in a series of interviews in the penultimate scene. Here the inner characters (except for Miriam who has died) are shown in their relatedness to Lazarus: Tiberius, Caligula and Pompeia. This scene stands as the human test for the teachings of Lazarus, which comprise the second line of development. Lazarus' teachings are unfolded essentially through three devices, reports about his ideas, his own speech, and in the stage directions. This pattern shows an accumulation of images to suggest transcendence, culminating in a final climactic movement in the final scene. Since Lazarus moves from the Holy Land, to Greece, and then to Rome, O'Neill seems to suggest that his new saviour arises from the ashes of the decadent ancient cultures. The human dimension of the play therefore is framed by an overarching movement toward a vision of transcendental merger of Lazarus' soul flying, as O'Neill puts it in his stage directions, "back into the womb of Infinity . . ." (371).

O'Neill's problems in dramatizing both human and god-like qualities are evident from the beginning. The first stage direction of the play draws the distinction between the levels of being. Lazarus is described as living between two worlds: he wears the aspect of a "detached serenity" and he stares straight before him "as if his vision were still fixed beyond life" (274). Miriam, too, is attached to another moment of time, but it is a moment in human time. Her mask is meant to convey her significance as "Woman" and "her eternal acceptance of the compulsion of motherhood, the inevitable cycle of love into pain into joy and new love into separation and pain again and the"

loneliness of age" (274). In a general way, this description outlines the progress of Miriam's life in her relationship with Lazarus and her children—she moves from love to loneliness. Her life is bounded by the kinds of attachments she makes with others around her, and these put her in the role of Mother. This is apparent in her mask, which shows her eyes gazing downward, "as they dream down at the child forever in memory at her breast" (274). Miriam is cast as the mother in mourning (she cannot forget her child who died) and she is a mother also to Lazarus. She is a mortal and as the play progresses she grows ever older; Lazarus on the other hand grows ever younger as he sheds the trappings of time and decay of the flesh. After Miriam dies, Lazarus mourns for her "like a young son who keeps watch by the body of his mother, but at the same time retaining the aloof serenity of the stature of a god" (350). The human level is emphasized in the initial description of Miriam: her mask is her fate. As a man-god Lazarus is detached and aloof, both part of this world and beyond it.

Because Lazarus is god-like O'Neill invests him with light. His head is "haloed and his body illumined by a soft radiance as of tiny phosphorescent flowers" (274). Both art image and light image are meant to suggest an illumined or transcendent state, yet Lazarus must teach men and in order to suggest this humanity O'Neill must invest Lazarus with fleshy attributes. The most important attribute linking Lazarus to this world is his laughter. In the opening scene, this laughter is described in images of flight and harmony:

He begins to laugh, softly at first—a laugh so full of a complete acceptance of life, a profound assertion of

joy in living, so devoid of all self-consciousness of fear, that it is like a great bird song triumphant in depths of sky, proud and powerful, infectious with love, casting on the listener an enthralling spell. (279-80)

This description introduces a tension between self-consciousness and cosmic consciousness.<sup>30</sup> O'Neill uses absolutes to indicate transcendence: "full," "complete," "profound." Yet he gives a paradoxical twist to the image of the song-like quality of the laughter. The bird image suggests not only soaring into heights but into "depths" of sky. The loss of consciousness and the implicit image of merger, the swelling of the song which begins softly, words like "love" and "enthralling spell," give the passage a sexual quality which becomes more apparent if we compare the final stage note describing Lazarus' ascension to the skies.

In the final description of his laughter in the play, Lazarus is engulfed in flames (where he has been joined earlier by Pompeia):

his voice is heard in a gentle, expiring sigh of compassion, followed by a faint dying note of laughter that rises and is lost in the sky like a flight of his soul back into the womb of Infinity. (371)

Now the rising and falling of the voice is followed by "an expiring sigh of compassion" (passion), and a "faint dying" as he re-enters the womb. The orgasmic quality of the passage is underlined when we recall that the "spirit" of Pompeia has merged with that of Lazarus. Her laughter has been heard "rising clear and passionately with that of Lazarus, then dying quickly out" (367). This pattern of merger at the end of the play is quite different from the mother-child images which we are given to represent the relationship of Lazarus and Miriam. O'Neill seems to have wanted to show the transformation of

the earthly into the superhuman, self-consciousness into cosmic consciousness. But he was faced inevitably with the problem of finding a place for the body, or rather, he was faced with the inevitable resistance of language. To represent the superhuman it is necessary to use the language of the body. In terms of the play as a whole, therefore, O'Neill's problem was how to find a dramatic image or scenic image that would illustrate effectively the kind of transformations he wanted to affirm. He seems to have realized the inadequacy of the mother-child image: he quite explicitly sets out to include adult sexual material in the play.

The first significant reference to the tension between the urges of the body and the transcendence of Lazarus' teachings appears in the second scene of Act One. It is a crowd scene, and those gathered are debating the value of the teachings of Lazarus. Among those predisposed to dismiss his teachings are the Orthodox Jews, and one of their priests scorns both Lazarus and the Nazarenes:

These renegade Nazarenes will soon deny they are Jews at all! They will begin to worship in filthy idolatry the sun and stars and man's body—as Lazarus in there . . . the disciple of Jesus, has so well set them the example! (283)

The subversive quality of the body in general is mentioned here for the first time in the play, and is associated with the teachings of Lazarus. "Worship" of the body, from the point of view of the established religious authorities, constitutes idolatry. However, though Lazarus does in his subsequent teachings refer frequently to the sun and stars, his allusions to the body are less frequent, and the ramifications of the body, in the guise of adult sexuality, are

rebuffed by Lazarus. When Lazarus speaks of the body, he uses essentially oral images, the foremost of which is laughter, and the connections are with infancy.

Central to his teaching is Lazarus' sermon in Act Two, scene one:

Out with you! Out into the woods! Upon the hills! Cities are prisons wherein man locks himself from life. Out with you under the sky! Are the stars too pure for your sick passions? Is the warm earth smelling of night too desirous of love for your pale introspective lusts? Out! Let laughter be your new clean lust and sanity! So far man has only learned to snicker meanly at his neighbor! Let a laughing away of self be your new right to live forever! Cry in your pride, "I am Laughter, which is life, which is the Child of God!" (310-11)

The contrasts here are important. On the one hand we have the cities which are associated with "prisons," "sick passions," and "pale introspective lusts." On the other hand we have the healthy life: woods, hills, skies, the "pure" stars, and "earth smelling of night" and above all the laughter which is equated with "new clean lust and sanity." Laughter has the power to dissolve the limited self-consciousness; in the equation of the passage, Laughter equals Life equals the Child of God. The child image conjures up associations of peace and harmony, and seems in fact a variation of the mother and child image we saw in the description of Miriam and her mask. Inasmuch as this "lust" or laughter is childlike, it is clean and sane. At the same time, this invitation to identify oneself with the laughter suggests a certain kind of passivity and dependency. And since laughter is an oral expression of bodily well-being, it is associated with all-or-nothing thinking of infancy: Norman Holland explains: "people who approach the world as if they were going to be fed by it often perceive

experiences in all-or-nothing terms. You can sample these feelings for yourself by imagining the state of the infant: the feeding mother is either wholly there or utterly absent; he is either being totally gratified or he is completely frustrated and despairing."<sup>31</sup> Lazarus is the one character in the play who is presented as being wholly nurtured by the universe. Because he is at one with the cosmos, he is not subject to mortal pain and frustration. The "new clean lust" Lazarus speaks of corresponds to the state of Nirvana that O'Neill projects in his personal diagram, a life without tension or desire.<sup>32</sup> Those about Lazarus experience a sense of fragmentation (visually represented by their masks) to varying degrees: those who most wish to be nurtured are most frustrated and despairing. They experience a "pale introspective lust" and this is evident in the eye images O'Neill uses to describe them. They in-spect themselves as it were because they lack the vision to see beyond their narrow limits.

The pattern of eye images is prefigured by a brief scene in the last part of Act Three. In this scene, the chorus is made up of two groups—representing young Roman Manhood and Womanhood respectively. "The whole effect of these two groups is of sex corrupted and warped, of invented lusts and artificial vices" (336). In this scene Lazarus appears before Tiberius, the Roman Emperor, for the first time. As Lazarus steps forward, the Emperor "draws his toga over his face" (339). Lazarus reaches out to uncover the face of Tiberius and the light radiating from him falls on the Emperor. The visual qualities of the scene underline the theme of illumination. In the subsequent dramatic action of Scene One, Act Four, Lazarus meets face to face

with Tiberius, Caligula, and Pompeia. In each instance these people are revealed in the light of Lazarus to be less knowing than he.

Equally important to the dynamic qualities of the interview scenes is the gesture of the kiss, which is also part of the action in the concluding scene of Act Three. Tiberius characterizes himself as a misanthrope who has learned "to read the lies in faces" (341). Lazarus accepts this self-description, but also challenges Tiberius: "Look well into my eyes, old Reader of Lies, and see if you can find aught in them that is not life—and laughter!" (341). Tiberius remains silent and begins slowly to relax. Pompeia comes forward and attempts to gain the attention of Tiberius. She kisses the hand of the Emperor and calls to him. At this moment, Lazarus does not look at her, but she "stares defiantly at him" as if they were involved in a struggle for possession of Tiberius, who "blinks his eyes in a daze" (342). Tiberius does not respond immediately to Pompeia; rather he speaks dreamily, as if he were on another level of awareness. The images of his speech are an echo of the images of Lazarus: "Yes! A cloud came from a depth of sky—around me, softly, warmly, and the cloud dissolved into the sky, and the sky into peace!" (342). The images suggest a merger, or at least a potential merger of self and cosmos. And the images are clearly sexual as well: being surrounded by soft warm depths leads to dissolution and peace. The tableau here described shows a triangle—Pompeia (the sexual woman), Tiberius, and Lazarus—the imagery reveals the tension between the new clean lust that Lazarus has spoken of, and the bodily expression of sexuality manifest in the figure of Pompeia. In this particular scene, Pompeia's sexuality



bursts the bubble of idealistic reverie and Tiberius suddenly springs to his feet and presses Pompeia to her knees. Her power subverts his desire for peace and calls him back to time and space and the body.<sup>33</sup> Ironically, the reverie of Tiberius gives every appearance of being "introspective" and Pompeia's urges negate that introspection. The dark undercurrent of feeling here pulls against the protestation of an affirmative philosophy.

There is a further irony in the subsequent developments of this scene in which Miriam is poisoned, dies, and then speaks from beyond death. Tiberius, Pompeia, and Caligula are all confounded by this new evidence of the teachings of Lazarus. Lazarus, for his part, glories in his triumph. His laughter is "the laughter of a conqueror arrogant with happiness and the pride of a new triumph" (349). Here we see again O'Neill's problem in having a man-god for his hero: "The combination of laughter and aloof compassion causes some awkwardness in the effect achieved, because it means that Lazarus can laugh the laughter of the gods even when friends and relatives are being slaughtered."<sup>34</sup> More than that, the scene does not work visually either. Lazarus carries Miriam's body to the table, and "touches one hand on her breast, as if he were taking an oath to life on her heart . . . " (349). O'Neill means this touch to illustrate Lazarus' commitment to his belief in the eternal cycle ("Men are . . . unimportant . . . . Man remains!"), but it might just as readily be interpreted as his wish to find life. The physical gesture is not congruent with the assertion of the stage direction. O'Neill's didactic impulse is indeed strained here: he

struggles to make the scene affirmative but does not achieve that effect. It has been suggested that an undercurrent of feeling pulls against his didactic impulse. In this scene, with his hero (son) laughing over the body of his wife (mother) whose name is Miriam (a variant of Mary), it appears that O'Neill's animosity for his mother comes to the surface. Such a scene argues against those interpretations which see this play as "a mythically cohesive force . . . ." <sup>35</sup> There is more than a trace of misogyny here (inasmuch as Miriam is Woman); O'Neill quite simply fails to give his theme a humane dimension. He was much more successful in the subsequent scene, the interviews with Lazarus. In this scene even Lazarus takes on believable human characteristics.

### III

The first scene of Act Four deserves close attention for a number of reasons. First, it has been described as one of the most moving scenes in the play. <sup>36</sup> Second, it reveals a good deal about O'Neill's characterization: the "inner" characters are shown to have a complexity of feeling that arises from a family past. This is particularly true of Tiberius, who describes a family past very much like that O'Neill described in his personal life chart. Tiberius is shown to be the product of a family fate. Third, the scene anticipates in its structure and imagery some of the central patterns of other plays in the middle period. The interview structure anticipates the opening scenes, for example, of Strange Interlude and of Mourning Becomes Electra. And fourth, it dramatizes most effectively the subversive power of sexuality.

Here Lazarus' philosophy is put to the test, and his attitude toward the body is shown to be not idolatrous, but ineluctably ambivalent. The scene moves forward slowly toward a confrontation of Pompeia with Lazarus, an encounter that has provoked a number of different critical responses. Taken as a whole, this scene dramatizes the human qualifications of the teachings of Lazarus.

The scene begins with Tiberius questioning Lazarus about the death and subsequent "return" of Miriam. Lazarus does not respond to these questions, but when Tiberius articulates his own inner wish—"I want hope for me, Tiberius Caesar" (351)—Lazarus responds, first with a question of his own, and then with a brief assertion of his vision.

The question Lazarus asks is the one that Tiberius must face: "What is—you? But there is hope for Man!" (351). The main theme of Lazarus' philosophy is presented to a specific individual. Tiberius must discover that he is fragmented, and that he is more than Tiberius Caesar, figure of social and political power. Caesar must discover that he is also Tiberius the man. Lazarus does not say any of this directly, but instead addresses Tiberius' assertions that all gods are dead and life is a sickness.

"We are sick," they say, "therefore there is no God in us, therefore there is no God!" Oh, if men would but interpret that first cry of man fresh from the womb as the laughter of one who even then says to his heart, "It is my pride as God to become Man. Then let it be my pride as Man to re-create the God in me!" (352)

This little parable seems to touch Tiberius and leads him to begin to reflect upon his own infancy. This movement back in time toward the movement of awakening in an earlier stage of life anticipates images

in Strange Interlude and in Mourning Becomes Electra.<sup>37</sup> There are stages to the response of Tiberius, and these require attention.

The first response he makes is a denial (the response that Marsden makes to the eruption of erotic feelings about Nina in the opening thought aside of Strange Interlude).<sup>38</sup> Tiberius dismisses Lazarus' paradoxes as mere obscurities, but he becomes increasingly forthright and talkative, and eventually moves into a deeper level of response, a direct confession. Lazarus facilitates this unlocking of Tiberius' deepest feelings simply by making a series of brief positive assertions. The tone of Lazarus' interjections becomes more personal and gentle, until he is speaking not to the Emperor but to Tiberius: "There is peace!" "I know that age and time are but timidities of thought." "I believe you, Caesar." "I hear Tiberius." (353, 354, 355).

Tiberius' receptive mood is signalled by his tone of voice. He appeals to Lazarus for certainty and then gradually articulates his fears: "But surely Lazarus, nothing is sure—peace the least sure of all—and I fear there is no rest beyond there, that one remembers there as here and cannot sleep, that the mind goes on eternally the same—a long insomnia of memories and regrets and ghosts of dreams one has poisoned to death passing with white bodies spotted by the leprous fingers of one's lusts" (353). This utterance sums up all those qualities that are at odds with peace. The associations with lust are particularly powerful. One quality contributing to its impact is that Tiberius makes no distinctions between kinds of lust. The purity of the dreams is sullied by the "leprous fingers" of lusts, not any one particular lust or any group of them, but all of them.

The metaphor suggests that wishing, desiring, lusting itself is a loathsome disease which manifests itself in the fingers, appendages whose capabilities make man a distinctive animal. To the extent that fingers have phallic associations, the image suggests that the very core of his manhood is rotten. (The passage calls to mind Edmund's lament in Long Day's Journey that everything seemed rotten to him after he discovered that his mother was a drug addict.<sup>39</sup>)

The associations with the figure of speech go even further when we consider the word "leprous." Leprosy is a degenerative and consumptive disease, and it was consumption that violated O'Neill's sense of himself as a young man. Something of the power of the figure of speech is suggested by Susan Sontag in her recent Illness as Metaphor:

In the Middle Ages, the leper was a social text in which corruption was made visible; an exemplum, and emblem of decay. Nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning—that meaning being invariably a moralistic one. Any important disease whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance. First, the subjects of deepest dread (corruption, decay, pollution, anomie, weakness) are identified with the disease. The disease itself becomes a metaphor. Then, in the name of the disease (that is, using it as a metaphor), that horror is imposed on other things. The disease-like, meaning that it is disgusting or ugly.<sup>40</sup> In French, a moldering stone facade is still lepreuse.

The disease indeed becomes adjectival, and in O'Neill's metaphor it describes the horrible sense of alienation and self-despair that Tiberius feels. And this sense of corruption and dis-ease is everything that Lazarus' "new-clean lust" is not.

Lazarus answers this lament simply by saying that there is peace. Tiberius sneers at this notion, too, in words that anticipate the

phrases used by Nina in Strange Interlude to dismiss the idealistic sexual mores of her father. Tiberius says, "Peace! Another word blurred into a senseless high by men's longings! A bubble of froth blown from the lips of the dying toward the stars!" (353). But the very presence of Lazarus seems to reassure him, and Tiberius speaks of his genuine need for peace and the means to achieve it.

Unlike Nina, who refuses to separate lust and purity, Tiberius says that he wants youth again "because I loathe lust and long for purity." Tiberius in effect asks to be believed and to be believed in, and we are prepared to listen carefully, just as Lazarus listens carefully. At this point, Tiberius' tone becomes less imperious and hostile, and he begins to confess—to "reveal" his own "unique truth" (354) as he says.

The memories that Tiberius has of his own childhood counterpoint the idealistic parable of joyous infancy earlier articulated by Lazarus. Tiberius tells that he was not accepted by his mother, that there was no joy at his birth except in anticipation of what he might become. He was loved not as a child, but as a potential Caesar. Tiberius says of his mother, "She made me feel, in the proud questioning of her scornful eyes, that to win her mother love I must become Caesar" (355). In this story of childhood, pride sits with the mother, not the child, and it is a calculating, reasoning pride; it contrasts with the sense of bodily joyousness that Lazarus posits as the prideful laugh-cry of the newborn infant. This contrast between Lazarus' vision of birth and Tiberius' memory of infancy is underlined by Tiberius' assertion that his mother bore him "as a weapon" (355).<sup>41</sup> The simile suggests both

that he was born into a world of conflict and that he became an instrument of battle.

Yet, despite the anxiety that the battle image speaks of, Tiberius must also have experienced a kind of innocence, for he explicitly wishes to recover it: "I want youth, Lazarus, that I may play again about her feet with the love I felt for her before I learned to read her eyes" (355). In other words, Tiberius wishes to throw over his adult suspiciousness and his self-proclaimed identity as a Reader of Lies. Rather than to read—for reading implies a separation between subject and object, a sense of distance—he wishes to merge with his world. (His appetite for this kind of merger may have been whetted by the "trance" he experienced earlier when speaking with Lazarus, before the intervention of Pompeia.)

In responding to this confession only that he "hears," Lazarus responds in an apt way. By so responding he identifies himself as one who takes in, and Tiberius wants nothing less than to be taken in, to be at one with this world. His wish is for the kind of relatedness that a child has with the world before he senses himself to be separated from it.

The second major life-theme of Tiberius, which follows as an outgrowth of the way he was treated as a child, is possession. Again, this theme counterpoints the earlier sermonizing of Lazarus. Lazarus had earlier enjoined Tiberius to "dare to love Eternity without your fear desiring to possess her! Be brave enough to be possessed!" (352). But Tiberius has been possessed, and in a way that one possesses an object. The effect of this counterpointing is to humanize the

rhapsodic preachings of Lazarus.

Tiberius emphasizes the experiences in his life which recapitulate the experiences of his infancy. First, he experienced happiness. He fell in love with and married Agrippina by whom he had a son. But then his mother conspired with Augustus Caesar to destroy that happiness. Caesar ordered Tiberius to divorce Agrippina and then marry a daughter of Caesar. Tiberius recounts his feelings and his mother's: he describes how he felt that his mother "wished to keep me tortured that I might love her alone and long to be Caesar!" (356). This experience of being possessed by the wishes of another person answers Lazarus' sermonizing about being open to possession. The results of being possessed are grotesque. Tiberius sums up his life as follows:

In brief, I married the whore [daughter of Augustus Caesar], she tortured me, my mother's scheming prospered—that subtle and crafty woman!—and many years passed in being here and there, in doing this and that, in growing full of hate and revengeful ambition to be Caesar. At last, Augustus died. I was Caesar. Then I killed that whore, my wife, and I starved my mother's strength to death until she died, and I began to take pleasure in vengeance upon men, and pleasure in taking vengeance on myself. (356)

This picture of his adult life acts as a gloss on his earlier comment that his past is all "a red blot!" in which he "cannot distinguish" (355) one crime from another. The undifferentiated violence of his adulthood undercuts the implicitly undifferentiated peace of his early infancy.<sup>41</sup> The turning point from peace to violence came at that moment when he learned to read his mother's eyes. Learning to "read," then, not only disturbed his childhood, but blurred his adult life as well and effected a perversion of feelings and values. He feels compelled to "kill love" (356) whenever he can.



Tiberius gradually re-assumes his role as Caesar, and finally asserts pointedly to Lazarus: "And remember there shall be death when I am Caesar!" (357). The moment when he again becomes Caesar is at hand, but before that happens, Lazarus makes one more appeal to the Tiberius who lives behind the Emperor mask. Lazarus catches Tiberius up short. With a smile Lazarus says, "Caesar must believe in death. But does the husband of Agrippina?" (357). That aspect of his identity which flourished when he was the husband of Agrippina responds to the question, but Tiberius quickly assumes his imperious manner. The revelation of the human side of Tiberius, however, shows that the preaching of Lazarus has meaning within a human context. The revelation also anticipates the final scene in which we see the laughter of the burning Lazarus reaching out from the flames to expunge the fear of death from Tiberius. At this point his fear disappears, and he is murdered by Caligula, the Caesar in waiting.

The second interview in the first scene of Act Four is between Lazarus and Caligula. Caligula is less reflective than Tiberius, and less intrigued by the mystery of death than by the mystery of earthly power. Accordingly, he is less receptive than Tiberius to the preaching of Lazarus. However, both men are alike in their yearning to be Caesar, and so there emerge a number of parallels between the interviews. In the wish that he utters, Caligula appeals for the kind of acceptance sought by Tiberius. Caligula says

I would be clean! If I could only laugh your laughter, Lazarus! . . . If I could only believe—believe in them—in life—in myself!—believe that one man or woman in the world knew and loved the real Caligula—then I might laugh your laughter! (358-59)

This wish to be clean and to be accepted is couched in such terms as to suggest that he has never experienced love or acceptance; in this respect Caligula differs from Tiberius.

Lazarus asserts that he loves Caligula, but the latter cannot accept this affirmation. Rather, Caligula is confounded by such acceptance and must immediately deny it. In his denial, he again responds as did Tiberius, but Caligula never gets far beyond this stage of denial to a stage of acceptance. So deep-rooted is his habit of denial, that Caligula denies even himself: "There is nothing in me at bottom but a despising and an evil eye!" (359). Caligula's assumption of a negative identity (an evil I) is a way he has of protecting himself, and his use of an eye image connects him also with Tiberius.

Lazarus counters this assumption of a negative identity, just as he did with Tiberius. Lazarus asserts that there is no good or evil. He asks of Caligula, "What if there are only health and sickness?" (359). He encourages Caligula to believe in the laughing god within, but Caligula cannot get beyond the either-or thinking which characterizes one who does not trust the world. Momentarily moved by Lazarus' vision, Caligula proclaims that he will one day transform the Roman Empire into a peacable kingdom. But his either-or thinking emerges even in his seemingly positive rhetoric:

When I am Caesar, I will devote my powers to your truth.  
I will declare that there must be kindness and love! I  
will make the Empire one great Blessed Isle! Rome shall

know happiness, it shall believe in life, it shall learn to laugh your laughter, or I—(He raises his hand in an imperial autocratic gesture). (360)

In this passage we see both the positive and negative dimensions of the desire for transcendence, and again O'Neill has presented that desire as springing from an infantile wish.

The "Blessed Isle" allusion in this passage anticipates the South Sea Island motif which O'Neill describes in his "Fragmentary Diary" to Mourning Becomes Electra and corresponds to the "Nirvana" concept in Marco Millions and O'Neill's chart.<sup>42</sup> Lazarus is the one O'Neill character who seems to have achieved the peak experience described by O'Neill in Marco as the "supreme enlightenment which would conquer birth and death."<sup>43</sup> In his "Fragmentary Diary" O'Neill associates the South Sea Island symbol with "release, peace, beauty, freedom of conscience, sinlessness, etc.—longing for the primitive—and mother symbol—yearning for prenatal non-competitive freedom from fear . . . ." <sup>44</sup> To use the language of Lazarus, we might say that to reach the Blessed Isles or Nirvana is to "re-enter infinity" (360). It is a re-entry because it has been experienced before, that is, in the pre-natal state before one learns to read eyes and to sense one's distinction from the mother. Lazarus' injunction to Caligula is to go out "under the sky" and cast his heart outward to the stars. In short, he urges an identification with the cosmos and a recognition of Eternal Recurrence. "Men pass! Like rain into the sea! The sea remains! Man remains! Man slowly arises from the past of the race of men that was his tomb of death! For Man death is not! Man, Son of God's laughter, is!" (359-60). All this is what Caligula seems

to wish for, but cannot feel.

The negative or despairing side of his wish is evident in the gesture that Caligula makes, raising his hand "in an imperial autocratic gesture" (360). Because he does not feel or cannot "remember" the sense of belonging that Lazarus describes, Caligula remains a victim of his frustration and despair. The Blessed Isles are beyond his ken; he simply cannot trust the world. His existence is characterized by his fear of death and a craving for power; he cannot overcome his consciousness of self.<sup>45</sup>

Given this pattern of imagery by which O'Neill reveals the character of Caligula, it is necessary then to qualify certain critical descriptions. Cunningham asserts, for example, that Caligula is the "ultimate mechanist in O'Neill's apotheosis of organicism."<sup>46</sup> But the images I have discussed suggest that Caligula can better be understood as one incapable of trust in the world outside himself and who therefore treats it with violence and attempts to force the world to take the shape of his wishes. Caligula perceives the world in terms of nothingness; Lazarus perceives it in terms of allness. Because he is unable to recapture the childlike relatedness to the cosmos that Lazarus speaks of, Caligula is obsessed with the instruments of earthly power. Accordingly, he is seen at the end of the play dancing around Lazarus at the stake and waving a spear which he uses to pierce Lazarus. Caligula prances back on stage with blood on his spear to assert that he has killed God and to identify himself with death.

Since the play teaches that there is no good and evil, only sickness and health, then Caligula is indeed sick. This sickness gives

him a human quality that Lazarus does not have, but since both deal in absolutes, they are necessarily perceived as near of kin. O'Neill's difficulty in projecting his own teaching is evident in his working notes for the play. Virginia Floyd describes O'Neill's ambivalent attitudes toward his characters:

The notes reflect his dilemma; he veers in two directions, torn between the historical attempt to portray Caligula and Tiberius as evil monsters and his own inclination to depict them as vulnerable human beings—victims caught in a web of tragic circumstances that force them to stifle their natural goodness. The dramatist ultimately shows—as the mask-mouth dichotomy suggests—that it is impossible to draw a clear-cut battleline between good and evil as, for example, between two opposing forces—the virtuous Lazarus and the wicked Roman tyrants. The terms "good" and "evil" are not mutually exclusive as they apply to O'Neill's characters.

The kinship of Caligula and Lazarus is also evident in O'Neill's 1926 note for the last speech of the play. O'Neill assigns the last speech to Lazarus (not Caligula as in the published version.) The passage suggests that O'Neill was again torn between delivering an affirmative philosophy and presenting a believable human being; moreover it shows traces of O'Neill's own struggle to understand himself in his autobiographical papers.

The tragedy is that Man forgets! . . . As the day of his birth recedes he forgets the God in him. . . . He grows alien and afraid and an outcast from the spirit of life. Sin is born—guilt & conscience—as he becomes aware of his meanness as man and blames it on devils & evil. He thinks of himself as a hero fighting the dragons of evil. Alas, this dragon is a grave worm born in himself and he is a feeble actor making brave faces into a mirror and saying "I am a warrior!" If he could see what applause his audience would give to his last gesture how happily would he die, acting the hero! . . . And if one should speak to him of God he says resentfully I am an unhealthy animal—therefore there is no God in me—therefore there

is no God. Such logic comforts his dying. He invents original sin to explain his craven forgetting of his original virtue, his laughing innocence. "I was born soiled." This craven lie—never "I have soiled myself." Or if he even admits weakness in himself, he weeps at the same time with pity for that weakness. When he does not deny, he pities. Thus he always spoils and coddles himself. He remains his own mother.<sup>48</sup>

Two obvious conclusions emerge when this passage is set beside O'Neill's diagram.<sup>49</sup> First, the shaping metaphor for life is the same: it is seen as a decent or a loss. In the diagram it is a descent from Nirvana; here it is Man's forgetting "the God" in him. Second, the goal of life is seen as the recovery of the Mother. When Man is nurtured by the cosmos (as Lazarus is) he moves beyond good and evil: when man forgets the God in him he pities himself and thus "remains his own mother."

This passage also sheds light on Lazarus' behavior at the death of Miriam. Since he is mothered by the cosmos, he does not need her individual mothering. Caligula differs only in that he has never received the mothering he wished for and had to become his own mother. Lazarus receives all; Caligula nothing.

O'Neill's success in the completed play is to make Caligula at least potentially human, more human perhaps than Lazarus. In this interview scene a strong undercurrent of personal feeling seems to be at odds with O'Neill's determination to project an affirmative philosophy. The perverse lusts of Caligula at least are qualified by his wish for innocence; Lazarus' exultant innocence is not qualified by a responsiveness to human needs.

The essential criticism of the teachings of Lazarus emerges in the interview between Lazarus and Pompeia. The scene is dramatically effective and poignant: it contrasts strongly with the previous interviews in two respects. First, the scene involves the meeting of bodies (there are three kisses), and second, Lazarus does not respond to the wish of his interlocutor in a way that will lead her to understand herself. Furthermore, the dramatic conflict is carried both by physical actions and dialogue. The scene involves tenderness and touching, and has the potential to be quite moving.

Central to this scene are the kisses. Pompeia approaches Lazarus and kisses his hand, and says that she loves him. Lazarus responds that he loves her, and Pompeia challenges him to make real his avowed love for her. At her prompting he puts his arms around her and kisses her forehead. She insists that he kiss her on the lips. He does, but without passion. She draws back, feeling rebuffed, and exclaims her need to be acknowledged as a woman of flesh and blood:

No! No! It is my love, not Love! I want you to know  
my love, to give back love—for me—only for me, Pompeia—  
my body, my heart—me, a woman—not Woman, women! (361)

Pompeia charges that he is is "neither a man nor a god but a dead thing without desire!" (361). She leaves the scene, and then Lazarus bends down and kisses the dead Miriam (who was his mother and who represents Woman). The paradox is thus revealed: Lazarus rejects a woman alive in her body and instead "loves" the dead mother, symbol of Woman. Pompeia's function is to keep this triangular conflict alive and her role in the play is therefore central. She is the voice of the body that cannot be stilled.

Pompeia's sexuality is straightforward and urgent. A sense of urgency is evident in the words she uses: "my body, my heart" are placed together as if they cannot be separated but are one and the same. Her plea, then, is the plea of the whole Pompeia; she is more than just the mask she wears ("a dissipated mask of intense evil beauty of lust and perverted passion" [336-37]), she is also the pale young woman with a "gentle girlish mouth" (337). Her anger and pain, her namecalling and her subsequent spitting on Lazarus, these are all aspects of the distress she feels because she is a creature of the flesh. To borrow words from Lionel Trilling, she speaks from "a hard, irreducible stubborn core of biological urgency, and biological necessity, and biological reason . . . ." <sup>50</sup> In saying no to Lazarus, she is affirming her sense of life. And in asserting that Lazarus is a dead thing without desire, Pompeia not only judges the character of Lazarus, she also makes a judgment about the play. For without the active tension generated by her sexuality, the play might descend to that level of tensionless assertion that Chothia objects to. <sup>51</sup> But Pompeia activates the play, she gives life to the figure of Miriam, and to the portrait of Lazarus. She gets to the heart of the matter, that the philosophy Lazarus teaches denies the bodily needs of an adult woman and is therefore a celebration of neither men nor gods but of abstractions.

The importance of the encounter between Pompeia and Lazarus has been acknowledged by critics, but they tend to play down the critical function of sexuality. Doris Alexander, for example, sees Lazarus as a composite saviour, and in her view this scene reveals only the



limitations of one of those roles in the composition: "In his capacity as the positive masculine Dionysus, . . . Lazarus cannot well refuse Pompeia's request that he kiss her on the lips, and the best that O'Neill can do is to make his kiss so dispassionately universal that it repels Pompeia, a not entirely satisfactory resolution of the problem."<sup>52</sup> There can be no satisfactory resolution to the problem, but the situation does reveal the subversive power of sexuality.

Frank R. Cunningham acknowledges Pompeia's subversive powers, yet at the same time denigrates her vitality. He says that "mindless negation . . . is her only source of life," and that she is "the eternal instinctual woman, so practical that she is oblivious of Lazarus' spiritual mission."<sup>53</sup> Cunningham further argues that Pompeia's criticism of Lazarus as a dead thing is simply wrong. He describes Lazarus as "post-sexual rather than sexless" and asserts that Lazarus is "more sexual in the true meaning of the word than she, but O'Neill cannot create the conflict within him that will make us believe so."<sup>54</sup> The reason that O'Neill cannot make us believe so may be that Pompeia's voice is the very stubborn irreducible core of biological urgency. When Cunningham goes on to say that Lazarus celebrates "earthly life,"<sup>55</sup> he seems explicitly to deny the life of Pompeia. The full impact of Pompeia's sexuality can be seen in the conclusion of the play.

When Lazarus kisses the dead Miriam, he marks a pivotal point at which the play turns away from an exploration of the tension generated by adult sexuality in conflict with a transcendent ideal and turns toward the final image of fusion and merger. The characters

who became believable in their involvement with Lazarus collapse in the end into mere puppets. The spectacular elements of sound and lighting assume a correspondingly larger role in the action. To discover the fate of the characters, we must turn to the stage directions. Here we return to the images of pre-genital or infantile sexuality that we saw in the beginning of the play.

