

LACAN AND SUBJECT FORMATION IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S *MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA*

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Abstract: In Eugene O'Neill there is a visible disillusionment with the modern human conditions. The material progress that defines the contours of American Dream finds a critical space in his plays. He considers the American dream as a source of decadence. And unlike his contemporaries, he does not find the source of this fall in the material conditions. For him, the experiencing human soul is the seat of discontentment and unhappiness. The present study positions O'Neill in psychoanalytical paradigm of critical interpretation to trace how human soul is affected by modernity. The characters in *Mourning Becomes Electra* find themselves in a state of existence that they cannot find any escape from it. The more they try to get free, the more they are trapped by existential human conditions. I have applied Jacques Lacan argument to trace how the soul faces the split between the real and imaginary when it becomes a part of the symbolic order. On human's entry into language, part of the self is completely lost that can never be recovered. Such a loss creates fear and anxiety in human sphere. The human beings then remain in search of the lost self that Lacan terms as object a. It is the fate of modern human to remain in search of that object and never to find it. Mannon's represent human beings in the play. And a permanent source of loss is the fate of modern man.

Key Words: Material, Human Soul, Psychoanalytical, Modernity, Existence, Anxiety.

Introduction

In *Mourning Becomes Electra* O'Neill rewrites the Greek myth in the modern context to explore the dark recesses of human soul. He borrows the story line from *Oresteian Trilogy* to see how the myth works in the modern human conditions. As an artist, he feels completely disillusioned with these conditions and yearns to have something more stable and meaningful. This yearning expresses itself in the form of different images and metaphors in many of his plays. With the conspicuous absence of godhead, he seems to desire for a transcendental reality that produces the order and harmony between the external and internal universe of man. In the present study I have applied Lacan's theory of human subjectivity conditioned through language. Lacan argues that on our entrance into the symbolic order or language we lose the pre lingual state of existence and for the rest of our lives remain engaged with the search for that lost *objet petit a* which language can never experience in the day to day life

Lacanian Reading of *Mourning Becomes Electra*

The Imaginary

The play begins following the tradition of Greek tragedy. In Aeschylus, the Trojan War provides the backdrop to tragedy. O'Neill uses the American Civil War (1861-1865) as the backdrop to tragedy. I argue that the backdrop of war is strategically important as the chaos created by war is experienced both at public and private level. War not only affects individual psyche but also the national psyche. Hence it connects the personal with national. But in O'Neill, the devastating effects of war are limited only to the Mannon House. Moreover, the Mannons are also at war with their instinctive and psychological drives. Thus the idea of split self can at best be explored by bringing war into the personal tragedy.

The setting of the stage is expressionistic. The technique is used in painting in which the artist or writer seeks to express the inner world of emotions rather than external reality. It is the study of human soul. Hence O'Neill employs it to see how New England Puritanism and the Civil War define human self; and what strategies do human self adopts to confront the void created by these external drives.

In the play, Christine Mannon serves as the imaginary, the Mother figure which defines human desires. She is an outsider to the puritanical traditions of the house. The first part of the trilogy deals with the

strained relationship between Christine and Lavinia. As a middle aged woman of forty, Christine is in search of love and romance. She feels that her marriage with Ezra Mannon is dead with no possibility of resurrection. It is important to look at the way O'Neill describes her in the opening scene. He depicts her:

Christine Mannon is a tall and 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 colour of her thick curly hair, partly a copper brown, partly a bronze gold, each shade distinct and yet blending with other. Her face is unusual. Handsome rather than beautiful.¹

The image of voluptuous figure moving with animal grace reminds the reader of its association with Dionysic existence. She stands in contrast to the puritan traditions of the house. She yearns for something in life. And also she displays the courage to pursue her ideal by subverting the power hierarchies in the rational puritan settings. When the play opens, Seth, the old gardener of the house, watches her from a safe distance. As a chorus figure, he introduces her to the audience. The reader discovers that Seth has distaste for Christine as she is not the part of the Mannon House. He loves more Lavinia because of her standing for the family traditions. As the play progresses, we find the relationship between Lavinia and her mother are strained. As I have argued earlier that Christine represents the imaginary, the mother figure in whose presence the child finds fulfillment and a complete image of the self. The split takes place on the entrance into the symbolic order, the language where Father figure rules supreme. In the first Act, the split has already taken place. Lavinia has disassociated herself from her mother. And she also knows that Christine is having an extra marital affair with Adam Brant. It is also pertinent to look at the portrayal of Lavinia on her first entry on the stage. O'Neill notices:

She is twenty three but looks considerably older. Tall like her mother, her body is thin, flat breasted and angular, and its unattractiveness is accentuated by her plain dress. Her movements are stiff and she carries herself with a wooden, square shouldered, military bearing....But in spite of these

dissimilarities, one is immediately struck by her facial resemblance to her mother.²

The theme of facial resemblance reinforces the Lacanian theoretical underpinning of Ideal. It is the stage in which the mother serves as the Ideal that is never retrieved once the child has entered into the symbolic order. When the play opens, Lavinia has already entered into the symbolic order that brings him into conflict with the mother figure, Christine. The conscious effort not to look like mother is symbolic of surrendering to the demands of the symbolic order. As the play progresses, the reader notices that Lavinia's split self undergoes through a process of transformation. Lacan observes:

This form would have to be called the Ideal-I, if we wished to incorporate it into our usual register, in the sense that it will also be the source of secondary identifications, under which term I would place the functions of libidinal normalization. But the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only re-join the coming-into-being (le devenir) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as I his discordance with his own reality.³

Lacan argues that the libidinal normalization takes place when the entrance into the symbolic order has taken place. In simpler words, the cessation from the mother results in the social acceptability of our gender roles in society. But the bond with the Ideal I, the mother is never completely broken. It remains irreducible for the individual. It means that neither can individual express it nor can completely disassociate from it. In metaphorical terms, the individual remains attached to mother or Ideal I even the umbilical cord has been severed.

Lavinia resembles her mother. But she makes a conscious effort to look different. Since she claims herself to be the guardian of the traditions of the Mannon House, she objectifies differences rather than similarities. On the other hand, Christine's figure constantly reminds her of her perpetual loss of primitive libidinal energy. Lavinia, the daughter figure is dialectical synthesis of the Imaginary and the Symbolic which moves towards resolution with the movement of the plot.

In the first Act, mother daughter relation is strained. Lavinia discovers that Christine's frequent visits to New York were meant to see her lover, Adam Brant. Herself in love with Adam Brant, Lavinia conceals her true feelings under the garb of propriety and decency. She pretends herself to be too big to fall in love with anybody. What complicates the nature of relations is the fact that Adam Brant also happens to be another Mannon—a fact revealed to Lavinia by Seth. Lavinia was completely unaware of this secret. Again the theme of facial resemblance reinforces the Lacanian division of the imaginary and the symbolic. O'Neill describes Adam's appearance on the stage:

One is struck at a glance by the peculiar quality of his face in repose has of being a life like mask rather than living flesh. He has a broad, low forehead, framed by coal-black straight hair which he wears noticeably long, pushed back carelessly from his forehead as a poet's might be. He gives the impression of being always on the offensive or defensive, always fighting life.⁴

The image of Adam Brant wearing a mask symbolizes the split self. The masked self has earned the social acceptability by entering into the symbolic order. But the prenatal, mother fixated self keeps on asserting itself. Hence O'Neill describes Adam Brant as always fighting life, either offensive or defensive. The son of poor Canadian nurse, wronged by the Mannons, Brant harbours the feelings of hatred and revenge against Ezra Mannon. He falls in love with Christine only as a strategy to exact justice on the Mannons. But as the play progresses, he discovers that the figure of Christine is the self that has been lost on the entry into the symbolic. Thus revenge paves way for love. The affair serves the dual purpose of taking revenge from the Mannons as well as a merger with the pre symbolic self.

As discussed earlier, the body of Adam Brant is the site of contestation for both the mother and daughter. For Christine, the young Adam Brant can fill the lack that she experienced during her long marriage with Ezra Mannon. For Lavinia, it is painful to know that Brant prefers Christine over her. Instead of confessing that as ordinary human being, she also needs love to survive, she out rightly rejects the ideal of love. In a conversation with Peter she declares that she cannot love anybody

because she hates love.⁵ She has a duty to her father. The word duty, in itself, connotes to surrendering a social reality that keeps on hounding us in the symbolic order. She is duty bound to Ezra Mannon and fulfil the demands of duty if she consciously distances herself from Christine. In a long conversation with Adam, she takes pride in taking after her father and not her mother.

Lavinia—I love Father better than anyone in the world. There is nothing I wouldn't do --- to protect him from hurt.

Brant—(*Watching her carefully--- keeping his casual tone*) You care more for him than for your mother?

Lavinia—Yes.

