

Tragic Vision: Similarities and Departures in the Tragic Vision of O'Neill and Aeschylus

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ABSTRACT: *In this paper, I have explored the genesis of modern tragedy through a comparison between t Aeschylus' Oresteia and Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra. O'Neill has reworked the Oresteian Trilogy by placing his characters in the modern cultural context. Although there are similarities in both the tragic narratives yet I have focused on the points of departure to highlight the differences between Greek and modern sensibilities. For the theoretical background, I have drawn on the writings of Hegel, Schopenhauer and Frederic Nietzsche to demonstrate that in modern tragedy, human existence is fraught with the burden of cosmic loneliness and Man, and in the absence of God/s, has been left with no other option but to mourn his fate.*

Key words: fate, departure, trilogy, greek, existence

In this paper, I intend to compare O'Neill's tragic vision with that of the Greek's to locate his individual talent in the Western tradition of tragedy. For this purpose, I have selected *Mourning Becomes Electra* as a representative text because in this play, O'Neill has reworked the myth of curse on House of Atreus by Aeschylus in a modern context. Although there are similarities in both the tragic narratives yet in O'Neill's play there are points of departure. My argument is that these points of departure essentially construct O'Neill's tragic vision and provide parameters to differentiate between Greek and modern sensibilities. For the critical paradigm, I rely upon the concept of tragedy as theorized by Aristotle, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

Theoretical Paradigm:

After Aristotle, Hegel's views on tragedy are most oft quoted. Arguably, he is the first theorist to make a comparative study of the Greek Tragedy with the modern tragedy. He views tragedy as the inevitable consequence of the absolute realizing itself in the course of history. The tragic hero in Hegelian metaphysics is set against choices essentially dialectical in nature. According to Hegel, during the course of history, one sided positions emerge which contain within themselves their antitheses. These positions give birth to conflicts which are resolved in each case by the transcendence or the death of the particular. And history moves dialectically through contradictions and negativity towards a comprehensive and rational end. The choices made by the tragic heroes are not ratified by a vast majority and in the phenomenological perspective; these choices bring him into direct conflict with the tradition. But after the death of tragic hero, the situation will change. In *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel observes:

That is the position of heroes in the world history generally; through them a new world dawns. This new principle is in contradiction with the previous one, appears as destructive; the heroes appear, therefore, as violent, transgressing laws. Individually they are vanquished; but this principle persists, if in a different form, and buries the present. (1: 515)

Hegelian tragedy challenges the idea of ahistorical Aristotelian

conception which views tragedy as a story of suffering eliciting the emotions of pity and fear. For Hegel, the tragic hero fights for an ethical substance which represents itself as an Absolute in the course of history. The hero's positioning towards a certain conflict is not based on a clear demarcation between the seemingly simple categories of good and evil. He aligns with a certain ideal because it represents the Absolute. But the opposing absolute is as good as the one he stands for. So the tragic conflict is made of two absolutes which are equally good. We hear the power of an ethical substance that has been violated as a result of collision, and we sympathize with the tragic hero who while transgressing one absolute has upheld the opposing one. Agamemnon is torn between two absolutes of fatherhood and leadership. He sacrifices the daughter, Iphigenia and the audiences feel terrified at his callousness but within their hearts they know that innocent blood is also spilled when national pride is at stake. In *Lectures on Aesthetics*, he observes:

The original essence of tragedy consists then in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposite sides, if taken by itself, has justification, while on the other hand each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by negating and damaging the equally justified power of the other. Consequently, in its moral life, and because of it, each is just as much involved in guilt. (1196)

Thus every choice the tragic hero makes is accompanied by greatness and guilt. But the conflict between greatness and guilt does not produce chaos. On the contrary, it helps producing a rational order which has its own Absolutes to be challenged in the dialectic, linear flow of history. In Hegelian metaphysics, we see a paradigm shift in defining tragedy as he lays more stress on the Absolute ethical sense than the ahistorical positioning of Aristotelian tragic hero.