The play, then, describes a circular structure.<sup>56</sup> Lazarus grows ever younger as the play progresses, and just as Miriam gazes fixedly downward at the child forever in memory at her breast, so does Lazarus move ever closer to the child-mother union. He becomes like a son to his wife, and in the final moments of the play his laughter "rises and is lost in the sky like the flight of his soul back into the womb of Infinity."<sup>57</sup> Pompeia, too, merges with the cosmos in the final scene, and presumably she merges with Miriam. Ernest Griffin's remark that the only reconciliation of the love triangle in the play "seems to be that the merciful Mother Superior Miriam must unite with the aristocratic courtesan Pompeia"<sup>58</sup> can be restated so as to take account of the treatment of sexuality in the play. The play projects two aspects of woman in the figures of the maternal Miriam and the sexual Pompeia. This splitting suggests a desexualization of the loved woman. The course of Lazarus' "life"—including his mortal days and his moment as a super-human—corresponds to the paradigm described by Weissmann: "there is a brief treatment of mature sexuality—that is, love, marriage, and children—which then regresses to a desexualization of the loved woman accompanied by a regressive abandonment of the child

or children."<sup>59</sup> Lazarus unites with Miriam and Pompeia after the latter has passed through the cleansing flames and is purified of bodily lusts. Thus the final images suggest a new clean lust has been achieved and the loved woman has been desexualized.

So says the artist. But if we trust the tale and not the artist, then we sense that the real vitality of the play resides in those moments when the voice of the body has its say in the interviews between individual characters. Lazarus, who is attacked by the orthodox priest for preaching worship of the "sun and stars and man's body" (283), finds his own teachings subverted by the bodily needs of Pompeia.

Virginia Floyd makes an apt summary:

Paradoxically, Lazarus' aspiration—to attain the highest good, to become Man the demi-God—produces a fatal flaw in his character as man: his inability to experience human love. It is Pompeia who detects his weakness. For all her promiscuity, she craves a pure but complete love that embraces both the physical and the spiritual. . . . As man—husband, son, friend—Lazarus is an anomaly as <sup>60</sup>perverse for his species, in his own way, as Caligula.

We are left then with a sense of the gap between what O'Neill aimed for and what he achieved. The laughter of Lazarus can be a new clean lust and sanity only in the sense that it is autoerotic, a full bodily expression of pleasure. But while laughter can be shared, in this play such sharing precludes the meeting of man and woman alive in their bodies.

## IV

Lazarus Laughed marks a turning point in O'Neill's career, for after 1927 the so-called Triumvirate (O'Neill, Kenneth Macgowan, and Robert Edmund Jones) disbanded, and O'Neill formed an association with the Theatre Guild who produced Marco Millions and Strange Interlude in January of 1928.<sup>62</sup> As a theatrical experiment Lazarus looks back to the work done by the Triumvirate and represents O'Neill's most elaborate experimentation with masks and choral scenes.<sup>63</sup> But the play also bears the stamp of its moment in the life of the author and looks ahead to subsequent works, especially those engendered or brought to completion in the years following O'Neill's reformation—Strange Interlude, Dynamo, and Mourning Becomes Electra.

The interviews of Act Four scene one suggest the interviews or "analysis" O'Neill underwent with Dr. Hamilton<sup>64</sup> and, in terms of structure, they anticipate a method he used with greater subtlety and variety in Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra. In the Lazarus interviews the inmost wishes of the characters are brought to the surface: in Interlude and Electra O'Neill was able to manage the principle so that different layers of his characters' inner lives are gradually peeled away. In Interlude the surfacing principle informs not only interviews between characters but also individual soliloquies, acts within the play and the play as a whole. And in Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill used the same structural principle to connect the first scene of his opening play to the last scene in the concluding play of the trilogy.

In terms of characterization, O'Neill splits his figures in Lazarus Laughed even as he represented different aspects of his own life by use of parallel lines in his diagram. The either-or thinking of Caligula anticipates the rigidity of Reuben Light, hero of Dynamo.<sup>65</sup> O'Neill's splitting of his portrait of woman into the ideal mother (Miriam) and the earthy sexual woman (Pompeia) prefigures his much more searching and aesthetically satisfying portraits of the splits within Nina in Strange Interlude and Lavinia in Mourning Becomes Electra.<sup>66</sup> Tiberius' attempt to link his present needs to his childhood past suggests O'Neill's family summary<sup>67</sup> and anticipates similar patterns in Interlude, Dynamo, and Electra. In each case a family past shapes the fate of an individual.

O'Neill's struggles in Lazarus to find appropriate figures of speech or images to project a sense of perfect peace (Nirvana in his diagram) are more fruitful in the later works in that they are more concrete. Caligula mentions the Blessed Isles here, but in Electra the Blessed Isles image is woven through the entire fabric of the play.<sup>68</sup> O'Neill uses stage directions to tell us Lazarus re-enters the womb of infinity; in Strange Interlude he has Nina, shortly after she has given birth, reflect from centre stage that God is a mother. He finds in this scene an effective dramatic method for projecting a sense of cosmic unity and peace.<sup>69</sup> In Dynamo, O'Neill tries to present an image of the Mother with his machine; once again he opts for the concrete.<sup>70</sup>

Lazarus also shows the persistence of the theme of subversive sexuality in O'Neill's vision. He set out to present through the

figure of Lazarus a "new clean lust" but was driven also to acknowledge the voice of the body. This tension, however, does not inform the entire play: it remains a force that emerges when O'Neill begins to invest his characters with individual human traits in the penultimate scene. Pompeia's sexual needs bring O'Neill's metaphysic tumbling down; in subsequent plays O'Neill begins to take control of his theme: he invests his characters with bodily voices and we find that the sexual impulse has the power to disrupt self-images, family life, and cultural and religious values. We find too that sexual needs undermine the seemingly objective ideals of modern science.

## Notes: Chapter Two

A note on citations:

All quotations from Lazarus Laughed refer to The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1954), Vol. 1 and will be cited parenthetically in the text. O'Neill's stage directions are in italics and will here be underlined.

<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spake Zarathustra: First Part," in The Portable Nietzsche ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1954, 1968), p. 144.

<sup>2</sup>For an overview see Travis Bogard, Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 279. Hereafter Contour in Time.

See also footnote 14, Chapter One above for further details on the composition process.

<sup>3</sup>O'Neill to Kenneth Macgowan, 14 May 1926, in "The Theatre We Worked For": The Letters of Eugene O'Neill to Kenneth Macgowan ed. Jackson R. Bryer, with introductory essays by Travis Bogard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 112. Hereafter cited as O'Neill to Macgowan.

<sup>4</sup>Bogard, Contour in Time, pp. 278ff.

<sup>5</sup>See Bogard's essay on the O'Neill-Jones-Macgowan collaboration in O'Neill to Macgowan, pp. 3-17; pp. 68-85.

<sup>6</sup>Eugene O'Neill at Work: Newly Released Ideas for Plays edited and annotated by Virginia Floyd (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981), p. 92. Hereafter cited as O'Neill at Work.

<sup>7</sup>Timo Tiusanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 129.

<sup>8</sup>O'Neill to Macgowan, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup>Tiusanen calls it a pageant "through history"; see O'Neill's Scenic Images, p. 129. Floyd in O'Neill at Work describes the play as a "religious pageant" (p. 112).

<sup>10</sup>H.O. Stechan, "Lazarus Laughed," Billboard 40 (April 21, 1928), 11; reprinted in Playwright's Progress: O'Neill and the Critics ed. Jordan Y. Miller (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1965), pp. 61-62. The quotation is from the latter, p. 61.

<sup>11</sup>John Henry Raleigh, Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Works (Toronto: Forum House, 1969), p. 42.

<sup>12</sup>Frederic I. Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 71.

<sup>13</sup>Raleigh, O'Neill, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. Floyd reproduces O'Neill's scheme in O'Neill at Work, p. 100.

<sup>16</sup>Contour in Time, p. 282.

<sup>17</sup>Oscar Cargill, "Fusion-Point of Jung and Nietzsche," in O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism ed. Oscar Cargill, N. Bryl-lion Fagin, William J. Fisher (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 412.

<sup>18</sup>The quotations are from, respectively: F.I. Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill, p. 71; Frank R. Cunningham, "Lazarus Laughed: A Study in O'Neill's Romanticism," Studies in Twentieth Century, 15 (Spring, 1975), p. 71; and Esther M. Jackson, "O'Neill the Humanist," in Eugene O'Neill: A World View ed. Virginia Floyd (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1979), p. 255.



<sup>19</sup> See Doris Alexander, "Lazarus Laughed and Buddha," Modern Language Quarterly 17 (December, 1956), pp. 357-365; Cyrus Day, "Amor Fati: O'Neill's Lazarus as Superman and Savior," in Eugene O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), pp. 72-81; Egil Törnqvist, "Nietzsche and O'Neill: A Study in Affinity," Orbis Litterarum 23 (1968), pp. 97-126; Leonard Chabrowe, Ritual and Pathos—The Theatre of O'Neill (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976), esp. pp. 41-53; Jean Chothia, Forging a Language: A Study of the Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 47-49; pp. 96-97.

<sup>20</sup> Egil Törnqvist, "O'Neill's Lazarus: Dionysus and Christ," American Literature 41 (January, 1970), p. 549.

<sup>21</sup> Carl Dahlström, "Dynamo and Lazarus Laughed: Some Limitations," Modern Drama 3 (December, 1960), p. 226.

<sup>22</sup> Chothia, Forging a Language, pp. 97-98.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Carpenter, O'Neill, p. 72.

<sup>25</sup> Cunningham, "Lazarus Laughed: A Study in O'Neill's Romanticism," p. 71.

<sup>26</sup> Ernest G. Griffin, "Pity, Alienation and Reconciliation in Eugene O'Neill," Mosaic 2 (Fall, 1968), p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Sophus Winther, Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961), p. 99.

<sup>29</sup> Törnqvist, "O'Neill's Lazarus," p. 547.

<sup>30</sup>Terms used by Edwin Engel, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 127. Engel does not cite his source for these terms, but he is probably drawing on the distinctions made by Richard M. Bucke in his Cosmic Consciousness (first published 1901); available in Dutton paperback (New York: Dutton, 1969). I do not mean to suggest that O'Neill achieved what Bucke calls cosmic consciousness, nor does Engel, but I use the terms to describe the qualities of the images.

<sup>31</sup>Norman N. Holland, Poems in Person: An Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Literature (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), p. 138. Caligula is the character who most obviously fits the pattern. At one point, Caligula says, "I must fear everyone. The world is my enemy" (p. 301). This absolutist trait in his character is discussed below.

<sup>32</sup>See Chapter One above for a discussion of the diagram.

<sup>33</sup>Pompeia's kiss contrasts with the kiss scene in Marco Millions. In the latter, Princess Kukachin strains to kiss Marco Polo, prototypical Western businessman, but he turns away from her when he hears money jingling in the background. Marco's greed is more basic than his "passion." See Marco Millions, in Plays, II, pp. 414-415.

<sup>34</sup>Ernest G. Griffin, "Introduction" to Eugene O'Neill: A Collection of Criticism (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p.15.

<sup>35</sup>Cunningham, "Lazarus Laughed: A Study in O'Neill's Romanticism," p. 71.

<sup>36</sup>Travis Bogard comments that in a 1950 production at the University of California at Berkeley, "Tiberius' monologue in Act IV, scene i . . . had a greatness of line, an elemental strength that ranked it close to Ephraim's monologue in Desire Under the Elms" (Contour in Time, p. 289n).

The power of the scene may result from its autobiographical sources. Raleigh points out that this scene anticipates relationships in Act Four of Long Day's Journey into Night (Eugene O'Neill, p. 47). James R. Scrimgeour notes that Tiberius and Caligula "may be viewed as real human beings as well as allegorical representatives of a state of mind . . . . They are presented, at times at least, as human beings whose despair grows naturally out of their lives in this

world . . . "; see "From Loving to the Misbegotten: Despair in the Drama of Eugene O'Neill," Modern Drama 30 (March, 1977), p. 44.

<sup>37</sup>In the opening scene of Strange Interlude, Marsden reflects upon his sexual awakening in adolescence; see Plays, I, pp. 5-6. In Electra Christine reveals how her disgust for her daughter Lavinia began with the distress caused by Mannon's lovemaking on their wedding night. See Plays, III, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup>Plays, I, p. 5.

<sup>39</sup>Long Day's Journey into Night (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 118.

<sup>40</sup>Susan Sontag, Illness as Metaphor (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 57-58.

<sup>41</sup>This image of giving birth "as a weapon" is related to a similar image in O'Neill's family summary in which he wonders if his mother underwent the "series of brought-on abortions" in order to defy her husband. Later in the summary, O'Neill describes her as involved in a "war with [her] husband . . . ." The image in the play and the image in the summary assume that (1) family life is a battleground and (2) children—dead or alive—may become weapons in the battles. The images recall O'Neill's definition of psychological fate as springing from within the family in his Notes to Electra. For a discussion of O'Neill's view of fate, see Chapter One above.

The life history of Tiberius has striking parallels with O'Neill's life-chart. First, there is a sense of blissful peace (Nirvana in the chart); then, a separation from the mother (represented by double lines) and concomitant development of ambivalence toward her; finally she is done away with altogether (the mother-line in the chart breaks off abruptly). For a detailed discussion of the chart, see Chapter One above.

<sup>42</sup>See Chapter One above for a discussion of these correspondences.

<sup>43</sup>Plays, II, 372.

<sup>44</sup>In Horst Frenz ed. American Playwrights on Drama (New York: Hill & Wang, 1965), p. 8.

<sup>45</sup>Doris Alexander, "Lazarus Laughed and Buddha," Modern Language Notes 17 (December, 1956), p. 359.

<sup>46</sup>"A Study in O'Neill's Romanticism," p. 57.

<sup>47</sup>O'Neill at Work, p. 101.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>49</sup>See Chapter One above for discussion of the diagram. It is reproduced in Son and Playwright, p. 506.

<sup>50</sup>Lionel Trilling, Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), p. 115.

<sup>51</sup>Chothia, Forging a Language, p. 98.

<sup>52</sup>Alexander, "Lazarus Laughed and Buddha," p. 364.

<sup>53</sup>Cunningham, "O'Neill's Romanticism," p. 61.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>56</sup>Egil Törnqvist, A Drama of Souls: Studies in O'Neill's Supernaturalistic Technique (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 252.

<sup>57</sup> Once again the image of the "end" of life recalls Nirvana in O'Neill's diagram.

<sup>58</sup> Griffin, "Pity, Alienation and Reconciliation," Mosaic (1968), p. 70.

<sup>59</sup> Phillip Weissman, Creativity in the Theatre: A Psychoanalytic Study (New York: Delta Books, 1965), p. 143.

<sup>60</sup> O'Neill at Work, p. 102.

<sup>62</sup> See Travis Bogard Contour in Time, pp. 294-295.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 262-268.

<sup>64</sup> See Chapter One above.

<sup>65</sup> Dynamo is discussed in detail below, Chapter Four.

<sup>66</sup> Below, Chapters Three and Five.

<sup>67</sup> The summary is discussed in Chapter One above.

<sup>68</sup> See Chapter Five below.

<sup>69</sup> See Plays, I, p. 110.

<sup>70</sup> See Plays, III, p. 477.

### Chapter Three

#### "Beyond Desire": Strange Interlude of Love

##### I

Strange Interlude was the single greatest public success of O'Neill's career and, next to Electra, his most expansive exploration of the power of love. Opening on 30 January 1928, the play gained immediate support and ran for more than 400 consecutive performances.<sup>1</sup> Strange Interlude's success was all the more striking when one considers its five hours playing time, enough to tax even the hardest audience. Play and book, the latter issued in February 1928, were both successful, a success aided by a banning in Boston where the mayor described Strange Interlude as "a plea for the murder of unborn children, a breeding ground for atheism and domestic infidelity, and a disgusting spectacle of immorality."<sup>2</sup> A Pulitzer Prize (May 1928) and the launching of a plagiarism suit (May 1929)<sup>3</sup> kept the play before the public eye; Strange Interlude became "the most talked-about, written-about, joked-about play of the decade (Robert Benchley called it 'just an ordinary nine-act play')."<sup>4</sup>

Because of the length of the play, a summary of the narrative will reveal one level of the play's construction and provide an introduction to an analysis of the theme of subversive sexuality.

The play comprises two parts, Part One consisting of five acts and Part Two of four. Part One delineates a little over two years in the lives of the main characters, central among whom is Nina Leeds, daughter

of a New England college professor. As the play opens, the time is an afternoon in late summer shortly after the end of World War I; we assume it to be 1919. The starting point for the drama which is to follow, and the turning point of Nina's life, is the death of her fiancé Gordon Shaw, killed two days before the armistice. Nina is now twenty and feels herself to be scarred by the war, for she did not consummate her love for Gordon before he left to join the air force. Her bitterness, as the play opens, is heightened by her sense that she has been betrayed by her father who, we discover in the opening act, had indeed appealed to Gordon's "honor" in order to prevent the young people from marrying. From the beginning we see a conflict between the urges of the body and the ideals of conventional society. Nina feels that in denying her passion she has violated her sense of integrity. "I didn't make him take me!" she cries. "I lost him forever! And now I am lonely and not pregnant with anything at all, but—but loathing!" (19). She resolves to recover her sense of self and this she proposes to do by giving herself so often that she can give "without scruple, without fear, without joy except in his joy!" (18). Once she accomplishes this kind of self-obliteration, she thinks she will have found herself and have repaid her debt to Gordon. Her father and his friend, novelist Charlie Marsden, himself a father figure, are shocked at her proposal, but the Professor is finally persuaded that she must strike out on her own and he must resign himself to her independence.

Nina carries out her plan to give herself, and her promiscuity leaves her with a desire to be punished; her conscience becomes all the more active, presumably, because she has been active sexually. The conflict between bodily desire and conscience thus persists. Ned Darrell, a

doctor from the hospital where Nina has been working, persuades Marsden that Nina's salvation lies in her marrying a placid admirer, Sam Evans, and having a child by him. Nina learns, however, that there is insanity in the Evans family and that to have a child will only cause grief for her husband. She arranges, therefore, to abort Sam's child and to have a child by Ned Darrell. Part One ends with Nina satisfactorily pregnant: her deceived husband is propelled forward by new-found confidence in his masculinity. So pleased is Nina that she projects her imminent motherhood upon the universe—"God is a Mother" she says (110)—and her only regret is that she must give up her lover.

The Second Part—Acts Six through Nine—deals with the next twenty-two years, and carries into a fictional future. Nina has given birth to a healthy boy, named Gordon. Darrell returns from Europe and threatens to tell Sam the truth about Gordon, but Nina persuades him to continue to act as her secret lover. Eleven years later, Gordon begins to loathe Darrell and to suspect the elder man's motives in visiting his mother, but Darrell placates the boy by appealing to his sense of honor. Sam, meanwhile, grows prosperous and remains ignorant of the affair; Marsden still stands protectingly in the background to offer support for Nina. Ten years later, the group gathers to watch Gordon in a boat race. He wins, and Sam collapses with a stroke. In the final act, several months later, Gordon mourns his father's death, comforted by his fiancée Madeline, whom Nina sees as a competitor. Darrell returns and antagonizes Gordon, who strikes him. Nina cries out that he has struck his own father, but Gordon does not understand and though the truth has been revealed it does not have the power it had when it was kept secret. Nina blesses



Gordon and Madeline, Darrell blesses Marsden and Nina, and the final scene shows the fated couple together, united in their resolve "to be in love with peace together" (200) having passed through, Charlie says, "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" (199). The sexual couple, Gordon and Madeline, have flown away and we are left with the pure love, as O'Neill would have it, of two old people "beyond desire" (200).

Part of the play's success derives from O'Neill's adaptation of a novelistic stream of consciousness method for revealing the inner life of his characters. The play and its method obviously touched a responsive chord in the audience and even inspired a lively parody at the time:

Mark in "Strange Interlude"  
 Souls at last being viewed  
 Publicly in the nude  
 Each with its label.  
 Uttering hidden things,  
 Strange and forbidden things,  
 Freudian midden things . . .

.....

Oedipus apron strings,  
 Scalding Libido stings,  
 Subconscious hiccoughings  
 Prickle the players;  
 Finger is laid on works  
 Just where the mainspring lurks,  
 Wires pulled, the puppet jerks  
 Open, in layers.

Ticketed "Novelist",  
 "Female", "Biologist",  
 Not one protagonist  
 Seems even human . . .

Mangy and muddy paste  
 Padded with cotton waste  
 Never with likeness graced  
 Of man or woman.<sup>5</sup>

Here in brief are a number of criticisms of the play: it is overschematic, the characters are dead, the language is flabby.<sup>6</sup> And yet there is also in the parody an implicit recognition of the play's novelty, if not its vitality: "souls at last are viewed/Publicly in the nude" as if it were inevitable that the psychoanalyst's couch should be planted on the stage.

The novelty of the play is signalled by its title, and there we find O'Neill's own brand of humor. The interlude, we recall, was originally in formal terms a short play characterized by brevity and wit. It first arose as a dramatic form in the sixteenth century and took on some of the secular character of the age. "Like the morality the interlude was didactic in tone, but made its appeal to reason rather than to revelation," reflecting the humanism of the Renaissance.<sup>7</sup> O'Neill's version of the interlude, as one critic has observed, is like the old interlude in that it presents "a topical handling of the serious and moral and intellectual concerns of a culture in transition."<sup>8</sup>

Critics do not agree on this assessment of the play, however. One finds that the portrait of Nina Leeds has "universal appeal" for O'Neill "shows how the moral certitudes of the old faith have been overthrown and how the various characters react, each in his way, to the inexorable pressure of instinct."<sup>9</sup> Another argues that the play illustrates "O'Neill's tendency to look at life without reference to a society, to tell his story only in terms of personality."<sup>10</sup> The truth probably lies somewhere in between: O'Neill has here adopted a strategy for projecting a vision of

the conflicts between sexuality and the values of the culture into the future. In this sense, Strange Interlude is the obverse of the strategy he uses in Mourning Becomes Electra where he shows how contemporary sexual conflicts are rooted in the culture of the past. O'Neill's strategy in Interlude is only partly successful. His play succeeds in showing how sex has the power to undermine self-image, family life and career: it succeeds in projecting intense dramatic conflicts which pit the sexual impulse against social and cultural values. In this sense, Strange Interlude is more than simply "a study of a neurotic woman whose selfishness destroys the lives of the three men she needs to fulfill herself."<sup>11</sup>

But O'Neill fails in his projection of his theme into the future, for without the web of historical context he imposes upon that future a personal vision of integration or peace, a Nirvana-like state where his characters are "bleached" of the needs of the flesh in a life "beyond desire" (200). This shows a second meaning of the title: O'Neill presents man's sexual life as a mere moment in time. As Nina says, "Strange interlude! Yes, our lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father!" (200). O'Neill's cosmological preoccupations, perhaps a carry over from Lazarus Laughed,<sup>12</sup> are in the end of the play at odds with the impulse of the narrative.

To demonstrate the complexity of O'Neill's treatment of the theme of subversive sexuality and to show his successes and failures, I discuss (1) his stream of consciousness method, (2) the structure of the play as it flows from the opening soliloquy or thought aside, (3) the relation of character, image, and action in the middle of the play, and (4) the

ending in which we see the artist attempting to impose a resolution to his tale of love in New England.

## II

Strange Interlude dates from 1923 when O'Neill first noted the idea for a play about a woman whose loved one had been killed as an aviator in World War I.<sup>13</sup> O'Neill did not immediately hit upon the stream of consciousness method for his play. He wrote a scenario in the summer of 1925, then picked up work on Lazarus Laughed, returning to Strange Interlude in the spring of 1926.<sup>14</sup> In his Work Diary O'Neill records that he began "scheming out" the play on 16 May. The next morning he began to work noting "speech-thought method—looks right." The idea for the method seems to have come earlier; his Work Diary for 13 March 1926 includes the following note: "new ideas for everything crowding up—think I've got hold of the right method for doing Strange Interlude when I come to it."<sup>15</sup> O'Neill may well have written a note on the method that day. To his 1925 scenario of the play he added a section headed "Method-1926":

Method—Start with soliloquy—perhaps have the whole play nothing but a thinking aloud (or this entrance for other play—anyway the thinking aloud being more important than the actual talking—speech breaking through thought as a random process of concealment, speech inconsequential or imperfectly expressing the thought behind—all done with the most drastic logic and economy and simplicity of words (Thought perhaps, always naturally expressing itself to us—thinking itself—or being thought by us—always in terms of an adolescent level of vocabulary, as if we thereby eternally tried to educate to mature self-understanding, the child in us.)

Carrying the method to an extreme—one sees their lips move as they talk to one another but there is no sound—only their thinking is aloud.<sup>16</sup>

This formulation is interesting for a number of reasons. First it shows a sophisticated grasp of the phenomenon of the stream of consciousness. Like a stream, consciousness has movement, continuity, depth, and a certain texture (of murkiness or clarity).<sup>17</sup> The first three of these are evident here in O'Neill's note. We see a sense of movement ("speech breaking through thought"), continuity ("the whole play nothing but a thinking aloud"), and depth (thought underlying speech, the past in the present, the child in the adult).

O'Neill's parenthetical comment about the nature of thought is less transparent. He distinguishes between different phases of life: childhood, adolescence, and mature self-understanding, and these states are seen as continuous. The problem is with his conception of language, the idea of "an adolescent level of vocabulary" being adequate to "educate to mature self-understanding, the child in us." This remark I take to be O'Neill's statement of the inadequacy of language to express what we are or what we feel. He seems to suggest that mature self-understanding can be achieved but cannot be spoken. "Stammering is the native eloquence of us fog people," says Edmund, O'Neill's self-portrait in Long Day's Journey Into Night.<sup>18</sup> And in Strange Interlude itself he has Nina exclaim that she has "seen the lies in the sounds called words" (40). This early formulation of method, then, anticipates an important tenet of the play: "that words do not convey but hide the truth . . . ." <sup>19</sup>

There is also a personal tone in this formulation about thought. O'Neill had only recently composed his autobiographic papers during his consultations with Hamilton. In that process, O'Neill as an adult attempted to bring himself to a mature self-understanding of the child

in himself. (Hamilton in his published study described his work as "in a measure a study of the child in us"<sup>20</sup> [emphasis added].) The experience of working with Dr. Hamilton, according to Travis Bogard, "had a formative influence on the writing of Strange Interlude,"<sup>21</sup> though Bogard does not say what the influence might have meant for the formal qualities of the play. It seems that working with Hamilton gave O'Neill personal experience in working with the method of association as a means to discover (recover) the past. It also gave him professional sanction for what was a habit of thought: the persistent linking of the present to the past.<sup>22</sup>

One other formal strategy also stems from O'Neill's preliminary formulation of the method. It hints at the structure he eventually chose: "Start with soliloquy . . . ." With this background picture in place, we must now turn to the completed play and consider how the stream of consciousness method works there.

Strange Interlude presents inner thoughts and feelings of the characters directly to the audience in a manner derived from the soliloquy and the aside.<sup>23</sup> Characters utter their private thoughts and feelings in moments of suspended time, as it were, an effect common to radio drama and achieved on stage by having the non-speaking characters "freeze" while the private experience of thought and feeling is communicated to the audience. One effect of this device is to extend and deepen the range of conflicts and contrasts. "To the dramatic contrasts and conflicts of ordinary spoken dialogue," Kenneth Macgowan points out, "O'Neill added the contrasts and conflicts of thought."<sup>24</sup> Another effect of the thought

aside device,<sup>25</sup> as O'Neill called it, is to slow the pace of the play and to add "thickness" to the forward-moving linear dimension of the play. Accordingly, the thought-asides emphasize the reflective nature of the characters and create an atmosphere of brooding and delay. The characters seem to watch their thoughts as they speak to other characters and to attach emotions to those thoughts in the asides. As the inner thoughts and feelings are revealed, we are forced to assume a spectator or audience position vis-a-vis the characters. We observe not only overt conflicts and contrasts, but also inner turmoil. This doubleness of communication heightens our awareness of the duplicity in the conventional dialogue between characters. The overall effect adds an "atmosphere of secrecy"<sup>26</sup> to the drama, and thus enhances the play's narrative interest.

There are some obvious limits to the method. In the theatre it can draw attention to itself and divert the attention of the audience. And since the thoughts are spoken they must be more or less comprehensible. The method, therefore, "does not penetrate very deep levels of consciousness" (for example, it does not reach the pre-speech level that a novelist can project).<sup>27</sup> O'Neill himself came to see these limitations. In retrospect he thought the device too showy to deal with "simple direct folk or characters of strong will and intense passions" such as those in Mourning Becomes Electra; rather it is a "special experience for special type of modern neurotic, disintegrated soul . . ."<sup>28</sup> This comment has some validity but does not do justice to the subtlety and complexity of his achievement. To get a sense of O'Neill's achievement, we turn to a detailed analysis of Act One.

## III

O'Neill must be credited for his powers of composition in Strange Interlude for he structured the entire work in terms of a single principle—that of raising to the surface what is implicit in a particular situation.<sup>29</sup> This is true for his managing of thought-asides, of scenes within each act, of each act in the play, and in terms of the overall pattern of the work. It is essentially an analytic method yet in O'Neill's hands it has a lyric dimension as well. O'Neill was sensitive to this organizing power and observed in his Notes to Electra that it was not sufficiently recognized: "Interlude never got credit for this technical virtue," he wrote, "that the first part rounded out a complete section of Nina's life with a definite beginning and end and yet contained the suspense at its end which called for Part Two . . . ." <sup>30</sup> More than this synthesis of end and beginning, O'Neill also attempted a synthesis of structure, character, and theme. The power of sex to determine the growth of a character is evident even in the opening thought-aside as Marsden reflects upon his personal sexual experience and that power informs the work's dramatic structure in scene, act, and play.

Marsden's role in facilitating the dramatic action is central. His function is to chronicle, expound, and explain. We cannot expect full explanations from him but we know his limitations and sensitivities from the opening moments of the play and therefore can intuit the kind of colouring he gives to his reports. He is not a one-dimensional character as Bogard would have him— "a figure without wisdom, deservedly held in contempt until the final moments of the play,"<sup>30a</sup> but he acts in



effect as a chorus. He is a screen against whom the values of others are projected. His wisdom is partial and limited, yet his heightened sensitivity to sexuality makes him a barometer of states of feeling in other characters. (In a note for the play O'Neill describes him as "bisexual."<sup>31</sup>) Marsden personifies an individual whose life has been shaped by early sexual experience, a single experience which continues to rule his consciousness and to exacerbate and tug at his overly strong attachment to his mother. The subversive power of sexuality is manifest in his personality, and the shape of his emotional experience is the shape of things to come.

In the opening words of the play, Marsden addresses the Professor's maid, and identifies his primary mode of relating to the world. "I'll wait in here . . ." (4), he says as he enters Professor Leeds' study. Marsden is not only the one who waits, he waits in a special place, the Professor's "unique haven" (4) he calls it, a state of being as much as a place, and there he remains until Nina turns to him at the end of Part Two nearly twenty-five years later and acknowledges him as her father-lover. As O'Neill argued, the end is in the beginning. Love begins within the family, and the nature of that first love shapes the future. Charlie has only to wait for Nina to pass through the strange interlude of mature sexuality before she returns to an "innocent" mode of loving, bleached of the desires of the flesh.

Marsden does not wait in peace, however, anymore than Professor Leeds can live in peace. Marsden defines the ambience of the Professor's

haven and in so doing introduces implicitly a conflicting pattern of values in a manner analogous to the description of the two bookcases in Long Day's Journey Into Night. Marsden smiles as he looks at the books: "Primly classical . . . when New Englander meets Greek! . . ." (4). Inasmuch as he is identified with the place, Marsden is describing his own values as primly classical. But the prim surface demeanor is only a veneer on a sensibility still responsive to the voice of the body. Marsden's needs become apparent as his thoughts drift into the past and centre on his father who first brought him into this room and whose image calls to mind the pain experienced at his death. This memory emerges in a cluster of sense impressions:

. . . the hospital . . . smell of idioform in the cool halls . . . hot summer . . . I bent down . . . his voice had withdrawn so far away . . . I couldn't understand him . . . . (4)

Marsden then covers the experience with a generalizing reflection which articulates the play's central theme of filial relationships: "what son can ever understand? . . . always too near, too soon, too distant or too late! . . ." (4). More importantly this rationalizing facilitates a layering of experience; this crisis in the past is one that Marsden has come to terms with but cannot forget. The rationalizing, too, keeps us at a distance, placing us in the position of bystanders who observe his reflections. We do not get deeply involved with this man's feelings—he is too elusive to bear our full trust as he jumps so neatly from emotional experience to experience summed up with a rhetorical flourish. At the same time, though, the pat response alerts us to the doubleness so critical to the play.

Marsden tries to fling off the train of thoughts which the room has

set in motion, but he is unsuccessful and another layer of his experience surfaces even as he reveals information necessary to our full appreciation of the narrative. The thought of death has activated a complex of emotions associated with the events of the immediate past in post-War I Europe. Marsden is in the process of settling in to the quiet atmosphere of small-town New England. He found himself unable to write in Europe: "how answer the fierce questions of all those dead and maimed? . . . too big a job for me . . ." (5). At home, though, it is "the interlude that gently questions" in a town "dozing" with "decorous bodies moving with circumspection through the afternoons" (5). This environment provides him with material for his novels.

Marsden has mixed feelings about his novels. He self-deprecatingly characterizes them as comprised of "amusing words" and "not of cosmic importance." At the same time he is pleased with the facts that he has a reading public and that he can "write." This last quality distinguishes his work, he believes, from that of "modern sex-yahoos!" (5). Marsden's superior attitude to his more "modern" competitors confirms his identification with the prim and decorous qualities of New England life, and it masks his awareness of the limitations of his work. There is a doubleness, too, in his metaphor of "sex-yahoos." Yahoos, in Swift's conception, are excremental creatures; that at least is the dominant connotation the name carries. In connecting the excremental with the sexual, Marsden experiences a return of the repressed. As Norman O. Brown has put it, "the first way in which consciousness becomes conscious of a repressed idea is by emphatically denying it."<sup>32</sup> By so vigorously denouncing the "yahoos" Marsden enjoys a measure of relief from his recognition

that the "decorous bodies" whose surface "habits" he chronicles have less decorous habits as well.

From sex and excrement it is but a short distance to love and death, key words in the subsequent flow of Marsden's thoughts. O'Neill here has skillfully interwoven necessary exposition and images consistent with Marsden's character. At the level of exposition we learn of Gordon's death two days before the Armistice and Marsden's attachment to his mother and his desire for Nina. The images considerably enrich the bare bones of exposition. Marsden thinks of Nina in two ways: as baby and as woman.

