

**Specters of Change:
Analyzing Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* as a Reflection of the
Roaring Twenties**

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Abstract

Following the cessation of the First World War, the American milieu underwent a profound psychological upheaval, compelling its denizens to seek solace in the realm of art as a mechanism of dissociation from the pervasive trauma. The ensuing epoch, colloquially designated as the Roaring Age or Jazz Age during the 1920s, bore witness to transformative metamorphoses across various domains. Notably, this era of hedonistic pursuit exhibited an egalitarian indulgence, with both genders partaking in the pursuit of pleasure with parity. Women, emancipated from the constraints of patriarchal hegemony, actively engaged in professional pursuits and embraced a liberated lifestyle. This newfound agency manifested in the acquisition of voting rights and the prerogative to terminate matrimonial bonds, encapsulating a paradigm shift in societal norms. The sartorial landscape underwent a discernible alteration, with women assuming the epithet of "flappers." This nomenclature connoted a departure from the conventional curvilinear aesthetic, adopting instead a tomboyish visage that symbolically repudiated the notion of womanhood as an object of male desire. Eugene O'Neill, in unveiling his theatrical opus "Mourning Becomes Electra" in 1931, confronted a zeitgeist in which the flapper fashion had succumbed to obsolescence amid the throes of the Great Depression. O'Neill, cognizant of the exigencies of the contemporary American milieu, endeavored to adapt Aeschylus's Greek tragedy "Oresteia." This endeavor necessitated substantial alterations to align the narrative with the prevailing sociocultural context. O'Neill, through his creative agency, imbued the female characters, particularly Christine and Lavinia, with a mental fortitude surpassing their male counterparts. The treatment of the character Electra, pivotal in orchestrating the tragic denouement, reflected O'Neill's nuanced portrayal of feminine resilience. This paper endeavors to delineate the intricate interplay between O'Neill's comprehension of the flapper phenomenon and his engagement with twentieth-century American society. In doing so, it aims to discern the manner in which these dynamics informed the delineation of characters within "Mourning Becomes Electra" while concurrently scrutinizing O'Neill's ideological stance vis-à-vis the abrupt emancipation experienced by women during this transformative epoch.

Keywords: Artistic escapism, Jazz Age, Gender dynamics, Women's liberation, Societal transformation, Great Depression, Feminine resilience

Tragedy, originating in the Athenian amphitheatre and subsequently transposing itself onto the Elizabethan stage, promulgated the notion that knowledge, arriving post-action, cannot preemptively avert tragic consequences. The spectators, conditioned by an anticipation of an inevitably melancholic denouement, attended tragic plays. Nietzsche, in "The Birth of Tragedy," contends that Greek theatre's demise coincided with the ascendancy of the Apollonian realm of prudence over the Dionysian domain of passion. This led him to doubt the modern democratic world's capacity to comprehend the true essence of tragedy. The American ethos, grounded in the veneration of intellectual acumen, diverged from the Elizabethan milieu, rendering the conventional sense of fate less efficacious. Diggins (208) asserts that the viability of crafting tragedy diminishes when the sustaining living faiths have perished.

Emerson posited that Americans, engrossed in profit-centric pursuits, harbored little interest in tragedy. Eugene O'Neill, however, defied this paradigm by producing tragedies that unveiled the desperation inherent in desire, invariably leading to self-destructive consequences. His works delved into familial secrets, soul-wrenching agonies, historical cruelties, and youthful traumas. Informed by Nietzschean philosophy, O'Neill's characters embodied loneliness, seeking identity protection and pity. His readings led him to distinguish between freedom and democracy, interpreting desire as a multifaceted concept encompassing revenge, property acquisition, lust, genuine romantic attraction, the pursuit of social recognition, or the yearning to escape it. The motif of desire pervades much of his oeuvre, prominently featured in the trilogy "Mourning Becomes Electra," an English adaptation of Aeschylus' Greek play "Oresteia."

