

Chapter III

O'Neill's Use of Greek Tragic Elements:

Plot, the Tragic Hero, and Destiny and Its Revelation

In a letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn in 1952, Eugene O'Neill announces that his objective as a writer is

to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives. And just here is where I am a most confirmed mystic, too, for I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind--Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it--Mystery certainly--and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and that it is possible--or can be--to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage.¹

¹Eugene O'Neill, Letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn, 1952, quoted in C. W. E. Bigsby, "Eugene O'Neill," in A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, Vol. 1: 1900-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 45.

Additionally, in this letter, he also confesses that he wants to achieve tragedy in the Greek way, for it seems to him that the "Greek dream in tragedy is the noblest ever!"² Therefore, apart from his use of the Greek tragic structure, chorus, unities of time and place, and masks, O'Neill also makes use of other elements of Greek tragedy in his Greek influenced tragedies, Desire Under the Elms, Lazarus Laughed and Mourning Becomes Electra, such elements being plot, the tragic hero, and the role of destiny and its revelations.

In Aristotle's famous statement on dramatic plot, he says that in "tragedy there is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself."³ Therefore, Greek tragedy was built around certain plots which were supposed to be historical or legendary. O'Neill, too, in writing Desire Under the Elms makes the plot go back to 1850--the time of the California gold rush. In Mourning Becomes Electra the time is 1865-1866--after the Civil War. And in Lazarus Laughed, the time follows the crucifixion of Jesus. Like Greek tragedy, O'Neill's tragedies are about murders and, like Greek tragedy, some of them are murders among people

²Ibid.

³Aristotle, On Poetics, trans. Ingram Bywater, in The Work of Aristotle, Vol. 2, Robert Maynard (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), p. 684.

in the same family, such as the murder of son by mother as in Desire Under the Elms; husband by wife as in Homecoming and uncle by nephew as in The Hunted. Additionally, in composing Desire Under the Elms, Lazarus Laughed and Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill is very much influenced by Greek tragic plot.

A study of Desire Under the Elms will reveal that its plot re-enacts many of the tragic incidents of the old Greek myths--Oedipus, Hippolytus-Phaedra-Theseus and Medea; however, there are differences that are very much "O'Neill" in character and which remind us that the play is not merely a Greek "transplant" but an ingenious synthesis of antiquity and modernity. Like Euripides' Hippolytus, the father, Ephraim Cabot, or Theseus in Hippolytus, has returned to his farm, bringing with him a young wife, Abbie, Phaedra's counterpart, who is immediately attracted to her stepson Eben or Hippolytus. Like Phaedra, Abbie at first conceals her passion for Eben but by different means. While Phaedra conceals her passion by starving herself, Abbie conceals it with "the mask of scorn."⁴ Like Phaedra, she asks that the son be banished for the same reason that Eben is a potential

⁴Edgar F. Racey, Jr., "Myth as Tragic Structure in Desire Under the Elms," in O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliff; New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 59.

rival for the farm. Unlike Phaedra, Abbie confronts Eben directly and although she is rejected at first, she is finally successful in her advances. Phaedra's Nurse handles everything for her but she fails and Hippolytus not only rejects Phaedra but insults her as well. Like Phaedra, Abbie, when rejected by her stepson, accuses him of raping her. However, unlike Euripides' Hippolytus, Eben is not the chaste Hippolytus. He not only enjoys the affair but also seems to enjoy sexual affairs in general as seen in his desire for Min, the Prostitute. And with the affair between Eben and Abbie, the play reminds us of the incest in Sophocles' Oedipus the King although theirs is a technically quasi-incestuous one. Also, in Desire Under the Elms, the curse of the father on the son does not come from Ephraim on Eben like that of Theseus on Hippolytus, but it comes from the father Eben on his son by Abbie. Furthermore, the instrument of the death is not Poseidon or a bull from the sea, but Abbie herself. Additionally, with Abbie's infanticide, O'Neill echoes the Medea myth in his play. However, Medea kills her two children as revenge against Jason for his cruel treatment of her whereas Abbie kills her child to prove her love for Eben: "She kills what she loves to prove a greater love;"⁵

⁵Normand Berlin, Eugene O'Neill (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), p. 77.