. . . she has bossed me, too, ever since she was  
a baby . . . she's a woman now . . . known love and  
death . . . (5)

He then poses questions which bring to the surface a complex of sensuous images:

. . . why have I never fallen in love with Nina? . . .  
could I? . . . that way . . . used to dance her on my  
knee . . . sit her on my lap . . . even now she'd never  
think anything about it . . . but sometimes the scent  
of her hair and skin . . . like a dreamy drug . . . (5)

And, typically, Marsden shuts off this stream of association with self-deprecating irony: "dreamy! . . . there's the rub! . . . all dreams with me! . . . my sex life among the phantoms! . . ." (5). Marsden's sexual frustration links him to Nina in a way that subsequent events clarify; indeed the image of frustrated love—the gap between what is wished for and what is experienced—is the play's central image. Marsden cannot fully articulate what he wishes for—to possess Nina sexually—he censors his own thoughts, and can only speak of loving "that way."<sup>33</sup>

Evidence of his resistance to his sexual desire emerges in the

vigorous projection of both lustful urges and impotence onto his contemporaries:

. . . oh, this digging in gets nowhere . . . to the devil with sex! . . . our impotent pose of today to beat the loud drum on fornication! . . . boasters . . . eunuchs parading with the phallus! . . . giving themselves away . . . . (5-6)

Marsden's language deserves attention. In wishing to send sex to the devil he once again associates the sexual with the excremental, and in speaking of "our impotent pose of today" Marsden indicts himself as much as the moderns whom he detests. His image of the eunuchs on parade is a projection of the impotence and sexual preoccupation which underlie his decorous manner. The final irony in this phase of his reverie is his rhetorical question—"whom do they fool? . . . not even themselves . . . ." (6).

Marsden's inability to fool himself immediately becomes apparent as a flood of memory flushes his face "with an intense pain and disgust" (6). The memory concerns his having visited a house of prostitution when he was sixteen years old. This was his sexual initiation. As he remembers it, he was afraid not to take the girl for fear of losing the esteem of his peers. Afterwards, his emotions surged forth:

. . . back at the hotel I waited till they were asleep  
 . . . then sobbed . . . thinking of Mother . . . feeling  
 I had defiled her . . . and myself . . . forever! . . . (6)

The curious part of this speech lies in the strength of feeling, as if his emotional life had been strangled by adolescent experience. Marsden yearns for purity even as he feels the surge of his passion for Nina. His sex life is truly a phantom. He remains inordinately bound by his adolescence and the challenges of war and sex turn him backward and inward.

In broader terms, Marsden's dilemma sounds the key-note of the play. He feels uneasy about the morality of prim New England and attacks it. But he cannot move out of the corral of that limiting morality; therefore, he embodies what D.H. Lawrence has called "tight mental allegiance" to a morality "which the passional self repudiates."<sup>34</sup> Marsden is stung by the sense that his sexual initiation violated the purity of Motherhood, yet in Act Two he conjures up a tidy triangle for himself with Mother at home and Nina at her home. Then he thinks of a triangle involving himself, Nina and Sam, Nina's mooted husband (33), yet he is contemptuous and suspicious of Darrel's trying to arrange a "convenient triangle" (38) for himself by promoting Nina's marriage to Sam.

O'Neill has been criticized for not bringing the male characters of Strange Interlude to life,<sup>35</sup> but this is an overstatement. O'Neill goes to some lengths to show that each of his figures represents one kind of male "desire" and he further demonstrates each of those desires to involve conflict. Marsden's essential conflict is given in the opening thought-aside, but the full implications of that conflict are only gradually unfolded as the drama progresses. The unfolding of the characters' inner conflicts over a period of time constitutes their psychological fate. In each case the fate of the character is rooted in family experience.

Marsden's psychological fate is shaped by his overvaluing and idealizing woman to the degree that he feels sexual experience to be a degradation of womanhood. Nina excites sexual desires which he immediately suppresses out of his conflicting need to idealize her.<sup>36</sup>

Marsden desires a relationship without conflict but his impulses and his ideals keep him in a state of conflict. Because his most significant emotional experiences have been with women, he becomes especially sensitive to women, and this sensitivity enhances his expository function. He is referred to alternately as an old woman and an old maid; he interacts with Nina most significantly during her maidenhood and her old age. In between, he serves her as a generous non-obstructive forgiving father.

The images Nina uses to describe him confirm his supporting function: "Charlie sits beside the fierce river immaculately timid, cool and clothed, watching the burning frozen swimmers drown at last" (13). Charlie cannot immerse himself in the destructive element of passion to burn and freeze at once, but neither does he remove himself entirely. His sexuality is muted, but his guardianship is constant. Nina thinks of him as a domesticated dog whose response to the dark side of life is to "bark softly in books at the deep night" (14). Her image reinforces his self-characterization as a writer who prefers not to dig into the passions of love and death (or sex and war), but at the same time it conveys a degree of affection for his faithfulness. When she grows weary of the hot days of passion, his coolness will be comforting to her.

Through Marsden O'Neill also creates a picture of the relationship between sexuality and the creative life, a relationship he had explored earlier in The Great God Brown. In this strand of Marsden's unfolding O'Neill suggests a gradual movement toward awareness. Acts Seven and

Eight show this unfolding: Marsden moves slowly toward self-awareness.

Act Seven is set some fourteen years after the action of Act One. The fictional time would be 1933. Nina is giving a birthday party for her son Gordon who is now eleven. Darrell is present and he and Nina have been arguing about the future course of their love affair. Darrell, annoyed at being interrupted, and annoyed too that Marsden spoils young Gordon, greets Charlie with a sardonic barb charging that Charlie has never written about life. Marsden inwardly acknowledges the thrust to be true: "I've never married the word to life! . . . I've been a timid bachelor of arts, not an artist!" (148). This represents a growth in Marsden's self-understanding; at least he no longer poses smugly about his superiority to sex-yahoos. In the next moment, though, he senses that Darrell is about to leave Nina. He feels that she is tired of sexual passion and is turning to him with his finer love. He wishes for a time of peace with Nina: "I would be content if our marriage should be purely the placing of our ashes in the same tomb . . . our urn [sic] side by side and touching one another . . ." (148). Even in this thought Charlie imagines a relationship within the confines of marriage, and the progression of images conveyed by the nouns, "marriage . . . ashes . . . tomb," suggests that marriage represents an utter denial of life. Marsden himself is contemptuous of this train of thought and admits to himself that he would give anything to see Nina's eyes show desire for him. The use of synecdoche is telling: because he himself is fragmented he does not think of Nina as a whole person. This image, too, reveals a distance between them; he wants to be desired by Nina, not to meet her fully as a woman.



A more telling revelation of Marsden's limits comes in Act Eight, set another ten years in the future (i.e., 1944 in terms of the fictional frame). Marsden is on the yacht of Sam Evans with Sam, Nina, Darrell, and Madeline, Gordon's fiancée. All ostensibly are there to cheer Gordon to victory in a rowing competition. Marsden is in mourning following his sister's death, the last family female to possess him, his mother having died early (1922). He becomes drunk and in a series of outbursts he first asserts his intention to marry Nina once Evans has died (a death which he thinks and wishes to be imminent), and then announces that after their marriage he will write his "first real novels" (176). Words tumble as he blurts his intentions:

Now I'm going to give an honest healthy yell—turn on the sun into the shadows of lies—shout "This is life and this is sex, and here are passion and hatred and regret and joy and ecstasy, and these are men and women and sons and daughters whose hearts are weak and strong, whose blood is blood and not a soothing syrup!" (176-177)

The irony of this outburst is that Nina ignores him, for she is preoccupied with scheming to block the marriage of Gordon and Madeline. Marsden seems to have progressed in self-awareness yet he quickly lapses into his self-imposed role as observer of the "novel" happening around him. The self-deception of his outburst is further underlined when Nina tells him explicitly of the insanity in the Evans family and of her having conceived Gordon by Darrell. She addresses him as Father, and after his initial shock, he lapses into that role. He goes from bachelorhood to fatherhood without ever having been husband or lover. He waits out his life-in-death, waiting for others to die.

To the extent that Marsden is a portrait of one kind of artist,

O'Neill's aesthetic values are implicit in his character. O'Neill's sympathies seem to reside with the sex-yahoos whom Marsden so forcefully rejects and yet approves in his final outburst about the necessity of giving a full-bodied yell of affirmation to sex and ecstasy and blood. Implicit also is an aesthetic which values feeling over form and which desires to encompass the full range of emotional and bodily experience. It is an attitude derived partly from O'Neill's naturalistic forbears, especially Strindberg. "I don't love life because it's pretty," O'Neill once said in an interview. "Prettiness is only clothes-deep. I am a truer lover than that. I love it naked. There is a beauty to me even in its ugliness."<sup>37</sup> Marsden cannot realize this attitude; he only asserts it. He values himself as one who can write, but it is his fate only to skate on the surfaces, never to dig out the truths of his own inner experience or the truths of his larger world. His inability to overcome his attachment to his early sexual experience leaves him debilitated; as Nina observes (in a metaphor similar to O'Neill's own explicit statement about art) he prefers to be clothed and to maintain a distance from the "burning frozen swimmers" of life and art. Marsden is incomplete; at the same time, though, O'Neill invests him with a significant strand of emotional and intellectual experience.

Marsden's experience fits part of the paradigm that Phillip Weissman finds informing O'Neill's life and his art.

In his life and in his created characters that unconsciously portray himself, there is a brief enactment of mature sexuality—that is, love, marriage, and children—which then regresses to a desexualization of the loved woman accompanied by<sup>38</sup> regressive abandonment of the child or children.

Marsden undergoes the early sexual experience, but he omits the middle phase of marriage and husbandhood, becoming at last a desexualized lover-father to his little girl Nina once she too passes "beyond" adult sexuality back to a pre-genital girlhood. O'Neill gives us cause to judge Marsden as contemptible, or at least limited, but he also goes to lengths, especially in the final act of the play, to make his love for Nina seem appropriate and true.

If O'Neill's treatment of Marsden is richer than has been generally recognized, so too is his managing of the opening act of the play. Just as Marsden's fate is rooted in the opening thought-aside, so is the dramatic action of the play as a whole an extension of the conflicts within and among all the characters we are first introduced to. Nina becomes the center of our attention throughout the course of the play, just as she is the catalyst for the rush of emotions and memories that Marsden experiences in his opening thought-aside. Nina's emergence is carefully managed, and like Marsden, she goes through a stage of self-sacrifice, a period of servitude to love, though hers is more fully imagined than his. She fulfills all the experiences of womanhood: daughter, lover, wife, mother. The principle of surfacing, first manifested in Marsden's thought-aside, is the motivating principle of Act One in which she defines herself in relation to her father.

Act One takes the shape of an interview between Nina and her father, or between Nina and her fathers since Marsden is present throughout.

In the course of this interview Nina gradually calls to the surface her deep feeling that her father was somehow responsible for Gordon's failing to possess her sexually. She resists her own deep feeling, for to see her father as deliberately having frustrated her means to recognize that he does not wish to share her with a younger sexually potent man.

Nina goes through a series of stages in achieving independence from her father. She must come to terms not only with her father but with the fatherly authority of her conscience. O'Neill links this growth in Nina's self-awareness to a corresponding growth in the Professor's sense of himself and his relationship with Nina. Marsden observes the interview and responds to its nuances; his responses echo the responses of Professor Leeds.

A metaphor of the first stage in Nina's emergence underlies the entire interview. It is the metaphor of a balance sheet. Nina is determined "to pay" for her "cowardly treachery to Gordon" (18). The exact implications of her account-keeping startle the Professor and Marsden. On one level Nina is simply asserting her determination to work in a hospital with returned soldiers. She says, "But they are sick and I must give my health to help them live on, and to live on myself" (18). Her statement suggests a kind of emotional vampirism: the men will feed on her health, she imagines, and she will feed on their need for her. Professor Leeds does not understand or chooses not to understand what she means, and she goes another step further to clarify and another step toward breaking down her inner barriers to

self-knowledge. Significantly, Nina's subsequent speech is couched in language more explicitly sensuous. The sensuous dimension is underlined by her direct appeal to her father:

I must learn to give myself, do you hear—give and give until I can make that gift of myself for a man's happiness without scruple, without fear, without joy except in his joy! When I've accomplished this I'll have found myself . . . . Don't you see? In the name of the commonest decency and honor, I owe it to Gordon! (18; emphasis added)

Nina's desire for self-obliteration is not subjected to any criticism in the course of this first Act. Though both Professor Leeds and Marsden bridle at the thought of Nina's giving her body to men, they do not respond to the utter self-effacement that her speech describes. Their response is to a violation of their image of womanly purity. They take no notice of the servility her wish implies. When Nina openly regrets that she is "still Gordon's silly virgin," (19) her father's response is to think "What an animal!" and Marsden thinks she is "all flesh now . . ." (20).

Nina, for her part, gradually comes to terms with her conscience. First she conjures up an image of Gordon succumbing to his brain which kept commanding "no, you musn't . . ." She feels guilt for not responding to her own impulses. She characterizes her conscience as a "cowardly something in me that cried, no, you musn't, what would your father say?" (19). Once she has reached this point she is then able to reconstruct her father's past action and to confront him openly. She drops the third person form of address and speaks to him directly:

"You told him it'd be unfair, you put him on his honor, didn't you?" (20).

At this point, Professor Leeds admits the truth, though he resists it too by rationalizing that he appealed to Gordon for Nina's sake. She challenges this defense and finally he achieves his own insight:

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. (20)

This admission wins Nina's ready forgiveness, yet it also marks the end of the very dependence which has kept him alive. The Professor agrees that Nina must go away to recover herself (and at least tacitly approves her plan to give her body).

As this first Act closes he feels himself abandoned and in a concluding soliloquy reflects upon the paradoxes of his state:

. . . I feel cold . . . alone! . . . the house is empty and full of death! . . . there is a pain about my heart! . . . . (20)

His feelings of emptiness and fullness echo Nina's feelings of being empty (not pregnant) and full of loathing. His experience of having lost his fatherhood balances Nina's sense of having lost her womanhood, or at least her chance to conceive a child of Gordon's. The sequence of nouns in the Professor's thought-aside reflects the flow of his consciousness toward an image of his own death: "home . . . house . . . death . . . pain . . . heart."<sup>39</sup> Nina has achieved a kind of independence and so he no longer has a role in her life. Accordingly, O'Neill has him die in the interval before Act Two begins. On the surface, in this act, Nina leaves her daughterhood behind. It remains for her to become the lover and mother she yearns to be.

Act One, therefore, prepares us for the dramatic action to follow. Nina has wrested independence from her paternal bonds; her father dies in her absence. She thus embarks upon her adulthood but the pain she experiences at the death of Gordon—more specifically the pain attendant upon her not consummating her love for Gordon—shapes her adulthood. She sets out to give herself to men in order to pay an unfulfilled debt. She gradually learns that she cannot realize her inner needs by indiscriminate giving: to become whole she must become mother, wife and lover. And underlying each of these needs is her desire for Gordon.

Nina embarks on her independent life yet finds herself incomplete. We learn in Act Two that she has indeed been promiscuous but that her giving has not resulted in relief. She feels just as empty as she did after Gordon's death. None of the men she has given herself to have been individuals to her: they have all merged in the consuming image of Gordon about whom she has dreamed. In her dream she saw (here the images anticipate Orin's description in Electra of death on the battlefield<sup>40</sup>):

Gordon diving down out of the sky in flames and he looked at me with such sad burning eyes, and all my poor maimed men, too, seemed staring out of his eyes with a burning pain, and I woke up crying, my own eyes burning. (45)

The repetition of "burning" effectively suggests her desire for her lost Gordon, while at the same time stressing her sense of loss and separation. The fact that her eyes burn suggests, too, the intensity of her need for self-knowledge. The effect of the imagery is to make Nina's vulnerability apparent—she needs guidance.

Her sense of discomfort is accentuated by her loss of belief. At a psychological level, she feels betrayed by her father and by God the Father. While viewing the body of her father, she tried to pray but she could not believe either in "the modern science God" nor in the traditional God whom she senses to be indifferent. She wishes that God had been conceived as a Mother:

We should have imagined life as created in the birth-pains 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. And we would feel that death meant reunion with Her, a passing back into Her substance, blood of Her blood again, peace of Her peace! (42)

Nina's wish for a sense of purpose and peace underlies her feelings of rootlessness and turmoil.

O'Neill's projection of a conflict between God the Father and God the Mother shows how far Nina's failure to consummate her love for Gordon has taken her. She has bitterly questioned religion and morality: having risked public censure by promiscuity she goes so far as to question the order of the cosmos. (Implicit in this description of life as pain and separation is O'Neill's diagram showing birth as a loss of Nirvana.) Vulnerable as she is at the moment, Nina is open to guidance. It is one of O'Neill's ironies that she should take advice from a man of science.

The key figure in the middle years of Nina's life is Doctor Ned Darrell. As a neurologist, he analyses Nina's condition and prescribes her cure. O'Neill describes him as one who has "come to consider himself as immune to love through his scientific understanding of its real



sexual nature (33). Darrell's prescription is that Nina should marry Sam Evans and find a normal outlet for her abnormal yearning for self-sacrifice by having children. Marsden, though he loathes Darrell, helps set the plan in action.

Other demands for sacrifice emerge once the marriage has taken place. Sam's mother takes Nina aside to "call her to account" and discloses details of a family curse of insanity which has afflicted the Evanses, including Sam's father and his aunt who, in New England Gothic fashion, lives in a locked room on the top floor of the house. The elder Mrs. Evans pleads with Nina to abort her child, which Sam knows nothing about, in order to preserve Sam's sanity and happiness. Sam's mother speaks too of the sacrifices she has made:

Why, I even love that idiot upstairs. I've taken care of her for so many years, lived her life for her with my life you might say. You give your life to Sammy, then you'll love him same as you love yourself. You'll have to! That's as sure as death! (62)

This appeal is consistent with Nina's bent for self-denial, and in spite of her attachment to the unborn child, Nina agrees to sacrifice it for Sam's happiness. Though she seems to have separated herself from her father, Nina remains susceptible to the values of duty and honor as held by the parental generation. In succumbing to this appeal, Nina denies the life within her, at least temporarily.

At the same time, however, the senior Mrs. Evans has planted the germ of an idea which Nina later picks up. Sam's mother discloses that she had wished that she had picked "a healthy male to breed by, same's we do with stock, to give the man I loved a healthy child" (63).

Significantly, both parts of the plan Nina gathers from Sam's mother

involve deception of Sam, and both parts keep us aware of Nina as a bodily creature.

O'Neill presents marriage first as a means to an end—socially acceptable motherhood for Nina—and then closes even that function. Nina withholds herself from Sam for five months after her abortion; her sense of duty to her husband has limits. The "logic" of her situation demands first that she take a man for breeding purposes and that she choose a man for pleasure. The scientific paragon Darrell serves both functions and finds that the needs of the body give the lie to his pose of objectivity. Nina's discovery of the family curse<sup>41</sup> and her willingness to sacrifice herself precipitates the next major movement in the play, the love between Nina and Darrell. Here our attention is shifted to Darrell and his discoveries about himself.

Darrell ironically displays resistance to self-knowledge similar to that we saw earlier in Marsden and then in Nina and Professor Leeds. The irony results when Darrell finds himself forced to give up his mask of objectivity as he begins to feel the emotional consequences of his experiment in human lives. He feels the pangs of conscience and begins to think, he says to Nina, "we've wronged the very one we were trying to help" (103). The falsity of his altruism is not apparent to him, but when Nina proposes that she divorce Sam in order to marry him, Darrell responds quickly. He immediately senses her to be a threat as the progression of his thought-aside indicates: ". . . marry! . . . own me! . . . ruin my career! . . . ." (103). In fact he here foreshadows not his marital status but his emotional fate. He becomes possessed by his desire for her, though he is right to sense that her

love for him is possessive also: "her body is a trap!" (105) and he struggles to free himself. He has been caught by the disease that he himself has diagnosed in Nina. Love he has said is nothing but "romantic imagination" and it is a form of insanity that has ruined "more lives" (102) than all other diseases.<sup>42</sup> Unable to heal himself, Darrell opts simply to flee to Europe. Flight becomes his characteristic manner of dealing with his desire for Nina.

The main outline of Darrell's awakening is given in Act Six which marks a kind of interlude within the play itself. The essential patterns have been established. Charlie is contented in his role and with the way things are unfolding. He thinks that Nina's child is the product of his love as well as Darrell's and Sam's; he remains intuitively sensitive to Nina.

. . . she has strange devious intuitions that tap the hidden currents of life . . . dark intermingling currents that become the one stream of desire . . . her child is the child of our three loves for her . . . I would like to believe that . . . I would like to be her husband in a sense . . . and the father of a child, after my fashion . . . (135)

Nina too glories in her new found sense of health:

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,  
 then life is my life . . . I am pregnant with the three!  
 . . . husband! . . . lover! . . . father! . . . and the  
 fourth man! . . . little man! . . . little Gordon . . .  
 he is mine too! . . . that makes it perfect! . . . (135)

(Here Nina has become identified with God the Mother.<sup>43</sup>) Sam, for his part, sits contentedly and congratulates himself for his good luck in having Nina as wife and mother. Darrell senses himself to be trapped in the role of lover, and on the outside of the web of intimate

emotional relationships Nina has woven around herself. He can only serve as friend to Sam and secret lover to Nina. His awareness comes in a thought-aside, which prefigures his later confrontation of Nina with the truth of his situation. Because he knows this truth at an inner emotional level, his first articulation must be partial and private:

Nina called my son after Gordon! . . . romantic imagination! . . . Gordon is still her lover! . . . Gordon, Sam and Nina! . . . and my son! . . . closed corporation! . . . I'm forced out! . . . (128)

The metaphor of a closed corporation is significant for it adds an ironic dimension to Marsden's "silent partnership" in Sam's new business firm. He and Marsden are therefore united in their support of Sam. But since Darrell is the unacknowledged sexual partner, once for procreative purposes and now for pleasure, his relationship with Nina depends upon her wishes. And since Darrell wishes to have his fatherhood acknowledged publicly, he suffers rejection he did not know might be possible when he agreed to Nina's plan. Again his sexuality has led him into a conflict with his ideals.

Darrell's business metaphor resonates with Nina's earlier metaphor (in Act One) of the balance sheet. It is as if his account with her is closed. Since "corporation" derives from corps or body, we are made aware also that her body is not now available to him. She is preoccupied with the quality of her milk: she thinks of herself as a mother rather than a lover.

Darrell's modern scientific understanding of sexuality, therefore, is no more proof against the urges of the body than Marsden's persistent

and platitudinous moralizing. Neither conventional morality (Marsden is the one who is quick to judge the behavior of Nina and Darrell) nor the findings of modern science serve to immunize an individual against the force of sexual desire. They differ only in the manner of their rationalizations. In terms of the pattern of man-woman relationships in O'Neill's life and work described by Weissman,<sup>44</sup> Darrell is implicated in the enactment of mature sexuality, and the creation of a child, but he is denied social recognition of his procreative power. Sexuality, in O'Neill's vision, is vital only when it is outside marriage.

The sense of stasis implicit in the images of intermingling currents at the end of Act Six—the desires of the man joining in Nina into one current—gives this scene the effect of an ending.<sup>45</sup> After this point in the play, O'Neill labors to create dramatic interest but the latter three acts suffer a loss in intensity.

The key formal change marking this break in the dramatic action is O'Neill's treatment of time. Acts One through Six have covered an expanse of approximately four years, from late summer of 1919 to summer of 1923. The subsequent acts are separated by much greater gaps in time. Act Seven is set in 1934, Acts Eight and Nine in 1944. The effect of this shift from an essentially seasonal time frame to a novelistic frame of floating time is to place a burden of dramatic change on time itself. Changes do not grow out of the interaction of characters but tend to occur simply because people have grown older. O'Neill is too accomplished a craftsman to overlook such a break; but his craftsmanship becomes apparent and draws attention to itself as he attempts to unify his work. Marsden of course becomes a more prominent

figure, and conflicts once issuing from Nina's attitudes to Gordon Shaw now issue from her attitudes toward Gordon her son. The conflict is explicitly oedipal: Gordon hates Darrell and is puzzled by his visits to Nina. At the same time the boy feels a grudging admiration for Darrell. But Gordon is a newcomer and excites less interest than his ghostly namesake whose ghostliness contributes an air of mystery to the narrative.

The image patterns, too, reflect the shift in attention from vital interaction to reflection and commentary.<sup>46</sup> In Act Seven, the once virile and dynamic Darrell is now reduced to playing "at biology" (140). He has given up his career in neurology and sardonically admits that his life's work is "to rust—nicely and unobtrusively" (140). This image of mechanical rather than bodily decay is interpreted by Nina to be Darrell's version of rotting in peace. The images of decay diminish the intensity of the conflict between sexuality and cultural values. Darrell tells us he is in love and his career has drastically changed, but these remain verbal reports rather than dramatized episodes. What O'Neill does dramatize is Darrell's return to a life bound by a code, this time not a commitment to heal but a commitment to remain honorable. As a character he begins to go dead.<sup>47</sup>

Darrell refuses Nina's request to tell Gordon of his paternity. His speech represents both the apex of his awareness of Nina's power over him and the starting point of his breaking away from her hold.

No, Nina—sorry—but I can't help you. I told you  
I'd never meddle again with human lives! (More and  
more confidently) Besides, I'm quite sure Gordon  
isn't my son, if the real deep core of the truth were  
known! I was only a body to you. Your first Gordon

used to come back to life. I was never more to you than a substitute for your dead lover! Gordon is really Gordon's son! So you see I'd be telling Sam a lie if I boasted that I—And I'm a man of honor! I've proved that, at least! (174)

Darrell turns his energies into his work and his young companion scientist Preston. Even this new life is disturbed by ghosts from the past, though, for Sam leaves money to the research station, and Darrell is trapped into working with Sam's money, the final settling of accounts on Sam's part. Darrell's final words in the play are in a thought-aside in which he makes an ironic appeal to an indifferent God: "Oh, God, so deaf and dumb and blind! . . . teach me to be resigned to be an atom! . . ." (199). O'Neill's pun on "atom" (Adam = man) suggests Darrell's sense of insignificance in the overwhelming rush of life's force and, on another level, his sense of loss at being expelled from the garden of love. Darrell is dead to Nina at this point, in a scene reminiscent of the final words of Professor Leeds who also dies once Nina moves out of his sphere of values. The difference is that Darrell adopts the code of honor which Professor Leeds used to bind Nina to him. In both cases a commitment to honor means death to love, a denial of sexuality.

The code is variable and flexible; when Darrell interferes with Nina's attempt to frustrate Madeline's love for Gordon, he assumes his role as physician. He uses his moral authority to steer Madeline away from Nina. In thus acting honorably, Darrell perhaps atones for his earlier interference in Nina's life, but his change is too sudden to be convincing. At this point O'Neill's plot has virtually taken

over from the characters. Without the animating power of sexual conflicts, the play begins to drift to its close.

Sam, who has always conformed to the codes of his society, literally dies during the course of the play and is fittingly given a ritualistic farewell. His death scene is very well handled by O'Neill, particularly in its visual qualities. Sam lies prostrate on the floor, ostensibly having collapsed from the cumulative effect of watching his son win the boat race and having drunk too much liquor. Psychically, though, his collapse is caused by the ghost of Gordon, and by Sam's own denial of his fatherhood, and his admission that young Gordon's spirit really belongs to Gordon Shaw and to Nina. His last words are uttered in response to Nina's emotional wheedling. Gordon is not ours, she says to Sam, he is mine. Sam replies:

Of course he's yours, dear—and a dead ringer for  
Gordon Shaw, too! Gordon's body! Gordon's spirit!  
Your body and spirit, too, Nina! He's not like me,  
lucky for him! I'm a poor boob! I never could row  
worth a damn! (182)

Sam's death is imminent, and like that of Professor Leeds, occurs once Nina asserts her independence from him. The other characters gather round the fallen Sam, Darrell and Nina kneel beside him. Nina has asked Darrell if all their wishes have come true, but Darrell turns her question aside and attends to Sam. Standing over the threesome is Marsden, drunk, dressed "immaculately in black", (159) and exultant. He makes the sign "over the body like a priest blessing" (183). It is as though he offers a final farewell to the sexual triangle, as if the full power of their sexuality were now



finally and ineluctably over. He stands himself in the background, waiting for Nina. His blessing prefigures the re-establishment of God the Father once the interlude of sexuality has run its course.

As a final touch, O'Neill gives the concluding words of the scene to Madeline, who has remained standing at the rail of the ship, staring after Gordon's racing shell and addressing him in her thoughts: "your head will lie on my breast . . . soon! . . ." (183). Her final word suggests the urgency of her desire to embrace her lover; her looking down the river calls to mind Nina's image of the fierce river of passion which is now Madeline's and Gordon's to enjoy. Her seeming lack of awareness of the older generation suggests, too, her innocence of the power the past may work on the lives of people. Her vision of her Gordon at her breast also suggests something of the innocence of mother and child.

#### IV

The final act of the play demands close attention for O'Neill carefully manages his picture of the waning of sexual desire. Again we see an effective blend of verbal and scenic images.

Early in the final act, O'Neill has Nina imagine that a future life with Charlie will recreate for her the happiness of her girlhood. She thinks she can recover the peace she knew before she "fell in love with Gordon Shaw and all this tangled mess of love and hate and pain and birth began! . . ." (191). O'Neill begins preparing us for the ending much earlier. In Act Seven he has Nina utter a thought-aside

which suggests that passion ends at menopause: "I'm thirty-five . . . five years more . . . at forty a woman has finished living . . . life passes by her . . . she rots away in peace! . . ." (138). Later in that Act she contemplates taking Charlie as her lover in old age; she thinks he would make "a perfect lover when one was past passion! . . ." (149). The imagery of these earlier passages melds with that of the ending; both Nina and Charlie become autumnal creatures, happy to fade away without the turmoil of fleshly desires.

Why passion should end so arbitrarily is not clear, but O'Neill as craftsman goes to great lengths to convey the waning of bodily desire. Early in Act Nine, Marsden hands to Madeline a rose, symbolic of the full blossoming of her sexuality in her relationship with Gordon.<sup>48</sup> He thinks of Nina, on the other hand, now forty years old, as a rose "exhausted by the long, hot day, leaning wearily toward peace . . ." (187). At the end of this concluding Act, Nina speaks of re-entering the "old garden," presumably a garden of prelapsarian bliss. She thinks of their life together as a time of reintegration: "I feel as if I were a girl again and you were my father and the Charlie of those days made into one" (199). At a symbolic level the conclusion is tidy. Gordon and Madeline fly away together, another sign of their sexuality and a symbolic act which contrasts neatly with the death in an aircraft of Gordon Shaw. There is accord between generations and Charlie's ritualistic gesture is answered by Gordon's ritualistically dipping the wings of his aircraft as he and Madeline fly away into the sunset. The young people carry the seeds of a creative future away with them, and all ends well.

The ending therefore seems to sound a positive note. God the Father is back in his heaven, the young lovers have flown the nest, Charlie and Nina are in each other's arms in their new found garden. Yet there are two strands which accentuate the dark tones of the play and reveal both O'Neill's criticism of his culture and something of the failures of the play. If we trust the tale and not the artist, then the ending is ironically blasphemous and formally uneven.

The first strand concerns the relationship of Marsden and Nina. O'Neill obviously wants us to see Marsden as three fathers in one: the "natural" father of Nina, a priestly father bestowing forgiveness and representative, therefore, of God the Father—an elaborate image of fatherhood by proxy. The blasphemous qualities of Marsden's role are summed up in the final tableau showing Nina in his arms. The tableau is a kind of reverse (some might say perverse) pieta: the newly-cleansed daughter in the arms of the (almost) Virgin Father.<sup>49</sup> We think here of Dion Anthony's determination in The Great God Brown to conceal blasphemies in his architectural designs<sup>50</sup> in order to have the last laugh on a blindly ignorant commercial culture. In this respect, O'Neill's ending is consistent with his penchant for opposing and undermining the values of American culture. His ending seems almost pious.

And yet to achieve this seeming piety O'Neill has had to deny Nina's sexuality explicitly. He goes against human experience in attempting to make Nina devoid of sexual passion once she reaches menopause. It seems here that O'Neill was still caught up in the idealism of Lazarus Laughed that attempts to preach a "new clean lust"

or in the notion of a Nirvana as the proper goal of life. O'Neill has not fully integrated his vision of sexual subversion (which focuses our attention on bodily desire: "her body is a trap" says Darrell of Nina) with his grudge against modern religiosity. Much more successful dramatically is the tableau in which Nina as a new mother sits surrounded by her men commenting on her milk and the convergence of their desires in her. The scene effectively projects an image of the sexual woman and an indictment of a stern patriarchal religion.

The second strand which darkens the tone of the evening concerns the future of the young lovers. Gordon Evans and Madeline are fated to be of the house of Evans, and everything we have learned of that house is unpromising. Gordon is "given" by Nina to her dying husband Sam to "give" to Madeline (183). This underlines the identity of Gordon and Sam. Perhaps Nina's gift is a wish for her Gordon's happiness. If so, however, it is a happiness issuing from ignorance.<sup>51</sup> Lurking in the background of the Evans household is Sam's mother, the most problematic character in the play. Her influence needs some discussion.

She seems to represent the dark side of New England puritanism. She is identified by her physical appearance and by her attachment to the old woman upstairs in her house. Symbolically, the house represents an aspect of the New England psyche ("It's a queer house," Nina writes to Ned. "There is something wrong with its psyche, I'm

sure" (29). The house, Nina senses, is a house of death. She feels stifled and is unable to sleep. "I lay awake and found it difficult to breathe, as if all the life in the air had long since been exhausted in keeping the dying living a little longer" (49).

O'Neill suggests in his description of Mrs. Evans that she utters the voice of death. Her experiences have worked havoc with her appearance, especially her face: "what has happened to her has compressed its defenseless curves into planes, its mouth into the thin line around a locked door, its gentle chin has been forced out aggressively by a long reliance on clenched teeth" (53). The image of her mouth as a door identifies her further with the house, and suggests also her repressed nature. Her eyes indicate restriction and constraint; they are "grim with the prisoner-pain of a walled-in soul" (53). There are qualities of tenderness about her mouth and eyes, but it is mainly her voice which O'Neill relies on to convey her character as a destroyer. "Her voice jumps startlingly in tone from a caressing gentleness, as if what she said then was merely a voice on its own without human emotion to inspire it" (53-54). The values that Mrs. Evans represents are therefore suspect, and we wonder to what extent they may influence young Gordon and Madeline. Mrs. Evans speaks for the values of family, self-sacrifice, duty, and the appearance of fidelity. How far she may influence Gordon we cannot know but her influence on Nina has been decisive. Inasmuch as Nina accepts the dictates of Mrs. Evans by sacrificing her child for Sam's happiness, she can be said never to escape the stifling ambience of that New England country house until she resolves to move

back with Marsden into Professor Leeds' house where "New England meets Greek" (4). This plan to move back into the house to pick up life is consistent with the incestuous love of Marsden and Nina (and it may foreshadow the grim ending of Mourning Becomes Electra) but it seems too pat and neat to be fully convincing.<sup>52</sup>

This interpretation of the ending differs from that offered by others. W.D. Sievers notes the tension in the play between O'Neill's conceptions of God the Mother and God the Father. These he identifies, respectively, with Jung and Freud.<sup>53</sup> He quotes Nina's comment to the effect that her having a son was a failure.