Contemplating the psychological nuances of tragedy in a contemporary context devoid of belief in gods or supernatural retribution, O'Neill questioned whether it was conceivable to imbue a modern audience with the Greek sense of tragedy. The response, encapsulated within his play, eschews sacrificial acts for divine appeasement seen in Greek tragedies. Instead, O'Neill substitutes the Greek fate with the characters' lascivious desires, serving as the harbinger of their downfall. Against the backdrop of the Great Depression and the aftermath of World War I, O'Neill's work mirrors the prevailing tragic milieu, resonating with the societal turmoil of the Civil War, a period marked by fratricidal conflicts and patricidal strife within the Mannon

family. The tragedy elucidates an internal strife within the Mannon family, encapsulating the ethos of war.

O'Neill's rendition of the *Oresteia* intricately engages with a subtly distorted manifestation of the Oedipal complex. Within the trilogy, the initial segment, "Homecoming," closely parallels the *Oresteia*, while the subsequent part, "Hunted," maintains a somewhat proximate alignment, and the concluding segment, "Haunted," deviates markedly. The transposition of the Trojan War into the American Civil War accentuates the return of Ezra Mannon (Agamemnon), weakened and less Puritanical, reminiscent of post-World War I veterans seeking affectionate solace upon their return. The narrative complexity is exacerbated not only by the romantic entanglement between Christine and Adam Brant (Aegisthus) but also by Lavinia's affection for him—her cousin. Adam, the progeny of David Mannon and Mary Brantome (a French Servant entangled romantically with both David and Abe Mannon, Ezra's father), harbors vengeance against the family but succumbs to a romantic entanglement with Christine. Lavinia, resentful of her mother, threatens to expose the extramarital affair to her father, triggering a plot for revenge on the less Puritanical Ezra. However, instead of stabbing him, Christine and Adam opt for poison. As Ezra succumbs, he implicates his wife, and Lavinia uncovers the unnatural circumstances of her father's demise, exclaiming, "She's guilty—not medicine!" (O'Neill, 748).

Upon Orin's return (Orestes), seeking solace in his mother's embrace, Lavinia incites him by revealing the affair, leading to Adam's demise and Christine's subsequent suicide. Orin, consumed by hysteria, embarks on a voyage with Lavinia to the South Seas Islands in a bid to escape their harrowing past. Post-return, while Lavinia appears liberated, Orin remains emotionally distressed. His incestuous affection for his mother transforms into a morbid love for his sister, culminating in his tragic suicide. Lavinia's Freudian revelation during a passionate encounter with Peter prompts her realization that her vengeance against her mother stemmed from her love for Adam. Rejecting an escape with Peter, she opts to reside with the ghosts within the Mannon house.

In deviating significantly from Aeschylus, O'Neill's narrative diverges in its treatment of Lavinia. Unlike the *Oresteia*, where the son Orestes avenges his mother Clytemnestra, O'Neill

accentuates Lavinia's character, emphasizing the family's tragic trajectory. The substitution of Greek fatalism with the psychological morbidity of the characters is a hallmark of O'Neill's approach. Lavinia, assuming the role of the tragic figure, opts to coexist with the ghosts, symbolically withdrawing from life—a denouement that echoes more of Sophocles's *Antigone* than Aeschylus.

O'Neill's conceptualization of femininity is deeply entrenched in his equation of the feminine with the maternal paradigm. This foundational perspective is evident in all his female characters, positioning them not as objects of masculine desire but as subjects in their own right. "Mourning Becomes Electra," emerging in the later stages of his literary career, represents O'Neill's inaugural exploration of the intricate dynamics among women. Notably influenced by Freudian theories, O'Neill accentuates the mother-daughter relationship, aligning with Freud's assertion that a girl's estrangement from the mother is imbued with hostility, culminating in a profound transformation of attachment into enduring animosity. The play intricately revolves around this pivotal relationship, endowing the two female protagonists with paramount significance within the narrative fabric.

“Christine Mannon is a tall striking-looking woman of forty but she appears younger. She has a fine, voluptuous figure and she moves with a flowing animal grace. She wears a green satin dress, smartly cut and expensive, which brings out the peculiar color of her thickly curly hair, partly a copper brown, partly a bronze gold, each shade distinct yet blending with each other. Her face is unusual, handsome rather than beautiful... Her black eyebrows meet in a pronounced straight line above her strong nose. Her chin is heavy, her mouth large and sensual, the lower lip full, the upper a thin bow, shadowed by a line of hair.”(O'Neill 690)

The very first impression of Christine that we form from the above description is that she is a woman who is not defeated by her age. Her body is almost described in a masculine fashion with a strong physique. Even Minnie calls her “awfulhandsome” (O'Neill 691) instead of using the word beautiful. Her daughter Lavinia is however described as a woman way beyond her age.