In his notes for Lazarus Laughed, O'Neill quotes and paraphrases Aristotle and Nietzsche, and made a thorough reading of selections from historical works on Tiberius, Roman history, and books on mythology. He also made copious notes on Dionysus. Thus, in composing this tragedy, O'Neill was influenced by several sources. However, in his published version, there is some similarity to Euripides' The Bacchae, in that the play concerns a new but strange religious creed and its god. Although O'Neill uses the Hebraic Lazarus as the protagonist of the play, the central allegory refers to the Dionysian rites. It is obvious that "in his use of the Hebraic Lazarus who gains a Greek insight from Christ, O'Neill implies analogy between the Christian, Hebraic, and Greek mythology patterns. His real emphasis, however, is upon the ritual death of Lazarus as Dionysus."⁶

Not the coarse, drunken Dionysus, nor the effeminate God, but Dionysus in his middle period, more comprehensive in his symbolism, the soul of the recurring seasons, of living and dying as processes in

⁶Doris V. Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension: An Interpretative Study of the Plays (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 113.

*eternal growth, of the wine of life stirring forever in the sap and blood and loam of things.*⁷

Like The Bacchae, Lazarus Laughed begins with the return of Lazarus, not from Asia but from death to preach his new religious creed, as Dionysus did. Although the means of preaching differs--Dionysus uses wine while Lazarus uses laughter--the result is similar, as seen in The Bacchae when Pentheus reports:

. . . our women [leave] home to frisk
in mock ecstasies among the thickets on the mountain,
dancing in honor of the latest divinity,
a certain Dionysus, whoever he may be!
In their midst stand bowls brimming with wine.
And then, one by one, the women wander off
to hidden nooks where they serve the lusts of men.⁸

and in Lazarus Laughed in an aged Orthodox Jew's words:
"Our young people are corrupted! They are leaving our
farms--to dance and sing! To laugh! Ha--! Laugh

⁷Eugene O'Neill, Lazarus Laughed, in his Nine Plays, int. Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Random House, 1932), p. 415. All future references to the work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁸Euripides, The Bacchae, trans. William Arrowsmith, in The Complete Greek Tragedies, Vol. 4: Euripides, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), ll. 218-224, p. 552.

at everything!" (Lazarus Laughed, I.ii, p. 394). The followers of both Dionysus and Lazarus are completely possessed, killing their sons or nephews as in The Bacchae, or stabbing themselves to death as in Lazarus Laughed. However, when the wine loses its effect or the laughter has gone, they recover and cannot remember what happened when they were so possessed. Although Lazarus, as implied in the play, is the reincarnation of Dionysus, he is not a mighty god like Dionysus who can punish those who oppose him, but an ordinary human being who cannot avoid his ultimate destiny. Thus, he dies at the end of the play.

Although Desire Under the Elms and Lazarus Laughed, contain definite similarities to Greek tragedy, neither was written in deliberate imitation of any Greek tragedy in particular. However, in writing Mourning Becomes Electra O'Neill determined to write a Greek tragedy. The idea of writing a Greek tragedy came to his mind after he read Arthur Symons' translation of Hugo von Hofmannstahl's Electra. It is a German idea using a Greek tragic plot in a modern setting. O'Neill praised it as a "beautiful written thing"⁹ in his letter to Macgowan,

⁹Eugene O'Neill, Letter to Macgowan, 4 April 1926, quoted in Virginia Floyd, ed., Eugene O'Neill at Work: Newly Released Ideas for Plays (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981), p. 185.

and he wondered why no one had ever done this before. Later, O'Neill decided to write a Greek tragedy himself following the plot of the Oresteia. In his 1928 Notebook, he records his original idea: "Use the plots from Greek tragedy in modern surroundings--the New England play of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Electra & Orestes--Oedipus."¹⁰ Since "Electra [was] to [him] the most interesting of all women in drama,"¹¹ he narrowed the focus of the play to the idea of Electra. Thus, in his original outline for the play, he gives two possible titles to the whole work, Electra Trilogy and Mourning Becomes Electra. The latter title he kept for his published version.

In addition, O'Neill wrote Mourning Becomes Electra to explore his curiosity about why Electra in Greek tragedy escapes punishment. He questions:

¹⁰Eugene O'Neill, Fragmentary Diary, 1928, quoted in Virginia Floyd, ed., Eugene O'Neill at Work, p. 185.

¹¹Eugene O'Neill, Letter to Robert Sisk, 28 August 1930, quoted in Virginia Floyd, ed., Eugene O'Neill at Work, p. 185.

Why did the chain of fated crime and retribution ignore her mother's murderess?--a weakness in what remains to us of Greek tragedy that there is no play about Electra's life after murder of Clytemnestra.¹²

Thus, his fundamental intention in writing Mourning Becomes Electra was "to present in this work imaginative--but logically envisioned--events that follow the murder, showing the avenger as unable to escape the tragic web of family fate."¹³

At the beginning, O'Neill made general notes on the characters in which "[h]e changes, in some instances several times, the names of the characters and the early concept he has of them."¹⁴ O'Neill utilizes the relationships in the house of Atreus in creating the structure of the Mannon clan. The names of the characters are "developed by the alliterative scheme."¹⁵ The names Mannon and Orin follow the punning allusion to "Agamemnon" and "Orestes" respectively. At one time, he tried to

¹²Eugene O'Neill, Fragmentary Diary, November 1928, quoted in Virginia Floyd, ed., Eugene O'Neill at Work, p. 185.