Arthur Schopenhauer contests the idea of linear flow of history and the emergence of a rational order as a result of the conflict between two Absolutes. He views life as a representation of a blind will, a thing-itself in Kantian sense, which replaces God, rationality, fate and chance. (Hegel 354). Life is but a manifestation of will that expressly becomes a

will to live and remains in a perpetual conflict with itself and its surroundings. But this strife is not meant for some higher purposes to be achieved or a rationalistic order to dawn. Sufferings in Schopenhauer do not lead to wisdom but only serve the sole purpose of bringing life to the brink of death. Sufferings are inherent to human existence. In *The World as Will and Idea* he observes:

The demand for so called poetical justice rests on the entire misconception of tragedy, and indeed the nature of the world itself... The true sense of tragedy is the deeper, that it is not his own individual sins that the hero atones for, but original sin, i.e., the crime of existence itself. (328)

In Schopenhauer's critical paradigm, death is conceived as the only reality which delivers us from the crime of being born. He does not believe either in the presence of a divine order or the dialectical struggle of the Absolutes as theorized by Aristotle and Hegel respectively. On the contrary, he interprets human life as purposeless voyage whose final destination is death. And the amount of suffering or pain one bears depends on one's natural disposition. One can bear neither less or more pain than he has the natural capacity to feel. But this mode of suffering ultimately leads us to a nihilistic view of human existence. We are trapped in a state of constant yearning in which satisfaction of any desire leads on to wish for fulfillment of another desire. Ultimately we end up being depressed and dejected after going through a long process of disillusionment. He observes:

That all happiness is only a negative not a positive nature, that just on this account it cannot be lasting satisfaction and gratification, but merely delivers us from some pain or want which must be followed either by a new pain, or by languor, and ennui.... Every epic or dramatic poem can only represent a struggle, an effort and fight for happiness, never enduring and complete happiness itself. (1: 413)

Nietzsche rejects this nihilistic vision of viewing the whole world as a representation of blind will that ultimately leads us onto a meaningless death. He argues in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Spirit of Music* that our brightest dignity lies in the meaning of works of art—for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and world are eternally justified. (32) Thus any work of art is an affirmation of human dignity in the face of apparent chaos and disorder created by Schopenhauerian blind will.

In theoretical terms, Nietzsche argues that tragedy dramatizes the essential conflict between god Dionysus and god Apollo. The Dionysic spirit entails an ecstatic condition where the individual surrenders his individuality and feels united with the mystical oneness and Apollonian tends to contradict it by stressing on the need of discipline and order in life. In Nietzsche, the world is perceived not subservient to a blind will but an aesthetic phenomenon, represented through a conflict between the two gods, Apollo and Dionysus. In Apollo we find an expression of the principle of individuations, the a priori will “from whose gestures and looks all the delight, wisdom and beauty of illusion speaks to us. (16) And the god Dionysus sets the human spirit free by dismantling the established orders and principles strengthening the bond between man and man, and breaking down the boundaries that “distress, despotism or impudent fashion have erected between man and man. (17) The liberated subject feels like going through a mystic experience, dancing and singing, dissolving all historical, cultural and racial identities. The traditional demands to authority in the form of religious laws and state apparatuses are subverted and the Dionysic orgies purify the feelings of sin and guilt. Characters in modern tragedy after feeling disillusioned with the blind will of Schopenhauer express a strong yearning to participate in this mysterious world of Primal Oneness theorized by Nietzsche.

Socio Political Context of the Study:

Aeschylus (525-456 BC) wrote *Oresteia* (Curse on House of Atreus) in the 5th century B.C. His play is strongly anchored in the philosophical and political consciousness of his time. It was a time of transition when Greek civilization was moving towards a cultural

cohesion after passing through a long period of wars and bloodshed. Athens was about to play a critical role in coming years as one the one hand, it had emerged successful in its struggle against tyrannical regimes of the past, and on the other hand, it had to consolidate the Greek city states against the possible invasion of the Persian Empire. Sarah B. Pomeroy et al observe:

During the Archaic period, numerous Greek city-states struggled with a variety of problems – factional quarrels between aristocratic families, tensions between aristocrats and the people, and tyranny. Sparta found a unique solution to the Archaic crisis and so did Athens. By 500 BC Athen's problems had been largely resolved. The last tyrant had been expelled and Athens had a democratic government, and aristocratic stasis was largely confined to competing for offices and persuading the assembly. (110)

The rise of democracy was accompanied by a culture of critique. The citizen class (the Demos) felt empowered to challenge the power hierarchies and demanded for a society based on democratic institutions. The old order of settling tribal feuds through bloodshed should give way to a more institutionalized system of justice and the power hierarchies to be redefined. In fact, man was trying to apply a rational order on his earthly existence.