He couldn't give me happiness. Sons are always their fathers. They pass through the mother to become their father again. (199)

Sievers then goes on to conclude his interpretation:

Nina thus reverses the Jungian image which had been fundamental throughout the play—that God was a Mother. Now she regresses to childhood and finds security curled up in the arms of Charlie Marsden, whom she marries. God proves to be a Father after all, and Nina concludes:

. . . our lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father.

It is the triumph of Freud's Father-God over Jung's Mother-Goddess at the end of this life-cycle of woman—a monument of psychoanalytic literature.<sup>54</sup>

This interpretation seems altogether too categorical and speculative: the identification of the God images with writers as complex as Freud and Jung is just too tidy. It seems more true to say that O'Neill had many purposes in writing Strange Interlude and they are at odds with each other. He set out to explore sexual love in New England and to

indict that culture's narrowness and rigidity, its willingness to adopt a science god and a material god all the while maintaining the old patriarchal god. His installation of God the Father at the end is at odds with the exploration of sexuality. And so O'Neill arbitrarily gives up his sexual theme to his religious preoccupation. In formal terms, his characters go dead and one strand of his plot takes over.

On the whole, Strange Interlude represents O'Neill's most complete exploration of sexuality to this point in his career. He shows how sexuality informs behavior and values at a number of levels. At the personal level he shows in Marsden and Nina how sexual experience and lack of sexual connection cause anguish and pain. In Nina's case he shows how her frustration in sexual expression leads to an awakening both to sexuality and to cosmological values. Marsden too awakes to a new sense of what constitutes art. He grows aware that to be genuine and vital art must acknowledge and find positive value in the sexual body. But Marsden is never to fulfill his insights; as O'Neill put it in an early note for his novelist character "What his mind sees can never come out in his work."<sup>55</sup>

O'Neill shows too how commercial success (in the figure of Sam) is linked to a sense of sexual power. When Nina withholds herself from him, his business suffers. When she is satisfactorily pregnant, he prospers. The irony in O'Neill's treatment of the business culture is that Sam never knows that he is not the father of his son. Sam's financial success depends upon his acceptance of appearances as reality.

O'Neill shows not only how sex undermines the conventional pieties of family life, religion, and business, but also how it subverts the smug complacency of a man of science who thinks love can be explained by identifying it with sex. A genuine work of art, says D.H. Lawrence, contains the essential criticism of its own basic system of values.<sup>56</sup>

In presenting Darrell as a neurologist, O'Neill can make fun of Freud. This he does through the character of Marsden who thinks:

. . . a lot to account for, Herr Freud! . . .  
 punishment to fit his crimes, be forced  
 to listen eternally during breakfast while  
 innumerable plain ones tell him dreams about  
 snakes . . . pah, what an easy cure-all! . . .  
 sex the philosopher's stone . . . (34)

In presenting such a criticism of Freud (or as Freud was popularly perceived<sup>57</sup>) O'Neill is establishing distance between himself and his own ideas. In making jokes about Freud and showing Darrell's frustrations once he has made love to Nina, O'Neill is working at a level of complexity not apparent in Lazarus Laughed where the playwright's own predilections diminish the aesthetic impact of the play. In his treatment of Darrell, O'Neill shows the sexual body subverts even the ideals of a person who thinks he knows what sex is.

Strange Interlude marks a step forward for O'Neill as a playwright of the sexual revolution. The play was "the first work of O'Neill's full maturity"<sup>58</sup> and much of that maturity stems from his projection of the power of sex and his extended experimentation with the stream of consciousness method. O'Neill goes beyond his personal concerns here and begins to make a criticism of cultural values that anticipate both Dynamo and Mourning Becomes Electra. Both these later works



stem from the same matrix of ideas as Interlude (an early title for the play was "The Haunted and Hunted"<sup>59</sup> which later appear as titles in the Electra trilogy). When Nina comments on the "electrical display" our lives are part of, she announces the central image of O'Neill's next play, Dynamo.

## Notes: Chapter Three

A note on citations:

All quotations from Strange Interlude refer to The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1954), Vol. I, and will be cited parenthetically in the text. Stage directions will be underlined to indicate italics in the original.

<sup>1</sup>Jordan Y. Miller, Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic: A Bibliographical Checklist, Second Edition (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1973), pp. 63-64.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973), p. 341. Hereafter Son and Artist.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 340.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 288.

<sup>5</sup>Unsigned, "The Rhyming Reader," The Bookman 67 (August 1928), p. 692.

<sup>6</sup>See Leon Edel, "Eugene O'Neill: The Face and the Mask," University of Toronto Quarterly 7 (October 1937), p. 31.

<sup>7</sup>Roy Battenhouse, "'Strange Interlude' Restudied," Religion in Life 15 (1946), p. 212.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Charles I. Glicksberg, The Sexual Revolution in Modern American Literature (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Travis Bogard, Contour in Time; The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 306.

<sup>11</sup> Eugene O'Neill at Work: Newly Released Ideas for Plays edited and annotated by Virginia Floyd (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981), p. 69. Hereafter cited as O'Neill at Work.

<sup>12</sup> Frederic I. Carpenter sees Lazarus linked to Strange Interlude as Dante's Paradiso is linked to his Purgatorio. See Eugene O'Neill (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 71.

Floyd describes the process of composition in O'Neill at Work, pp. 82-113 (Lazarus) and pp. 68-80 (Strange Interlude).

See also Chapter One above.

<sup>13</sup> O'Neill at Work, pp. 68-69.

<sup>14</sup> Work Diary transcribed by Donald Gallup (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1981), Vol. I, see entries for March, April, May (pp. 23-27). Hereafter cited as Work Diary.

<sup>15</sup> Work Diary, I, entry for 13 February 1926, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> O'Neill at Work, p. 74.

<sup>17</sup> These are my terms for aspects of the stream of consciousness. William James describes four characters in consciousness in Psychology (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1907), p. 152.

<sup>18</sup> Long Day's Journey into Night (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 207.

<sup>19</sup> Egil Törnquist, A Drama of Souls: Studies in O'Neill's Supernaturalistic Techniques (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 207.

<sup>20</sup> A Research in Marriage (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1929), p. vi.

<sup>21</sup> "The Theatre We Worked For": The Letters of Eugene O'Neill to Kenneth Macgowan ed. by Jackson R. Bryer with introductory essays by Travis Bogard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 76 n12.

<sup>22</sup> See above Chapter One.

<sup>23</sup> See A Drama of Souls, pp. 199-205.

<sup>24</sup> "The O'Neill Soliloquy," in O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism ed. Oscar Cargill et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 452.

<sup>25</sup> "Working Notes and Extracts from a Fragmentary Work Diary," in American Playwrights on Drama ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill & Wang, 1965), p. 10. Hereafter cited as Frenz.

<sup>26</sup> Timo Tiusanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 216.

<sup>27</sup> Liisa Dahl, Linguistic Features of the Stream-of-Consciousness Techniques of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Eugene O'Neill (Turku: Turin Yliopisto, 1970), p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> Frenz, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Eugene M. Waith describes the "characteristic movement of an O'Neill play" as "a movement toward discovery or revelation or both--a kind of unmasking." See "Eugene O'Neill: An Exercise in Unmasking," in O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 33.

<sup>30</sup> Frenz, pp. 14-15.

<sup>30a</sup> Contour in Time, p. 304n.

<sup>31</sup> O'Neill at Work, p. 71.

<sup>32</sup> Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), pp. 180-81.

<sup>33</sup> Marsden's euphemisms slow down the flow of associations creating a variation in the rhythm and pace of the sentences. O'Neill's language is not often inventive but his rhythms are interesting and dramatically effective here.

<sup>34</sup> Studies in Classic American Literature (New York: The Viking Press; 1923, 1964), p. 171.

<sup>35</sup> Contour in Time, p. 304.

<sup>36</sup> Compare D.H. Lawrence Sons and Lovers (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), p. 279. See also discussion of Orin, Chapter Five below.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Barrett H. Clark, Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays (New York: Dover Publications, 1947), p. 97.

<sup>38</sup> Creativity in the Theatre: A Psychoanalytic Study (New York: Delta Books, 1965), p. 143.

<sup>39</sup> William James says the function of the transitive parts of the stream of consciousness is to move from one substantive to another; see Psychology, p. 160.

<sup>40</sup> In which he imagines all the dead men he has seen are actually one; see Act IV of The Hunted in Electra 2, Plays, p. 115.

<sup>41</sup>O'Neill's introduction of the family curse perhaps reflects an autobiographical source. He records in his personal family summary that his mother had a series of abortions. See Chapter One above.

<sup>42</sup>For a discussion of O'Neill's concept of romantic imagination, see Sophus Winther, Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961).

<sup>43</sup>Bogard points out that Nina is both a sexually attractive woman and God the Mother. See Contour in Time, pp. 312-313.

<sup>44</sup>Creativity in the Theatre, p. 143.

<sup>45</sup>Frederic I. Carpenter has commented upon the theatrical effectiveness of the scene; "The Enduring O'Neill: The Early Plays," The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter 1 (May, 1977), p. 3. Tiusanen describes this as an exceptional scene within disharmonies in the play; O'Neill's Scenic Images, pp. 218-219.

<sup>46</sup>Bogard describes Strange Interlude as a kind of "anti-drama"; see Contour in Time, p. 307.

<sup>47</sup>See E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel for a description of the inevitable conflict between plot and character (which the plot almost always wins). (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), pp. 102-103.

<sup>48</sup>For a discussion of the rose as a metaphor, see Robert Rogers, Metaphor: A Psychoanalytic View (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), Chapter 4.

<sup>49</sup>This is almost a reverse of the scenic image at the end of A Moon for the Misbegotten.

<sup>50</sup>Plays, Vol. 3, p. 397.

<sup>51</sup>Battenhouse, "'Strange Interlude' Restudied," p. 209.

<sup>52</sup>John Henry Raleigh, Eugene O'Neill: The Man and his Works (Toronto: Forum House, 1969), p. 193.

<sup>53</sup>Freud on Broadway: A History of Psychoanalysis and the American Drama (New York: Cooper Square, 1970), p. 118.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>O'Neill at Work, p. 71.

<sup>56</sup>"Study of Thomas Hardy," in D.H. Lawrence: Selected Literary Criticism ed. Anthony Beal (New York: Viking Press, 1966), p. 185.

<sup>57</sup>See Thomas E. Porter's discussion of Freudianism and Electra in Myth and Modern American Drama (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), pp. 40ff.

<sup>58</sup>Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 300.

<sup>59</sup>O'Neill at Work, p. 69.

## Chapter Four

### "An Act of Nature": The Education of Reuben Light

#### I

O'Neill conceived Dynamo in the summer of 1924, and completed the play some five years later, after he had written Strange Interlude and Lazarus Laughed.<sup>1</sup> Dynamo was copyrighted in 1928 and published in October of 1929. Production ran from 11 February 1929 for a mere fifty performances. The play was not a success in the theatre, nor has it been a success with critics, despite O'Neill's attempts to salvage in the published play what he considered to be his primary intention—to write a psychological and not a metaphysical play.<sup>2</sup> Because Dynamo was produced when O'Neill was out of the country, and because his salvage job was not successful, the play "unlike any of O'Neill's other plays produced in his lifetime, is an unfinished work . . . ." <sup>3</sup> Though it is not a fully realized work, nor a satisfying one, it has special value for this present study, arising from its chronological position, in part, and from its incomplete nature.

In Dynamo O'Neill used "Interludisms," as he called his thought-aside technique, to reveal the inner life of his characters.<sup>4</sup> As simple people, they speak and think in a forthright and direct manner. Even their evasions are quite transparent. The play focuses on the adolescent turmoil of Reuben Light—on his coming forth or his education—and his sexuality acts as the underlying motive force of the



dramatic action. The relative simplicity of the characters and his clarity of focus means that O'Neill's attitudes toward sexuality emerge quite clearly. O'Neill did not have the aesthetic distance from Dynamo that he had from other works of the period, and so this play, however tangled it may be (especially in its ending), acts as a kind of short-hand commentary on the treatment of sex in the other plays. Dynamo, as its title suggests, is about power, and it reveals aspects of O'Neill's vision of sex and love that are hinted at or latent in Lazarus Laughed, Strange Interlude, and Mourning Becomes Electra. The connections between Dynamo and O'Neill's personal life-chart or diagram,<sup>5</sup> which pictures his own life from birth to adolescence, are more direct here than with any other middle play, and O'Neill himself was quite candid about his personal involvement with the play. There is an urgency of tone permeating Dynamo and this too seems to speak of the play's importance to the playwright.

Dynamo has been accorded comparatively little critical attention, the most common critical lament being that the play is schematic.<sup>6</sup> One of O'Neill's comments about his intentions, however, has been often quoted and seems almost to have been of more interest than the play itself. O'Neill wrote that Dynamo

is a symbolic and factual biography of what is happening in a large section of the American (and not only American) soul right now. It is really the first play of a trilogy that will dig at the roots of the sickness of today as I feel it—the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with. It seems to me anyone trying to do big work nowadays must have this big subject behind all the little subjects of his plays

or novels, or he is simply scribbling around on the surface of things and has no more real status than a parlor entertainer.

This inflated view of the play's design seems to have led some critics to overvalue Dynamo's religious themes. One recent writer has described the play, for example, as part of O'Neill's efforts to create "a new iconography—a system of signs, images and symbols expressive of the relationship between man and God in the New World."<sup>8</sup> This view seems to understate O'Neill's interest in critical analysis of his culture and his interest in the human drama of his plays.

A more balanced view of Dynamo is forwarded by Egil Törnqvist who argues that the play "can be read primarily as a psychological drama or as a metaphysical parable . . . ." <sup>9</sup> In his discussion, Törnqvist tends to emphasize the psychological drama, but he comments on sexuality only in passing. Other comments on sexuality in Dynamo tend to be cryptic—Dynamo dramatizes the way love "turns to hate or lust"<sup>10</sup>—or subsumed under a discussion of the religious implications of O'Neill's handling of sex. In his chapter on sexuality in O'Neill, Charles Glicksberg concludes that O'Neill's frank treatment of sex is but part of O'Neill's "naturalistic nihilism." Glicksberg's chapter title illustrates the point; he calls the chapter "Eugene O'Neill: The Tragedy of Love Without God."<sup>11</sup>

Taking a stand against most critics of the play, William Wasserstrom argues that, though flawed, Dynamo is "a seminal text"<sup>12</sup> in the American modernist period in its attempt to find appropriate techniques for coming to terms with the modern industrial era. Indeed, Wasserstrom goes so far as to say that the play is "Unmatched by any other single

poem or novel or play . . . [in showing] the reasons why American sensibilities in the late twenties suffered a sea-change of spirit, an inversion of mood . . . ."<sup>13</sup> Wasserstrom goes on to place O'Neill with D.H. Lawrence and Henry Adams as seminal critics of American culture.<sup>14</sup> This present chapter takes a more modest view and charts O'Neill's treatment of the central character in his family and cultural setting, with special attention to the internal formal qualities of the play's structure and images. O'Neill's treatment of his hero's education dramatizes the theme of subversive sexuality.

## II

A close study of the play shows the power of sexuality to undermine the peace of two families and all the individuals in them. Reuben's emergent sexuality leads him out of himself and out of his family. Their resistance to his emergence, prompted by his attraction to his neighbor Ada, precipitates his break with them, the subsequent death of his mother whom he taunts with blasphemous postcards, and the growing despair of his father. When Reuben returns to find his mother dead, he undertakes a search for her which leads him to his love for the dynamo. He imagines that he must purge himself of fleshly desires in order to win the love of the dynamo, and so he kills the girl Ada, who loves him, and who prompted his coming forth in the first place.

The theme of subversive sexuality is apparent in O'Neill's notes for the play, especially in his ideas about the husband-wife relationship.

Although bound to each other by a tie of deep love and passion, there also exists a strong tie of hatred between these two. She has always hated her love for him as a weakness that made her prefer him to many suitors more suitable from a practical standpoint . . . . 15

(Virginia Floyd correctly notes this relationship anticipates that between Christine and Ezra Mannon in Mourning Becomes Electra and James and Mary Tyrone in Long Day's Journey Into Night.<sup>16</sup>) O'Neill also explicitly notes how sexual impulses underlie family quarrels about the future of the son. The husband "blames her sex for triumphing—her feminine body betraying his will as it had when he first fell in love with her."<sup>17</sup> Part of O'Neill's achievement in Dynamo is to make this sexual tension part of his characters' language without being as blatant as he is here.

The play has obvious autobiographical sources. It stems from O'Neill's attitude to his mother, his break with his parents' religion during his own adolescence, and more directly perhaps, his contemporary wrangles with his second wife, Agnes, who was proceeding with a divorce from O'Neill during the time he worked on the play.<sup>18</sup>

The main literary source is equally apparent<sup>19</sup>: Chapter XXV, "The Dynamo and the Virgin," in The Education of Henry Adams. What O'Neill drew from Adams, however, apart from the symbol of the dynamo as a symbol of force in the modern world, is a matter of conjecture. Bogard argues that in his reworking of the play over the five years between conception and birth O'Neill "destroyed his conception . . . of the dynamo as a real symbol of God."<sup>20</sup> It seems, though, that O'Neill may have drawn other ideas from Adams. One passage in "The Dynamo and the Virgin" sheds light on O'Neill's treatment of sex in

the play.

Adams began to ponder, asking whether he knew of any American artist who had insisted on the power of sex, as every classic had always done; but he could only think of Walt Whitman; Bret Harte, as far as the magazines would let him venture; and one or two painters for the flesh tones. All the rest had used sex for sentiment, never for force . . . . <sup>21</sup>

Such an idea—using sex for force—may well have had special appeal for O'Neill. By insisting on the power of sex, he could ally himself with the classics, whom he admired, and with the classic American writers. <sup>22</sup>

At the same time, by dramatizing the power of sex, O'Neill could assault those aspects of American life, especially New England life, that he found repressive and stultifying.

In 1925 O'Neill wrote to George Jean Nathan that what he wanted to do in Desire Under the Elms "was to give an epic tinge to New England's inhibited life-lust, to make its inexpressiveness practically expressive, to release it. It's just that—the poetical (in the broadest and deepest sense) vision illuminating even the most sordid and mean blind alleys of life—which I'm convinced is, and is to be my concern and justification as a dramatist."<sup>23</sup> And in Strange Interlude O'Neill had his (failed) writer-character Marsden articulate the wish to become a real writer. The language O'Neill gives to Marsden is similar to that in his letter to Nathan: "Now I'm going to give an honest healthy yell—turn on the sun into the shadows of lies—shout 'This is life and this is sex, and here are passion and hatred and regret and joy and ecstasy . . . .'"<sup>24</sup> This evident concern with dramatizing the power of sex to illuminate the depths of New England life may well have been prompted in part or received further impetus from Adams.

Two letters O'Neill wrote after the production of the play and before its publication as a book suggest the importance of the sexual themes to him. To Benjamin de Casseres O'Neill wrote on 12 March 1929 that Reuben "finally has to sacrifice the girl his mother hated to a maternal deity whom he loves sexually."<sup>25</sup> We recall that the story begins with Reuben's sexual attraction to Ada. On March 16, 1929 O'Neill wrote about the play again, complaining that he had not been understood, and outlining Dynamo in such a way as to emphasize the human, implicitly sexual themes he wanted the play to carry. He began with a jibe at the reviewers who were in his view

all hot after my general abstract theme for three plays—I was a boob to let that out—and nobody saw my play, Dynamo, about the psychological mess a boy got into because he suddenly felt that the whole world had turned against him and betrayed him into cowardice. Most of all his mother, whose betrayal really smashes him. Psychologically, the interest in the play—for me—was how he works it out so that he electrocutes his bullying father's God, finds his dead mother again in the dynamo—a mother deified into God by the aid of pseudo-science—and is even compelled to sacrifice the girl he loves, whom his mother was jealous of and hated, to achieve that final return to his mother. His last words as he embraces the Dynamo are—in my script—'Never let me go from you again! Please, Mother!' What could be plainer than that? . . . How anybody could think, in the light of previous work, that I would waste time writing a play on the piffling struggle between pseudo-religion and pseudo-science is more than I can make out.

The underlying motive for this strange sequence of events is the sexual attraction between Reuben and Ada. The mother betrays Reuben in that she refuses to accept him as a sexual adult, wishing instead to possess him for herself in a mother-child relationship.

The pattern O'Neill describes is very much like the pattern that informs Lazarus Laughed. There are four stages to this pattern. First,

the old god (the Father) is denied. In Lazarus this includes the God of both Christians and Jews. Second, the mother figure is "killed" and the hero is implicated at least emotionally in that he does not seek to save her. In Lazarus, Miriam plays the role of the mother-figure, and Lazarus does not attempt to intervene to prevent her death. In Dynamo Reuben denies his mother in so many words ("I'll do without a mother rather than have your kind!" [450]) and by leaving home he becomes "responsible" for her death. This pattern of denial is very much like that figured in O'Neill's diagram in that he breaks off the line showing his relationship with his mother at adolescence, as if she were no longer a part of his life.<sup>27</sup> O'Neill exploits the emotional power of that moment in his life (when he first learned that his mother was a drug addict) in Long Day's Journey when Edmund says to his mother, "God, it made everything in life seem rotten!"<sup>28</sup> The third stage, which seems to be caused by the second, requires that the sexual woman be denied. In Lazarus Pompeia is scorned; in Dynamo Reuben kills Ada. The fourth stage involves the recovery of the mother, and a grotesque sexual merger. Lazarus joins with Pompeia and Miriam and the womb of infinity; Reuben joins with Ada in his embrace of the dynamo.

This sequence of phases also anticipates some aspect of Mourning Becomes Electra with its three-part structure of "The Homecoming," "The Hunted," and "The Haunted." Act One of Dynamo depicts Reuben's separation from his family; Act Two shows his homecoming (he calls himself the "prodigal son" [457]); and Act Three shows Reuben communing with the ghost of his mother and hunting for the secret of the dynamo. In a sense, he is haunted by his need to merge with the Great Mother,

as he calls the dynamo.

But despite these similarities, the texture of the play is markedly different from that of the others in this period. Overall, the tone of the play is dark and negative, but the sheer amount of verbal abuse among the characters, especially in the first act, gives the play a quality all its own. O'Neill said his "brain was woolly with hatred"<sup>29</sup> when he wrote the play, and the extent and intensity of name-calling, scatological images, and derogatory epithets seem to give evidence of that personal involvement. The name-calling and epithets, though they are quite narrow in range, provide important clues to the character relationships and require detailed examination.

The name-calling and epithets of the first act prepare us for the drama to follow. Characters reveal themselves, their attitudes and preoccupations as they denounce others, or address them in pet names. Epithets and names combine to form recurrent images of sex and dirt that reveal the latent dynamics of the love theme in the play.

The play opens with a thought-aside by Reverend Hutchins Light. Though he is ostensibly making notes for a sermon, his thoughts drift to comments made to him earlier that day by his neighbor, Ramsay Fife. Light poses a question, which becomes the central concern of the first act, and then he describes Fife. This description reveals the character of Light and establishes a tension between him and Fife. The sound of the opening, though, conveys an important ambiguity: "What did he mean about Reuben? . . . that foul-mouthed scoundrel . . ." (422).



Actually, Light means to call Fife a scoundrel, but the sequence of his utterance suggests that he thinks of Reuben, his son, as a scoundrel too. In fact, this ambiguity anticipates what happens later in the play. After Reuben leaves home, he sends what Light thinks of as blasphemous post-cards to Mrs. Light. When Reuben returns, Light accuses him of blasphemy, and of murdering his mother.

Images of speaking and of dirt are also part of Light's opening thought-aside, and they are related to the attitudes toward sexuality in the play. Following the judgment he has made, Light recalls the words of Fife which precipitated the judgment. In this recall, Light reveals himself, too, for he censors his own thoughts (much as Marsden censored his own thoughts in Strange Interlude):

"Better call in your son or some night I might mistake his odor of sanctity for a skunk's and fill his" . . . filthy word belching from his grinning mouth! . . . "full of buckshot" . . . . (423)

Fife's words are explicitly anal—"odor," "skunk," the unspoken "ass,"—and they combine with Light's adjective "filthy," to accentuate the scatological quality implicit in "foul-mouthed." Fife is thus characterized by oral and anal images, an appropriate way of presenting an individual whose name is also the name of a wind instrument.<sup>30</sup>

Reuben, in his turn, is implicated in this sequence of images, and this suggests a further identification in Light's mind of his son with Fife. Moreover, the point of Fife's joke—that he might mistake Reuben's "odor of sanctity" for the odor of a skunk—suggests the earthy base of higher ideals, and this conjunction of earthy and sacred we see later in a similar relationship. Fife attempts to undercut the self-

righteousness of Light and Reuben, reminding them always of their limited humanness. Similarly, Reuben's drive to achieve a purified "love" for the dynamo is undercut by his sexual needs, as we see later.

A third part of Light's opening thought-aside consists of his recalling the scene in which the meeting with Fife occurred and recalling the responses that were made to Fife's wit. Light remembers that the people present, "street loafers" Light calls them, laughed at him, so that he pretended not to hear and had to "slink" by. Light then erupts in a rationalization and violent threat (cast in the conditional voice since he is reacting to his memory of the event not the event itself): "If it weren't for my cloth, I'd have beaten his face to a bloody pulp!" (423). Light frightens himself with this threat, and he immediately judges his own feelings and thoughts as those of a "murderer." This self-assessment coincides with the accusation he makes later to both Fife and Reuben. The gradual surfacing of this violent aggressive wish prefigures the action of the play as a whole, which moves from verbal to physical violence.

The opening thought-aside establishes a kind of identity among the three male characters. Fife needs a god to ridicule, Light needs a god to sanction his violent aggressive thoughts of punishing others, and Reuben seems to learn both of these dispositions. He also learns from their attitudes to sexuality.

Light's attitudes are ambivalent. In a thought-aside Light shows some understanding of Reuben's interest in Ada. Light asks himself, ". . . who am I to cast the first stone at Reuben if he desires a woman? . . . hasn't my love for Amelia been one long desire of the

senses? . . . " (135). Light concludes that he should understand Reuben's "weakness," as he calls it, and forgive him. But at the same time, Light considers Reuben's interest in Ada, daughter of an avowed and outspoken atheist, as treachery to God, and his overt response is to beat Reuben. Light's physical abuse anticipates Reuben's self-flagellation during his attempts to purify himself and earn the love of the dynamo.

Light reveals another side of himself as a sexual being in a nightmare he suffers while Reuben is absent. The dream concerns his dead wife. Light recounts the dream in a thought-aside. Though it is uncomplicated, the dream troubles him. "I dreamed Amelia was in my arms . . . and Reuben came and beckoned her and she went away with him . . . " (456). The dream acts as a metaphor for the larger drama that Reuben is acting out. The needs of the body can be denied (Light's beating of Reuben is one aspect of this denial; he denies his son's sexuality), but they will inevitably find their way into consciousness in one way or another.

Reuben, too, suffers from this tension between desire and ideal, and once he loses his reticence about having sex with Ada, his father effectively disappears from the play. This disappearance parallels the disappearance of Professor Leeds (his death) once Nina has determined that she will give herself sexually to the men in the hospital. After their angry confrontation upon Reuben's return home, Light plays no direct role in the dramatic action. He remains a figure in Reuben's thoughts, however, and there we see something of the influence he has had upon the boy. Light dehumanizes sexuality, just as he dehumanizes

the Fifes in the references he makes to them as the "pack" next door. This attitude emerges in Reuben's thought-aside after he has had sex with Ada: "But it's grand to have her around handy whenever I want . . . the flesh, as the old man would call it! . . . (471). There is a trace of tenderness in Reuben's attitude, but the more powerful quality is this tendency to debase Ada.

In his struggle to break free from his father and his father's values, Reuben begins to realize an aspect of his character that is implicit in his name.<sup>31</sup> Reuben is the son of Leah, unhappy wife of Jacob. In Genesis Reuben is connected with sexuality in two ways. He collects mandrake roots which his mother gives to the barren Rachel, who in turn sends their husband Jacob to Leah's bed. Leah bears Jacob two more sons and a daughter. The mandrake root is purported to have aphrodisiacal qualities, and is often associated with fertility and the genitals. Rachel subsequently becomes fertile and gives birth to Joseph. In this way, Reuben "saves" Rachel from the anger of Jacob and from the shame of her barrenness. O'Neill's Reuben tells Mrs. Fife that the Great Mother Dynamo "wants some one man to love her purely and when she finds him worthy she will love him and give him the secret of truth and he will become the new saviour who will bring happiness and peace to men! And I'm going to be that saviour . . ." (477). In the symbolism of the play as a whole, Reuben must deny the denying mother in order to save himself and her and all mankind.

The second quality that O'Neill's Reuben shares with his biblical namesake is the involvement with the lover of his father. In Genesis,

Reuben lay with his father's concubine Bilhah (Chapter 35), and Jacob later curses his son for going into his father's bed (Chapter 49). O'Neill's Reuben acts in much the same manner in the dream of Reverend Light. Reuben approaches the bed (presumably) of his parents, and beckons to his mother, who leaves with him. Reuben's role in his father's recurrent nightmare gives emotional intensity to Light's denunciation of his son upon the latter's homecoming.

Reuben's sexual awakening is connected with his overcoming fear of his father and fear of lightning. The lightning then, functions as an image of sexuality as well as an image of heavenly power.<sup>32</sup> The sexual connotations of the lightning image (in Lazarus the fire in which Lazarus and Pompeia burn has a similar function) are made apparent in a comment by Fife to Reuben. Fife says, "I'll have no young spark seducing my daughter—getting her with child, maybe, and then deserting her with no marriage lines to save her from disgrace" (438). The image of the little, or young, spark, suggests Reuben's sexual immaturity at this point. When Reuben first makes love with Ada, he chooses Long Hill where he had waited out the thunderstorm after leaving his parents. His lovemaking becomes the final step in his leaving behind childhood innocence and entering the world of adult experience. Reuben makes the point explicitly to Ada.

After that storm was over I'd changed, believe me! I knew nothing could ever scare me again—and a whole lot of me was dead and a new lot started living. And that's the right place for us to love—on top of that hill—close to the sky—driven to love by what makes the earth go round—by what drives the stars through space! (460-61)

Lightning, as such, plays no part in the symbolism of the play after

Reuben's homecoming; the principle of electrical power becomes, in a sense, domesticated in the symbol of the dynamo. Sex and its aberrations become the most important acts of nature, and the dynamo represents the attempt to harness and control that power.

Fife's role in the education of Reuben is as important as Light's. From Fife, Reuben learns to scorn his father's God and to ferret out some of the mysteries of electricity, but Fife also provides a modicum of guidance, too. Reuben's values become a composite of those held by the two fathers. Wasserstrom's punning on the names of the fathers suggests a commingling of values in Reuben: "Fife and Light, Light and Fife—life fight, fie flight, fight life . . . ." <sup>33</sup> Fife's story about his violent past provokes Reuben to respond in a way in which he shows himself to be his father's son. This story, like Light's dream, shows a love triangle, and in this triangle, too, the licit lover loses to the illicit one.

Twenty years ago there was a man by the name of Andrew Clark lived in the town of Arming, Ohio. . . . Now Clark was in love with a girl whose family had got her engaged to another fellow, but she loved Clark and used to meet him in the woods. But this fellow who was engaged to her got suspicious and one night he sneaked up on them lying in each other's arms—in sin, as you'd call it—and he rushed out with a knife at them both, but Clark picked up an ax and split his skull! (440)

Reuben's sensibilities are offended by the story, and he makes just the kind of judgment that Fife expected. Reuben adopts his "father's tone" (a booming voice to cover his uncertainty):

She had no right to love Clark! That wasn't love, it was lust! She was an adulteress! It would have been only her just punishment if that fellow had killed her! I would have! (440)

Here we see that Reuben does indeed harbor murderous thoughts prompted by his equation of sexuality with sin and lust. Subsequent to this, he thinks of Ada as the daughter of an adulteress and a murderer, and even though he is soon disabused of this illusion, he nonetheless acts out this fantasy of destroying the sexual woman.

Fife tells Reuben this story as a test of the boy's independence, but it is a cruel test on two counts. First, Fife himself is committed to marriage and believes in it; and second, the challenge places Reuben in a position where he must open himself to his mother. Emotionally, he is not ready to win his independence from her. One betrayal leads to another. And Reuben's first main betrayal is by his mother.<sup>34</sup>

At the beginning of the play, Reuben is a "Mama's boy," (430) and she too shapes what he becomes. When Light suggests that Reuben might be seeing Ada at night, Mrs. Light immediately denounces the girl. She calls her "a painted flapper with her skirts hitched up over her knees!" (425). The hitched-up skirts connote promiscuity, and in a subsequent thought-aside, as she spies on Reuben while he waits for Ada, Mrs. Light thinks of the girl as "that dirty little . . ." (427). She does not articulate, or admit to consciousness the name she has for Ada. Once the two young people meet, however, the name emerges, and she thinks of Ada as "the little harlot." Later she thinks of Ada as a little "filthpot" (446). This image fuses a genital image (the vagina as a vessel) with an anal one (a dirty vessel).<sup>35</sup>

Predictably, Mrs. Light uses these abusive terms in speaking to Reuben. What is more she does so under circumstances where Reuben cannot but be hurt deeply. With Reverend Light (the judging father) hiding in the closet, Mrs. Light wheedles out of Reuben the story planted by Fife. But Mrs. Light's real concern is with Reuben's attitude to Ada, not the failings of Fife, and so she attacks her son directly: "So you want to marry that little harlot, do you?" (447). This assault reveals three important aspects of her attitudes to Reuben and to sexuality.

The first point concerns her view of Reuben's future. She would like Reuben to go to college, enter business, and then marry a "nice girl with money" (423). Such a future would satisfy her, and her wish to live in less penurious circumstances, but does not take into account Reuben's wishes.