¹³Virginia Floyd, ed., Eugene O'Neill at Work: Newly Released Ideas for Plays (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981), p. 185.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 186.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 341.

name the other characters in keeping with this scheme. In Lavinia's case, he first called her "Elavinia," and in Christine's case, first "Clemence" and then "Clementina." From the ancient servant of Electra, O'Neill got Seth and from Pylades he got Peter. O'Neill even included Electra's sisters, Iphigeneia and Chrysothemis, and also wrote descriptions and details about them in his outline. He called them Effie and Crystal. However, he ultimately omitted them. Furthermore, given his purpose in writing the play and the reference to the title of the whole trilogy, O'Neill has Lavinia assume the role of heroine--the prime mover of the play's action--and has her appear in the very first scene of the play, whereas, in the Oresteia, Electra plays a subordinate role, and there is a complete absence of her in the first play of the trilogy. She does not appear until the second play.

While Aeschylus' Agamemnon is about the curse of the house of Atreus, which is transmitted from generation to generation, O'Neill concerns his plot with the "curse" of the Mannon house. In the Agamemnon, the curse began with the struggle of the sons of Pelops--Atreus and Thyestes--over their father's throne and the seduction of Atreus's wife by Thyestes. Atreus drove his brother out of the country and brought him back again only to feed him with the flesh of his children at a banquet. Thus, Thyestes, in a rage, cursed the house of Atreus. Many years later, Aegisthus, Thyestes' son, comes to Argos to

avenge his father's death and to claim his right to the throne. Similarly, in Homecoming, the first play of the Mourning Becomes Electra trilogy, the "curse" of the Mannon house begins with two brothers, Abe and David Mannon. Abe drove his brother from the house because his brother had gotten a French-Canadian nurse pregnant. Years later, Adam Brant, the son of the union, comes to avenge his mother's death which was caused by maltreatment at the hands of various Mannons. Here, O'Neill departs from the Greek original because in Agamemnon Aegisthus seeks revenge against Agamemnon because of the wrong done to his father, not to his mother, by Agamemnon's father. Moreover, even though Aegisthus and Brant become the lover of their enemy's wife and together with the wife plan to slay the husband, Christine does not stab her husband in his bath like her Greek counterpart. She, rather, gives poison to him instead of the medicine he expects. Also, her motive for murder is not her husband's ritual sacrifice of her daughter as in the Greek tragedy but her sexual frustration with Ezra's incapability as a husband and her anger with Ezra for sending Orin away to serve in the army, resulting in Orin's head wound. Also, as the Greek tragedy begins with the husband, Agamemnon, fighting in the Trojan War, O'Neill offers a counterpart in Ezra Mannon, who when the play opens is away fighting in the Civil War. O'Neill believed "that the Civil War

offered a luckily appropriate means of modernizing the post-Trojan-war period."¹⁶

The Hunted, too, follows closely the outline of The Libation Bearers, in that it deals with the return of a son to avenge his father's death. However, unlike the Greek original, the son in Mourning Becomes Electra was forced to serve in the army by the father and the sister while the son in the Greek original was sent away to another country by the mother. In Aeschylus' The Libation Bearers, the god Apollo, disapproving of the murder of Agamemnon, urges Orestes to avenge his father's death, whereas in O'Neill's The Hunted Lavinia serves that function because O'Neill intended to develop Lavinia's character so that her punishment can take place. Also in the Greek original, Orestes kills both his mother and her paramour while in O'Neill's tragedy Orin plans to kill only Brant and thus free his mother. However, he later unintentionally drives her to commit suicide through his revelation of Brant's death. Moreover, although Electra does appear in Aeschylus' The Libation Bearers, her role in the play is much less important than Lavinia's role in The Hunted because the main concern in

¹⁶ Travis Bogard, Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 342.

The Libation Bearers is Orestes, who is the hero of the trilogy as its name suggests, not Electra.