The philosophers of the antiquity were also interested in developing a rational understanding of the universe. The ontological study of nature in the 6th century B.C. was based on sense perception rejecting the old model of mythological interpretation of natural phenomena and the universe. This paradigm shift i.e. from theogonic to cosmogonic interpretation of the universe was the first milestone towards a rational and empirical understanding of the universe which in the coming centuries would give birth to a discourse of critique and skepticism. Prominent among these philosophers were Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes and Pythagoras. These philosophers viewed the universe as a cosmic whole in which man's existence happens to be an integral part which finds its fullest expression in a rational society based on the

principles of justice and democracy. And here we face the most difficult of all the ontological questions, “What is justice?” In Plato’s ideal Republic, the idea of justice is interpreted as building up of social classes in which the individuals are condemned to live forever. Hence a cobbler remains a cobbler. George Thompson observes:

To Plato, who regarded the material world as an unreal image of the ideal and sought to stabilize human society on the basis of exclusive domination of a leisured class, the concept of justice was something absolute and immutable which expressed itself politically in the doctrine that the cobbler must stick to his cobbling. (270)

Plato’s idea of justice was critiqued by the Sophists who viewed justice not as idealistically constructed social configuration but a tool in the hands of the powerful people to rule the weaker ones. “The notion that justice is relative can be traced in the democratic thought of the fifth century. Thus justice was defined by Thrasymachos, a representative of Sophist thought as the strong man’s interest.” (Thompson 271)

What I am emphasizing here is the fact that the question of defining the idea of justice was pivotal to Greek political and philosophical thought in the fifth century. Both the elitist juridical view of Plato and power centric justice of Sophists was anti-democratic and inimical to the ideals of individualism and freedom cherished by Aeschylus. He believed that without justice, it was well nigh impossible for any democratic state to survive. And in *The Oresteia*, he makes an attempt to define justice as a political and social construct which can only be operative in a democratic dispensation and furthermore, it also helps the individual to realize its potential as a productive member of polis (the city state)

Greek tragedy was primarily a religious and cultural phenomenon. It originated from public festivals and it served social, moral and political purposes. Aristotle in *Poetics* views tragedy in the social perspectives. Catharsis of pent up emotions was necessary to make people more balanced citizens. Thus the therapeutic effect of catharsis also served the political purpose of making the citizen conform to the

political demands of an organized society. Terry Eagleton observes:

Aristotle's ingenious riposte to this censure is the doctrine of *catharsis*, which accepts Plato's premises while denying his conclusions. Tragedy can perform the pleasurable, politically valuable service of draining off an excess of enfeebling emotions such as pity and fear, thus providing a kind of public therapy for those of the citizenry in danger of emotional flabbiness. We feel fear, but are not inspired to run away. We are, so to speak, shaken but not stirred. In this sense, tragic drama plays a central role in the military and political protection of the state. (153)

Although as an artistic necessity, it drew on the events of heroic age, rejecting trivial and ordinary yet its thematic concern was always to define man's relationship with gods on the one hand and his political destiny on the other hand. Chorus played a central role to achieve this synthesis. Its presence on the stage developed an integrated relationship between the audience and the actors. Symbolically, the chorus represented a link between the physical and the metaphysical.

As discussed earlier, in *Oresteia*, Aeschylus was dealing with a complex philosophical and political question of defining and exacting justice in the face of tribal claims of revenge. Although the figures on the stage are mythopoeic, yet the conflict is essentially of a social nature. The curse on the House of Atreus has claimed many lives and yet there seems to be no possibility of its coming to an end. How could this bloodshed be stopped to serve the purpose of maintaining the political cohesiveness of the Polis? Aeschylus finds a solution in the establishment of a democratically constituted court of justice where Athena, the goddess of wisdom purifies the guilt of matricide, setting Orestes free. Furies are turned to Eumendies and assigned the sacred duty of safeguarding the newly established political order. Hence the politics of tribal justice is replaced with the politics of power distribution between the democratically elected institutions. For Aeschylus, the tribal justice should give way to institutionalized justice if Athenian democracy is to endure. The curse on House of Atreus is expiated and the order and harmony restored to society. The trilogy does not end with a tragic note

but invests hope in the future of mankind.