The second point is that her outburst effectively betrays the trust that Reuben had in her and precipitates Reuben's leaving home. Reuben thought of his mother as the one person he loved "better than anyone in the world!" (42).<sup>36</sup> Her remark about Ada plants images in the mind of Reuben which confuse the sexual and anal functions, and we see that Reuben never moves much beyond the association of dirt and sex that she unwittingly speaks of. Reuben, for example, cannot forget his mother's remark that Ada is "no better than a streetwalker."<sup>37</sup>

The third point is that the images of sex and dirt in Mrs. Light's remarks imply an opposite idealized "pure" kind of love. If sexual love is dirty, then non-sexual love must be pure. Reuben later seeks this kind of false purity in his love affair with the dynamo.



(The money theme in Mrs. Light's terms of abuse [sex for money] does not become a significant part of the narrative dimension of the plot, but the symbolic equation of feces and money operates on the psychological level, so that "harlot" and "streetwalker" represent an extension of the "filthpot" image.)

The confusion of sex and dirt which is so important in Dynamo can be illuminated by a brief comparison with scatological images in Lazarus Laughed. In the latter play, Lazarus is the target of the dirty names. Name-calling serves a number of functions in Lazarus. It provides an alternative sound pattern to the various kinds of laughter in the play, to the declamations of Lazarus, and to the choral chants which echo Lazarus. Name-calling also suggests connections between characters, and also adds earthy images to the (limited) lexicon of the play.

The most striking instance of name-calling in Lazarus occurs in the concluding scene. Lazarus at that point is being burnt alive and he admits to Tiberius that he is dying. The crowd, echoing Tiberius in part, hoots in derision, their shouts enlivened with "all sorts of grotesque and obscene gestures and noises . . . ." They shout: "Yah! Yah! Yellow Gut! Bungkisser! Muckheel! Scumwiper! Liar! Pig! Jackal!"<sup>38</sup> One outcome of this tirade is that Pompeia, who earlier used some of these words to describe Lazarus, now senses that she cannot subscribe to this kind of abuse. She cries out, "They are tormenting him. I hear him crying to me!"<sup>39</sup> And she then joins Lazarus in the fire, their merger being described in sexual terms.<sup>40</sup> The merger, though, is separate from the scatological images of the

earth-bound crowd. The fire purifies her of earthly dross, and in the images of that play, sanctifies their union.

In Dynamo there is no such separation, however strained, of the excremental and the genital functions, until the concluding moments of the play when Reuben seeks purification by (electrical) fire. But to achieve that hopeless ideal, Reuben abuses Ada verbally and then kills her. To the extent that Dynamo is the dark counterpoint of Lazarus, the idealism of the latter is equally deadly.

Reuben's movement toward this state of deadly confusion can be seen in the forms of address he uses for Ada. The attitudes that Reuben had imbibed from his mother gradually surface, until he uses his mother's very words to address the girl.

Before Reuben leaves home, he refers to Ada in ways which prepare us for the ending. One instance of this occurs when he thinks of Ada as the "daughter of an adulteress" (441). And after the betrayal, in a scene of accusation and counter-accusation, Reuben retorts to Ada, "It's you who're the rat, Ada!" (452). The sound of this sentence is significant. Because of the second verbal contraction, there is a pun which can be heard when the sentence is spoken aloud. We hear a sequence of substantives: you/whore/rat/Ada. The implication of this buried pun and the dehumanizing image it connotes emerges at the end of the play.

## III

When Reuben returns from his fifteen months' absence, his appearance and his manner have changed. So too, his manner of addressing Ada has changed. Bolstered by his new-found wisdom that love is biology ("and I've proved it with more than one female" (458) he says, using the neutral language that we associate with Darrell in Strange Interlude), Reuben calls Ada "kid," a term she used to name the innocent Reuben. In O'Neill's plays, Egil Törnqvist points out, the address "kid" indicates that "the speaker is sexually more experienced than the person spoken to."<sup>40a</sup>

While there is a measure of affection in the way Reuben speaks to Ada, once he has made love to her he lapses, as least in a thought-aside into his mother's derogatory naming:

. . . tonight she was dead easy . . . like rolling off  
a log! . . . Mother said she was no better than a  
streetwalker . . . . (471)

Again, there appears a chilling, dehumanizing element in these thoughts. His language de-personalizes and dehumanizes both himself and Ada, and though his callousness disturbs him (he does seem to have genuine feeling for her) he latches on to catch-phrases which permit him to maintain the illusion that love is biology.

. . . she'll be useful . . . and I'll treat her decent  
. . . maybe it's love . . . whatever the hell love is!  
. . . did Mother really love the old man? . . . she  
must have or how could she stand him? . . . and she made  
me with him . . . act of Nature . . . like me and Ada . . . . (471)

Reuben's "act of Nature" phrase is telling, for it denies individual human responsibility, implying that lovers are mere agents in the "act" of some great power outside themselves. It is an evasion of human

responsibility, an evasion that Reuben makes when he tells Ada that they need not be married because they are "married by Nature now" (470).

Reuben's dehumanizing love is even more apparent if we contrast his use of the word nature with that of Abbie in Desire Under the Elms. There Abbie says to Eben as she moves her body seductively: "Hain't the sun strong an' hot? Ye kin feel it burnin' into the earth—Nature—makin' thin's grow—bigger 'n' bigger . . . ." <sup>41</sup> Abbie makes the word flesh by her movements; her speech is erotic and compelling. Reuben, on the other hand, seems a stick figure by comparison; his sexual experience has left him less human and sensitive than he was before he left home. His catch-phrase speaks of a denial of the erotic.

The final stage in the education of Reuben involves his attempts to recover the lost love of his mother. He imagines that the ghost of his mother communicates with him, and that Mrs. Fife, like his mother, has become part of the dynamo. Reuben imagines that the dynamo seeks some one "to love her purely" and in his efforts to realize this pure love his behavior becomes increasingly bizarre and destructive. By attempting to deny his bodily passion he merely intensifies it. He flogs himself, an extreme kind of self-abuse, and stays away from Ada. But the body has its say, and Reuben convinces himself that the dynamo wants him to make love to Ada in what he calls the temple of the new mother (an upper gallery above the dynamo) as a final test of his purity. (Törnqvist calls this episode a rape, <sup>42</sup> but afterwards Ada is standing beside Reuben and speaking tenderly to him.)

Reuben, however, is completely distraught, and as he prays to the dynamo, the feelings his mother had for Ada begin to surface.

Reuben calls Ada a harlot and shoots her in the breast. Then he stretches out his arms, embraces the dynamo, and is joined again with the mother. The stage notes describing this final embrace are crucial to the psychological themes of the play.

There is a flash of bluish light about him and all the lights in the plant dim down until they are almost out and the noise of the dynamo dies until it is the faintest purring hum. Simultaneously Reuben's voice rises in a moan that is a mingling of pain and loving consummation, and this cry dies into a sound that is like the crooning of a baby and merges and is lost in the dynamo's hum. (488)

This final image represents a combination of the three essential modes of relatedness between man and woman. Freud's comments on the ending of King Lear are apposite.

One might say that the three inevitable relations man has with woman are here represented: that with the woman who bears him, with the companion of his bed and board, and with the destroyer. Or it is the three forms taken on by the figure of the mother as life proceeds: the mother herself, the beloved who is chosen after her pattern, and finally the Mother Earth who receives him again.<sup>43</sup>

O'Neill's accent is distinctive, though, for he imagines Reuben going backwards as it were from his state of early adulthood.<sup>44</sup> His first consummation is sexual, then he regresses to the infantile state, and then merges utterly with the mother in death. In the terms that O'Neill uses in his personal diagram, Reuben achieves a recovery of Nirvana, a perfect blissful state before consciousness begins. At least this is what O'Neill aimed for.

But the ending does not really succeed. Bogard argues that the ending fails because O'Neill has not resolved the religious question "as to whether Reuben has committed an act of religious devotion or

whether, out of madness and despair, he has followed Fife's atheistical teachings to their warped end."<sup>45</sup> More important, though, is the failure of the dynamo to carry the burden of O'Neill's sexual themes. As a product of man's ingenuity, the dynamo may provoke curiosity but most people do not have prior visual or aural or sensual associations with a dynamo to bring to the scene. We cannot make the kind of imaginative leap that O'Neill demands of us; rather we remain aware of O'Neill's attempts to create maternal associations with the dynamo. We remain aware of the stage business and this distances us from Reuben's plight, a distancing which the thought-aside technique encourages because it slows down the action and disturbs the emotional flow generated by action. O'Neill seems to have sensed this failure himself, for in retrospect he noted that the thought-aside method "was quite alien to the essential psychological form" of the characters . . . . " He went on to say, ". . . when dealing with simple direct folk or characters of strong will and intense passions, it is superfluous show-shop 'business.'"<sup>46</sup> Certainly it remains true that O'Neill wishes to show Reuben's madness in the final scene, but there is no human quality in the dynamo, as such, to make us feel that his madness is our madness.

This sense of being distanced from the dramatic action does not occur, for instance, in a parallel scene of merger in Strange Interlude. In Act Six Nina is surrounded by her men and in a thought-aside makes an identification between herself and God.<sup>47</sup> The thought-aside does not inhibit our feeling of being involved.<sup>48</sup> In her thought-aside Nina centers life in her womb and she feels the desire of her men

converging in her: her husband (and her lover), her father-surrogate, her son. As she speaks she makes an emotional identification that can be expressed as a syllogism: God is a mother; I am a mother; therefore I am God. Nina dominates the scene, and we are involved with her and her men. In the ending of Dynamo, however, we do not participate emotionally because the dynamo does not invite identification. The dynamo does not generate sexual interest.

Dynamo insists upon the power of sex to transform a life, but Reuben is an adolescent and his insistence that sex is an "act of Nature," while it conveys some ambivalence, does not rise above the level of insistence. The play, though, because of its stark treatment of sexuality, and its dark tones, illuminates sexual themes of other plays in the period. Happily, in Mourning Becomes Electra O'Neill developed a constellation of images which gave the sexual conflicts a rich and human context and at the same time he achieved the criticism of his culture which he groped for in Dynamo.

## Notes: Chapter Four

A note on citations:

All quotations from Dynamo refer to The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1954), Vol. 3 and will be cited in parentheses in the text. O'Neill's stage directions are in italics and will here be underlined.

<sup>1</sup>O'Neill wrote to Macgowan (19 August 1924) about an idea for a "queer and intriguing" play to be called Dynamo. See "The Theatre We Worked For": The Letters of Eugene O'Neill to Kenneth Macgowan edited by Jackson R. Bryer and with introductory essays by Travis Bogard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 53.

<sup>2</sup>Travis Bogard, Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 318 and p. 320.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 317.

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of thought-asides, see above Chapter Three.

<sup>5</sup>O'Neill's diagram is discussed above, Chapter One. An obvious connection is that the play and the diagram give special attention to adolescence. In both there is a symbolical destruction of the mother. At the end of Act One, Reuben denounces his parents' influence as pernicious; he feels his psychological fate, indeed, to spring from his family.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Clifford Leech, O'Neill (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), p. 92.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted by Bogard Contour in Time, p. 321.

<sup>8</sup>Esther M. Jackson, "O'Neill the Humanist," in Eugene O'Neill: A World View ed. Virginia Floyd (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1979), p. 253.



<sup>9</sup>A Drama of Souls: Studies in O'Neill's Supernaturalistic Techniques (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 70.

<sup>10</sup>Frederick Wilkins, "The Pressure of Puritanism in O'Neill's New England Plays," in Eugene O'Neill: A World View, p. 239.

<sup>11</sup>Charles I. Glicksberg, The Sexual Revolution in Modern American Literature (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), pp. 68-81; the quotation is from p. 81.

<sup>12</sup>"Notes on Electricity: Henry Adams and Eugene O'Neill," Psychocultural Review (Spring, 1977), p. 163.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 174-177.

<sup>15</sup>Eugene O'Neill at Work, ed. Virginia Floyd (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981), p. 134.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>See Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist (Boston: Little Brown, 1973), pp. 271-335.

<sup>19</sup>John Henry Raleigh compares Adams and O'Neill in his Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Works (Toronto: Forum House, 1969), pp. 246-248.

See also Susan Tuck, "'Electricity is God now': D.H. Lawrence and O'Neill," The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter 5 (Summer/Fall, 1981), pp. 10-15.

<sup>20</sup>Contour in Time, p. 320.

<sup>21</sup>Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams (New York: The Modern Library, 1931), p. 385.

<sup>22</sup>See Wasserstrom, "Notes on Electricity."

<sup>23</sup>From a letter by O'Neill to Nathan, 26 March 1925, reprinted in Modern Drama ed. Anthony Caputi (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), p. 450.

<sup>24</sup>Plays, Vol. I, p. 176.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted by Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 319; emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup>Eugene O'Neill to Robert Sisk; quoted by Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist, p. 325.

<sup>27</sup>See Chapter One, above.

<sup>28</sup>Long Day's Journey into Night (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 118.

<sup>29</sup>In a letter to Eleanor M. Fitzgerald 13 May 1929; quoted by Sheaffer in Son and Artist, p. 326.

<sup>30</sup>Egil Törnqvist, "Personal Nomenclature in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill" Modern Drama 8 (February, 1966), p. 369. Törnqvist does not discuss the images associated with the characters; he discusses only the symbolical associations of the proper names per se.

<sup>31</sup>Bogard notes that Reuben was called Benjamin in the early scenarios of Dynamo. His comment on the name Reuben is very brief.

He suggests that Reuben's having slept with Bilhah "may have reflected in O'Neill's mind an appropriate parallel to Reuben's attempt to find mother substitutes in Ada Fife and her mother" (Contour in Time, p. 318n). Bogard does not discuss the mandrake roots story; Törnqvist (see footnote 30 above) does not trace Reuben's name.

<sup>32</sup>Tuck in "Electricity is God now" observes that Lawrence uses electricity as a sexual symbol but does not pursue O'Neill's use of the symbol.

<sup>33</sup>"Notes on Electricity," p. 166.

<sup>34</sup>Wasserstrom says that treachery is the "pre-eminant theme" of O'Neill's last years and is also the theme of Dynamo. See "Notes on Electricity," p. 171.

<sup>35</sup>Compare Marsden's confusion of sexual and anal functions; Strange Interlude in Plays, I, pp. 5-6.

<sup>36</sup>At virtually the same time, Mrs. Light is thinking of Ada as a "little filthpot."

<sup>37</sup>Mrs. Light uses this phrase in Act 1, scene 4, p. 450. Reuben recalls this description in a guilty mood after having sex with Ada (Act 2, scene 2, p. 471).

<sup>38</sup>Plays, Vol, I, p. 366.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>For a discussion of the ending, see above Chapter Two.

<sup>40a</sup>"Personal Addresses in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill," Quarterly Journal of Speech 55 (April, 1969), p. 128. Törnqvist surveys different kinds of address in a number of plays, but he does not discuss the

abusive terms I have been considering. He suggests that characters who use the term "kid" do so to demonstrate their worldly wisdom, but "spiritually it is they who are the 'kids.'" This view amounts to a defense of the less worldly values of the more innocent characters, but it is the "worldly" characters, in this case Reuben, who animate the plays and carry the main thrust of O'Neill's criticism of the dominant culture.

<sup>41</sup>In Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill (New York: The Modern Library, 1959), p. 164.

<sup>42</sup>A Drama of Souls, p. 75.

<sup>43</sup>Freud is discussing the ending of King Lear when Lear enters with Cordelia in his arms. See "The Theme of the Three Caskets," in On Creativity and the Unconscious ed. Benjamin Nelson (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 75.

<sup>44</sup>Again, a parallel to the course of Lazarus' career.

<sup>45</sup>Contour in Time, p. 321.

<sup>46</sup>In Frenz, ed. American Playwrights on Drama, p. 10.

<sup>47</sup>Plays, Vol. I, p. 135.

<sup>48</sup>Frederic Carpenter says this scene in 1929 "moved me more profoundly than any other which I have witnessed in a lifetime of theatre-going"; see "The Enduring O'Neill: The Early Plays," The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter 1 (May, 1977), p. 3.

## Chapter Five

### "Dirty Dreams of Love": The Fall of the House of Mannon

#### I

When Mourning Becomes Electra opened in New York on 26 October, 1931, it became apparent that O'Neill had reached a new peak in his development as an artist. Though the play runs nearly five hours (almost an hour longer than Strange Interlude), it was accorded critical acclaim and was generally regarded as O'Neill's masterpiece until his late plays led to a reevaluation of his achievement.<sup>1</sup> Mourning Becomes Electra, whatever its position in relation to the O'Neill oeuvre, stands as the finest achievement of his middle years.

The play had been simmering for a number of years; in a note dated "Spring, 1926," O'Neill thought of writing a "Modern psychological drama using one of the old legend plots of Greek tragedy for its basic theme" and wondered "Is it possible to get modern psychological approximation of Greek sense of fate into such a play, which an intelligent audience of today, possessed of no belief in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by?"<sup>2</sup> The trilogy which eventually appeared benefited by the long gestation and the intervening work on Lazarus Laughed, Strange Interlude, and Dynamo. Elements which are rough-edged and sometimes distracting in these earlier plays are fused into the overall design of Electra. The formal and technical experiments that he undertook gave him a reserve of experience to draw from in executing his trilogy.

The synthetic nature of Electra has been described from a number of angles of vision. The trilogy has been seen, for example, as O'Neill's finest analysis of New England puritanism; as the high point of his experimental phase of writing; as his most successful adaptation of classical myths.<sup>3</sup> From another viewpoint, Electra is seen as representing the Inferno phase in O'Neill's Divine Comedy, with Lazarus Laughed as Paradiso and Strange Interlude as Purgatorio.<sup>4</sup> One early critic saw Electra as the only "really good play" built on O'Neill's exploration of the sexual impulse.<sup>5</sup> What these approaches have in common is the idea that Electra emerges from a matrix of works which precede it or appear while the trilogy is in progress, a view reinforced by O'Neill's publication of his diaries describing the process of composition.

These notes have provided a rich bed of material for students of O'Neill, for they reveal not only his judgments of the work in hand but also his comments on plot and sources, characterization and structure, symbolism and staging techniques, as well as on the merits of earlier plays. The steps O'Neill followed in composing Electra are outlined in detail in his "Working Notes and Extracts from a Fragmentary Work Diary."<sup>6</sup>

O'Neill's "Fragmentary Diary" shows the gradual emergence of his final conception of the play. He began to work seriously on the play in 1929; in a note dated April of that year he gives reasons for his decision to choose the Civil War as the setting for his family drama. This description, as well as his repeated reminder that the play was to be modern and psychological, anticipates some significant elements

of the plot and characterization in the finished work.

World War too near and recognizable in its obstructing (for my purpose) minor aspects and superficial identifications (audience would not see fated wood because too busy recalling trees)—needs distance and perspective—period not too distant for audience to associate itself with, yet possessing costume, etc.—possessing sufficient mask of time and space, so that audience will unconsciously grasp at once, it is primarily drama of hidden life forces—fate—behind lives of characters. Civil War is only possibility—fits into picture—Civil War as background for drama of murderous family love and hate—. . . . (4)

Once this essential decision had been made, O'Neill then went on to work out the methods that would best enable him to appeal to the unconscious of the audience and create a modern psychological drama out of historical American materials while maintaining traces of the Greek roots of the legend as a vital part of the whole composition.

In a subsequent note, also dated April, 1929, O'Neill sketched the similarities and differences between his story and the Greek legend. He notes that the family must be New England and of the "town's best" in order to parallel the social prominence of Agamemnon. The choice of a New England setting was a natural for him: it was the setting he knew best, and as the cradle of American culture it would enable him to give his characters status within the community of the first Americans.

A New England house, furthermore, would provide a visual link between nineteenth century America and the Greeks: "house Greek temple front type that was rage in 1st half 19th century—(this fits in well and absolutely justifiable, not forced Greek similarity)—. . . ." The house would then stand for the values of the New Englanders, which O'Neill considered to be a "grotesque perversion of everything Greek

temple expressed of meaning of life— . . . . " Another link between the Greeks and the New Englanders could be drawn between the "Greek plot of crime and retribution, chain of fate" and a corresponding "Puritan conviction of man born to sin and punishment—Orestes' furies within him, his conscience . . . " (4). O'Neill, then, wanted to set up a system of correspondences such that the outer signs would point to inner qualities and feelings. His concept of fate would have to show itself working within the house and the characters.

Also in this April, 1929 note, O'Neill details his departures from the Greek story. These departures are important for they show how he rooted his Yankee family's fate in sexual frustration. In the Oresteia on the other hand, sexual frustration is only part of the motivation. Clytemnestra seeks revenge on her husband Agamemnon for his having sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia; she works in collaboration with her paramour Aegisthus who wishes to avenge his father's having been wronged by Agamemnon. O'Neill omits the infanticide (not through any aversion to the subject itself, since Desire Under the Elms ends with infanticide) and substitutes sexual frustration as the primary motivation of his Clytemnestra figure. O'Neill emphasizes the sexual rivalry between Electra and her mother Clytemnestra ("Electra loves Aegisthus—always fated to be mother's rival in love, always defeated—first for father's love, then for brother's, finally for Aegisthus" [4-5]) and the sexual incompatibility of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon ("—reason for Clytemnestra's hatred for Agamemnon sexual frustration by his puritan sense of guilt turning love to lust . . . " [5]). O'Neill wished also to draw some distinctions between kinds of love: he adds



that Clytemnestra "had romantic love for him before marriage . . . ." (5) This shorthand contrast of romantic love and lust, while not very illuminating of his vision of love, does emphasize the sexual motivation of his characters.

Other changes from the Greek plot allowed for intensity of treatment. O'Neill resolved to have only Orestes and Electra as children of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, and to omit Cassandra altogether. (In Aeschylus, Cassandra is abducted by Agamemnon and taken back to Argos as his mistress, thus compounding Clytemnestra's sense of grievance against him.) By leaving out Cassandra, O'Neill was able to concentrate on the tensions among the five main characters of the Greek legend: Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Orestes, and Electra. As for the generations preceding Agamemnon's, O'Neill wished to keep only the outline "of rivalry, hatred, love, lust, revenge in past between Agamemnon's father, Atreus, and Aegisthus' father, Thyestes (in legend Thyestes seduces Aerope, wife of Atreus)—hatred of Atreus for brother—revenge—banishment—(keep general spirit of this but pay no attention to details of legend) . . . ." O'Neill then went on to note that he should work out a specific system of "family resemblances and identification (as visible sign of the family fate) . . ." (5).

With this general outline in place, O'Neill pressed forward.<sup>7</sup> He worked deliberately, experimenting with various devices as he went along. For his first draft he decided to use "comparatively straight realism" (6) to work out his plot materials. He began to write out his first draft in October of 1929; he finished in February of 1930 and set it aside. He read over the first draft in March and found his draft

"scrawny" and pointed up again the task he had set himself: "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—" (9).

O'Neill took the play through two more drafts in which he tried, first, asides of the kind he used in Strange Interlude and Dynamo, and then, stylized soliloquies and half-masks, both of which he dropped. He took the play through two more drafts, and then for his sixth and final draft he decided to use make-up masks and carefully managed repetition of scenes and themes to project a sense of the crowded inner life of passion and emotion. Together these elements of design and language would give the play a depth dimension, a layered effect:

"Mannon drama takes place on a plane where outer reality is mask of true fated reality—unreal realism—. . ." (12).

By March, 1931, he had only cutting and pointing up to do, and he sent the script to the Theater Guild in April, 1931. He received galley proofs from his publisher in August of that year, and was impressed with what he had achieved:

—after nearly four months of not looking at this trilogy, get fairly fresh impact—moved by it—has power and drive and the strange quality of unreal reality I wanted—main purpose seems to me soundly achieved—there is a feeling of fate in it, or I am a fool—a psychological modern approximation of the fate in the Greek tragedies on this theme—attained without benefit of supernatural—

And technically (although this is of minor importance, naturally) I flatter myself it is unique thing in dramaturgy—each play complete episode completely realized but at the same time, which is the important point, not complete in that its end begins following play and demands that play as an inevitable sequel—. . . . (14)

Criticism of Mourning Becomes Electra befits the complexity and

richness of the play. The play is admittedly literary with its title alluding to the body of Greek drama and story, and with an explicit allusion to Melville's Typee within the play as well as echoes of Biblical passages throughout.<sup>8</sup> Consequently a number of studies trace the play's literary sources and antecedents. There is the argument that the Oresteia of Aeschylus is not O'Neill's primary source and that Hamlet provides closer analogues to many elements in the play.<sup>9</sup> An indebtedness to Strindberg's Miss Julie has been argued, as well as a debt to Thus Spake Zarathustra.<sup>10</sup> O'Neill's references to the Civil War have been shown to parallel scenes in Crane's The Red Badge of Courage.<sup>11</sup> As O'Neill's work is subject to more close examination, more of these comparative studies are bound to emerge.<sup>12</sup>

To the list of literary antecedents for Mourning Becomes Electra should be added Sherwood Anderson's Dark Laughter. First published in September of 1925, it had reached a seventh printing by December.<sup>13</sup> Many aspects of Dark Laughter might have drawn O'Neill to the work: the concern with contrasting the mysterious rich laughter of Negroes with the restrained stiff complacency of middle class white Americans; the discussion of psychoanalytic notions by the characters (one of whom says, "If there is anything you do not understand in human life consult the works of Dr. Freud"<sup>14</sup>); the formal experimentation with a stream of consciousness method. War is the backdrop of the human conflicts in Dark Laughter, as it is in Strange Interlude and Electra. More important, perhaps, is Anderson's concern to reveal a depth dimension to the characters and the metaphors that are used to express this kind of depth. In one scene Anderson presents the conflicts within the mind of Aline

Grey; she is concerned about her relationship with her husband (whose surname is telling).

Something hung fire between the man and woman, a wall separated them. . . . Did Fred really want her to tear it away? . . . . Aline wondered if she wanted the wall destroyed. Sometimes she made an effort. At the top of the stairs she turned and smiled at her husband. Then she took his head in her two hands and kissed him, and when she had done that went quickly into her own room, where later, in the darkness, he came to her. It was odd, amazing, how close another could come and yet remain far away. Could Aline, if she will it so, knock the wall down, really come close to the man she had married? Did she want that?<sup>15</sup>

In Electra, O'Neill has Ezra approach Christine and speak to her of his wish to break down the wall that has grown up between them.

In the middle of battle I'd think maybe in a minute I'll be dead. But my life as just me ending, that didn't appear worth a thought one way or another. But listen, me as your husband being killed that seemed queer and wrong—like something dying that had never lived. Then all the years we've been man and wife would rise up in my mind and I would try to look at them. But nothing was clear except that there'd always been some barrier between us—a wall hiding us from each other! I would try to make up my mind exactly what that wall was but I never could discover. (With a clumsy appealing gesture)  
Do you know? (The Homecoming, III, 54)

This mutual concern to explore the ambivalences and ambiguities of sex in marriage in the light of modern psychological thought may have drawn Anderson and O'Neill together. According to the Gelbs, O'Neill met Anderson in New York in 1926 at a party given by an executive of Liveright, publishers of both men (and of Theodore Dreiser who was also there). Later Anderson and O'Neill formed a friendship marked by mutual respect.<sup>16</sup> Whatever their personal relationships, the parallels between their works are marked.

Another stream of criticism of Electra, less extensive, examines

the play as it relates to O'Neill's contemporary milieu. Included here are studies tracing O'Neill's concept of psychological fate to Hamilton and Macgowan's What Is Wrong with Marriage or showing the impact of anti-puritanical attitudes (represented by the work of H.L. Mencken) upon O'Neill's conception of puritanism in the play.<sup>17</sup> These studies, however, underplay the importance of Hamilton's more technical book A Research in Marriage and overlook the importance of the personal documents which O'Neill composed during his consultations with Hamilton.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the theory O'Neill had absorbed from contemporary psychoanalysis made its way into Electra. O'Neill was not above underlining his meaning, and we find his characters demonstrating a modern psychological self-awareness. For example, Christine says to Lavinia, "You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin! You've always schemed to steal my place!" (The Homecoming, II, 33). This self-awareness has led a number of critics to complain that O'Neill is too schematic and too obvious, that in his play psychology commits incest with psychology.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, as Travis Bogard points out, a more important relationship between the trilogy and psychoanalytic theory is O'Neill's structuring his work so as to provide a "purgative action" which is "concentrated on the raising and recognition of submerged truths . . . ." <sup>20</sup> As I have shown above, this principle informs both structure and characterization in Strange Interlude, and less successfully, the organization of the interviews in Lazarus Laughed and the action of Dynamo.<sup>21</sup> Again, as I shall argue below, this principle of surfacing informs structure and characterization in Mourning Becomes Electra.

Two other themes common in O'Neill criticism merge in the criticism of Mourning Becomes Electra. These themes are, first, that O'Neill is not concerned with his society, and second, that he is preoccupied with sexuality. They first appear together in the criticism of the Thirties, but show remarkable strength and persist for decades.

One critic of the Thirties makes both these points. First, there is the argument that O'Neill's work does not have social significance: "O'Neill's attempt in his own words, to 'borrow the theme pattern of Aeschylus (and the old legends) and to re-interpret it in modern psychological terms with Fate and the Furies working from within the individual soul' is inadmissible because, wrenched from its context, the story becomes pure melodrama."<sup>22</sup> And there is the assertion that O'Neill fails because of his treatment of sex:

With steady and almost maddening persistence throughout thirteen acts O'Neill relates every occurrence, every trait, back to the sexual impulse, or its distortion and frustration, just as he did in Strange Interlude. One cannot acknowledge as a great dramatist a playwright who persistently ignores any causation except that induced by sex.<sup>23</sup> Some human beings, after all, are sexually normal!

These comments cannot be dismissed as the notions of a social realist gone awry, for they appear again and again, though in somewhat more sophisticated guise.

An essay which has been reprinted several times again makes this charge: that O'Neill is preoccupied with sex to the detriment of the social themes in his subject. The essay is Eric Bentley's "Trying to Like O'Neill":

Instead of reverent family feeling to unite an Orestes and an Electra we have incest. Mourning Becomes Electra is all sex talk. Sex talk—not sex lived and embodied, but sex talked of and fingered. The sex talk of the subintelligentsia. It is the only means by which some sort of eloquence and urgency gets into the play, the source of what is meant to be its poetry. The Civil War never gains the importance it might have had in this telling of the story, it is flooded out by sex. "New England," surely a cultural conception with wider reference than this, stands only, in O'Neill, for <sup>24</sup>the puritanic (that is, sexually repressive) attitude.

This statement seems to blur a number of important distinctions, and these require some discussion.

In answer to Bentley it is first necessary to point out that in Electra O'Neill is not faced with a choice between either "reverent family feeling," on one hand, or "incest," on the other, nor does he approach family relationships in that categorical way. What O'Neill does is attempt to dramatize the interplay of inner and outer; he shows that incestuous attachments underlie reverent family feeling and other socially acceptable affiliations, and that the former is an aspect of the latter. Bentley neglects to take into account the layered quality of the play. While it seems true to say that sex adds "urgency" to the play, we might ask whether it is O'Neill or his characters who "finger" sex. As for the point that the Civil War is flooded by sex, we can answer that the war seems to have different impacts on the different characters. Ezra, for example, seems to have been prompted by the war to reassess his relationship with Christine and to make the first halting steps toward a reconciliation with her; Orin, on the contrary, has been disabled to the point that he seems unable to form a healthy adult relationship with Hazel. Ezra seems to have discovered a capacity for love, while Orin seems to have been incapacitated. Their

ability to have healthy relationships has been influenced by the Civil War, an internecine conflict, and the character and quality of the relationships within marriage and the family manifest those qualitative changes. And Bentley's point that O'Neill equates "New England" with sexual repression seems to be more a description of Dynamo than of Electra in which we find repeated references to materialism; "man's dirty dreams of greed and power," is how Adam Brant phrases it (The Homecoming, I, 24).

This chapter argues that in Mourning Becomes Electra O'Neill fused social criticism with his analysis of sex in New England. The method of his criticism was oblique: he wanted his play to be modern and the tack he took was to reveal contemporary New England and American values by exposing their roots in the past. He also aimed to write a psychological play and to achieve this kind of emphasis he contrasted two sets of values—those associated with uninhibited sexuality in the South Sea Islands, and those associated with the House of Mannon. His contrast shows how dreams of love are distorted by New England life, how New England values write themselves in the bodies and inner fantasies of his characters. In Mourning Becomes Electra O'Neill achieves his desire "to give an epic tinge to New England's inhibited life . . . to make its inexpressiveness practically expressive, to release it"<sup>25</sup> by showing how the power of sex disturbs not only individual characters but undermines a proud family line. His treatment of the causal factors which provoke the fall of the house of Mannon are complex rather than single-minded; he shows that New England culture distorts sexual relationships and that distorted sexual relationships create cultural discontent.



To assess O'Neill's achievement in Mourning Becomes Electra it is necessary to discuss (1) the opening act of the trilogy in which he introduces his major symbolic patterns and establishes the organizational principle of surfacing, (2) the main characters and their relationships, especially the way in which they define themselves in relation to the house and the South Sea Islands, and (3) the ending of the play in which his "release" of New England's inhibited life finds its most powerful statement.

## II

In composing his trilogy O'Neill put a heavy burden on his first act. It is a measure of his powers of construction that this scene should effectively anticipate the ending of the first play and of the trilogy as a whole. The formal tightness of construction intensifies his treatment of sexual conflicts. O'Neill achieves unity by a number of devices. First, he uses essentially a single setting, the interior and exterior of the Mannon house. The only exception is the scene on Brant's ship in Boston harbour. O'Neill further emphasizes the importance of the house by a special curtain which shows the house at a distance. The curtain holds the image of the house before the audience, though at a greater distance than the stage set which features, from the outside, the steps and facade of the building. A sense of distance in the interior scenes is enhanced by the galleries of portraits peering down from the walls. O'Neill deliberately maintains a perspective from which we observe the action. This creates a balance between the intense passions of the family conflicts and the sense of aloof austerity. We

are kept at a distance even as the distance between us and the dramatic conflict is varied.

The curtain shows the house as seen from the street. "From this, in each play, one comes to the exterior of the house in the opening and enters it in the following act "(2). There is, then, a sense of gradually moving inward to focus on the family, and since their numbers decrease during the course of the play, the telescoping effect focuses our attention on the psychological conflicts. This device invites analysis for we are always at a distance from the action. This distancing contrasts for example with Strindberg's A Dream Play in which there is no single focal point except that of the dreamer, as Strindberg says.

In his note to A Dream Play Strindberg wrote:

In this dream play, as in his former dream play To Damascus, the Author has sought to reproduce the disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream. Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist; on a slight groundwork of reality, imagination spins and weaves new patterns made up of memories, experiences, unfettered fancies, absurdities and improvisations.

