Classical and Modern Representations in O'Neill

The playwright Eugene O'Neill brought many innovations to American drama. His voluminous works reflect a harmonious integration of elements from anachronistic and seemingly disparate traditions such as classicism, modernism, impressionism, and naturalism. Further, much of what make such a heterogeneous texture of dramatic writing so rich are its implications for what it means to be human. Specifically, if literature is supposed to offer examples of how it is people can, should, or actually *do* live, it makes sense that human life should be represented multi-dimensionally with different people, in different settings, struggling against different obstacles. In this sense, O'Neill brings to audiences and readers plays that portray tragedy within the self and outside of it, arising from the mind as well as acting upon it. Two of his major dramatic works reflect this pattern in his writing: Mourning Becomes Electra and The Iceman Cometh. While Mourning Becomes Electra demonstrates a more classical, circumstance-oriented view of human life through treatment of character as the sum of his/her actions under the influence of cosmic forces, The Iceman Cometh reflects a more modern, psychologically-oriented view through its exploration of the tragedies of characters' inner lives.

O'Neill draws directly from dramaturgical and thematic elements of Aeschylus' The Oresteia to create the dramatic trilogy Mourning Becomes Electra in truest adherence to the conventions of classical tragedy. As one might expect in this context, characters are represented through their actions in opposition (or according) to some idea of fate and the supernatural forces upholding it. In keeping with the spirit of classical tragedy, characters' missteps, both intentional and unintentional, are punished in a way congruent with some idea of a just and proportionate cosmic balance. Similarly, the tragic effect arises from characters' recognition of

the significance of events that have occurred within the scope of the play's present. This immediacy of action and temporality restricts the expression of characters' psychology to the ways in which it manifests directly in the plot, through action.

One dramaturgical device in particular epitomizes the classical convention of fate predominating over any sense of agency or choice a character might have: the possession of the progeny by the dead progenitors. After the murder of Adam Brant and the subsequent suicide of Christine Mannon which occur in *The Hunted*, the first act of *The Haunted* begins one year later with Orin and Lavinia assuming the physical and postural aspects of their same-sex parent. The reader is given these descriptions of Orin and Lavinia:

> Then Lavinia enters […]. One is immediately aware of an extraordinary change in her. Her body, formerly so thin and undeveloped, has filled out. Her movements have lost their square-shaped stiffness. She now bears a striking resemblance to her mother in every respect, even to being dressed in the green her mother had affected […]. [Orin] carries himself woodenly erect now like a soldier. His movements and attitudes have the statue-like quality that was so marked in his father. […] The Mannon semblance of his face in repose to a mask is more pronounced than ever (384-385).

In this sense, the possession by their parents has begun. However, its initial manifestation in Orin's and Lavinia's reflection of their parents' superficial qualities grows more influential, eventually acting on their behaviors until they quite literally become their parents. This transformation is almost never demonstrated through soliloquy or many of the conventional methods for exploring characters' psychology. Rather, it is demonstrated through character action and interaction.

As *The Haunted* progresses, this possession begins to form one of the play's main antagonistic thrusts: the tension between Lavinia as she is her mother and Orin as he is his father. The guilty Mannon conscience consuming Orin, presumably instilled by the ghost of Ezra, and

the selfish, scheming duplicity Lavinia develops while inhabited by Christine altogether become the main vehicles of conflict driving the play forward. An example is found in these two passages during the rising action in the second act:

> Lavinia—(*with a sudden flare of deliberately evil taunting that recalls her mother in the last act of "Homecoming," when she was goading Ezra Mannon to fury just before his murder)* […] I'm not your property! I have a right to love!
> Orin—(*reacting as his father had—his face grown livid—with a hoarse cry of fury grabs her by the throat)* You—you whore! I'll kill you! (401).
> Orin—(*with quite a mad insistence)* 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! […]
> Lavinia—(*putting her hands over her ears*) For God's sake, won't you be quiet! ([…] *unconsciously repeating the exact threat she had goaded her mother to make in Act Two of "Homecoming*) Take care, Orin! You'll be responsible if—! (402).

In both these passages, it becomes apparent that as Orin and Lavinia inherit the ghosts of their parents, they inherit the sins they committed in life. As the siblings recreate the argument leading up to Ezra Mannon's murder, Orin's lines illuminate the thematic implication readers or audiences are meant to understand: the doom of the children is for them to become their parents and their past. Ultimately, the trajectory of the possession culminates in Lavinia's stunning recognition (as well as the reader's) as she finally understands and distills the significance of the play's events into the lines "I'm bound here—to the Mannon dead. […] It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born" (423).

Ultimately, O'Neill recreates in this play the notion which resonated throughout so much classical tragedy: a person is their actions (despite their lack of control over them). By driving the play forward entirely with the plot, audiences and readers see characters represented almost entirely through their sequences of actions and reactions. Similarly, the influence of the "fate factor" via the supernatural possession ensures that they are sufficiently punished for their

transgressions. Finally, the tragic effect of the play arises from the character's recognition of the significance of her actions. Any attention given to character psychology is incidental. In the world portrayed in Mourning Becomes Electra, a human being is provoked, acts and reacts under the influences of forces they often do not understand, is punished, and "purified" by the recognition of how they have transgressed against the cosmic order.