Tall like her mother, her body is thin, flat-breasted and angular, and its unattractiveness is accentuated by her plain black dress... She has a flat dry voice and a habit of snapping out her words like an officer giving orders. (O'Neill 692)

In the portrayal of both female figures, a nuanced exploration of androgyny is evident, contributing to the overarching depiction of flapper women emblematic of the post-World War I era. This historical period witnessed a paradigm shift in women's autonomy, notably with the establishment of the U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau, dedicated to safeguarding the rights and needs of wage-earning women. The attainment of voting rights, coupled with the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923 permitting divorce on grounds of adultery, marked significant milestones.

These societal transformations granted women newfound freedoms, leading to their increased presence in clubs and engagement in activities such as drinking, smoking, dancing, and engaging in casual sexual relationships. In stark contrast to their Victorian predecessors, traditional notions of marriage, homemaking, and motherhood ceased to be the predominant focal points of their lives. Fashion choices reflected this departure, with flappers adopting a radically different aesthetic—binding their breasts, adorning flashy stockings, applying bold cosmetics to their faces, and shortening skirts to knee length. Hairstyles were transformed, featuring cropped hair to chin length, complemented by the iconic cloche hat and elaborate strings of beads or pearls.

The observed independence and authority exhibited by both Christine and Lavinia align with the unconventional standards of beauty prevalent during this era. Moreover, the contentious dynamics within the mother-daughter relationship depicted in the literary context can be interpreted as reflective of the societal tensions characteristic of the time. Flapper girls, epitomizing this era, frequently clashed with their Victorian mothers, who disapproved of their daughters' extravagant lifestyles and challenged societal norms. Christine confesses that the mother daughter relationship has no meaning for her as Lavinia was born not out of love but “disgust”(O'Neill 714).

Christine: “You were always my wedding night to me-and my honeymoon!”(O'Neill 714) The extramarital liaison burgeoning between Christine and Adam Brant is explicated through her profound "disgust" for her Puritan spouse. Her unwavering resolve to forge a life with Adam culminates in a nefarious plot to terminate Ezra immediately upon his return from war. O'Neill's thematic emphasis pivots predominantly on the putrescent conjugal dynamic rather

than the affair per se. In a manner reminiscent of flappers, Christine refuses to be circumscribed by the confines of her disconsolate marriage. Paradoxically, this transcendence precipitates her inexorable downfall.

In the lighted room, the change in her is strikingly apparent. At a first glance, one would mistake her for her mother...she seems a mature woman, sure of her feminine attractiveness.(O'Neill825)

The narrative delineates a subtle insinuation of the protagonist's engagement in carnal relations with an indigenous man—an ostensibly incongruous proclivity for a woman entrenched in Puritanical mores. This intimates at unmet corporeal exigencies, hitherto suppressed over an extended temporal continuum. The character endeavors to assimilate her matronly role, assuming ascendancy over her sibling Orin. Orin, discerning this, expounds, “Little by little it grew like Mother’s soul—as if you were stealing hers—as if her death had set you free-to become her!” (O’Neill, 827). Despite Lavinia's overt repudiation of such insinuations, her veneration for her mother's uninhibited, non-Puritanical disposition becomes conspicuous. Even Peter is unable to conceal his astonishment at Lavinia's transformation into a semblance of Christine upon her return, a transformation that Orin attributes to the influence of the “dark and deep blue ocean” (O’Neill, 831). However, Lavinia is disinclined to acquiesce to this revelation as seamlessly as Orin does: “Can’t you see I’m now in Father’s place and you’re Mother?” (O’Neill, 843). This cognizance, however, assumes a disconcerting manifestation of incestuous desire in Orin, a revelation that unsettles Lavinia.