Eugene O'Neill wrote his play in 1930's when most of the writers were grappling with the social and economic realities of the times. The New York stock market crashed in October 1929 shattering the hopes and aspirations of American people they had invested in almost the mythical idea of American dream. Consequently, much of the literature produced in the context of 30's is diagnostic. It aims at finding out the social and economic causes which led to "the Great Depression" and its implications on the lives of the common Americans. Hence a spirit of pessimism prevailed both at individual and societal levels. However, O'Neill rejected the economic study of man's conditions and diverted his attention to explore the deep recesses of human soul. Intensely introvert, he was always interested in finding a harmonious relationship between the physical and metaphysical. His dramatic universe is peopled with characters who are disillusioned with the idea of Christian God but at the same time yearn for the presence of some non temporal, non spatial reality that could give them a sense of release from a stultifying and absurd mode of existence. In Greeks, the idea of such a duality did not exist. Gods represented not only the divine intervention in human affairs but also ensured that any disorder in the moral universe of man should express itself in the form of chaos in the physical universe. Thus if Oedipus is not punished for his pride, the state of Thebes would suffer from famine and epidemic. And in Aeschylus, Furies are to be satisfied for the crime of matricide. The modern mind would hesitate to accept any metaphysical reasoning for a phenomenon which happens to be purely physical and can be explained in empirical terms. This episteme shift can help us in understanding the modern tragic vision. O'Neill does not see individual to be blessed in the Greek sense i.e. he may be saved when the chaos goes beyond human power and understanding. His tragic vision is entropic i.e. the chaos is the inherent principle of the universe and no amount of human wisdom can stop it and restore the moral order.

Data Analysis:

In the opening scene of *Agamemnon*, the watchman feels tired of performing his duties for the last ten years. He wants a release from this toil and prayer to gods for the safe return of Agamemnon. In the very

idea of praying lies the affirmation of some divine order in which when the suffering becomes unbearable beyond a certain point, the humanity can turn to some powers for release. The watchman is not an ordinary sentinel on whom Aeschylus places the duty of opening the play with the most beautiful of lyrical poetry ever created. He becomes a representer of human wish for order and harmony in life. When he has finished his prayer, he sees the beacon-light. The Troy has been captured and Agamemnon will soon be coming home. The prayer does not go waste in the cosmic wilderness rather it has been granted at the very moment when suffering humanity is in dire need of it. H. D. F. Kitto observes:

Aeschylus, being a poet, and a dramatist, will convey some of his thoughts through his imagery. This prayer, release from toils, repeated by more important characters in the trilogy, becomes the prayer of suffering humanity, waiting for its own release; the light that the watchman sees blazing out of the darkness culminates, after several other false lights, in the torch light procession that escorts the Eumendies to their new home in Athens, and really does put within man's grip, if he will take it, "release from misery." (67)

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the prayer is repeated in the form of a longing throughout the play to reinforce the idea of human helplessness and despair. Seth Bede, a minor character, and a close aide of Lavinia sings a chanty:

"O, Shenandoah, I long to hear you
A-way, my rolling river
Oh, Shenandoah, I can't get near you
Way-ay, I am bound away
Across the wide Missouri." (*Homecoming* 1)

The watchman in *Agamemnon* never appears on the stage. His absence reinforces the idea of fulfillment. He got what he prayed of gods. But the longing to go across the river Missouri to see the beloved Shenandoah remains a longing. This little song is embedded in the structure of the play to suggest firstly, the cyclic nature of time and secondly to reinforce the idea that longings in O'Neill's world are never to be materialized.

The play ends with Seth appearing on the stage for the last time to sing to the audience that he would never be able to go across the river Missouri.