The third play, The Haunted, radically differs from the first two. O'Neill no longer follows the Greek pattern but creates his own myth because his intention is to explore the life of Lavinia after the murder of her mother, not that of Orestes as in the Greek original. The central character of the play is Lavinia rather than Orin. In his Fragmentary Diary for August 1929, O'Neill notes, "have given Yankee Electra tragic end worthy of her--and Orestes, too."¹⁷ Like Orestes, Orin is tortured by the guilt of matricide, not by the externalized Furies as in the Greek tragedy, but by his own conscience. Both Orin and Lavinia cannot escape punishment. Orin is not cleansed of his sin as Orestes is. Instead, he is too weak to carry the burden of his guilt and is driven by Lavinia, he then commits suicide. Similarly, Lavinia accepts her punishment which is greater than that of any of the Mannons; she locks herself in the Mannon house and is bound there forever to the dead Mannons. She does so because it is she herself who insists on justice and who also acts as the personification of Justice, throughout the trilogy. Therefore, she has to punish

¹⁷Eugene O'Neill, Fragmentary Diary, August 1929, quoted in Virginia Floyd, ed., Eugene O'Neill at Work, p. 204.

everyone who commits sinful deeds. Even she herself, who is the prime mover of all the crimes that happen in the trilogy, is no exception, as she tells Seth at the end of the play when Seth warns her not to go into the Mannon house because he is afraid that she will commit suicide like her mother and brother:

LAVINIA Don't be afraid. I'm not going the way mother and Orin went. That's escaping punishment. And there's no one left to punish me. I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself!

(The Haunted, IV, p. 376)

In addition to the parallels in theme and characterization to Greek tragedy in the plots of O'Neill's plays, the plots of Desire Under the Elms, Lazarus Laughed and Mourning Becomes Electra, also are concerned with change in the hero's fortune and involve both "peripeteia" or reversal and discovery, which Aristotle describes, respectively, as the "tragic effect of human effort producing exactly the opposite result to his intention,"¹⁸ and as "a change from ignorance to knowledge."¹⁹ In Greek tragedy, the change in the hero's fortune is usually from fortune to misery. This is also

¹⁸Frank Laurence Lucas, Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle's "Poetics" (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), p. 113.

¹⁹Aristotle, On Poetics, p. 687.

true of the protagonists in O'Neill's tragedies. In Desire Under the Elms, Eben Cabot buys his two brothers' shares in the family farm against the hope that his father, Ephraim Cabot, is dead and that he will become sole owner. An unexpected twist in fortune, however, makes Eben's sole ownership of the farm impossible when his father, after having been away for months without word, returns with a new young bride.

Ephraim, himself, suffers a fall from fortune when he discovers his young wife's treachery. He believes he has reached the height of happiness and good fortune when Abbie bears him a son only to suffer despair when he discovers the child is not his but Eben's.

In Lazarus Laughed, the fortune of the hero also changes from fortune to misery. Lazarus returns from the dead only to be burned to death at the end of the play.

Like Desire Under the Elms and Lazarus Laughed, the Mourning Becomes Electra trilogy also deals with the change in the heroes' and heroines' fortune. In the first tragedy of the trilogy, entitled Homecoming, Ezra Mannon, who survived from the Civil War, come home as a war hero only to be killed in his own house. In the second tragedy, The Hunted, Christine's fortune, too, changes from fortune to misery. She succeeds in her plan to kill Ezra Mannon, her husband. However, instead of being happy afterwards, she is driven by her own son, Orin, to commit

suicide. And also in the third tragedy, The Haunted, Lavinia, the protagonist in the tragedy, although she accomplishes her plan to get rid of Christine and Brant, at the end has to lock herself in the Mannon house.

Like Greek tragedy, the change in O'Neill's heroes' fortune also involves reversal. In Desire Under the Elms, what Eben and Ephraim expect and what they attempt to do to achieve their goal finally reverse to the opposite. Neither of them can possess the farm. Instead, Eben's son is killed and he himself is doomed at the end of the play while Ephraim has to burn the farm down and has to wander away.

In Lazarus Laughed, Lazarus, after his resurrection, seems to be happy with his family. However, his parents and his sisters have a quarrel which is so serious that his father curses all of his children including Lazarus. At the end of Act I, scene ii, Lazarus' parents and sisters are killed, and Lazarus is burnt to death by Tiberius Caesar at the end of the play.

In Mourning Becomes Electra, Ezra Mannon in the first tragedy of the trilogy, entitled Homecoming, is an able man in the eyes of the people in the community and also a Civil War hero. However, according to the notion of justice--the sinner cannot escape unpunished for justice must be done--Ezra, in spite of being received as

a hero with honor and love by his wife, is unheroically killed in his own bed by his wife with the help of her lover as a revenge for Ezra's taking away her beloved son, Orin, to serve in the army.