Even the event of Orin’s suicide fails to abate Lavinia’s resolve to espouse Peter and cultivate a life imbued with ardor. Paradoxically, his demise amplifies her ardency, culminating in an almost desperate entreaty to Peter for matrimony on the very day of his death. “Kiss me! Hold me close! Want me! Want me so much you’d murder anyone to have me!...Want me! Take me, Adam!” (O’Neill, 865). A sudden epiphany ensues when she realizes that her inadvertent utterance of the name was not a mere lapse; it was an inadvertent avowal of her affection for Adam. This Freudian slip precipitates an awakening, wherein she comprehends that her antipathy toward her mother was, in actuality, an expression of jealousy, and Adam’s demise was not an act of rectitude but an unmitigated vendetta. This underscores the peculiarity of the mother-

daughter dynamic, wherein, instead of being symbiotic, they were engaged in a clandestine competition. Her reconciliation with this morose psychology compels her to spurn Peter's proposal, opting instead to reside within the Mannon household amidst spectral apparitions. "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..." (O'Neill, 866). This declination of matrimony can be construed as a manifestation of her self-assurance in navigating life sans a male counterpart, opting for the company of Mannon's apparitions over a romantic liaison, recognizing the lack of utility in the latter pursuit.

Eugene O'Neill's opus "Mourning Becomes Electra" could more aptly be designated as his 'feminine dramaturgical composition' (Manheim, 168). The Machiavellian plot unfolds as Christine and Adam, driven by the inexorable compulsion to consummate their affair, plot the demise of Ezra Mannon. Nonetheless, an exposition of the narrative against the backdrop of the 1920s alludes to Christine's latent resistance to acquiesce to the patriarchal dominion of Ezra. Having lived a liberated existence, she remains unwilling to capitulate to Ezra's imperatives. A curious dichotomy ensues as both mother and daughter find themselves irresistibly drawn to the same man concurrently, precipitating perennial discord rooted in jealousy over their respective romantic entanglements. Despite O'Neill's Freudian influences, a contextual analysis of the period in which he scribed his work proffers an alternative interpretation.

The jealousy Lavinia experiences can be attributed to her veneration of her mother's resplendent allure as a Puritan woman. Upon the realization that the man she believed to be enamored with her is, in fact, her mother's paramour, she orchestrates a plot to dispatch him. The denouement of the play witnesses her feeble yet resolute proclamation: "I'm Mother's daughter—not one of you! I'll live in spite of you!" (O'Neill 856). O'Neill's thematic focus on Lavinia positions her as the tragic protagonist, akin to Electra. Nevertheless, Susan Harris Smith posits that Lavinia assumes tragic dimensions only upon capitulating to patriarchal dictates. The male characters perpetuate their dominance, relegating the female contingent to the 'Other,' existing in perpetual estrangement. Lavinia seemingly embraces her punitive destiny, surrendering to a life of seclusion—a trajectory seemingly imposed upon her by the playwright, who insinuates that carefree feminine autonomy is an untenable proposition. O'Neill's treatment of Christine, though

distinct from his portrayal of other maternal characters, culminates in her demise under the vengeful motif orchestrated by her own daughter.

Interpreting Christine and Lavinia through the prism of their zeitgeist reveals a societal milieu where flappers encountered vehement censure from the patriarchal establishment. Advertisements of the era, ostensibly targeting the burgeoning purchasing power of women, concurrently sought to circumscribe their societal agency. Vogue magazine featured cosmetic ads with taglines such as "For men demand youth in women's faces" and "You think I'm a flapper but I can keep house" (Sagert 20). The press, alarmed by the ascent of flappers, disparaged them, likening their reproductive practices to bee hives with few women procreating while men functioned as drones subject to sterile female control. The discourse on androgyny was subjected to medical critique, as articulated by The Express.

Given that "Mourning Becomes Electra" premiered in 1931, postdating the cessation of the Roaring Twenties and the Jazz Age, it inevitably reflects the cultural milieu of its epoch. If the female characters were sculpted in the image of flappers, O'Neill's critique of them becomes salient. The emancipation of these women does not merely culminate in their individual demises but triggers the cataclysmic collapse of the entire familial structure. O'Neill, in affording the women agency to determine their destinies, underscores the peril inherent in their interpretation of liberty.

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