The appearance of Clytemnestra and Christine on the stage is also of grave importance to draw a distinction between the Greek and modern tragedy. Clytemnestra appears as a self confident woman who has been ruling the land for ten years in Agamemnon's absence. Instead of becoming a victim at the hands of Greek power structure which tends to marginalize women in their public and private lives, she takes the lead in making critical decisions of her life. She simulates masculinity to challenge the traditional political power structure. The watchman calls her,

“Clytemnestra, in whose woman's heart

A man's will nurses hope. (*Agamemnon* 1)

In the long absence of Agamemnon, she has been running the state like a king. Thus her place on the centre stage of state politics subverts the traditional power hierarchies and privileges her to a position she is not ready to quit. “Clytemnestra's will to mastery is a thread running throughout the play from the first speech to last.” (Ingramm 78).

In O'Neill, Christine, the modern version of Clytemnestra is portrayed as woman who is at the verge of nervous breakdown. Feeling disgusted with the marriage bond, and as an ageing woman, she is desperate to find some moments of happiness in life. Her extra marital affair with Adam Brant makes her a victim of catholic guilt. She has already been marginalized in the Mannon House by her own daughter, Lavinia who in the absence of Ezra Mannon performs the self appointed duty to defend the puritan value system of the Mannon House. Christine makes a desperate effort to set herself free of this “Puritan Temple.” In her opinion, it suits Lavinia the best to be an integral part of the Mannon House- a symbolic representation of life denying Puritanism. The first meeting between the mother and the daughter presents a dismal picture of their relationship. When Lavinia asks Christine about her ailing father, Christine's answer reveals her true feelings for Lavinia and the Mannon House:

CHRISTINE. (Casually, avoiding her eyes) Yes. He's

much better now. He'll soon be going the rounds to his patients again, he hopes. (As if anxious to change the subject, looking at flowers she carries) I've been to the green house to pick these. I felt our tomb needed a little brightening. (She nods scornfully towards the house) Each time I come back after away it appears more like a sepulcher! The "whited" one of the Bible—Pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray Ugliness . . . Forgive me, Vinnie I forgot you liked it. And you ought to. It suits your temperament. (*Homecoming* 1)

All the images which describe the Mannon House have been derived from the religious narratives. The image of a tomb, further qualified by the white one of the Bible, reflects on a spirituality which is devoid of human emotions. The colorlessness of white symbolizes the puritan wish to completely eradicate evil from human existence. In this context, Christine constructs Lavinia as a Puritan self, the other, to mundane human existence which is incapacitated to reconcile with the slightest deviation from the bookish moral code envisaged by Puritan religiosity. In symbolic terms, Christine is the secular Christ, in search of her Bible of worldly pleasures. In this speech, she is trying to shed off the cross of puritan normalcy and wishes implicitly to participate in a mode of existence which transcends all what is stifling and prescriptive. She rejects the essentiality of the Mannon House.

Parallels have also been drawn between the homecoming of Agamemnon and Ezra Mannon. Agamemnon comes back as a destroyer of the cities. He does not nurture the feelings of guilt over the critical decision of sacrificing his own daughter for sack of his masculine pride. As a king and commander in chief of Greek Warriors, it was his moral duty to fight his fraternal feelings and to show his commitment to the idea of national pride. Although his homecoming is overshadowed by fears and doubts yet he retains the regal status worthy of a proud king. The ten years long war has made him more of a god of success than simply an earthly king. Hence he dares tread the red draperies to express his fearlessness of the divine beings. He argues that the fears associated

with invoking the wrath of god must pass unnoticed otherwise it would undermine his status as a king and a great warrior.

Since you're resolved --- (to an attendant) Come,
kneel; untie my shoes;
It offends modesty, that I
Should dare with unwashed feet to soil these costly rugs,
Worth weight for weight of silver, spoiling my own house!
But let that pass. (1.1, 52-57)

No where do we find Agamemnon worried of the wrath of gods if he treads these purple carpets. Rather, he is more concerned with soiling such costly articles of decoration. He is confident, composed and harbours no feelings of guilt for killing his own daughter, Iphigenia. In Greek culture, romantic notions are attached to the idea of war. It provides the kings and warriors to prove their manly mettle in the battlefield. Agamemnon had the choice of avoiding shedding the blood of his innocent daughter and then afterwards the blood of so many people. But it would undermine his capacity as a king to rule and further it tantamount to disturbing the moral order based on the idea of Dike (Justice). H. D. F. Kitto observes:

Agamemnon has taken it for granted that a war for a wanton woman is a proper thing: it is his conception of Dike. It is also Zeus's conception, and Zeus is going to follow it by destroying the destroyer. The necessity is the necessity of shedding innocent blood in such a war, which Artemis anticipates by requiring him first, as a condition, to shed some innocent blood of his own family, as a foretaste, and to take the consequences. (71)

So both the human agent and the divine power agree on the point that to restore the moral order, it is imperative to shed even the innocent blood. This war would bring prince Priam and his accomplices to justice who has criminally violated the sanctity of a Royal House by eloping with its Queen, Helen.