In the second tragedy, The Hunted, Christine, after poisoning Ezra, plans to go with her lover, Adam Brant, to the South Sea Islands or, "the Blessed Isles" in Brant's words. However, at the end of the play, in true Greek tragic form, her lover is killed by her own son, Orin Mannon, and she ultimately commits suicide. Similarly, Orin, after returning from the war and learning that his father is dead, believes that from then on he will be the sole possessor of his mother's love since his dreaded rival has been removed. However, when Lavinia, his sister, reveals to him that their father died not as the result of his heart disease, as thought by all the townspeople, but at the hands of their mother and her lover, Orin shoots Brant, which results in his mother's suicide. Thus, his plan to live with his mother in the South Sea Islands completely collapses. Consequently, in The Haunted, Act III, he cannot avoid his punishment and like his mother, he commits suicide after failing to persuade Lavinia to assume with him their parents' place.

Also in The Haunted, Lavinia, after getting rid of both her mother and Brant, and after returning from the South Sea Islands, wants to leave her past behind. She wants to "get back to simple things and begin a new

life. And [she thinks that Peter's] friendship and love will help [her] more than anything to forget" (The Haunted, I.ii, p. 342).²⁰ Unfortunately, Lavinia cannot escape justice, either. Although she attempts to start a new life with Peter, she realizes the impossibility of this when she calls Peter "Adam" by mistake, which forces her to accept the fact that, deny it as she may, her past remains inescapably within her. With this acceptance, she seals her own doom by locking herself up in the Mannon house to live with the ghosts of the dead Mannons until she dies.

Furthermore, O'Neill's tragedies also provide discoveries for both the recognition of persons and facts which, like Greek discoveries, ultimately result in the hero's doom. In Desire Under the Elms, Ephraim, in Part III, scene i, thinks that Abbie's baby is his own son so he arranges a feast to celebrate the baby's birth. However, in Part III, scene iv, Ephraim discovers the baby's real identity by Abbie's own admission: "He wa'n't yewr son! . . . An' he was Eben's son--mine an' Eben's--

²⁰Eugene O'Neill, Mourning Becomes Electra, in Three Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Vintage Books, c. 1958), p. 342. All future references to the work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

not your'n."²¹ Moreover, in this scene, Ephraim also acknowledges that Abbie hates him but loves Eben. These discoveries hurt Ephraim so much that he burns the farm, on which he has laboured all his life, so that no one else can possess it. The other discoveries in this play are those made by Eben. Eben has never understood Abbie's motive in marrying Ephraim; however, after the feast scene, Ephraim tells Eben that Abbie married him merely to gain his possessions--the home and the farm. Eben also learns that Abbie told Ephraim that Eben had tried to make love to her and that she wanted Ephraim to disinherit Eben if she had a son. Eben bitterly and heartbrokenly wishes the baby had not been born. Such a wish makes Abbie kill her own son to prove her love for Eben. Thus, with Abbie's infanticide, Eben, Ephraim and Abbie gain nothing but doom at the end of the play.

Like Desire Under the Elms, Mourning Becomes Electra also provides discoveries for both the recognition of person and facts. The first discovery in this trilogy is Lavinia's recognition of Adam Brant's identity. At the beginning of the Homecoming, Lavinia does not know who Brant really is. She knows only that he is a Mr. Adam

²¹Eugene O'Neill, Desire Under the Elms, in Three Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Vintage Books, c 1952), p. 54. All future references to the work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

Brant who is the captain of the Flying Trades, and a man, whom Christine, her mother, has come across in New York. Later, she finds out that he is Christine's lover when she spies on Christine in a hotel in New York where Christine and Brant meet. Finally, through some strange remarks made by Seth Beckwith, the Mannons' gardener, about Brant's likeness to the male Mannons, Ezra and Orin, she suspects that Brant might be in some way related to her. Lavinia's referring to Brant as "the son of a low Canuck nurse girl" (Homecoming, I, p. 243) while Brant is flirting with her causes Brant, in rage of the insult to his mother, to reveal his real identity to Lavinia; he is the son of her father's uncle, David Mannon and the Canuck nurse girl named Marrie Brantome, who used to be a servant in the Mannon house. Therefore, Lavinia writes Mannon a letter telling him about the relationship between Brant and Christine. This inevitably causes Christine, with the help of Brant, to plot to kill Ezra Mannon.

In Lazarus Laughed, the protagonist's discovery does not take place in the play, but occurs before the play opens, that is, Lazarus' discovery of what lies beyond the grave. This discovery enables Lazarus to be "able to overcome the fear of death, he thus, defeats the ravages of time and partakes of eternity in the course of

mortal life."²² However, this discovery does not bring good fortune to Lazarus. On the contrary, Lazarus' discovery brings doom to his family and to Lazarus, like the discovery of Oedipus which consequently brings doom to his family in the Greek original.

In addition to the recognition of person, there is also recognition of facts, such as Lavinia's recognition of the real cause of Mannon's death. Lavinia finds out that her father died, not because of his heart disease but because of her mother's poison. These discoveries--the discoveries of Brant's identity, of the real cause of Mannon's death and of the poison--are very significant in the plot development of the second play of the trilogy in which another tragedy takes place.