In The Iceman Cometh, O'Neill works within a more naturalistic, modern, and character-driven context. The back room at Harry Hope's bar serves as the space in which the audience watches characters interact. By setting the majority of the action in this location, O'Neill creates a grotesque reflection of Ibsenian setting. Whereas in an Ibsen play, a Victorian drawing room might come to epitomize and evoke Northern European bourgeois society, in The Iceman Cometh, the back room of the bar becomes iconic of Skid Row alcoholism and sets the stage for a play whose focus is a subgroup of some of the most dejected characters to be found within the working class. The single, confined bar setting restricts the possibilities for characters' actual physical action to whatever can be performed within its proximity. Indeed, within this limited space, characters do little more physically than drink and sleep. However, it is in the sense that this claustrophobic feeling opens up space in the characters and on the stage for the dynamics of the "inner life" that the play's modernism arises. The play contrasts with Mourning Becomes Electra most significantly in the sense that characters' psychology is brought to the forefront at the limitation of their actions. Similarly, the most significant events occur outside of the scope of the play's present rather than within it. When the scope of physical mobility is limited, actions must arise from, and ultimately have their impact on, the richly written dimensions of characters' psychology. It is in this way that O'Neill deviates radically from most classical notions of action. Rather than relying on the actions of characters under the influence gods or

fate to reveal characters and yield representations of human life, he illuminates the realm of characters' psychology as the precursor to action or inaction.

Indeed, through its primary antagonistic force, Hickey, the play seems to most directly focus on what characters are not doing rather than what they are. When Hickey arrives and attempts to convert his former friends with a message of existential reform, the main antagonistic thrusts of the play begin: those between Hickey and the other characters and between each character and his conscience. When Larry admonishes Hickey for attempting to "disabuse" another character, Hickey responds:

> […] I have pity but now I've seen the light, it isn't my old kind of pity—the kind yours is. It isn't the kind that lets off easy by encouraging some poor guy to go on kidding himself with a lie—the kind that leaves the poor slob worse off because it makes him feel guiltier than ever—the kind that makes his lying hopes nag at him and reproach him until he's a rotten skunk in his own eyes. (*With a salesman's persuasiveness*) No, sir. The kind of pity I feel now is after final results that will really save the poor guy, and make him contented with what he is, and quite battling himself, and find peace for the rest of his life (88).

In his proselytizing, he calls into question the nature of each character's delusions, or "pipe-dreams." Though the other characters resist these attempts at conversion in their own ways and to varying degrees, many of them begin to question the validity of Hickey's observations. They realize (but seldom admit) that despite Hickey's abrasiveness, he is often fairly accurate in his assessment of their pipe dreams. As many of them begin to confront their delusions by making preparations to resume the failed endeavors that led them to the bar in the first place, the tenuous connections holding their group together become threatened. As characters uncomfortably and unwillingly rise to higher levels of self-awareness and become forced to confront their own issues, their deeply suppressed and long-held tensions with other characters come to the forefront. In this way, O'Neill creates a "community" of characters whose ability to exist and

coexist relies solely on their capacity for codependent self-delusion. As he examines the question of what happens when that delusion is disabused, he highlights the profound dynamism of stagnation and the influence of character psychology often as instigator, means, and end of action.

Beyond this, though, O'Neill seems to remain adamant that no single character exist above the influence of this delusion, even Hickey. As Hickey tries to save the other characters from their pipe dreams, he reveals traces of his own. Collectively, these traces lead up to the revelation that his newfound perspectives regarding personal agency, self-awareness, and redemption through the erosion of delusion, are the mask with which he has covered the murder of his wife and the madness that results. Even more ironic than this revelation is that it happens in every other character *but* Hickey. After his entire "crusade" against pipe-dreams, he is led off to Bellevue with his own pipe-dream intact, ultimately proving the most grossly deluded character in the play. In this way, the culmination is in the revelation of Hickey's inner state rather than some sort of lamentation of recognition arising from a reflection of the events surrounding it. The fact that the play's most tragic character retains his pipe-dream until the end attests to the inescapability of delusion despite one's earnestness, deeds, awareness, or stature. In the world reflected by The Iceman Cometh, people's lives their lives in the delusion of what they should, could, or deserve to be as opposed to the reality of who they are and what they do. Ultimately, by the definition O'Neill asserts with this play, the most profound tragedy occurs not as a result of circumstance or fate, but in the realm of a person's psychology.

With Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill creates a classical representation of human life in which tragedy arises from the way a person recognizes their mistakes relative to a higher moral order. In this representation, there are forces that control a person that remain beyond

their control, conspiring to maintain a cosmic balance in which transgression is balanced with proportionate punishment. In this representation, a person is their actions rather than their thoughts. With The Iceman Cometh, O'Neill creates a more modern representation of human life in which tragedy arises from a person's psychology, specifically their capacity for self-delusion. In this representation, notions of the "moral order" or "cosmic balance" governing reality are obscured because people do not share an objective reality. In this representation, a person is their thoughts and not their actions. With these two dramatic works, O'Neill gives readers and audiences a richly-textured portrayal of human existence.

Works Cited

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