In contrast to Agamemnon, Ezra Mannon comes back as a broken

individual. He is not proud of his achievements as a warrior and does not have anything romantic to describe about this war. On the contrary, he finds the phenomenon of power struggle through wars as a madness which results in spilling human blood like dirty water. Human existence is nothing more than a waste bin for dead bodies. Ironically, Lincoln has been assassinated at the time of victory making the whole effort to end civil war as completely meaningless and absurd. Hence Ezra Mannon feels disillusioned with the war politics and equates it with the life denying Puritanism of the Mannon House. The victory won in the battlefield has been lost in the wilderness of absurdity, as too much bloodshed has made him reject the grand narrative of humanism about this universe being homocentric. The Mannon House along with its life denying Puritanism is another objective correlative of this meaninglessness and absurdity he happens to discover firstly in the battlefield and secondly in the Mannon way of thinking and living.

MANNON. That's always been the Mannon's way of thinking. They went to the white-meeting house on Sabbaths and meditated on death. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born. That white meeting house. it stuck in my mind—clean scrubbed and white washed... a temple of death. But in this war I have seen too many white walls splattered with blood that counted no more than dirty water. I've seen men scattered about, no more important than rubbish to be got rid of. That made the white meeting house seem meaningless. (*Homecoming* 3)

For Ezra Mannon, the only escape from this ugly reality is possible through Christine's love. He could experience beauty, love, peace and harmony if he were successful in resurrecting the marriage that went stale because of the narcissistic tendencies in the Mannon ways of life. Mannons can love no one except themselves. It is only at the war front that Ezra Mannon realizes the inadequacy of the self which tries to sustain itself of its own. In philosophical terms, it is an attempt on the part of human existence to yearn for the status of an auto telic reality which does not need any one else for its survival. Man's attempt to

behave like gods is bound to recoil. Pride is meant only for divinity. And in earthly life, its longing beyond a certain point invites death and destruction. Both Agamemnon and Ezra Mannon are destroyed for exhibiting excessive pride with a difference that Agamemnon does not fall a victim to a psychological break down. He remains confident and composed till the last moment of his life. On the contrary, Ezra Mannon homecoming has nothing glorious about itself. He has developed sickness for war politics and abhors the romantic notions attached to the lives of the warriors. He is faced with the existential question of finding meanings in life through realizing the inadequacy of the narcissistic self to provide life giving vitality to an otherwise spiritually absurd life. The new god he has discovered is love, on whose altar he needs to surrender completely to survive:

MANNON. (Drawing himself up with stern pride and dignity and surrendering himself like a commander against hopeless odds) All right, then. I come home to surrender to you--- what is inside me. I love you. I loved you then, and all the years between, and I love you now. (*Homecoming* 3)

O'Neill makes a particular human situation emblematic of the plight of suffering humanity. The Mannons at a microcosmic level represent the tragedy of modern man who feels alienated from his surroundings and is completely hopeless of any external help that Greeks were so fortunate to have in the forms of gods. Thus there is an essential difference between Greek sense of fate and its modern version.

Fate as a philosophical concept in Greek tragedy did not mean a predetermined universe or mode of action. It offered the hero with certain choices that he was completely free to accept or reject. Agamemnon had a choice not to slaughter his daughter to set sail towards Troy. No god forced Oedipus to blind himself for a crime that he did not commit knowingly. The heroes made these choices because in these choices we see the practical manifestation of the narratives of human courage and dignity. Although they die at the end yet in their death and defeat, we see a life, soaring higher towards some sublime ideals. Greek tragedy ends with the defeat of a human being leaving a