The characters are split, double and multiply; they evaporate, crystallize, scatter and converge. But a single consciousness holds sway over them all—that of the dreamer. For him there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples and no law. He neither condemns nor acquits, but only relates, and since on the whole, there is more pain than pleasure in the dream, a tone of melancholy, and of compassion for all living things, runs through the swaying narrative. Sleep, the liberator, often appears as a torturer, but when the pain is at its worst, the sufferer awakes—and is thus reconciled with reality. For however agonising real life may be, at this moment, compared with the tormenting dream, it is a joy.<sup>26</sup>

O'Neill's design elements emphasize that space and time do exist, that this Mannon house is a particular house, that this dramatic action occurs in a specific identifiable historical moment. O'Neill's

insistent specification is part of his deliberate attempt to enlarge the scope of the drama and to give it a social dimension.

But O'Neill was not content with mere historical trappings; the real power of the trilogy resides in the play's managing of the inner conflicts of the characters. The elements of setting make their struggles seem larger than life, but we come to know their most intimate wishes and we see the body postures and attitudes that go with these inner wishes. Structurally, we experience what we saw in Strange Interlude—a pattern of surfacing of conflicts. This pattern informs the major interviews which make up the individual acts of the play and the play as a whole. Bogard describes this pattern as one of "purgative action, concentrated on the raising and recognition of submerged truths . . . ." <sup>27</sup> This structural principle also contributes to the play's psychological quality: we witness Lavinia's gradual recognition of her own inner drives and needs, and her response to that recognition. In this sense Mourning Becomes Electra has the structural tightness that we associate with the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles, in which the central figure resists knowledge and achieves recognition only at the end of the dramatic action.

More discrete formal qualities of the opening act are also exceptionally well-managed. Visual correspondences and resemblances between Christine and Lavinia are presented and these become an index to the inner changes that Lavinia undergoes. Briefly put, Christine is presented as an attractive woman in the full blossom of her sexuality, yet the mask she wears suggests she is in fact two people: the woman of the voluptuous body, and the scheming manipulative woman we come to

know. We see Vinnie as tightlipped, holding herself back, yet connected to the sexuality of her mother by her beautiful bronze-gold hair. In this kind of representation we have something of what Strindberg means by his characters being split. Christine and Lavinia are complementary characters, and we see later a kind of convergence when Lavinia takes on the dress and physical sensuality of her mother. Yet all this is framed and treated in slow motion; rather than a "slight groundwork of reality" we have a substantial groundwork consistent with a cultural analysis of New England.

O'Neill also weaves an effective pattern with his handling of sound and songs.<sup>28</sup> Seth Beckwith's refrains from the song "Shenandoah" are part of a network linking this opening to the ending. The repeated "bound" of the song becomes a leitmotif of the trilogy, which turns on questions of the nature of being free and bound. This question is given further solidity by the references to the Civil War and is personalized by Seth's running quarrels with the Negro cook Hannah, who is not above giving orders to him about household chores, much to his chagrin.

The solidity of the social images is established in the first few moments.<sup>29</sup> We perceive an image of a hierarchical society: Seth Beckwith is the first person we see. He is an old man of seventy-five and his face "gives one the strange impression of a life-like mask" (The Homecoming, I, 6). He has shrewd eyes and his mouth suggests "ribald humor," an impression of earthiness emphasized by his "earth-stained working clothes" (6). By virtue of his long tenure with the Mannons, Seth is a primary source of information; he represents a link between past and present generations. When the play opens he is a guide to a

group of townspeople, who, O'Neill tells us, is "a chorus representing the town come to look and listen and spy on the rich and exclusive Mannons" (7). Seth also serves as a guide to Lavinia in this opening act. It has been argued that the townspeople are intruders and unnecessary to the play's core<sup>30</sup> but they are important as (1) foils to the Mannons and (2) representatives of community attitudes and values. We see that they can create a sense of atmosphere that frames the more intense conflicts within the Mannon house. Their presence as spies alerts us to the patterns of looking and overlooking, of discovery and deceit, knowledge and secrecy. Their curiosity calls to mind the thresholds separating people from each other, both as individuals and as social groups. These people build up the groundwork of reality for the psychological drama. They carry community values and attitudes. Because they look "up" to the Mannons, their presence reinforces our sense of the Mannons being larger than life.

More important is that the townspeople act as purveyors of the accepted morality of the community. Part of this complex of attitudes is their view of love. From this perspective we can see a progression in the three scenes, one at the beginning of each play, which feature the townsfolk. In the first scene we are told that Seth's singing of the sea chanty "Shenandoah" has been for the benefit of Minnie, who remains unimpressed because she is fascinated by the house and the Mannon family. She perks up and grows more interested in the Mannons when her cousin Louisa introduces the gossip about "old Abe Mannon's brother David marryin' that French Canuck nurse he'd got into trouble" (The Homecoming, I, 9). Ames hushes Louisa, but he too likes to gossip

and whispers to Minnie that he will tell her about that story when Seth is not around.

This exchange creates an atmosphere of secrecy and enhances our sense of the Mannons as being distant from the common folk of the town. The nub of the story that Louisa introduces is a matter of illicit sexuality: their interest in the subject is an interest in the decline of the rich and powerful and in the matter of sexuality itself. There is also something of the appeal of the exotic involved; perhaps O'Neill is playing upon stereotyped notions of the French as being erotic.<sup>31</sup> This brief comment also suggests for the first time in the play the sexual vitality of Marie Brantôme, as we later learn her name to be. Like Christine, Marie was foreign and queer looking to the gossips of the town.

In the opening act of The Hunted the salacious interest of the townsfolk in the love affairs of the Mannon household is made explicit. Doctor Blake tells a secret to his friend Borden about Ezra Mannon's death. Blake says in part, "I have a strong suspicion it was love killed Ezra!" (The Hunted, I, 71). When Borden questions this explanation, Blake goes on to say:

Leastways, love made angina kill him, if you take my meaning. She's a damned handsome woman and he'd been away a long time. Only natural between man and wife—but not the treatment I'd recommend for angina. He should have known better, but—well—he was human. (71)

Both groups show themselves to be smug and self-righteous: Minnie and the Ameses in their petty curiosity, and Blake and Borden in their complacency. Essentially stock characters, they make stock response to situations that are beyond their limited sympathies.

The opening of The Haunted shows another scene of sexual banter, this time comic and grotesque. Abner Small is preparing to enter the Mannon house, which after the deaths of Ezra and Christine, the townspeople are saying is haunted. Joe Silva jokes that Small won't be lonely for Christine will provide him with company: "By God, if ghosts look like the livin', I'd let Ezra's woman's ghost set on my lap!" (The Haunted, I, 130). The sexual innuendoes are also evident in Ames' jest that he will be glad to look after and comfort Small's woman "providin' she'll need comfortin', which ain't likely!" (132).

Jokes in this instance extend the range of attitudes in the play and provide a sense of relief from the tensions of love within the Mannon family. The groundwork of reality is thus more solid on which O'Neill can make his exploration of sexual mores in New England.

O'Neill extended his analysis to the inner attitudes and values; he did this by dealing with an ostensibly historical subject but treating it in a modern way. He reveals the roots of contemporary attitudes and values. The social framework is built into the very stuff of the play from the beginning and the special curtain serves as reminder of the status of the Mannons.

Act One of The Homecoming also introduces the basic conflicts of the trilogy. One of the more muted conflicts is implicit between the townsfolk and the Mannons. While this tension never erupts into the dramatic action in a substantive way, except perhaps briefly during the scene in which Seth and his cronies make a bet that one of their number does not have the courage to spend a night in the Mannon house (Act I of The Haunted), it nonetheless informs some of the decisions

made by the central characters. Fear of public disgrace and exposure is one of the factors which prevents Lavinia from revealing to her father and the public at large the love affair between Brant and Christine. And again in The Haunted Orin's threat to expose his and Lavinia's role in the deaths of Brant and their mother leads Lavinia to seek to possess the manuscript Orin has written.

Scenic aspects of Act One are consistent with the principle of surfacing and suggest the emergent dominance of Lavinia. At the beginning of the scene, Christine stands at the centre of attention at the top of the stairs leading into the Mannon house. In her husband's absence, she is the head of the household, and this is our first impression of her. But the final scenic image of this act shows Lavinia at the top of the stairs looking down on Brant and then turning from him to enter the house and close the door behind her. This last image prefigures the ending of the trilogy in which Lavinia renounces Peter (by addressing him as Adam) and the potential married love he represents. In this first ending she kills the thing she loves, just as she does in her denial of Peter at the end of the play. Her denial of Adam, obviously a sexually attractive man, prefigures her denial of Peter (whose name suggests phallic potential and who is in this sense a simpler Adam—Adam before the fall and the knowledge of sin and shame).

We see in the opening act two love-triangles and hear references to others. The Lavinia-Brant-Christine triangle is the more dynamic of the love relationships presented; in fact it generates the action of the trilogy. In the course of an interview between Christine and



Lavinia we learn that their personal conflicts are underscored by deepseated conflicts within the family history. Their disagreements over Brant are thus shown to be a dramatic metaphor for the kind of love they hold for Orin and Mannon. The women are rivals for Brant (though Lavinia won't admit this), and he is a man who shares qualities with both Orin (who is younger) and Ezra Mannon (who is older). There is a striking similarity in appearance among these three: they may be thought of as three aspects of the same personality.<sup>32</sup> Two other love triangles are thus compressed into one dramatic scene.

Beneath the Lavinia-Brant-Christine triangle we have the relationship involving Lavinia, Peter and Brant. Though it seems less complicated than the first, this too is a dramatic metaphor for the conflicts within Lavinia.

O'Neill presents Lavinia's inner conflict in the first scene in two counterpointing interviews. In the course of these interviews key image patterns are presented which shape the entire work. Lavinia meets first with Peter and then, later, with Brant.

Peter has come to Lavinia to request again that she marry him, but he is reticent and begins obliquely, asking her if Orin loves Hazel. Vinnie's response gives Peter the answer to his unasked question. She says, "I don't know anything about love! I don't want to know anything! (Intensely) I hate love!" (I, 14). The strength of her denial suggests the fascination that love has for her. This response is characteristic of Lavinia's mode of dealing with emotional situations: she meets conflict with denial. The world does not open up new horizons and adventures for her; rather it threatens and frustrates her. Denial is a

means of containment, of limiting possibilities, and Vinnie wants nothing more than to have the world limited and so under control. But at another level she is fascinated by the world of love, and in her outburst to Peter she defines her own psychological task. She must come to terms with love, and in the process discover that hate and love are near of kin.

She has in fact been meeting Adam Brant, despite her assertions that she can love Peter only as a brother and that her first responsibility in love is to her father. Before Brant actually appears on stage, we learn from Seth that Brant may in fact be part of the Mannon tribe, that he is a bastard son of Vinnie's grandfather's brother. Though Vinnie has heard the story of the illicit love of David Mannon and Marie Brantôme, she refuses to see the truth of Seth's observations:

No! It can't be! God wouldn't let it! It would be too horrible—on top of—! I won't even think of it, do you hear? Why did you have to tell me? (I, 20)

This kind of language is the sort for which O'Neill is often criticized, but it is revealing of character and appropriate to the situation. Lavinia's first response is to deny, yet it is obvious that she senses the truth of what he has told her. The pattern of her response parallels the pattern of the opening act; her comment shifts from direct explicit denial, to a wishful appeal to the power of God, to a desire not to think the unpleasant thought, and finally to an aggressive turning outward and a blaming of Seth for bringing to consciousness something she prefers, or one part of her prefers, to remain blind to. Her subsequent readiness to inquire how she might be sure of Brant's identity indicates that Seth has merely brought out what was latent.

Accordingly, when Brant enters, Lavinia receives him with an air of detachment. At first, he is puzzled by her coolness, but when she speaks pointedly to him about an earlier conversation in which he had expressed his admiration for the "naked native women" of the South Seas, he is provoked into a lyrical reflection upon that idyllic experience:

Aye! And they live in as near the Garden of Paradise before sin was discovered as you'll find on this earth! Unless you've seen it, you can't picture the green beauty of their land set in the blue of the sea! The clouds like down on the mountain tops, the sun drowsing in your blood, and always the surf on the barrier reef singing a croon in your ears like a lullaby! The Blessed Isles, I'd call them! You can forget there all men's dirty dreams of greed and power! (I, 24)

Brant's dreaming aloud, as it were, identifies his inner life for the audience. He desires a paradise of conscienceless bliss significantly free of the dog-eat-dog competitiveness of the commercial world he has come to know. This rhapsody about the Blessed Isles, the second major symbol of the trilogy is balanced against the symbol of the house, a monument to all the Mannon wealth and prestige.

Lavinia's response to Brant's rhapsody effects a dramatic turn in the action. She asks, "And their dirty dreams—of love?" The immediate consequence of Lavinia's remark is to startle Brant into an angry revelation and defence of his own ancestry. In the course of his defense, Brant reveals that he has been wounded by what he takes to be the miserliness of Ezra Mannon in the treatment of his mother. This, then, is one source of his grievance against the Mannons. In his comments on the Blessed Isles, Brant alludes to those qualities which he finds lacking in his New England experience. Brant's images emphasize the peacefulness of the islands, the soothing quality of the

clouds "like down," the sun "drowsing" and the "lullaby" of the surf. For him it is a prelapsarian world in which one is nurtured like a child at his mother's breast. This image of the child at the breast is latent in the pattern of images Brant uses and underlies the image of noncompetitiveness. The image, then, is both psychological and social.

Lavinia's remark, like Brant's, reveals something of her inner life—her preoccupation with love (which she has just said she hates), and something of the tension between love in the South Seas and love in New England. It is as if she has asked: And do you, in the South Seas, forget the illicit love you have pursued here?

It is clear, then, that in this opening scene of the play O'Neill has posed the symbol of the Blessed Isles against the symbol of the house, and that both symbols embody a variety of kinds of love. Indeed each provokes different reactions from the different characters and they reveal themselves to us in the ways that they respond to the house on one hand and to the islands on the other. This relatedness of character and symbol needs to be examined in some detail. Such an examination challenges the view that Electra is O'Neill's least symbolic play<sup>33</sup> and reveals the process by which the house of Mannon falls.

### III

The major symbol of the trilogy is the house itself.<sup>34</sup> O'Neill takes pains to present the house in such a way that it becomes virtually a participant in the play. The house and its trappings becomes

identified with both action and characters. The visual qualities of the House in the completed work are especially striking. The play begins on a late afternoon in April 8, 1865.

It is shortly before sunset and the soft light of the declining sun shines directly on the front of the house, shimmering in a luminous mist on the white portico and the gray stone wall behind, intensifying the whiteness of the columns, the somber grayness of the wall, the green of the open shutters, the green of the lawn and the shrubbery, the black and green of the pine tree. The white columns cast black bars of shadow on the gray wall behind them. The windows of the lower floor reflect the sun's rays in a resentful glare. The temple portico is like an incongruous white mask fixed on the house to hide its somber gray ugliness. (The Homecoming, I, 5)

In this description O'Neill establishes the doubleness of the house: the surface facade does not quite conceal the ugliness beneath; the portico does not grow organically out of the house, but is fixed onto it. The mask that the house presents anticipates the make-up masks which suggests tensions within the characters. The house as physical structure is split and all members of the house (as family line) are so split.

The house functions as a symbol of the Mannon mind. The eye-like windows underline this connection between physical structure and consciousness. New England puritan qualities are held in tension with the pagan Greek elements. The house, then, provides the essential context for an exploration of murderous family love and hate.

The living quality of the house is created by the varying responses to it. Community attitudes differ from the attitudes of the family, and the family is divided against itself. Attitudes change as the play develops, as deaths add up.

The townspeople we first meet in The Homecoming are in awe of the place, as they are of the family. Seth Beckwith, a faithful servant who has served the three generations of Mannons who have lived there, explains to his visitors from the town that the Mannons have been "top dog around here for near on two hundred years and [they] don't let folks fergit it" (I, 8). A less sardonic assessment of the family's standing comes from the middle class people who attend Ezra Mannon's funeral. Borden, manager of the shipping company, finds the funeral arrangements too private for his liking: ". . . it does seem as if Ezra should have been laid out in the town hall where the whole town could have paid their respects to him, and had a big public funeral tomorrow" (The Hunted, I, 69). The deference in his manner becomes obsequiousness in the remark of congregationalist minister Everett Hills who calls Mannon "a national war hero," "a power for good" (The Hunted, I, 69).

But these public attitudes are coupled with more private opinions about the death of Mannon. Dr. Blake suggests to Borden that Ezra was killed by love, that is, by sexual excitement leading to heart failure (The Hunted, I, 71). Blake has established some credibility as a witness on Mannon affairs, for he has been their physician and has defended Ezra (and Christine) against the self-righteous judgments of Hills and his wife. (These last two are presented as outright hypocrites, another kind of doubleness in the community that the Mannons represent.) Blake's theory is to Borden's taste for he regards Christine as sexy even if he doesn't like her, and he "can imagine worse ways of dying" (The Hunted, I, 71). This remark compounds the irony of the house's history: it is a monument to hatred, and to illicit

sexuality. We are aware of the liaison of Christine and Brant, and that Blake's remark has a measure of truth. He assumes that the sexual union which brought Mannon down was his exuberant love for his wife. The conversation of Borden and Blake underlines our awareness of the power of sexuality to change the course of the life of a family through the generations.

After Christine's suicide and the return of Orin and Lavinia from the South Seas, the house takes on more ominous qualities and assumes a more prominent role as the title of the third play, The Haunted, indicates. Now the title refers not only to the house but to the surviving Mannons. O'Neill exploits the symbolic value of the house in this conclusion to the trilogy.

The Haunted opens with a kind of comic relief scene in which Seth and his cohorts Abner Small, Joe Silva, and Ira Mackel have gotten themselves drunk and made a bet that Abner cannot stay a night alone in the house. The ominous tones emerge after the appearance of Peter and Hazel who have come to prepare the house for the return of Orin and Lavinia. Peter and Hazel are annoyed with Seth's antics. Seth says that he does not believe in ghosts, though Small has fled the house in terror. But Seth does believe in evil spirits. He says (in a comment that echoes Ezra's complaint about the house before he learns of Christine's adultery) that he senses such a spirit in the house—"like somethin' rottin' in the walls" (I, 135). Though Peter dismisses this notion, Seth persists: "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" (I, 36). Seth's metaphors of growth and rot suggest the

gradual transformation of the house and invest it with qualities of a living organism. Seth asks Peter and Hazel to try to dissuade Orin and Lavinia from living there. Such images contrast with the static images of the portraits against which we measure the identity of the characters; because the characters change, the portraits too take on a living changing quality. The cumulative effect of the scene is to create an atmosphere of gloomy anticipation.

Family attitudes toward the house are more complicated than those of the community. Christine first calls the house a "tomb," a whited "sepulchre" with its "pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray ugliness" (The Homecoming, I, 17). She sees the house as an outgrowth of Mannon history, built by Abe Mannon as "a temple for his hatred" (I, 17). This hatred was for his brother David, who conceived an illegitimate child with a servant girl Marie Brantôme (a French Canadian). David married Marie but Abe Mannon dismissed them from the family house, then tore it down and built the present structure.

When we first meet Christine, she is gathering flowers. She is associated therefore with the vitality of the garden; her face, though, wears what Seth calls the "Mannon look," a mask which "they grow on their wives" (The Homecoming, I, 9). In appearance and in attitude Christine is dissociated from the house; it is not her place.

This disaffection began on her wedding night. Before marriage Christine was in love with Ezra:

He was handsome in his lieutenant's uniform! He was silent and mysterious and romantic! But marriage soon turned his romance into—disgust! (The Homecoming, II, 31)

Some critics have argued that marital discord was caused by Mannon's



clumsy lovemaking,<sup>35</sup> but it is more consistent with O'Neill's presentation of married love (in Desire Under the Elms and Strange Interlude for example) to say that marriage itself is inimical to passion. Passionate and satisfying sexual expression is outside marriage in these plays. In Electra marriage for Christine (and for Mannon) means moving into a house built on hatred and discord.

Christine's disgust with her marriage carries over to her relationship with Lavinia. Christina goes so far as to say that Lavinia as a child came to be identified for Christine with her wedding night and her honeymoon, and as a consequence she pushed the child away in disgust. The mature Lavinia's attachment to the house simply exacerbates her mother's feelings of alienation from that place.

Lavinia, despite the fact that she resembles her mother facially and in the colour of her hair, belongs to the house. She locks herself in her room to avoid Christine and Christine says the house "suits" Vinnie's "temperament" (I, 17). Vinnie chooses the house, whereas Christine is in it, but not of it. Christine finds love outside the house (and outside her marriage to Mannon), while Vinnie (whose remark that she "hates love" shows her ambivalence) does not find love or become capable of giving love until she goes to the South Sea Islands. While she is in the house, Vinnie tends to move in a manner which resembles the military-bearing of her father (The Homecoming, I, 10 and 27; II, 35; The Hunted, I, 78; II, 92; III, 101; V, 119, 123, 125).

When she returns from the trip abroad, she has lost her "square-shouldered stiffness" (The Haunted, I, 137). She does not move again in this way until after Orin's suicide. Then she proclaims her freedom

from the Mannon past, but her movements show her intimate connection with the house: "She squares her shoulders, with a return of the abrupt military movement copied from her father which she has of old—as if by the very act of disowning the Mannons she had returned to the fold—and marches stiffly from the room" (The Haunted, III, 168).

The last image of the play shows her walking "woodenly" into the house and closing the door behind her (The Haunted, IV, 179). O'Neill's placement of these descriptions underlines her identification with her father and therefore with the house. Six of these instances of her wooden-like movements occur at the end of a scene (The Homecoming, I, 27; The Hunted, I, 78; II, 92; III, 101; V, 125; The Haunted, IV, 179). Only Orin and Mannon himself are more closely connected with the house. Lavinia's transitional character is emphasized by the number of times she is shown framed by a doorway or a window; she is presented as on one threshold or another. Again the scenic images complement the psychological developments of the play.

Ezra Mannon as the head of the family is most closely identified with the house. He has never left it in that his portrait hangs there in his role as a judge as if he were overseeing the activities within the house. Yet when he returns home, he responds to the house in a manner that parallels the response of Ephraim Cabot to his house in Desire Under the Elms. Both men sense that "something" is amiss; their responses heighten our awareness of the illicit love affairs in their respective dwellings. Mannon's study (which parallels the private study of Professor Leeds in Strange Interlude in revealing the strange juxtaposition of New England puritanism and Greek paganism)

indicates again the connection between the family and the larger culture. The study is graced with portraits of George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Marshall, and Mannon himself. Mannon's portrait, done ten years earlier, reveals a striking resemblance to Adam Brant and has pride of place over the mantelpiece. The portrait thus underlines the connection between the social and political pre-eminence of the family with the illicit love theme. And it suggests too that love in New England is incestuous, and that there is an unwillingness to recognize this basic fact of love.

In the study we see the love triangles. In Act Two of The Homecoming we see Lavinia meet with Christine, and then Christine meet with Brant. Mannon is the silent third partner present in these two meetings.

More than a year after his death, Mannon still dominates the house. In Act Two of The Haunted Orin is in Mannon's study at work on the history of crimes in the Mannon family. Orin addresses Mannon's portrait as if the old man were still alive, but Orin is slowly assuming his father's position as head of the household. As long as he has the script he holds the position as head of the household. Orin in fact does not leave the house but becomes identified with it, preferring as he does to avoid the light of day and to work in the artificial light of the study.

In only two scenes is Mannon himself actually present in the flesh: the first on the steps of the house, the second in his bedroom. Mannon's appearance in the other settings is by proxy. The only interior scenes (other than those in the study or the bedroom) are set in the sitting-room in which portraits of the Mannons dating back to "the

witch-burning era" loom large, while Abe Mannon himself sits over the fireplace (The Hunted, Act II, 79). In the ship scene (The Hunted, Act IV) which is structurally the centre of the trilogy, the ship is Mannon-owned, and a Mannon servant (Adam Brant who captains the vessel) meets with a Mannon (Christine) in their secret affair. Again setting reinforces theme, and the Mannon empire is shown as undercut by sexual passion.

Since Mannon is so closely identified with the house, his values and attitudes toward love deserve special examination. When he first appears in The Homecoming (Act III) he speaks in a voice which is indicative of the stifling air of the house: his voice has "a hollow repressed quality" (III, 43). This aural image adds to the visual identity established between his face and the portraits in the study. Mannon embodies the deathly aura of the house and epitomizes the Mannon way of thinking. Christine asks why he speaks so persistently of death. He answers:

That's always been the Mannons' way of thinking. They went to the white meeting-house on Sabbaths and meditated on death. Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born. (Shaking his head with a dogged bewilderment) How in hell people ever got such notions! That white meeting-house. It stuck in my mind—clean-scrubbed and whitewashed—a temple of death! But in this war I've seen too many white walls splattered with blood that counted no more than dirty water. I've seen dead men scattered about, no more important than rubbish to be got rid of. That made the white meeting-house seem meaningless—making so solemn over death! (III, 54)

The white portico of his present house, which has been described earlier as a "temple of . . . hatred" (The Homecoming, I, 17), suggests the continuity of the family line. The contrast between whiteness and cleanliness (on the one hand) and blood, dirty water,

and rubbish (on the other) echoes distinctions made in the first scene of the play between free uninhibited enjoyment of life (in the South Seas) and "dirty dreams of love" in puritan New England. The house functions symbolically as the antinomy of the image of the Blessed Isles.

Yet despite Mannon's virtual identification with the house, in the early morning after his return Mannon articulates his sense of alienation and dissociation. A double quality again emerges.

This house is not my house. This is not my room nor my bed. They are empty—waiting for someone to move in! And you are not my wife! You are waiting for something! (IV, 60)

Mannon's sense of being dispossessed has been caused by his unsatisfactory relations with Christine, who we know is waiting for his death. The sexual aspect of his assertion is plain. Brant has indeed moved into his bed and his house.

Christine responds angrily to his accusations that she is waiting for his death, and provokes Mannon to elaborate on his anxiety and suspicions. Christine elicits a retort by asserting that in their sexual union he acted as if she were merely his "property" (IV, 60). Mannon complains in turn that he has been made to feel like an object and that a solely physical relationship is not what he expects from her:

Your body? What are bodies to me? I've seen too many rotting bodies in the sun to make grass greener! Ashes to ashes, dirt to dirt! Is that your notion of love? Do you think I married a body? (Then, as if all the bitterness and hurt in him had suddenly burst its dam) You were lying to me tonight as you've always lied! You were only pretending love! You let me take you as if you were a nigger slave I'd bought at auction!

You made me appear a lustful beast in my own eyes!  
 —as you've always done since our first marriage  
 night! I would feel cleaner now if I had gone to  
 a brothel! I would feel more honor between myself  
 and life! (IV, 60)

This speech amounts to an essay on love in the house of Mannon and requires close consideration.

Mannon has here summed up the kind of love he has experienced in his marriage since his marriage night. It has been a mere physical love, arising out of duty rather than an expression of affection, tenderness or play. Their love has been fruitful only in the sense that they have had two children; their love otherwise has not been honest or true in the way that Mannon now sees it might have been. Because their love rests on this dishonest basis, he associates it with the limitations of the flesh and rotting bodies: "ashes to ashes, dirt to dirt." Their relationship lacks even the straight-forwardness of sex for money that obtains in a brothel. Christine has become in his eyes "a nigger slave" who may be bought and sold as chattel; he has become in his own eyes "a lustful beast."

Mannon's economic metaphors—his allusion to the flesh markets of prostitution and slavery—add a social dimension to his lament, though they are fully in keeping with the Mannon way of thinking. Implicit is the idea that when exchange values invade the sphere of love relationships the latter become debased; by the same token those exchanges in themselves are debased because they depend upon treating persons as objects. The slavery metaphor has particular relevance in this play, for Mannon has participated in war to end slavery only to find himself bound in a relationship which humiliates him. Mannon

is the "top dog" in his society, yet he cannot maintain his own self-esteem. Mannon's speech recalls Brant's assertion that the South Seas Islands are a haven from man's (Mannon's) "dirty dreams of greed and power" (The Homecoming, I, 24). Greed and power govern affairs in New England; at the opposite pole are the freedom and peacefulness of the Islands. In his working notes to the trilogy, O'Neill described the Islands as symbol of a "yearning for pre-natal non-competitive freedom from fear" (29 May 1930; emphasis added). In Desire Under the Elms, another major New England play, O'Neill attacks what he calls New England's "dog-eat-dog" competitiveness, a metaphor for human interaction that is latent in Seth's remark about the Mannons being top dog for many years. O'Neill's point seems to be that New England competitiveness destroys all human relationships and that all relationships are shaped by the competitive acquisitive instinct of the culture. This attitude is consistent with O'Neill's attack on materialism in Dynamo. Similarly, O'Neill's indictment of dirty dreams of greed and power sheds light on the conflicts in Lazarus Laughed in which Lazarus preaches that men should seek a "new clean lust."<sup>36</sup> The implications of the scene between Brant and Vinnie in which she asks about the man's dirty dreams of love is revealed in this scene between Christine and Mannon. Mannon's dream of love with Christine has been sullied by his actual experience. (This is also true of her experience.) Love in the house of Mannon (love in New England) is tainted by the values that obtain in the economic relationships in the culture.

O'Neill's criticism of capitalistic society and its attitudes has been commented on, but more critics have remarked that his plays

lack a social dimension.<sup>37</sup> Electra illustrates that social criticism is part of his conception; O'Neill shows how social attitudes are internalized by his characters, how private relationships bear the marks of social attitudes. This point needs to be emphasized: O'Neill's social criticism is more subtle than he has been given credit for. There is clearly a social picture presented in Electra, the characters have a history and they are intimately connected with the power structure of their New England world. He attacks not only the stifling puritanism of that world as many critics have noted<sup>38</sup>; he also points out the destructiveness of the economic relations which govern the interpersonal relationships. We find again and again in the trilogy that the possessors are self-dispossessed. The house of Mannon is the top dog, but the fall of that house comes from within. Mannon's relationship with Christine starts to break down once they are married and move into the house. It is as if love cannot survive in the house, except for incest which flourishes. The house of Mannon is the home of incest; incest comes first in human affairs, and the Mannons cannot escape that first attachment.<sup>39</sup> To the extent that Mannon is man or everymannon (as Engel suggests)<sup>40</sup> or manunkind (to borrow a pun from e.e. cummings)<sup>41</sup> it is the fate of man to love incestuously. To become fully human means to come to terms with love (and hate) within the family. It is a theme that O'Neill explored again and again throughout his career.

O'Neill's social criticism becomes more apparent if we pursue the meaning of Mannon's name. As Cyrus Day points out, Mannon suggests Mammon, symbol of greed.<sup>42</sup> This identification is supported by image patterns in the trilogy. Money is associated with dirt (or feces). Part of



Adam Brant's hatred for Mannon stems from the latter's refusal to provide financial aid to Marie Brantôme. The chantyman who banterers with Brant in the ship scene says that Mannon had "no heart" and speculates that the "old skinflint must have left a pile o' money" (The Hunted, III, 94). Making a pile connects the money theme with anality or dirt. Mannon's wartime nickname—"Old Stick—short for Stick-in-the-Mud"—also has scatological connotations. The name suggests both Ezra's military steadfastness and his anality—he is a thing (stick) and dirty (mud). And this is exactly how sex with Christine has made him feel.

The horrible irony of the scene between Mannon and Christine is that Mannon has begun to open himself for the first time to Christine and to articulate his need for her, but she has gone so far to seek the love he hoped to offer that she cannot hear his plea and must plunge ahead with her plot to destroy him. The dwelling place itself, first built to mark a new beginning, becomes tainted with the illicit sexuality it was built to deny.

This constellation of images associated with the house of Mannon suggests the many-layered qualities of the trilogy and the care O'Neill has taken to reveal his characters. The house of Mannon comes to symbolize the death of love, relations which mean treating people as objects, a preoccupation with power and greed, a tightfistedness and holding back of money and affection, and violent outbursts of aggression and hatred. The play is rife with social criticism and the decline of a culture despite criticism to the effect that in O'Neill psychology commits incest with psychology.<sup>43</sup>

O'Neill's treatment of the dream of the Blessed Isles also serves as a comment on sexuality and New England culture. Insofar as the dreams embody a desire for a world different from the given reality of New England life, they act as a model for future building and a criticism on the "actual" felt world of the present. O'Neill's comments on contemporary values, through what he called a "sufficient mask of time and place,"<sup>44</sup> is actually a comment on what he sees to be the sources of those values in the remembered past, and is therefore more searching than a commentary linked only to the world of his contemporary audience might have been. This accounts for the greater solidity of Electra when compared with Strange Interlude. In the latter, unrealized dreams of the present are projected into an imaginary future for fulfillment. In Electra dreams of personal and marital fulfillment are projected onto an exotic place, markedly different from Puritan New England. O'Neill therefore could exploit the stock response of his audience to the South Sea Islands. The dream of the Blessed Isles is central to the play because each main character is involved in the dream in one way or another. It is also central because the Islands come to represent everything that the house of Mannon is not. The dream of the Blessed Isles is analogous to a vision of Utopia—it underscores the unfulfilled wishes and drives of the characters and bears witness to the weaknesses of the dominant values of the culture represented by the house. Moreover, since Melville, especially in Typee, provided a literary precedent for a New Englander's longing for a South Sea paradise, O'Neill could exploit the literary associations his audience might have.<sup>45</sup> All in all, the conventional utopian associations with the South Seas

and the literary associations together provided a mask both for O'Neill's remarks on his contemporary early twentieth-century culture and for the public literary exploration of his own private concerns. As we shall see, the Islands reflect the qualities that O'Neill calls "Nirvana" in his personal chart, and the nature of relationships in the play recall elements of his autobiographical documents.

O'Neill established the centrality of the dream of the Islands as part of his emphasis upon family resemblances. He wished to give his characters individuality without giving up the idea of a family fate directing their lives. In order to make the inner qualities of his people visible, he struck upon the idea of using make-up masks, similarity of hair colour, a gallery of family portraits. Together these visual elements would emphasize the family identity. Verbally, the main device for emphasizing this essential family unity would be achieved by the South Sea Islands symbol. In a long note dated 27 March 1930 O'Neill sketched the provenance of the Islands motif:

Develop South Sea Island motive—its appeal for them all (in various aspects)—release, peace, security, beauty, freedom of conscience, sinlessness, etc.—longing for the primitive—and mother symbol—yearning for prenatal non-competitive freedom from fear—make this Island theme recurrent motive—<sup>46</sup>

The Islands motif, then, was conceived to function in a number of ways. First, it would reveal the underlying identity of the family members across generations. Second, it would also provide a way of giving each character an individual "fingerprint of [his or her] inner nature"<sup>47</sup> by showing how the Islands meant something different to each of them. In the finished play, the Islands are related to the sexuality of the

persons who allude to them. Third, because of the overlap from character to character, the dream of the South Sea Islands becomes a generalized motif of the culture. Underlying and unifying these three dimensions—the individual, familial, and cultural—is the idea that the Islands are subversive of the established reality in that they represent a place where unfulfilled dreams and desires may be satisfied. Yet the complexity of O'Neill's conception becomes apparent in the execution of the play. Just as Mannon and Lavinia are the characters most fully revealed by their relationship with the house, so Christine and Orin are the individuals most fully revealed by their relationship with the Islands. Adam, who stands between these two couples and animates both of them, is the character who introduces the motif in the play.