In The Hunted, Orin is informed by Christine that Brant is just a stupid captain whom she met at Orin's grandfather's house, and who called at the Mannon house only because he was trying to work himself into the Mannon family in order to become the captain of one of the Mannon ships. Orin also suspects his mother of having had a hand in Ezra Mannon's death when he sees her reaction to the box of poison Lavinia has shown him as evidence of her accusation of Christine. Furthermore,

²²Margaret Loftus Ranald, The Eugene O'Neill Companion (Cambridge: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 354.

while eavesdropping on the conversation between Christine and Brant on the deck above the cabin of Brant's ship, the Flying Trade, in Act IV, Orin discovers who the real murderer is, and he also learns that Christine and Brant plan to take passage on another ship to their "Blessed Islands," to establish a life for themselves "out of Vinnie's reach. . ." (The Hunted, IV, p. 318). Consequently, Orin shoots Brant which results in Christine's suicide.

In The Haunted, Orin, after a trip to the South Sea Islands with Lavinia, believes that Lavinia wants to separate herself from him through marriage to Peter. However, he also discovers that Lavinia does not want to leave him alone with other people, especially with Hazel, because she is afraid that he will reveal her secrets: the plan to murder Brant and her love affair with a native on the South Sea Islands. To retaliate, Orin starts writing a manuscript of the history of the Mannon family. When Lavinia discovers that Orin has given the manuscript to Hazel, she begs him to get the manuscript back from Hazel before she reads it. He does so but uses it to force Lavinia to live with him and assume their parents' place in the Mannon house. It is with this that Orin discovers Lavinia's true feelings as she snaps at him with "frantic hatred and rage" (The Haunted, III, p. 365): "I hate you! I wish you were dead! You're too vile to live! You'd kill yourself if you weren't a coward!" (The

Haunted, III, p. 365). Orin, then, realizes that she wants to drive him to suicide in the same way that he drove his mother so that she can marry Peter, and her secrets as well as those of the Mannon family will be kept forever. Knowing this, Orin shoots himself, but makes the act appear to be an accident. Lavinia, subsequently, decides that she must accept her destiny and meet her doom in the Mannon house like the other Mannons. It is clear that, like most of the discoveries in Greek tragedy, the discoveries in O'Neill's tragedies also bring about the protagonists' doom at the end of the play.

Thus, O'Neill, in writing his tragedies, draws creatively upon the plots of Greek tragedies, but he does not do so in mere imitation. Rather, he transplants human struggles that are centuries old and synthesizes them with modern surroundings and characters, developing in the process myths that are uniquely "O'Neill's" in nature.

In addition to his use of Greek tragic plot, O'Neill also draws upon the idea of the Greek tragic hero in developing his characters. In an interview with Oliver Sayler, O'Neill reveals his belief that man has changed very little over the centuries--modern man remains as enmeshed in the struggles to obtain his dreams and desires as his earliest ancestors were:

The theatre to me is life--the substance and interpretation of life. . . . [And] life is struggle, often, if not usually, unsuccessful struggle; for most of us have something within us which prevents us from accomplishing what we dream and desire. And then, as we progress, we are always seeing further than we can reach. . . . Life as a whole changes very little, . . . It seems to me that, as far as we can judge, man is much the same creature, with the same primal emotions and ambitions and motives, the same powers and the same weakness, as in the time when the Aryan race started toward Europe from the slopes of the Himalaya.²³

Therefore, it is not surprising that O'Neill utilizes the idea of the Greek tragic hero in his tragedies. The Greek tragic hero, as stated by Aristotle in his Poetics, must not be "a good man," by which he means a man so ideal in character as to not seem human, nor must he be "an extremely bad man."²⁴ He must be a person of high status and he must come from the nobility or from a prominent house. Thus, although they are noble, Greek tragic heroes are basically ordinary men, neither all good nor all bad, but a bit of both. They are men who struggle to achieve their desires and who often fail as a result of

²³Eugene O'Neill, "What the Theatre Means to Me," in O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism, eds. Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin, and William J. Fisher (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 107.

²⁴Aristotle, On Poetics, p. 687.

predestined choices they are forced to make. Similarly, O'Neill's heroes and heroines are neither extremely good nor extremely bad persons, and since people of nobility are rarely found in modern times in America, O'Neill in Desire Under the Elms has his protagonists--Ephraim, Eben and Abbie Cabot--drawn from an ordinary family, a farming family. Lazarus, in Lazarus Laughed, too, comes from an ordinary family; he is a farmer and a breeder of sheep. However, in Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill does have his protagonists--Ezra, Christine, Orin and Lavinia Mannon--come from the leading and most powerful family in the town. Like all Greek tragic heroes, Ezra is a good and able man. He is a successful man in the business of shipping. He used to be a judge, a mayor and is a hero in the Civil War, and the "town's real proud of him" (Homecoming, I, p. 229). His son Orin, too, joined the army and returned home as a war hero in other people's eyes.