message for the victory of humanity over forces man had been struggling to understand and master. Time and again has he been defeated by these forces but he is not ready to surrender. The Sisyphus will keep on rolling the stone towards the highest point though he knows that it will stay there for only a fraction of a second. The humanity celebrates this brief time span as a human victory and the struggle goes on. So in its purely classical version there is no sense of loss and defeat at the end of the tragedy. The audience would leave the theatre with a sense of pride that they observed the victory of moral order at the end but it became possible through the sufferings of a human agent. Thus sufferings are not to be viewed as a purely subjective phenomenon but part of bigger schemata which happens to be cultural as well as religious. No compartmentalization of personal and public domains. Hence after killing Clytemnestra, Orestes does not make any attempt to reject the society. He has to define his being in the socio political domains of polis. His fate is to be decided by a democratically constituted court of justice to ensure legal representation and fulfillment of democratic ideals. Tribal feuds are to be settled by institutions and human individuality cannot be allowed to threaten the democratic foundation of the society. This is the wisdom earned through a long process of enduring sufferings. George Thompson Observes:

The reign of law has begun. As we followed the fortunes of Orestes, we were in effect watching the growth of law through successive stages of social evolution. Regarded originally as a crime to be redressed by the kinsman of the victim, and subsequently as a pollution to be expiated by the prescriptions of the aristocratic priesthood, the offence of homicide is now a crime to be submitted to the judgment of a legally appointed committee of the people. The conflict between tribal custom and aristocratic privilege has been resolved in democracy. (296)

The characters of modern tragedy, in Hegel's view, are more individual personalities than embodiments of world-historical forces, motivated more by subjective states than

conflicts of ethical substance. This paradigm shift from public to private, from collective to personal motifs and subjective emotional states happens to be the hallmark of the modern tragic narratives. An individual, in modern tragedy does not enjoy the status of larger than life figure engaged in a perpetual conflict with dark and inscrutable laws devised by divine beings. He is more of an introvert nature, victimized by his own psychological complexes which symbolically have replaced Greek gods. What remains intact in both the tragic paradigms is suffering humanity. As defined by Hegel, the individual is not at war with world historical forces, striving for greater ethical values but an isolated being destroyed by his inherent psychological complexes. Raymond terms it as Private Tragedy. In his seminal work on modern tragedy he observes:

Tragedy, in this view, is inherent. It is not only that man is frustrated, by others and by society, in his deepest and primary desires. It is also that these desires include destruction and self destruction. What is called the death-wish is given the status of a general instinct, and its derivatives, in destructiveness and aggression are generally seen as essentially normal. The process of living is then a continual struggle and adjustment of the power energies making for satisfaction or death. (Williams 106)

“Self destructive instincts” and “death wish” set the modern tragedy into motion. Viewed in this context, the Mannons are fated to death as they harbour such desires which bring their ultimate downfall. Lavinia, being a father fixated child yearns to have a sexual union with her father but the super ego or societal or cultural forces would not allow this to happen. Her repressed sexual desires create a tragic web of events around her in which every attempt to seek happiness brings her closer to death. She replaces the father image with Adam Brant whose facial resemblance with Ezra Mannon can bring a sense of fulfillment in her life. But under the influence of puritanical demands of the Mannon tradition, she refrains from openly expressing this love and buries it in the

deep recesses of her unconscious mind. Orin, a mother fixated child, after killing Adam Brant, falls in love with Lavinia, another dead image of Christine. Thus O'Neill places all the Mannons in a spiritual vacuity, where their psychological complexes take them to the point of nervous breakdown. This neurosis appears in sadomasochistic tendencies to torture themselves and each other to death. Doris V. Falk observes:

The house of Mannon is the tragic flaw of its occupants. It represents the Mannon self; its walls are those of the pride system, that cell of mirrored ego images from which no Mannon can escape alive... *Mourning Becomes Electra* demonstrates that in this inner world, true tragic drama may be acted. (Falk 142)

Arthur Schopenhauer and Frederic Nietzsche cast a considerable influence in shaping O'Neill's tragic vision. Schopenhauer viewed suffering as the only defining criterion of our existence. In his seminal text titled *Studies in Pessimism* he argues that unless suffering is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim. (5). Commenting upon this influence, Stephen A Black observes:

The view of life that evolved in Eugene owed a debt to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as well as to Greek mythology and had analogies with psychoanalysis. It is a view that O'Neill called tragic and that stood in the mind in intellectual and emotional opposition to the Christian view of life. (90)