Adam's attitude toward the Islands is established in the first act in conversation with Lavinia. He speaks of the Islands as a place where you "can forget . . . all men's dirty dreams of greed and power!" (The Homecoming, I, 24). As a man of the commercial world, it is appropriate that he should speak of the Isles as place of relief from dog-eat-dog competition. He attributes to the Isles those qualities lacking in his New England experience. His images emphasize the peacefulness of the Islands, the soothing clouds "like down," the sun "drowsing" and the "lullaby" of the surf. It is a world in which the individual is nurtured like a child at his mother's breast.

When Adam is with Christine, he uses different images for the Islands. When they are plotting the murder of Mannon, Adam speaks of the Islands as "the right place for love and a honeymoon" (The Homecoming,

II, 39). Later when he agrees to give up his ship in order to escape to the Far East with Christine, Brant uses many of the images he used when speaking to Lavinia, but his tone is changed: "There's peace and forgetfulness for us there—if we can ever find those islands now!"

(The Hunted, IV, 112). His dream was to one day be master of his own ship; now it is clear that Christine has become mistress of his fate. He has given up his dream in order to possess her.<sup>48</sup> Immediately after he has made his commitment to her, he is killed by Orin and Lavinia. The sequence of events suggests that Brant gives up his separate identity and has been swallowed up by Christine. He becomes part of her; the two lovers are one.

By virtue of his age and appearance, Brant resembles both Orin and Ezra. The attitudes that Brant reveals toward the Islands anticipate the attitudes and values of the other men. Brant sees the Islands both as a child might (a prelapsarian garden of bliss) and as a place to begin an adult love relationship (a honeymoon). The first of these we find in Orin's point of view (though they are not identical), the second in Mannon's.

To begin with Mannon. His sense of self, like Brant's and Orin's, is determined by his relationship with Christine, but he is less articulate than they in expressing feelings. He can only stumble toward expressing a wish to renew his love with Christine: "I've a notion if we'd leave the children and go off on a voyage together—to the other side of the world—find some island where we could be alone a while . . ." (The Homecoming, III, 55-56). Though Mannon clearly wishes that his wife should come to love him again, his

sentence remains incomplete, and like his sentence his fate is to remain unfulfilled. Even as he is speaking to Christine she withdraws her hand from him. When she decides that it is to her advantage to humor him, she embraces him passionately, but they are interrupted by Lavinia. When they retire to their bedroom, they are again interrupted by Lavinia. Scenic image and language reinforce each other and impress upon the audience the fragmented character of love among the Mannons in the family house. <sup>49</sup>

Orin's attitudes toward the Islands are closely bound up with his feelings for his mother. Indeed he identifies his mother with the Islands as he had during his battlefield fantasies. While the images that Adam uses are mythic (he refers to the Garden of Paradise before sin entered), Orin's images recall a pre-natal existence. "I only felt you all around me" he says to his mother (The Hunted, II, 90). The Islands for Orin become a spot of time to which he is irrevocably attached. Because of the strength of this attachment, and because the trilogy gradually narrows to a focus upon Orin and Lavinia (and then finally upon Lavinia alone), a close consideration of Orin's psychological fate reveals the interplay of the Islands symbol with the symbol of the house in the dramatic action, and sheds light on the personal autobiographical dimensions of the play.

Orin's image of childhood gradually surfaces in the first extended scene showing him with his mother. The extent to which he is attached to her appears in this opening scene. Christine triggers his recollection of childhood by the way she greets him: "My boy! My baby!" (The Hunted, I, 76). Later when they are alone Orin complains that she did

not write to him and Christine again mothers him, holding his hand and speaking of their closeness. She says, "We had a secret little world of our own in the old days, didn't we?—which no one but us knew about" (II, 85). Orin responds to her mood, and begins to recall those times. He remembers that theirs was indeed a special world with its own password: "No Mannons allowed . . ." (II, 85). The emphasis here upon secrecy, privacy, and denial of the self (for Orin is a Mannon) prefigures the later psychological crisis which leads to Orin's suicide. (It also recalls Christine's locking her husband out of her world, first verbally, and then literally, by administering him poison.) The language of this exchange emphasizes the closed nature of their world; ironically Christine is baiting Orin, for she has made her commitments to Brant. She lives in a world of adult sexual relations; her appeal to Orin's fantasy is designed to keep him preoccupied with his inner thoughts rather than with her relationship with Brant. There is some measure of verisimilitude in her power over Orin. His war experiences and his head injury have made him particularly vulnerable to suggestion; indeed when he first sees the house it appears strange to him but he does not know whether it is something in him, or something in the nature of the house itself, which accounts for the strangeness. "I was out of my head so long, everything has seemed queer since I came back to earth" (I, 74). Orin is thus presented as living in a hypnagogic state, between sleeping and waking.<sup>50</sup>

Orin's inward turning is anticipated by his being always susceptible to the images welling up from his memory. When in Act Three of The Hunted Orin sees his father's body, he remarks that his father takes

on the image of all the dead men he has seen.

Death sits so naturally on you! Death becomes the Mannons! You were always like a statue of an eminent dead man—sitting on a chair in a park or straddling a horse in a town square—looking over the head of life without a sign of recognition—cutting it dead for the impropriety of living! (He chuckles to himself with a queer affectionate amusement) You never cared to know me in life—but I think we might be friends now you are dead. (94)

Vinnie interrupts this soliloquy, and is annoyed at the tone Orin has assumed. Orin's response to her again emphasizes the fact that he is coming from a different state of awareness than that she knows.

You folks at home take death so solemnly! You would have soon learned at the front that it's only a joke! You don't understand Vinnie. You have to learn to mock or go crazy, can't you see? I didn't mean it in an unkind way. It simply struck me he looks so strangely familiar—the same familiar stranger I've never known. (94)

Here we see Orin relatively calm but his language reveals the state of mind he is in, as if he were in a kind of sleep-walking state. His paradoxes and sardonic tone show him to be agitated and ill at ease, whatever his surface manner. His subsequent comment on his dreams of murdering the same man over and over (95) indicates this train of thought. Again at the end of the scene after Vinnie's mousetrap has provoked Christine to terror, Orin says, "I should never have come back to life—from my island of peace! (Then staring at his mother strangely) But that's lost now! You're my lost island, aren't you, Mother?" (101) In each instance Orin is shown to be on the brink of lapsing into memories and images from his past.

Orin's attachment to his mother is evident in his reliance upon her very words to express his feelings, much as Reuben uses his mother's words to express his feelings about Ada in Dynamo. In Act Four of The



Hunted, Christine intensifies Orin's attachment to her by speaking to him of Mannon's hatred: "He hated you because he knew I loved you better than anything in the world!" (86). Later in the scene Orin says to Christine, ". . . no matter what you ever did, I love you better than anything in the world and—. . ." (89). There is a nice irony in this echoing in that Christine has spoken in the past tense. Orin's use of absolutes suggests that he is in a state of extreme excitement: he seems to be seeking an absolute love and acceptance.

Orin's desire for absolute acceptance connects him with Reuben (and with the vicious Caligula in Lazarus who seemingly cannot speak except in either/or sentences),<sup>51</sup> but Orin's fantasies of this perfect union have far greater resonance and sensuous appeal than the fantasies of Reuben. The resonance of the South Sea Islands motif derives in part from literary antecedents and in part from the contexts of the trilogy. The literary antecedents include Utopian writings which so often figure an island as the setting for a perfect world; more directly the image derives from Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra, one of O'Neill's favorite books, and from Melville's Typee which is named in the play.<sup>52</sup> Within the context of the play, Orin's speeches about the South Sea Islands echo those of Brant (to Lavinia and Christine) and Ezra (to Christine). The Islands motif is also integrated with the development of the narrative; later, Orin and Lavinia actually visit the South Sea Islands on their return from the Far East. This richness of association contrasts with O'Neill's dynamo symbol, which is first of all just a thing. The Islands motif connotes warmth and an appealing release from the rigors of New England weather, both physical and psychological.

The Islands motif symbolizes what might be, in contrast to the grim world that is.

Orin's fantasy about the Islands contrasts in both tone and sensuous quality with the images of cosmic merger in Lazarus and the images of Reuben's merger with the dynamo. Orin speaks to his mother of reading Typee repeatedly:

Until finally those islands came to mean everything that wasn't war, everything that was peace and warmth and security. I used to dream I was there. And later on all the time I was out of my head I seemed really to be there. There was no one there but you and me. And yet I never saw you, that's the funny part. I only felt you all around me. The breaking of the waves was your voice. The sky was the same color as your eyes. The warm sand was like your skin. The whole island was you. (The Hunted, II, 90)

O'Neill has often been attacked as a clumsy stylist but this passage has considerable power in its context. As poetry, abstracted from context, it is flat, primarily because the verbs are weak, essentially linking verbs. In context the speech has a sensuous quality. In effect Orin is drawing our attention to the body of a beautiful woman. He alludes to her voice, her eyes, her skin. Her physical beauty, commented on by others in the play, then makes the island (and Orin's speech) come alive.

The speech also has resonance with other speeches in the play. In effect in this scene we look at the body of Christine through Orin's eyes, and this focus on her beauty recalls Brant's meeting with her (The Homecoming, Act 2), their embraces, Brant's desire to take her to the South Seas for "love and a honeymoon," Christine's inveigling Brant to help her murder Mannon, and her soliloquy which again draws our attention to her body: "You'll never dare leave me now, Adam—for your ships or

your sea or your naked Island girls—when I grow old and ugly!" (The Homecoming, II, 42). Orin's speech also recalls Brant's meeting with Christine, his responses to her beauty, and his sense of disgust after they have made love. Orin's speech is dramatically effective (contrary to what Jean Chothia, argues, for instance<sup>53</sup>) because it points up Christine's vitality.

The vitality of Christine in this scene with Orin can be illustrated by comparison with Nina's languid utterance in Strange Interlude that she feels the desires of her three men (or four since she senses that the ghost of her lost Gordon is present) converge in her.<sup>54</sup> Nina appears seated in the centre of a tableau in which she is surrounded by her men, and her speech draws our attention to the unborn child in her womb and makes her womb the dramatic centre of the world of the play. But she seems relatively static and complacently maternal. Christine, on the other hand, is pre-eminently a sexual woman, and her maternal qualities are secondary. Indeed, her ministerings to Orin are motivated by her sexual needs. As she says to Mannon of Brant, "He's what I've longed for all these years with you—a lover!" (The Homecoming, IV, 61). So Christine flatters Orin in order to lead him away from the truth of her affair. In so doing she binds him to his fantasies of the past, and this enables her to control him.

O'Neill's representation of Orin and Christine relates to O'Neill's autobiographical diagram. Christine's need to separate her roles as wife, lover, and mother appear in a speech she makes to Hazel. This speech calls to mind the split in O'Neill's chart showing how "mother love" means "nurse love." Christine says to Hazel and Orin, "We'll

play nurse, Hazel and I, and have you your old self again before you know it." (80) Orin may be modelled on Jamie, rather than Eugene's own experience, as Sheaffer suggests, but in this instance some aspects of Eugene's autobiography seem to emerge.<sup>55</sup>

One other element from the chart which may be related to O'Neill's portrait of Orin is the attitude toward the mother. In his chart O'Neill breaks off the mother-line at the point he makes his "discovery of his mother's inadequacy," her drug addiction. This suggests that O'Neill's hostility toward his mother persisted into adulthood. Orin strikes out at all women in one of his speeches—"mothers and wives and sisters and girls"—who cheered their men on the way to war. There is more than a trace of misogyny in O'Neill's chart, and this element seems to have played a part in his presentation of Orin.<sup>56</sup>

A crucial difference from the chart, though, is O'Neill's treatment of sexuality in Electra. The chart does not broach the problem of adult sexuality at all; it shows O'Neill's life only to the crisis of adolescence. In the portrait of Orin, however, adult experiences are shown to be an extension of childhood experiences. Orin is shown to be one who cannot assume an adult sexual role because of his attachment to his mother. He is one of those sons whom D.H. Lawrence describes as being bound in by the sense of his mother.<sup>57</sup>

O'Neill explores the consequences of Orin's preoccupation with his mother fully. These include Orin's killing Brant and his accusation of his mother which precipitates her suicide. These actions can be seen as outward directed actions provoked by his attachment to his mother. The latter part of the play explores the psychological

implications of his attachments. It traces his gradual inward-turning, as he focuses more and more on himself. We see Orin unable to pursue Hazel, a woman to whom he becomes engaged but does not marry, because he cannot break from his sister and mother. Other implications of his inward turning are his writing, his proposal of incest to Lavinia, and his suicide. As he turns inward he is less and less attached to the world of the others in the play; the inward turning is evident even in the violent murder of Brant. The imagery shows his gradual withdrawal into himself, which is evident even when he seems to be acting most vigorously in pursuit of his own needs.

Orin's killing of Brant shows a noticeable lack of concern with social consequences. Vinnie in fact has to prompt him to make the motive for the murder look like robbery; Orin is inclined to brood even with the corpse in front of him. He stands over the dead Brant and reflects that Brant looks like the men he himself killed, like his father, and even like himself. As Vinnie urges him to leave the scene of the murder, Orin comments, "It's a rotten dirty joke on someone!" (The Hunted, IV, 116). This remark, like his Islands fantasy, is embedded in the play's scenic and verbal patterns.

It recalls for instance the scene in which Orin stood over his father's bier. There Orin commented that the corpses strewn over the battlefield, the kind of death he had come to know in the war, to him meant "nothing but a dirty joke life plays on life!" (The Hunted, III, 93-94). The second dirty joke is more particularized, (the someone is clearly Orin himself) and the repetition contributes to our understanding of his gloom and despair. In the first scene of The Homecoming, Brant

spoke to Vinnie of man's dirty dreams of greed and power and she responded with her query about man's dirty dreams of love. Orin's sardonic allusion to dirty jokes, then, is part of a verbal pattern and a tension established in the first scene of the trilogy. Brant seems discontent with the place he has found in the social structure, the realm where greed and power determine a man's fate; Vinnie's preoccupation is with the nature of love, especially with the relationship between Brant and her mother and her relationship with Brant; Orin's concern is metaphysical, rather than social or psychological. The dirtiness that distresses him is all-pervasive; for him the disease has become adjectival.<sup>58</sup>

(One consequence of Orin's brooding is to focus our attention more and more on Lavinia, who assumes the central role in the play, especially after the murder scene. This prepares us for the ending of the play.)

The ultimate result of Orin's inward turning—his growing attachment to his own phantasies—are his proposals of incest with Vinnie and his suicide. But these emerge slowly and are a part of the gradual inward turning that he is undergoing. The psychology of these developments can be illuminated by reference to Freud's classic essay "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love."<sup>59</sup> Freud argues that there are two main factors which decide whether or not a man shall leave his mother and father and cleave unto his wife. The first is the "amount of frustration in reality"<sup>60</sup> which opposes the choice of mate. In Orin's case, Vinnie is the main obstruction to his marriage to Hazel, or so she seems. Vinnie resolutely refuses to allow Orin to be alone with Hazel. And Orin's physical disability seems to be another factor which ostensibly frustrates him in his pursuit of his loved one. But it is apparent that

he does not pursue her with any determination. The second factor which Freud alludes to is the decisive one in Orin's case: ". . . the amount of attraction which the infantile objects that have to be relinquished are able to exercise, and which is in proportion to the erotic cathexis attaching to them in childhood."<sup>61</sup> Orin's attachment to his mother is evident in his South Sea Islands fantasy and in her ability to plant words in his mouth, as if he were a mere extension of her will. The attachment to the mother, the second of Freud's forces, is very strong in Orin's life, and he is never satisfactorily to relinquish those ties to his mother. Hence his inward turning and the growing reliance upon his own perceptions of the world, his desire to be alone, and ultimately his dismissal of Hazel, the proposal to Vinnie, and finally his suicide. O'Neill thus goes farther than D.H. Lawrence who has his narrator observe in Sons and Lovers that a good many men are reticent with women because they are "full of the sense of their mother. They preferred themselves to suffer the misery of celibacy, rather than risk the other person."<sup>62</sup> So full of the sense of his mother is Orin that he cannot risk breaking away from his sister, who has grown to resemble their mother. Nor can Orin energetically seek love in his relationship with Hazel.

Yet it must be recognized that there is nothing schematic in the limiting sense in O'Neill's presentation of Orin.<sup>63</sup> Orin is a type in the sense that he conforms to a recognizable pattern which has been labelled oedipal, but the richness of his character becomes apparent if we examine closely what O'Neill has done with the imagery of Orin's speeches, and with his scenic images.

Two scenes in The Haunted show the care which O'Neill has given to

this portrait of Orin. The first (Act Two) involves Orin and Lavinia and occurs some one month after they have returned from the South Sea Islands. Orin has taken to working in the study surrounded by the Mannon portraits; he keeps the curtains drawn and works under artificial light. When Lavinia asks him how he can tolerate working in the gloom, he says:

I hate the daylight. It's like an accusing eye. No, we've renounced the day in which normal people live—or rather it has renounced us. Perpetual night—darkness of death in life—that's the fitting habitat for guilt! You believe you can escape that, but I'm not so foolish! (The Haunted, II, 150)

Orin's use of personal pronouns indicates that he is still attached to the world outside himself: he is able to identify himself with Lavinia and distinguish himself from her.

His association of the daylight with an accusing eye and his choice of perpetual night give his despair a personal and haunting quality. The implications of the eye image begin to unfold in his next comment on the appropriateness of artificial light for his recording of the Mannon history of guilt and punishment.

And I find artificial light more appropriate for my work—man's light, not God's—man's feeble striving to understand himself, to exist for himself in the darkness! It's a symbol of his life—a lamp burning out in a room of waiting shadows! (150)

In this context the image of the accusing eye of daylight becomes associated with God; the effect of this connection is to extend Orin's sense of despair and gloom over the universe. When he calls artificial light man's feeble striving, he similarly extends this quality of darkness over the cosmos. Orin is so full of guilt that he projects it onto the entire world. The images also suggest a sense of distance between



man's efforts and God's; there is no communion between the human and the transcendent. Man is simply thrown onto his own devices, the images seem to say, and these are feeble. The shadows are given a sense of power in the image of their waiting implacably for the turning out of the light. Their latent power contrasts with the feebleness of the light. Orin's spiritual purgatory has a chilling quality about it which the imagery underlines. By extending as he does his own sense of gloom over all mankind, he makes a gesture which shows his personal situation to be hopeless.

The person he might turn to for relief from his sense of despair is Hazel, to whom he is now engaged, but her wholesomeness makes him feel even more sick. "Her love for me makes me appear less vile to myself! (Then with a harsh laugh) And, at the same time, a million times more vile, that's the hell of it!" (151). Hazel reminds him of his mother and this contributes to his ambivalence, for Hazel is another "lost island!" (152). Orin's ability to distance himself in this way and to make judgments about his own relationships and feelings is part, too, of his turning in upon himself.

The most striking instance of his sense of vileness is in the intensity of his comment to Lavinia:

It's wiser for you to keep Hazel away from me, I warn you. Because when I see love for a murderer in her eyes my guilt crowds in my throat like poisonous vomit and I long to spit it out—and confess! (152)

The image of poisonous vomit in his throat is consistent with the narrowing of the play's focus on Orin's world. He carries his malaise in the very breath he breathes. The rottenness he earlier spoke of is within his own body. Orin, as we have seen, has related to his mother and the world as if they were going to nurture him; now that he is separated from his mother,

or rather now that he recognizes his separation from his mother (the lost island) he feels that the world cannot nurture him, it poisons him instead.<sup>64</sup> In the kind of images used there is a totalism such as we see in the portraits of the characters Caligula and Reuben Light. It is a kind of allness-or-nothingness that distinguishes them, though the images O'Neill uses differ in each case. In this instance of Orin's feeling the vomit swell up and gag him, we also sense a prototype of Edmund in Long Day's Journey who laments that everything in the world seemed rotten. What makes Orin's case different, though, is that the image of poison in the throat is an internal image, consistent with the guilt-ridden Orin's sense of self. Edmund too is guilt-ridden but he is basically healthy in his ability to relate to other people. Orin lacks this ability.

Act Two also shows Orin making his incest proposition to Lavinia, and his offer to plan his own death. At this point, the emphasis of the play is almost totally psychological: we are concerned with the inner states of feeling. The scene shows the extent to which Orin is attached to his notion of the "purity" of woman. He speaks to Vinnie of their sojourn on the South Sea Islands. This part of the scene directly anticipates the ending of the play. Orin points out to Lavinia that she was jealous of Christine's love for Brant and that she wanted him for herself. Lavinia resists this awareness; as Orin says, it is the "last thing" (154) that she could ever admit to herself. He also recalls Lavinia's behavior on the Islands; his tone is "sinister and mocking":

What a paradise the Islands were for you, eh? All those handsome men staring at you and your strange beautiful hair! It was then you finally became pretty—like Mother! You knew they all desired you, didn't you? It filled you with pride! Especially Avahanni! You watched him stare

at your body through your clothes, stripping you naked!  
And you wanted him! (154)

Lavinia does not admit this, but Orin persists and extracts from her the comment that she had kissed Avahanni and felt good about it: "He was innocent and good. He had made me feel for the first time in my life that everything about love could be sweet and natural" (154). From this point forward in the scene, Lavinia and Orin begin to act out again the scene that Ezra and Christine had played out in the bedroom. When Orin wants to know if she had done anything more than kiss Avahanni, she says "with a sudden flare of deliberately evil taunting that recalls her mother in the last of "Homecoming," when she was goading Ezra Mannon to fury just before his murder. And what if it wasn't? I'm not your property! I have a right to love!" (154-55). Orin responds as Mannon had, and seizes Vinnie by the throat, and threatens to kill her. Lavinia is startled both by Orin's response and by her own remarks. She admits that what she said was a lie, and in a comment that echoes Ephraim Cabot in Desire Under the Elms says that "something" made her speak against her will: ". . . something rose up in me—like an evil spirit!" (155). In Desire the something which distresses Cabot is the incestuous love of Eben and Abbie; here in Electra the something is again an incestuous sexual impulse. The impulse which emerges has two aspects to it: one is the desire for independence from the family, the determination to be a person in her own right. The second aspect is the attachment to the loved person within the family. As Orin says, Lavinia will not admit her attachment to Brant who so resembled Ezra Mannon. In terms of the play as a whole, Vinnie's erotic feelings, like Orin's, have been shaped by earlier relationships, family relationships from the past. O'Neill

seems to be insisting that love is first and foremost incestuous, and those incestuous impulses shape all subsequent relationships.<sup>65</sup>

This is the insight that Orin finally realized in this scene. In a sneering manner he even proposes to help Lavinia plan his own murder so that no blame will befall her. Lavinia is "speechless with horror" (155) at his suggestion, but he presses grimly on, and carries his insight to its logical irrational extreme:

Can't you see I'm now in Father's place and you're Mother?  
That's the evil destiny out of the past I haven't dared  
predict! I'm the Mannon you're chained to! So isn't it  
plain— (155)

Lavinia does not wish to see the truth of Orin's remarks; she leaves the room sobbing with her hands over her eyes, and Orin takes his manuscript out of the locked desk.

Act Three, another interior scene, the third consecutive scene inside the Mannon house, shows the final acting out of the psychological struggles of Orin. He must choose between Hazel and Lavinia. The choice he will make is predictable. The focal point of gesture in the scene becomes the manuscript, much as the bottle of poison was the focal point of action in Lavinia's "mousetrap" (The Hunted, Act 3). During the course of the scene, Orin passes the manuscript to Hazel. Lavinia sees the script and pleads with Orin not to have Hazel take it. Lavinia promises to do anything Orin wants. At this point Orin takes the envelope from Hazel and bids her farewell. He asks her to forget him as he now is: "The Orin you loved was killed in the war. (With a twisted smile) Remember only the dead hero and not his rotting ghost!" (164). Now the adjective "rotting" becomes Orin's self definition; he has identified

himself with the process of decay, the "ghost" has no substance apart from the quality of rotting. The image of rotting resonates with the constellations of images relating to dirt and decay. Orin becomes the dirty joke he spoke of earlier.

His lack of a separate identity is underlined by his passing his manuscript—which takes on the qualities of his inner life since it represents his "work"—to Lavinia. He thereby assigns his place in the history and future of the family to her control.

His proposal to Vinnie this time is more direct, and more horrifying in that he stands over her:

There are times now when you don't seem to be my sister, not Mother, but some stranger with the same beautiful hair—(He touches her hair caressingly. She pulls violently away. He laughs wildly) Perhaps you're Marie Brantôme, eh? And you say there are no ghosts in this house? (165)

Orin says that he "must find some certainty some way or go mad" and his proposal to her aims to achieve that certainty. He then makes one last plea that they confess their murder of their mother (Orin does not mention Brant, the only one he has actually killed by his own hand).

Lavinia asserts that their action was only just, and she cries that she wishes he were dead. Orin is startled to hear her say this but he sees a crazy kind of logic in it, "An eye for an eye . . ." (166). He imagines that his mother is speaking through Vinnie:

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— (166)

Orin gradually loses all but the slightest hold on reality, and begins to address his mother as if she were present (as indeed she always has

been present in his thoughts):

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! (166)

This is Orin's final major speech; he leaves the room, re-enters the gloomy study where he wrote his history of the family and shoots himself, even as Lavinia is embracing Peter and wishing that they might have a happy married life together. The past and the future are thus juxtaposed and held in tension.

Orin's apostrophe to his mother deserves comment, for it shows another stage in his withdrawal into a world of his own fantasy. O'Neill's stage note suggests a connection again with the private chart. Once Eugene discovered his mother's "inadequacy," as he calls it, he abruptly ends the line showing his mother's place in life. In the autobiographical Long Day's Journey the mother figure's morphine is referred to by the men in the family as poison. It is the poison that separates the mother from them and which led to O'Neill's "separation" from her in the private chart. As Orin disgorges the poison from his throat he is explicitly acknowledging his mother as a sexual person. For the first time, even as he sinks into the dark fantasy which has obsessed him, he has faced the truth.<sup>66</sup> The importance of Adam's name (man) now becomes apparent as well. Orin tacitly admits that he can no longer dwell in Eden alone with his mother; the Edenic past is gone forever once he has expunged it from his memory. The horrible irony is that he has replaced that fantasy of Edenic bliss with another equally illusory.

Orin's suicide is the ultimate extension of his inward turning, but it is also a kind of revenge on Lavinia. Suicide is always an act of aggression against those who survive, and Orin's death by his own hand leaves Lavinia alone to bear the burden of the Mannon history. She is only partly a Mannon (she is also Marie Brantôme) but once Orin dies, then she is left with the script to act out. Orin's history becomes the script which she must continue, and her choice is to pursue justice.

Orin's destruction marks the end of the house of Mannon; he represents the flower of New England young manhood destroyed by the Puritan past. The indictment O'Neill makes then is of the entire culture; its history carries a blight from far in the past. This blight is sexual betrayal: first the "betrayal" by David Mannon and Marie Brantôme which is then compounded by the failure of Ezra Mannon to offer any help to Marie in her moments of great stress. The entire sequence of disasters is triggered by a response to sexuality, and denial of sexuality. The result is sickness and death. The fall of the house of Mannon, then, is the result of a betrayal in love, the very theme of O'Neill's first dramatic sketch, "A Wife for Life." The emphasis, though, in Electra is upon the sins of the mother, rather than upon the sins of the father, though both are implicated in the web of deceit and betrayals and revenge. Sexuality is shown here to be not only capable of throwing an individual life into crises, but to have the power to act upon a family, generation after generation. The final dramatic gesture of the family is made by Lavinia in the play's ending: she journeys into the night prepared for her by her family past.

## IV

The closing act of Mourning Becomes Electra has been praised as one of O'Neill's finest dramatic pieces.<sup>67</sup> The ending displays an integrity he had not before achieved; indeed, the tightness of construction is such that one recent critic has asserted that "It is almost as though, in this play, the action has been constructed in order to present the ending."<sup>68</sup> While the formal qualities of the ending have been generally praised, there is some controversy concerning the impact of the ending and this controversy reflects problems with interpreting the play as a whole. Responses have ranged from exhilaration to horror, and a blend of both.<sup>69</sup> The full impact of the ending cannot be assessed, though, without adequate consideration of O'Neill's view of sexuality as a subversive force exerting its power relentlessly through the actions of an entire family. Seen from this point of view, irony builds upon irony in the final moments of the play.

One of the more powerful ironies of the ending is that the house begins to assert its dominance even though the family line technically has ended with the suicide of Orin. Phoenix-like, the house rises out of its own collapse and becomes, finally, a palpable symbol of implacable psychological fate. It is a fate which has implications for the family, the culture which they lead, and O'Neill's view of human nature.

The emergent dominance of the house works through the character of Lavinia. She has in effect by the close of the previous act become identified with the salient family traits. She has assumed the military bearing of her father (and to some extent Orin), she is adorned with the strangely beautiful hair of her mother (and Marie Brantôme), she



has begun to echo the speeches of her mother's illicit lover, Adam Brant, about the sexual freedom of the South Sea Islands. She has taken these people and their values into her being; Electra has become the family past just as she has become the head of the family. But once she enters the house, she is, as it were, swallowed up by it. The house at last takes on the figuration of a cannibalistic mother eating her own children. The latent cannibalism of the Islands symbol (Typee means cannibal)<sup>70</sup> becomes manifest in the house. The house becomes a "maw"<sup>71</sup> and stands as a much more dramatic symbol of dark motherhood than the dynamo which destroys Reuben Light. Furthermore, the house takes on the rich associations of the stock in trade of the Gothic tradition of haunted houses, without being blatant or obvious.

O'Neill's stage notes establish the brooding presence of the house whose lower windows "reflect the sun in a smouldering stare, as of brooding revengeful eyes" (169). The eyes, though they reflect the sun, are also one means by which the world is taken in, and the stage description leaves no doubt about the power of the house. The first moments of the final act reveal Seth pretending to trim a hedge while singing the sea-chanty "Shenandoah" with its recurrent refrain of being bound. Lavinia is bound to the house and to the past. The song's repeated reference to being bound away stands in ironic counterpoint to her fate.

Seth mutters to himself as he works and his comments sound three important themes. First, he associates Lavinia's flower picking with Christine. Lavinia's action recalls the first act of The Homecoming

in which Christine gathered flowers ostensibly to brighten up the tomb but actually to prepare for the arrival of her lover Brant. Lavinia in her turn is gathering flowers in preparation for the arrival of Peter. Second, Seth refers to the reaction of the townspeople to Orin's death: "They'll fight purty shy of her now. A Mannon has come to mean sudden death to 'em" (170). Third, Seth describes Lavinia's capacity to meet community hostility. He thinks proudly of her as "able" (a term used to describe her father); to him, she is "Clean Mannon strain!" (170).

His comments summarise the process of Lavinia's becoming both her parents. That the Mannon strain should now be "clean" is ironic in light of the scatological images associated with her stick-in-the-mud father.

When Lavinia appears on the stage, she carries the flowers (which link her with her mother) but her body is now "flat chested and thin" (170) and she moves in the stiff manner of her father. The upshot of this congruence of visual impression and verbal statement is to suggest Lavinia's inner conflicts. The battle of love against death has located itself within her and her physical demeanor speaks of that conflict.

Lavinia's first words also reveal an inner turmoil lying just beneath the surface. She wishes to forget the house and assume a new identity as Peter's wife:

I'll close it up and leave it in the sun and rain to die.  
The portraits of the Mannons will rot on the walls and the  
ghosts will fade back into death. And the Mannons will be  
forgotten. I'm the last and I won't be one long. I'll be  
Mrs. Peter Niles. Then they're finished! Thank God! (171)

Lavinia's reference to God indicates that at this point she still sees herself as part of an ordered conventional New England world.

But when Hazel enters, the conflict within takes on another dimension. Hazel functions as a double to Lavinia, her better self as it were. Hazel pleads with Lavinia not to marry Peter. Lavinia finally bursts out and threatens to kill Hazel. Since Lavinia has only moments before described the house as a "temple of Hate and Death" (171), it is apparent that the house is gradually assuming dominance over her, possessing her.

Another step toward final identification of Lavinia with the house occurs when Peter arrives. This brief scene between the two lovers counterpoints their meeting in the first act of The Homecoming when Lavinia declined to marry Peter because, she said, her first love was for her father. In that scene, too, she asserted that she hated love. Now she pleads with Peter to marry her immediately. He is taken aback by the urgency of her demand and wonders why she is afraid to wait. She throws her arms about him and speaks frantically of her desire for him. Her pleas include verbal echoes of Brant's description of love on the Islands. Ironically, Lavinia wants to experience this innocent love with Peter in the house.

Listen, Peter! Why must we wait for marriage? I want a moment of joy—of love—to make up for what's coming! I want it now! Can't you be strong, Peter? Can't you be simple and pure? Can't you forget sin and see that all love is beautiful? (176)

Clearly, Lavinia is speaking to herself rather than to Peter; it is as if she is attached to her past (just as Orin was). Her words echo those she spoke earlier to Peter (147) which in turn were picked up from Brant. The most dramatic moments of her past are beginning to surface.

The next stage in this surfacing follows immediately as she kisses Peter desperately. As her words take her back in time, her deepest

wishes emerge:

Kiss me! Hold me close! Want me! Want me so much you'll murder anyone to have me! I did that—for you! Take me in the house of the dead and love me! Our love will drive the dead away! It will shame them back into death! . . . Want me! Take me, Adam! (177)

Here O'Neill achieves a more powerful effect than he did with the thought aside method in Strange Interlude. Lavinia's slip of the tongue picks up and culminates the process of surfacing begun in the opening act of the trilogy; it also has rich literary and mythic echoes.<sup>72</sup>

Lavinia's naming Adam recalls first things. Within the context of the play, it recalls her first sexual attraction to a person other than her father. She has not been able to recognize this attraction until this moment, though she has been told by her mother and Orin of her desire for Adam. In this respect the course of Lavinia's self-discovery parallels the pattern of Oedipus Tyrannus. Unlike Oedipus, though, Lavinia has not fulfilled her dreams of possessing the parent of the opposite sex; the incestuous nature of her attachment to Brant is implicit. Yet the pattern is clear enough: she wishes to possess and be possessed by the lover of her mother.