Moreover, like Greek tragic protagonists, O'Neill's protagonists are men and women with predestined fates. Their fates, however, have not been predestined by gods but by seemingly insignificant aspects in their external or natural environment. In Desire Under the Elms, for example, the characters' fates are predestined by the "sinister maternity" of two large elms. In O'Neill's stage direction which opens the play, he writes:

Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles.

(Desire Under the Elms, p. 2)

As the stage direction suggests, the reader or viewer of the play should keep in mind that the elms are present throughout the play. Whatever is happening in the play is happening *under* the elms, just as in Greek tragedy all action occur under the watchful eyes of jealous gods. In Mourning Becomes Electra, the Mannon house assumes the role of predestinator. Christine, in Homecoming Act I, scene i, refers to the Mannon house as "our tomb." She says:

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

(Homecoming, II.i, p. 237)

Ezra Mannon himself also has similar idea; he calls the house "a temple of Death" (Homecoming, III, p. 269). Seth, too, feels the evil in the house which perhaps

predestines what will happen in the house, as seen in his remark about the house in The Haunted Act I scene i: "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" (The Haunted, I.i, p. 338). Thus, the Mannons who live there are possessed by hate and all of them die there, even Lavinia. Doris V. Falk points out that the house leads "inevitably to death for the Mannon line."²⁵ Further, we can see that it is only outside the house on the South Sea Islands that Lavinia can experience happiness and love as she tells Peter:

I loved those Islands. They finished setting me free. There was something there mysterious and beautiful--a good spirit--of love--coming out of the land and sea. It made me forget death.

(The Haunted, I.ii, p. 348)

In Lazarus Laughed, however, the situation is somewhat different. Lazarus's fate is not predestined by elm trees or by a house built on hatred but by Jesus who has resurrected him from death. He is given the mission to preach the message he has learned from death and because of this mission he ultimately meets his doom.

²⁵Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension, p.

In addition to the element of predestination, the hero in Greek tragedy also has to choose between two alternatives. This element also appears in O'Neill's tragedies. In Desire Under the Elms, Eben is faced with two fatal choices like those of the tragic heroes in Greek tragedy. On his way to see the sheriff, he suffers mentally as a result of his indecision about whether to accept punishment with Abbie or whether to leave her to be punished alone. Both choices mean doom to him because he loves Abbie so much that he could not live without her but if he chooses to accept the punishment with her, they may both be sentenced to death. Finally, he decides to die with his love.

In Mourning Becomes Electra, Orin, too, is confronted with two fatal choices, whether to kill Brant or to leave his father's death unavenged. When he learns that his father is dead, he is relieved that his dreadful rival for his mother's love has been disposed of. However, Lavinia cannot leave her father's death unavenged. She urges Orin to kill Brant, an act that Orin is unwilling to do. Nevertheless, on learning of his mother's betrayal and of her plan to escape with Brant, he chooses against his will, to kill Brant.

Unlike other tragic heroes, Lazarus in Lazarus Laughed is not confronted with any choices although he does show a glimpse of uncertainty when he involuntarily half-reaches out one of his hands as if to stop Miriam

from eating the poisoned fruit. This is because he "has overcome the human fear of pain and death and has now learned to live, life affirmatively--freed from the negative dread of losing his own."²⁶

Thus, in coping with the hero's dilemma between two fatal choices, O'Neill reveals to us the universality of human suffering. Man is just an insignificant, small being in the universe. He has no control of his fate and thus is sometimes faced with two equally fatal alternatives to be chosen.

As in Greek tragedy, when the protagonists are female, O'Neill portrays them as evil. They, when hurt, commit evil deeds immediately without hesitation. Just as Medea, in Euripides's Medea, decides to kill her children to punish Jason, Abbie, in O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms, kills her son immediately after Eben, the child's father, says: "I wish he never was born! I wish he'd die this minute!" (Desire, III.ii, p. 48). In Lazarus Laughed, Pompeia, after failing to gain Lazarus' attention, gives Miriam, Lazarus' beloved wife, poisoned fruit to eat in order to be rid of her. When Lazarus still fails to return her love, she influences Tiberius' decision to burn him alive. Likewise, in Mourning

²⁶Frederic I. Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill (Boston: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 72.