Nietzsche interpreted this conflict Apollonian demand for moderation and order and a Dionysic yearning for release and happiness. The antagonistic relationship between these two forces shaped the Greek Tragedy. The suffering of god Dionysus in Greek tragedy are not self destructive as they happen to be in the modern tragedy. The balance between two forces is restored at the end of the Greek tragedy but in modern tragedy and especially in O'Neill there is strong yearning for letting lose the Dionysic frenzy. O'Neill finds peace and harmony in an imagined state of existence which is overpowered by Dionysic energy ignoring all which smacks of order or conformation. It has nothing to do

with ethical demands of Christian purity, sin and guilt. Terry Eagleton observes:

Tragedy has no truck with ethics: instead, it offers us an aestheticized version of sacrifice, of death-in-life and life through death, which is as implacably amoral as the old fertility cults. It is this world of wounded gods and life-enhancing heroes which will provide a vibrant alternative to Christianity and secular humanism alike, disfigured as they are by their sickly obsession with guilt, sin, pity and altruism. (56)

In *Mourning Becomes Electra* this conflict between Apollo and Dionysus is represented through the portrayal of the Mannon House and South Sea Island. As discussed earlier, the Mannon House symbolizes the puritanical demands of conformation and an obsession with the idea of sin and guilt. The South Sea Island, as represented in the text is an antithesis of these demands. It is an ideal mode of existence, enjoyed at a non temporal, non spatial plane where the idea of sin does not exist. It offers to humanity whatever is denied in a structured society, the letting loose of Dionysic frenzy in which the human beings sing and dance and find themselves in perfect harmony with nature. All the Mannons yearn to be part of the island as it would help them to transcend the limitations which the world of matter imposes on them- a pre natal existence far away from the idea of sin and guilt. Adam Brant gives a graphic description of the South Sea Island who he also calls as “Blessed Isles.”

BRANT. So you remember that, do you? (Then romantically) 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 Blessed Isles, I'd call them! You can forget there all men's dirty dreams of greed and power! (Homecoming 1)

Adam Brant perceives human existence on island as essentially transcendental in its nature. Nietzsche labels it as “Dionysic existence” as it provides release from the Apollonian demands of earthly existence.

Here duality of mind and body ceases to exist and life appears as a unity ever flowing through the whole cosmos. It is a spiritual reunion with the rest of the universe. But, unfortunately, this release and blessed life is of an illusory nature as it only helps to evade the overpowering existential reality present around them in the form of the Mannons House and the portraits of the ancestors hung on the wall. These portraits remind them that any attempt to escape from this prison house is bound to fail and the prayers for peace and happiness are never to be granted.

Conclusion:

Gods departed from the earth setting human beings free to make their own choices. In O'Neill's tragic vision, these gods have been replaced by psychological, cultural, genetic and religious determinism. The Greek hero was fortunate to have gods to help him when the conflict reached a stalemate situation. Modern man is deprived of this blessing. The gods he is confronting with are far more ruthless in exacting justice than the Greek gods.

Lavinia makes a last attempt to start afresh in life, rejecting the Mannon tradition by expressing her love for Peter. But her repressed sexual desire for Adam Brant expresses itself in a Freudian slip and she concludes that it is impossible to seek an escape from her psychological complexes. Hopelessness and an eternal isolation is the fate of modern Electra.

LAVINIA. Want me! Take me, Adam! Adam? Why did I call you Adam? I never even heard that name before--- outside the Bible! (Then suddenly with a hopeless, dead finality) Always the dead between! It is no good trying anymore.
(*The Hunted 2*)

No god would come to rescue Lavinia. And the conflict remains unresolved. In *Eumendies*, there is a procession of torch bearers at the end, reassuring the Athenians that gods do take care of their affairs and the creation of the universe and appearance of Man on the earth are organically linked with each other. And Man needs to define his destiny within the moral and political framework of polis. But in O'Neill, the split between the public and personal has finality about itself. Lavinia is

not to be punished either by society or by gods but by herself. No order is restored. And no problem is solved. Man has to face a cosmic loneliness in which sufferings bear no meanings. The Dionysic mode of existence would serve only as an illusion to confront an overpowering existential reality and prayers of the suffering humanity are not to be granted.

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