Lavinia's wish to be taken by Adam also recalls the myth of Eden. In wishing to drive away death with their innocent love, Lavinia is wishing to achieve a prelapsarian love before shame is known. Ironically her wish is also her fall. She falls into knowledge, but unlike Eve she must face life alone. A further irony is that her fall is not the result of action, but of thought or fantasy.

When Lavinia sends Peter away by telling him she "lusted" with Avahanni on the Islands, she is acknowledging her fallen state. She

calls herself his "fancy woman" (177), nineteenth century slang for a casual mistress or fallen woman.<sup>73</sup> She has thrown over all hope, then, of being Mrs. Peter Niles, a woman who could assume a place in the community with the full sanction that marriage would allow. Her gesture has an aura of grandeur about it: she has recognized that Peter would be better without her, and she has made the choice, so it would seem, to assume responsibility for her fate. Yet at the same time the horror of her situation is becoming apparent. She has chosen to be known to Peter as a woman who is beyond the pale. She has chosen her course but she has had to sacrifice community as well as Peter.

Peter, for his part, bitterly exclaims his hope that she receive her just reward: "—God, I—I hope you'll be punished—I—! (177). His invocation of God shows another dimension to her choice. Not only has she denied him and the community he represents, she has moved out of a theistical universe. Her world is governed by the iron laws of family fate, and she chooses in the family tradition to act as judge.

I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison! I'll never go out or see anyone! I'll have the shutters nailed closed so no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die. (178)

Lavinia's last sentence shows how far she has moved toward submerging her identity in the house. She shifts from the active to the passive voice in mid-sentence as if she were to become the object of the curse. She identifies herself now (the repetition underlines her identity) as "the last Mannon." Her earlier invocation of Adam, man's first family, contrasts ironically with her new awareness of the end of her family line.

Lavinia's final remark in this speech has her thinking forward to the future "With a strange cruel smile of gloating over the years of self-torture . . . " (178). In sexual terms she has denied Peter (the penis) entry into her house and looks forward to years of masochistic masturbation. She will be in her house alone.

Lavinia's last two utterances are both commands and both deflect our attention from her psychological and metaphysical state to the "actuality" of the house. She tells Seth to nail the shutters shut tight (thus closing off the symbolic eyes of the house; it will no longer take in the world). Then she says, "And tell Hannah to throw out all the flowers" (179). It is appropriate that this order should come last, for while it draws our attention to the house it reminds us again of the flowers of seduction carried by Christine in the opening scene of the play. The flowers remind us too of her loss of Peter, and at a symbolic level, by extension, fits with the pattern of images suggestive of the loss of Eden.

The trilogy closes with aural and visual impressions rather than verbal images or speech. Seth bangs shut the shutters closed, and "As if this were a word of command, Lavinia pivots sharply on her heel and marches woodenly into the house, closing the door behind her" (179). Her automatic response and stiffness suggest the movement of an automaton rather than a human.<sup>74</sup> It is as though she now stands for love in New England: mechanical rather than organic and vital, solitary, isolated, self-abusive.

The ending of Mourning Becomes Electra, then, stands as O'Neill's most effective exploration of the subversive power of sex in the plays

of the middle period. In wishing to be taken by Adam, not Peter, Lavinia articulates the voice of the body, what Trilling calls the "hard irreducible stubborn core of biological urgency, and biological necessity, and biological reason"<sup>75</sup> that civilized practices such as marriage try to silence or at least to domesticate. In wishing for Adam, Lavinia denies herself life as Mrs. Peter Niles; in describing herself as a "fancy woman" she takes the "logic" of her position one step further. From there she presumes her right to judge herself, and in entering the house she denies human community altogether. And since she has taken into herself the qualities of her parents, whose troubles first began with the distress caused by their marriage night sexual experience, we see Lavinia as carrying the family fate to an ultimate conclusion. The assault that O'Neill here makes is not only on New England life, but upon culture itself. In wishing to be taken by Adam, Lavinia wishes to return to that happy state before the fall, before time began. But man and woman must live in time (as Peter does) and in time dreams of love are coloured by experiences of the past. There is a note of betrayal in this ending, as so often in O'Neill. Lavinia wishes for innocence, but there is no innocence. In Long Day's Journey Into Night Edmund says everything seemed rotten when he discovered his mother's drug addiction. Again we sense that O'Neill wished that only Man in ultimate union with the cosmos mattered, but everywhere he discovered that men and women are separate from each other and alone.

## Notes: Chapter Five

A note on citations:

References to Mourning Becomes Electra are to Volume 2 of the three-volume Random House edition of The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York, 1954) and will be cited in the text. Because of the complexity and richness of the trilogy I cite individual play titles (unless clear from the context), followed by the Act in Roman numerals, and the page number. Thus, for example:  
The Homecoming, I, 5.

All references to other O'Neill plays, unless otherwise indicated, are to this three-volume edition and will be cited in footnotes.

<sup>1</sup>Louis Sheaffer comments, "the reviews were the most enthusiastic the author would receive in his lifetime (only Long Day's Journey into Night, produced after his death, won higher praise) . . . "; see his O'Neill: Son and Artist (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1973), p. 387. See pp. 387-391 for an overview of initial responses to the play.

<sup>2</sup>"Working Notes and Extracts from a Fragmentary Work Diary," in American Playwrights on Drama ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill & Wang, 1965), p. 3. Hereafter cited as Frenz.

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of O'Neill's technical experiments see Timo Tiusenan, O'Neill's Scenic Images (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 225-240. He describes Electra as "a temporary synthesis of the best" in O'Neill's "multipurpose experiments" before World War II (p. 240). In Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) Travis Bogard says Electra "takes its place in the forefront of many modern dramas based on Greek themes and written by the greatest names in the modern theatre . . . " (p. 341). Stephan L. Fluckiger in "The Idea of Puritanism in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill," Renascence 30 (Spring, 1978) describes Ezra Mannon as O'Neill's "emblematic Puritan" (p. 155). A more recent discussion of O'Neill and Puritanism is by Frederick Wilkins, "The Pressure of Puritanism in O'Neill's New England Plays," in Eugene O'Neill: A World View ed. Virginia Floyd (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1979), pp. 237-244. A more extensive discussion of puritan elements is by Thomas E. Porter, Myth and Modern American Drama (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), pp. 26-52.

<sup>4</sup>F.I. Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 71.



Carpenter argues that O'Neill's three plays together "describe the human tragedy of modern man, in contrast to 'The Divine Comedy' of earlier times."

<sup>5</sup> Eleanor Flexner, American Playwrights: 1918-1938 (New York; Simon and Schuster, 1938), p. 155.

<sup>6</sup> Extensive quotations from O'Neill's notes and early drafts of the play are included in Eugene O'Neill at Work: Newly Released Ideas for Plays edited and annotated by Virginia Floyd (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981), pp. 185-209. While these notes have the merit of detail, the "Fragmentary Diary" has the virtue of presenting an overview of the process of composition. Page numbers in parentheses refer to the "Fragmentary Diary" in Frenz.

<sup>7</sup> Virginia Floyd includes quotations from O'Neill's notes on plot and character (made by the playwright in May 1929) in O'Neill at Work, pp. 186-192; his scenarios for the first two plays (May through July 1929) are discussed pp. 192-204. A useful chart outlining O'Neill's subsequent progress on the play is on pp. 205-207.

O'Neill's notes for his characters (May 12-18, 1929) make their sexual motivations explicit. The figure who becomes Christine is described as having set out to make Ezra Mannon fall in love with her "and succeeded at the cost of losing her own head; but her passionate, full-blooded femaleness had never found sex-satisfaction in his repressed morally-constrained, disapproving sex frigidity." Then, while Mannon is absent during the war, she takes a lover. "A fierce tide of long-repressed passions sweeps over her, overthrowing all the religious and social taboos of her training" (p. 188). Here we have an explicit articulation of the theme of subverse sexuality.

The lover is characterized as a "man-about town . . . , his principle occupation that of a lover of women" (p. 189).

The Electra figure in the first scenario hates her mother and her lover (called Gustave), and yet is fascinated by the thought of marrying him: "a strange conflict is going on within her, she cannot help being fascinated by the idea of being his wife, in bed with him, although she loathes herself, and Gustave and her mother, all the same because of this" (p. 195).

In the story of the second play (June, 1929) when Orin learns of his mother's infidelity (from love letters) he is astonished; with phrases from the letters in his mind "he suddenly begins to identify himself with his father, to feel as if it was to him his mother had been unfaithful" (p. 200).

<sup>8</sup>Virginia Floyd in O'Neill at Work notes that O'Neill set aside work on his trilogy in 1929 to spend six days rereading and studying Greek plays. Floyd writes, "O'Neill's intention from the start—and this is reinforced by the six-day reading period—is to combine the Greek sense of family fate in a modern approximation of the Oresteia and the theme of incest in Oedipus Rex" (p. 197).

<sup>9</sup>Horst Frenz and Martin Mueller, "More Shakespeare and Less Aeschylus in Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra," American Literature 38 (March, 1966), pp. 85-100.

<sup>10</sup>See Egil Törnqvist, "Miss Julie and O'Neill," Modern Drama 19 (December, 1976), pp. 351-364. Travis Bogard in Contour in Time makes the reference to Zarathustra (p. 351).

<sup>11</sup>Jean Chothia, Forging a Language: A Study of the Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 104-105.

<sup>12</sup>In O'Neill at Work Floyd documents O'Neill's borrowings from various sources in the course of writing his plays. See, for example, her Bibliography, pp. 394-95.

<sup>13</sup>Howard Mumford Jones, "Introduction," to Dark Laughter by Sherwood Anderson (New York: Liveright, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup>Sherwood Anderson, Dark Laughter, p. 230.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>16</sup>Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 597-98.

<sup>17</sup>See Doris Alexander, "Psychological Fate in Mourning Becomes Electra," PMLA 68 (December, 1953), pp. 923-934; and see Thomas E. Porter, Myth and Modern American Drama, pp. 26-52.

<sup>18</sup>See Chapter One above for a discussion of O'Neill's idea of fate.

<sup>19</sup>Sheaffer comments in Son and Artist on the schematic intra-familial conflicts: ". . . Electra could hardly follow more closely, more obviously, Freud's view of the basic pattern between children and parents. Yet its weakness as literature is a prime source of the play's strength as theatre, for the schematic Freudian pattern constantly sets the stage for confrontations" (p. 371). The remark on psychological incest is by Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (New York: Atheneum, 1975), p. 57.

<sup>20</sup>Travis Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 349.

<sup>21</sup>See Chapters Two to Four above.

<sup>22</sup>Flexner, American Playwrights, p. 190.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>24</sup>Eric Bentley, "Trying to Like O'Neill," In Search of Theatre (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), pp. 232-33.

<sup>25</sup>O'Neill to George Jean Nathan, 26 March 1925, in Isaac Goldberg, The Theatre of George Jean Nathan (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1926), p. 158.

<sup>26</sup>Six Plays of Strindberg, trans. Elizabeth Sprigge (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955), p. 193.

<sup>27</sup>Contour in Time, p. 349.

<sup>28</sup>See Egil Törnqvist, A Drama of Souls: Studies in O'Neill's Super-Naturalistic Technique (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), pp. 178-81.

<sup>29</sup>For a discussion of the use of images of society as a mode of analysis, see Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961, 1965), pp. 120-142.

<sup>30</sup>Clifford Leech, O'Neill (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963), pp. 87-88.

<sup>31</sup>In The Romantic Agony (Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1956) Mario Praz writes: ". . . the exotic and the erotic ideals go hand in hand . . . a love of the exotic is usually an imaginative projection of a sexual desire" (p. 197). Christine is described as "Furrin lookin'" (The Homecoming, I, 8 and 9).

<sup>32</sup>In Hamlet and Oedipus (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954) Ernest Jones discusses the process of "decompositon" or "splitting" in which "various attributes of a given individual are disunited, and several other individuals are invented, each endowed with one group of the original attributes" (p. 140). From this point of view, then, Ezra, Adam, Orin are all aspects of puritan manhood; more positive features are embodied in Peter, who is outside the Mannon family. Hazel plays a role corresponding to Peter's for the Mannon women: Marie Brantôme, Christine, Lavinia. John Stafford in "Mourning Becomes America," Texas Studies in Language and Literature 3 (Winter, 1962), comments on this pattern: "Woman in Mourning Becomes Electra and in the United States is something more than the object of sentimental love; she is the symbol of Love, Life, Fertility, Beauty, Independence, Maturity, Freedom—everything that is the opposite of the Puritan strain of behavior dominated by Hate, Death, Sterility, Ugliness, Dependence, Immaturity, Slavery. . . . The description of Hazel and Peter Niles shows us the kind of wholesome American character that the non-Puritan behavior patterns can develop" (p. 553). O'Neill's achievement is to make these abstract attributes seem real. I discuss below how the play is not so neatly divided into opposing values. In fact, toward the end of the trilogy, Lavinia takes on the characteristics of both her mother and father.

<sup>33</sup>Bogard in Contour in Time makes this comment (p. 354) though he qualifies it somewhat by adding that "Such symbols as exist in the play, the house, for example, or the portraits, or the flowers, are all related to the human beings at the central focus."

<sup>34</sup>Egil Törnqvist in A Drama of Souls notes that "The inescapability

of the fate [of the Mannons] is underlined by the static setting: the house—exterior or interior—is nearly always before our eyes" (p. 64).

In an idea for a play dated 1929, while he was still working on Electra, O'Neill described some of the qualities suggested by the house symbol in Electra (the quotation is from O'Neill at Work, p. 211):

"The House"—a play in which a home (N[ew] E[ngland]) is principal—show all rooms—the house the symbol of the past, of hereditary influences—but in a larger way the symbol of man's life, of the home he tries to make his own out of a strange alien solitude of Time and Space and Nature—that becomes a symbol of his life and its intermingling with other lives—sprung up on its hill—to youth, manhood, decline, slow death, decay, passing back into nature—also in a particular way, a symbol of America, of the fineness of its ideals manifested and choked by the saneless growth of its prosperity—a play of ghosts from Indians down with present owner only living character.

<sup>35</sup> Doris Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 132.

<sup>36</sup> Lazarus Laughed, Plays, Vol. 2, p. 310.

<sup>37</sup> Doris Alexander in "Eugene O'Neill as Social Critic," O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism ed. Oscar Cargill et. al. (New York: New York University Press, 1961) writes "Ultimately Eugene O'Neill's social criticism cancels itself out, for he not only condemns all of society as is, he rejects all solutions for making it better" (p. 407). This amounts to a negative recognition of O'Neill's subversive bent: she assumes that a critic of society ought to offer a solution. In that case O'Neill would not be a critic. In Electra O'Neill's presentation of an idyllic life in the South Seas quite clearly points in the direction of a better life without offering a program for that betterment.

For an overview of this strand of O'Neill criticism, see John Gassner, "Homage to O'Neill," in O'Neill and His Plays, esp. pp. 325-26. Some recent critics have sought to right the balance concerning the nature of O'Neill's treatment of society. See E.G. Griffin, "Eugene O'Neill: An Introduction to His Life and Career," Eugene O'Neill: A Collection of Criticism (New York: MacGraw-Hill, 1976), pp. 1-20; see also Virginia Floyd's "Introduction" to Eugene O'Neill: A World View, pp. 24-27, and her "Introduction" to O'Neill at Work, esp. pp. xviii-xxii.

<sup>38</sup> See for example Thomas Porter, Myth and Modern American Drama, pp. 26-52.

<sup>39</sup> In Myth on the Modern Stage (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969) Hugh Dickinson writes, "The curse of the house is puritanism, and its agent is the incestuous triangles formed through self-love and self-hate" (p. 174).

<sup>40</sup> Edwin Engel, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 239.

<sup>41</sup> See cummings' sonnet, "pity this busy monster, manunkind," in e.e. cummings: A Selection of Poems (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), p. 125.

<sup>42</sup> Cyrus Day, "The Iceman and the Bridegroom: Some Observations on the Death of O'Neill's Salesman," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Iceman Cometh" ed. John Henry Raleigh (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 84.

"Manon" is also a French variation of "Mary," according to E.G. Withycombe, The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names, Second Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 201. This suggests that O'Neill's indictment of the Mannons may also be an oblique attack on the Mother Church and on his own mother, Mary Ellen "Ella" Quinlan O'Neill. "Minnie" (in Electra she has "round stupid eyes, and a round mouth pursed out to drink in gossip" [p. 6]; in Desire Under the Elms, Minnie is the district whore) is described by Withycombe as "a Scottish pet-form of Mary" which became popular in nineteenth century England (p. 210). There seems little doubt that O'Neill's resentment against his mother (signalled in the diagram, for example) is an undercurrent in his plays.

<sup>43</sup> Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 57.

<sup>44</sup> Frenz, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup>Floyd in O'Neill at Work suggests that O'Neill's conception of his "blessed isles" symbol may be an outgrowth of earlier notes for an unfinished play, "Career of Shih Huang Ti." O'Neill made notes for the latter in May and July 1929. In his notes for the play O'Neill quotes a passage from A.E. Grantham's Hills of Blue (1927) describing a "wonder-island on the edge of the world where the plant of immortality grew." Quoted by Floyd, p. 119. This background underlines the exotic quality of the Islands symbol.

<sup>46</sup>Frenz, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>In preliminary notes written in 1928 for what later became Dynamo, O'Neill describes the relationship between Light and his wife in terms which suggest the Adam-Christine relationship: "Her body has remained in full control over his will" (quoted in O'Neill at Work, p. 134).

<sup>49</sup>In his May 1929 scenario for the trilogy O'Neill describes his Electra figure's brooding on her mother's sexual drives: "'What filth physical passion is—and yet how it attracts her! She hates herself.'" (O'Neill at Work, p. 196). Dramatizing this kind of ambivalence is one of O'Neill's major achievements in the published play.

<sup>50</sup>One of the more striking literary instances of this psychological state is in the opening paragraphs of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." For a discussion of this quality in Poe, see Richard Wilbur, "Introduction," to Poe (New York: Dell, 1959), pp. 19-28.

Like Electra, Poe's story is one of incest, life-in-death and family dissolution.

<sup>51</sup>This language is consistent with the totalism discussed above in connection with Caligula (Chapter Three above) and Reuben Light (Chapter Four above).

<sup>52</sup>Bogard, Contour in Time, pp. 351-52.

<sup>53</sup> Forging a Language, pp. 107-110.

<sup>54</sup> Strange Interlude in Plays, Vol. I, p. 135.

<sup>55</sup> In his original scheme for Electra O'Neill had two brothers, Hugh and Orin. Floyd says that Hugh is "a self-portrait" (O'Neill at Work, p. xxviii). O'Neill describes in his early scheme how Orin is delighted with the news of Hugh's death in the war (O'Neill at Work, p. 190), a brother-to-brother conflict that prefigures Long Day's Journey into Night.

<sup>56</sup> In O'Neill at Work Virginia Floyd comments: "What O'Neill emphasizes in the scenario for the second play of his trilogy—and what emerges as a dominant theme in the notes and final draft—is mother betrayal of the son; his attempt to avenge infidelity necessarily—to conform to the Greek models—leads to her physical death. Undoubtedly, the person who exerts the greatest influence on O'Neill—personally adverse but creatively beneficial—is his mother. His subconscious cry of rage against her—the alternating currents of attraction and revulsion—echoes throughout the canon" (p. 197). In an unfinished play from 1941 called "The Last Conquest" O'Neill conceived of a statue which is, in Floyd's phrase, "an incarnation of evil" (p. 328). She has different functions in different scenes; she stands variously as "Our Mother of Destruction and Death," "Our Mother of Victory (War and Conquest)," "Mother of Bureaucracy and Fertility, Fecundity," "Our Mother of Gluttony (Cannibalism)," (O'Neill's notes quoted by Floyd, p. 339).

<sup>57</sup> D.H. Lawrence, Sons and Lovers (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), p. 279.

<sup>58</sup> Susan Sontag, Illness as Metaphor (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 58.

<sup>59</sup> In On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works compiled and edited by Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 247-260.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 250.



61 Ibid.

62 Sons and Lovers, p. 279.

63 Patrick Roberts overstates the charge when he suggests that the characters talk "with so consistent a Freudian emphasis" as to become in parts of the play "puppets of the author." He also overstates when he suggests that Orin is "the fullest and most interesting character study" in the play. See The Psychology of Tragic Drama (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 170-182; the quotations are from p. 179 and 173 respectively.

64 Norman N. Holland discusses the relation of oral imagery to infant-mother relationships in Poems in Persons: An Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Literature (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973): ". . . people who approach the world as if they were going to be fed by it often perceive experiences in all-or-nothing terms. You can sample these feelings for yourself by imagining the state of the infant: the feeding mother is either wholly there or utterly absent; he is either being totally gratified or he is completely frustrated and despairing" (p. 138).

65 Here too there is an element of social criticism. In a letter of 11 March 1929 to Lawrence Langer, O'Neill remarked on the failure of the critics to see his central point in Dynamo: ". . . no one seems to have gotten the real human relationship story, what his mother does to the boy and what that leads to in his sacrifice of the girl to a maternal deity in the end—the girl his mother hated and was jealous of—that was all that was the boy's real God struggle, or prompted it. This all fits in with the general theme of American life in back of the play, America being the land of the mother complex" (quoted by Floyd, O'Neill at Work, p. 126).

66 Orin's desire for death may also be linked to O'Neill's concept of Nirvana. In his autobiographical diagram, O'Neill places Nirvana outside of time, as it were, the perfect bliss of peace before the separation of mother and child at birth. He also thinks of Nirvana as the peace that follows death. In Marco Millions a Buddhist merchant character describes the achievement of Buddha: ". . . at last he attained the wisdom where all desire has ended and experienced the heaven of peace, Nirvana . . ." (Plays, 2, p. 372).

<sup>67</sup>For example, John Hutchens writes (in "Greece to Broadway," Theatre Arts 16 [January, 1932], p. 16; reprinted in O'Neill and His Plays ed. Cargill et al., p. 193: "In the moment when Lavinia, in black, stands framed between the white pillars of the House of Mannon, the sunset dying at her feet, the course of passion run—in that moment, playwright, performer and artist come together in a superb conclusion that belongs as completely and solely to the theatre as Mr. O'Neill himself."

<sup>68</sup>Chothia, Forging a Language, pp. 107-108.

<sup>69</sup>Stark Young uses the term "exhilarating" to describe his response to the ending. The last sentence of his article is: "When the play ended, and the last Mannon was gone into the house, the door shut, I felt in a full lovely sense, that the Erinyes were appeased, and that the Eumenides, the Gentle Ones, passed over the stage . . . ." (Eugene O'Neill's New Play, " New Republic 68 (11 November 1931), p. 355; reprinted in O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 88. Dickinson quarrels with this interpretation in Myth on the Modern Stage, pp. 171-175. He contends that there is no possibility of peace for Lavinia for she "has not escaped from the blight of puritanism, and her withdrawal from the world confirms the fact" p. 175. As I argue, below, it seems more apt to say that the blight manifests itself in puritanism but its source is the inevitable discovery that the needs of the body are inimicably at odds with cultural organization. Puritanism is that form of social ethos which exacerbates the tension between bodily drives and social order.

<sup>70</sup>Melville's sentence, in Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life (New York: Airmont, 1965), is as follows: "Their very name is a frightful one; for the word 'Typee' in the Marquesan dialect signifies a lover of human flesh" p. 29. O'Neill must have enjoyed the dark ambiguity of Orin's identifying his mother with the island and the island with Typee.

<sup>71</sup>Doris Falk comments on the name "Maw" as a pun "for O'Neill's ambivalent conception of woman . . ." (in "That Paradox, O'Neill," Modern Drama 6 (December, 1963), p. 228.

<sup>72</sup>The kiss recalls for instance the wish of Doctor Faustus to be embraced by Helen and his subsequent loss of his soul. In Electra it is Lavinia who is doomed by her passion.

<sup>73</sup>Eric Partridge, The Penguin Dictionary of Historical Slang, abridged by Jacqueline Simpson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 306.

<sup>74</sup>Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 10. Burke describes this ending as a reduction of action to sheer motion, "a kind of inverted transcendence . . ." p. 10. This idea of inversion suggests that Lavinia's entombment is an inversion of Lazarus' merger with the cosmos and Orin's desire to merge with his mother.

<sup>75</sup>Lionel Trilling, Beyond Culture (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), p. 115.

## Conclusion

The function of literature, through all its mutations, has been to make us aware of the particularity of selves, and the high authority of the self in its quarrel with its society and its culture. Literature is in that sense subversive.

This study has explored an "inner continuity"<sup>2</sup> to the writings of Eugene O'Neill which issue from a six-year span in the middle of his career, 1926 to 1932. In these writings we see an ongoing tension between O'Neill's didactic impulse, a wish to assert a sense of wholeness and integrity, and his implicit recognition of the forces which undermine that vision of wholeness. This tension is evident in the most personal documents O'Neill composed during the period (his family summary and private life-chart composed during consultations early in 1926 with psychiatrist G.V. Hamilton), in his public statements on the aesthetics of the drama (including his published working notes on Mourning Becomes Electra) and in the four plays completed during the period: Lazarus Laughed, Strange Interlude, Dynamo, and Mourning Becomes Electra. This study, then, is in the mainstream of O'Neill criticism which recognizes him as an autobiographical playwright. This study advances O'Neill scholarship in two ways.

First, it shows in detail the autobiographic base of (a) his aesthetic statements of the period (which include the only extended pieces he published) and (b) his treatment of sexuality. O'Neill asserted that the task of the modern dramatist is to "express those profound hidden conflicts of the mind which the probings of psychology

continue to disclose to us"<sup>3</sup>; this principle arises out of his practice as a playwright and parallels his personal drive to fathom, understand and shape his personal past and his cultural past. Such aesthetic statements and his plays of this period represent O'Neill's efforts to translate into dramatic practice the psychological principles implicit in his personal analysis. Similarly, the crises described in his written personal analysis are illuminated by the theoretical statements and the plays themselves. A close analysis of the plays has shown that the most persistent source of "profound hidden conflicts" is sexuality; this is true even of Lazarus Laughed in which O'Neill's didactic impulse led him to assert a vision transcending limitations of space, time, and the flesh.

Second, this study demonstrates how the four plays issuing from this period of personal upheaval and spectacular technical experimentation dramatize the subversive power of the sexual body. There are two levels to this subversion. One level is to reveal the limitations of the given world of values. A second level, potentially more searching and critical, is to posit a world of values in which bodily needs may be fulfilled. Lazarus Laughed fails as a work of art because it asserts a world of values which does not accommodate the needs of the body, yet the play itself includes the essential criticism of its own didactic vision. Dynamo fails because it emphasizes limitations of a contemporary world without effectively dramatizing a more satisfactory one. Strange Interlude, composed between Lazarus and Dynamo, is uneven because it fails to maintain the tension between a vision of potential fulfillment and a criticism of contemporary values. O'Neill's emphasis here falls on

a vision of a world "beyond desire" and hence does not fully accommodate the insistent demands of the sexual body. Mourning Becomes Electra emerges as the most fully-realized work of art of the period in that it offers a vision of potential fulfillment without compromising a searching criticism of the limitations of New England (and by extension American) civilization. It is in Electra that O'Neill radically accommodates the voice of the body, that force that Lionel Trilling describes as "a hard, irreducible, stubborn core of biological urgency, and biological necessity, and biological reason, that culture cannot reach and that reserves the right to judge the culture and resist and revise it."<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Electra represents O'Neill's most searching social criticism for he shows how a repressive system of values inscribes itself on the living body.

From these plays two complementary scenic images suggest the dimensions of O'Neill's treatment of sexuality. A positive sense of wholeness and integrity infuses the scene in Strange Interlude in which Nina imagines that the desires of her four men (father, lover, husband, and son) all merge in her.<sup>5</sup> This is an image of the sexual body as a world of potential: it encompasses the primary relationships between man and woman, and embraces the past, present, and future. Nina's womb and genitals comprise the focal centre of the scene and the vital centre of the universe projected by the play. In that Nina thinks of herself as God and includes her lover among her four men, O'Neill's undercutting of conventional values is apparent. Artistically, however, the scene is static and for its full effectiveness depends upon juxtaposition with other more dynamic scenes.

The scenic image which best complements this, and which reveals fully its dramatic representation of sexuality, is the ending of Mourning Becomes Electra in which Lavinia immures herself in the Mannon house. Where Nina's voice (her stream of consciousness) gets close to the roots of the body feeling which informs her utterance (we imagine her with knees apart, expressing physically her openness to her men), Lavinia's manner, both voice and body movement, is stiff and rigid. Lavinia in entering the house becomes, like her father, a stick (his nickname was "Old Stick in the Mud"). She becomes a stick in her own house; this radical shutting out of others and turning in upon herself makes the scene a composite image of masturbation. Yet the sexual body is acknowledged in her denial of the world; Lavinia makes a negative testimony to the power of sexuality. In this scene and in the Nina scene O'Neill effectively dramatizes the sexual body as the source and test of cultural values.

In sum, we see in this period O'Neill moving toward a mature vision of the world and the place of the body in that world. Like his great American predecessors, he develops a subversive vision. A recent critic of American literature has argued that most discussion of American writers overlooks "the kernel that today's readers still find relevant and that most disturbed the writers' own contemporaries." This kernel he describes as the "subversive vision": "For the mark of every major American author since the days of Poe has been an inability to find his culture adequate to his search for value, either in the universe or his immediate society; and the new ways of looking at the world postulated by these men—different as they were as

individuals—were definitely subversive of what has often been called the "official faith," although to each writer the "official faith" meant something different."<sup>6</sup> O'Neill's way of subversion is to dramatize the sexual body in a world of values, to say no to the prevailing orthodoxies of his time: God the father, the success ethic, the idolatry of the modern machine, the worship of science, the notion that the spirit is superior to the flesh.

Yet this was no easy matter for O'Neill. He was involved in the struggle which D.H. Lawrence has described as basic to American art.

Surely it is especially true of American art, that it is all essentially moral. Hawthorne, Poe, Longfellow, Emerson, Melville: it is the moral issue which engages them. They all feel uneasy about the old morality. Senuously, passionately, they all attack the old morality. But they know nothing better, mentally. Therefore they give tight mental allegiance to a morality which all their passion goes to destroy. Hence the duplicity which is the fatal flaw in them: most fatal in the most perfect American work of art, The Scarlet Letter. Tight mental allegiance given to a morality which the passional self repudiates.

Like Whitman, O'Neill tried to break "the old moral conception that the soul of man is something 'superior' and 'above' the flesh."<sup>8</sup> Like Whitman, O'Neill tried to seize the soul and tell her to "Stay in the flesh. Stay in the limbs and lips and in the belly. Stay in the breast and womb. Stay there, Oh Soul, where you belong."<sup>9</sup>

In so addressing the spirit even when he wanted to affirm her supremacy, O'Neill was part of the larger revolution in artistic values characterized as naturalism. The sexual revolution is but one strand of change in art and values effected by naturalism and which only



recently we have been able to see in proper perspective. O'Neill's middle plays show a development in his career which parallels the development of naturalism. Naturalism transformed literature by insisting that the artist like the scientist must observe the world as it is. The famous slogan of Zola—"A work of art cannot but be a corner of nature seen through a temperament"<sup>10</sup>—concisely states the main tenet of literary naturalism. O'Neill's contention that he wanted to illuminate "even the most sordid and mean blind alleys of life"<sup>11</sup> testifies to the impact of the naturalist ethos upon his art, though he would not accept the label of "naturalist" anymore than the label of "Freudian dramatist."<sup>12</sup>

But O'Neill's middle plays nonetheless correspond to a development inherent in the logic of naturalism. If the artist is to be a strict observer of nature, then just as a scientist examines his instruments of observation so the artist must examine the temperament through which the corner of nature is viewed. As Martin Esslin has effectively argued, the interior monologue represents an inevitable extension of the logic of naturalism.<sup>13</sup> O'Neill's experiments with stream of consciousness, his concern with the profound hidden conflicts animating the personality are also part of the naturalist movement toward an exploration of subjectivity. In dramatizing the subversive power of sexuality, O'Neill helped bring American dramatic literature into the mainstream of modern writing.

## Notes: Conclusion

<sup>1</sup>Lionel Trilling, "Freud: Within and Beyond Culture," in Beyond Culture (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), p. 103.

<sup>2</sup>The phrase is from Richard Dana Skinner, Eugene O'Neill: A Poet's Quest (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), p. xi.

<sup>3</sup>"Memoranda on Masks," first published in The American Spectator November 1932; reprinted in O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism ed. Oscar Cargill et. al. (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 116.

<sup>4</sup>Trilling, Beyond Culture, p. 115.

<sup>5</sup>Strange Interlude, Act 6, in The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 135.

<sup>6</sup>Michael J. Hoffman, The Subversive Vision: American Romanticism in Literature (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1972), p. 4.

<sup>7</sup>D.H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), p. 171.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 172.

O'Neill sketched an idea for a play about Man and his Soul (probably 1931). O'Neill's description of the course of their love illustrates the power of spirit to resist being absorbed by the flesh. See O'Neill at Work ed. Virginia Floyd (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981), pp. 226-227:

Man and his Soul—Soul, masked, feminine, beautiful—  
his life-long struggle is to possess her.

She is spiritual aspiration, pride, love in spiritual sense—at the same time she is humility, self-sacrifice, tender humanity and pity, goodness—the ideal.

He is mind, ambition, egotism, arrogance, worldly desire for self-eminence, craving for possession material, determination to succeed, iron will—at same time he is weakness, weariness, a turning back, a longing to fly from reality, a great fear of life and death, a fear of love which causes defiant reaction, a continual craving for possession [of] women in flesh, power over them, a false desperate lust for bodies.

He scorns love, notorious for many affairs but has never married—pretends [to] scorn marriage—his one love is for Soul.

Noted as bachelor, he lives with Soul, whom no one sees—lives in continual strife, love and hatred—always his Soul loves him but refuses [to] give herself to him until he becomes worthy—until he purifies himself—always she goads him on toward the heights.

It is only at the moment of death that he finally possesses her.

She always demands that he give up the world for her—that he ruin (save) himself as the price of her love.

<sup>10</sup>Quoted by Martin Esslin in Reflections: Essays on Modern Theatre (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), p. 18.

<sup>11</sup>O'Neill to Nathan 26 March 1925 in Isaac Goldberg, The Theatre of George Jean Nathan (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), p. 158.

<sup>12</sup>See O'Neill's comments on naturalism in "Strindberg and Our Theatre" in American Playwrights on Drama ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill & Wang, 1965), pp. 1-2.

<sup>13</sup>Reflections, p. 24.

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