Becomes Electra, Christine, afraid that she will not be able to meet her lover any longer after Ezra's homecoming, plans to kill Ezra. Lavinia, too, decides to kill Brant when she learns that he has taken part in her father's murder. Moreover, she drives Orin to commit suicide when he threatens her with the manuscript containing the true history of the Mannon family. Unlike tragic heroes forced to choose between two fatal alternatives, O'Neill's women seal their own doom just as those in Greek tragedy did through the commission of rash acts of revenge that, in keeping with the notion of Greek tragic justice, demand the deaths of those committing such acts.

Destiny plays a significant role in Greek tragedy and is often revealed through oracles. As in Greek tragedy, in O'Neill's tragedies destiny also plays an important role and reveals itself in form of oracles through dreams. In The Hunted, Orin reveals to Lavinia his dreams of

murdering the same man over and over, and that in the end [he] would discover the man was [himself]! Their faces keep coming back in dreams--and they change to [his] Father's face--or to [his].

(The Hunted, III, p. 305)

Orin's dreams, in fact, reveal his destiny since Orin does eventually kill both Brant, who resembles the male Mannons, and himself. Also, as in Greek tragedy, destiny can also be set in motion by human will through curses.

Eben, upon learning that his father plans to disinherit him in favor of Abbie's child, wishes that Abbie was dead and that he and the new born child were dead along with her. These curses become a part of their destiny. The child is killed by his own mother and Eben and Abbie are doomed at the end of the play. Similarly, in Lazarus Laughed, Lazarus' sisters curse Lazarus during a quarrel and their father curses all of them: "My son is dead! And you, my daughters, are dead!" (Lazarus Laughed, I.ii, p. 393). In The Haunted, Lavinia wants to get rid of Orin. She, in hatred and rage, curses him: "I hate you! I wish you were dead! You're too vile to live! You'd kill yourself if you weren't a coward!" (The Haunted, III, p. 365). Immediately after her curse, Orin goes into his room and shoots himself.

In addition to destiny, O'Neill also utilizes in his tragedies the Greek notion of moral retribution, not in terms of divine justice but in terms of human justice. In O'Neill's tragedies, those who commit sin will not be left unpunished for justice must be done. In Desire Under the Elms, Eben will not leave his father unpunished, for he considers him to be the cause of his mother's death. He seeks revenge against him and so justifies his quasi-incest with Abbie. In the last scene of the play, it is he who sends for the sheriff to arrest Abbie and it is he who punishes himself for having played a part in Abbie's sin, by accepting the punishment with her. Abbie, in the

middle of the play, also seeks revenge against Eben when he scornfully refuses her first advance by telling her husband to disinherit him and that he is trying to rape her. In Lazarus Laughed, upon failing to gain Lazarus' attention and love, Pompeia seeks revenge by killing the person whom Lazarus loves most and then uses Tiberius as her agent to punish Lazarus by burning him alive. Like the other characters, Pompeia and Tiberius cannot escape their punishment. Tiberius is stabbed by Caligula and Pompeia walks into the flame which is burning Lazarus.

However, it is in Mourning Becomes Electra that O'Neill emphasizes this notion of justice by having Lavinia insist on justice throughout the play. Ezra cannot escape his punishment for causing Brant's mother's death. He is killed by Brant and Christine. Similarly, Brant and Christine cannot escape their punishment for murdering Ezra. Orin kills Brant, and Christine, in despair over Brant's death, commits suicide, an act of which Lavinia approves as an act of justice. Orin must also pay for his treachery and is thus driven to commit suicide by Lavinia, and even Lavinia, who acts as O'Neill's substitute for the Greek goddess Justice, cannot escape punishment. Despite the fact that she does not commit sin herself, she is the prime mover of all sinful deeds in the play. She is the main cause of Christine's decision to kill Ezra. It is she who urges Orin to avenge their father's death which results in Christine's suicide,

and it is she who drives Orin to commit suicide. Therefore, she is in fact the most sinful criminal of all and she recognizes this. Thus, she acts out her last act of justice. She punishes herself with the most severe punishment--locking herself in the house and living with the dead Mannons until she dies.

Therefore, O'Neill, in writing Desire Under the Elms, Lazarus Laughed and Mourning Becomes Electra, owes a lot to Greek tragedy. He adopts many aspects such as the structure of the play, the unities of time and place, the chorus, the masks, the plot, the idea of the tragic hero and that of destiny and its revelations. However, he does not simply copy from the Greek originals. He takes a part of Greek tragedy and makes it his own by "sifting it through his distinction, through his personal experiences."²⁷ Hence, he deliberately makes several departures from the Greek originals and allows for influences from other modern writers and psychologists in order to create a myth entirely his own, and one which reveals the universality of human suffering.

²⁷Normand Berlin, Eugene O'Neill (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), p. 160.