Brant— Well, I suppose that's the usual way of it. A daughter feels closer to her father and a son to his mother. But I should think you ought to be a born exception to that rule.

Lavinia—Why ?

Brant—You are so like your mother in some ways. Your face is the dead image of hers. And look at your hair. You won't meet hair like yours and hers in a month of Sundays. I only know one other woman who had it. You'll think it strange when I tell you. It was my mother.⁶

The triangle is completed. Christine resembles Brant's mother and Lavinia also resembles her mother. Thus by falling in love with Christine, Brant has fallen for the mother image or the Ideal imago of Lacan. Apparently, Lavinia hates both Adam Brant and Christine. It symbolizes her desire to be acceptable to the symbolic order represented in the figure of Ezra Mannon and the Mannon House. Brant refers to the Oedipal connotations of Lavinia Ezra relationship as father and daughter. He further clarifies it by bringing in the ideal imago of her mother and Christine. It is interesting to note here that both Marie Bratom and Christine are outsiders. Neither do they belong to the Mannon House nor do they adhere to the puritanical values of the House. Thus they remain separated from the House, acting as the objective correlative for the imaginary order or the union with the mother figure.

The Symbolic

In Lacan, the symbolic refers to the entrance into the language, social structures and institutions. If the imaginary order was ruled by the mother figure, the symbolic is ruled by father figure since the child gets

the social identity through the name of the father. On entrance into the symbolic order, the primitive contact between the child and mother is completely lost. S/he is connected to other members of the society through the use of language. But language does not have the capacity to fully communicate. On the one hand, it promises to communicate and on the other hand, it creates a wall between the users of language. It creates separation and alienation. Separation in the sense that no two human beings can ever have a complete communication. And alienation in the sense that the individual is always alienated from his own identity that has been created through language. He is in search of the lost self in the imaginary that can never be recuperated through language. Hence being born into language means being born in a state of lack. Rob Lapsley in *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory* observes:

The other (Of language), he announced, is lacking. Put at its simplest, this was the proclamation that the crucial signifiers--- the signifiers that would enable the subject to express itself are missing. The speaking subject, the subject of the enunciation can never put everything into words, into the enounced of its utterances; it at once says less than it wants (there is an impossible to say) and more than it wants (the repressed always returns, the unconscious speaks).⁷

In the play under consideration, the architectural symbol of the Mannon House serves as the symbolic order with its traditions and demands. Ezra Mannon also represents the symbolic order in the form of the Father figure. Both Lavinia and Orin are forced to comply the demands of the father figure in the form of the puritanical traditions of the House. In the opening scene, O'Neill introduces the House, as having a life of its own. There is something eerie and surreal about the House. It is the presiding god of tragedy to ensure that no one dare subvert the structural demands of the House. O'Neill observes:

Exterior of the Mannon House on a late afternoon in April 1865. At front is the drive way which leads up to the house from the two entrances on the street. Behind the driveway the white Grecian temple portico with its tall six columns extend across the stage. ...It is shortly before the sunset and soft light of the declining sun shines directly on the front of the house,

shimmering in a luminous mist on the white portico and grey stone wall behind, intensifying the whiteness of the column.⁸

The house is presented as separate entity that has no formal relations with its neighbours. It exists in isolation. No other house is mentioned in the text. It means that the house has the power to exist of its own. Furthermore, it is defined by six tall columns which symbolize six unnatural deaths that take place in the family. The white columns also represent Puritanism that defines the lives of the people living in the house.

In the opening scene, we find Christine struggling hard to break away from the shell of puritanism. She is in love with Adam Brant as her marriage with Ezra Mannon was dead. And there existed no possibility of its resurrection. Lavinia, in the absence of her father and brother, declares herself to be the sole defenders of puritanical values. The Mannon House is best **descried** by Christine when she explains to Lavinia of the health conditions of former's father. Christine says:

Each time, I come back after being away it appears like a sepulchre! The "whited" one of the Bible—pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray ugliness. It was just Abe Mannon to build such a monstrosity—as a temple for this hatred. (then with a little mocking laugh) Forgive me, Vinnie. I forgot you like it. And you ought to. It suit your temperament.⁹

The Mannon House thus becomes the symbolic order which creates a split between the imaginary. To be part of the Mannon House, one has to abide by its values which are oppressive and sole destroyer. At the same time, the House also creates a desire for the primitive, pre lapsarian world, pre lingual world in which the sin has not yet been created/introduced. Lavinia denies the existence of any such world. And asks her mother to abide by the puritanical values with its excessive sense of sin and duty. By acting like this, Lavinia takes the position of a self-righteous guard of the house to defend it against any pollution. Hence Lavinia's claim of hating love. Christine discovers the split between the imaginary and the symbolic. She tells Lavinia that the latter does not have the courage to openly desire for Adam Brant's love. Christine rebukes Lavinia:

Christine—(*Stares at her daughter—a pause—then she laughs dryly*) what a fraud you are, with your talk of your father and duty! Oh, I am not denying you want to save his pride—and I know how anxious you are to keep the family from more scandal! But all the same, that's not real reason for sparing me!
Lavinia—(*confused—guilty*) It is!
Christine--- You wanted Adam Brant yourself!
Lavinia—That's a lie!¹⁰

Lavinia rejects the mother figure by denying her love for Adam Brant. In rejecting Brant, she actually rejects the possibility of having a union with the pre lingual imaginary world that resists to be burdened with the ideal of guilt.

The arrival of Ezra Mannon is another addition to the symbolic order. He is an epitome of the traditions of the House. Owing to his excessive pride and puritanical approach towards life, the marriage turned to disgust. It is at the war front, he comes across the emptiness of the puritan god he had been worshipping so far. War makes him appreciate life. And also helps him discovering the hollowness of the symbolic order represented in the architectural metaphor of the Mannon House. Unlike Agamemnon, he comes back as broken individual, sick of death and war and yearning for life and love. He sits at the feet of Christine. It symbolizes the hierarchy of Lacanian orders i.e. Christine, the imaginary mother figure and Ezra, the symbolic father figure. In the Homecoming, the symbolic surrenders to the imaginary. The desire is born to return to the primitive, the pre lingual. In *Modern Critical Views: Eugene O'Neill* Travis Bogard observes:

As a scene, it is among the most effective moments of the play, but what is perhaps most noteworthy about it is that Ezra, although he speaks to Christine as his wife, also asks of her the services a patient might ask of any analyst. He cannot look at her and asks her to shut her eyes so that she may hear him neutrally, dispassionately, as a psychiatrist might, and his words move in a free association around the pivots of loneliness and desire. It comes to nothing; she will not help him or try to understand. Even so, his attempt to purge himself by speaking his truth is a way of finding release from his interior torment.¹¹

Bogard draws the clinical analogy to describe the nature of relationship between Christine and Ezra Mannon. I interpret it as the moment of the birth of desire when the subject of enunciation i.e. the speaking subject, Ezra Mannon expresses his deficiency to fill the vacuity of life of its own. The subject finds a lack in the form of disillusionment with the war politics and the excessive pride he inherited from the House. Christine acts as the object of desire Ezra wants a union with to come to terms with the condition of lack. The symbolic or the Mannon House finds a moving description in one of Ezra's monologues:

Mannon—That's always been the Mannon's way of thinking. They went to the white meeting house on Sabbaths and meditated on death. Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born. (*shaking his head with dogged bewilderment*). How in hell people ever got such notions. The white meeting house. It stuck in my mind..... But in this war I have seen too many white walls splattered with blood that counted no more than dirty water.¹²

Ezra explains the Mannon way of thinking. Being born into the Mannon House is to start to die. Death in the Mannon House stands as a metaphor for the split between imaginary and symbolic. The Mannon House rejects all those who refuse to surrender to its structural demands. Foremost amongst them is the belief in the puritanical values. Hence a repeated reference to white meeting house. The return to the imaginary is possible by rejecting what stands as the Mannon House. And Ezra Mannon comes back with the burning desire to experience the consummation with Christine, the imaginary mother figure who stands as an antithesis to the Mannon House.

The Real

The Real resists representation in Lacan. It should not be confused with reality. Commenting upon Real, Simon Malpas and Paul Wake observe:

What is experienced as reality, the symbolic order in which the subject exists, is constituted by words and signs. The real designates that which falls outside the way of symbolization and signification, and therefore cannot be assimilated into symbolic order. The foundational gesture of language is to cut into the real and posit a moment at which a word stands in for

something, creating a symbolic reality. However the word, does not touch the real to represent it, except in the sense that it represents nothingness, which from the perspective of human symbolic reality, is what undifferentiated mass of the real actually is.¹³

The real escapes the symbolic. When the symbolic represents it, it redefines itself and moves away from the symbolic order. Thus human desire is actually a longing for something unknown and indescribable. It cannot be attained. We are only defined by a condition of lack that negotiates between the symbolic and the real. In the play under consideration, the symbolic and real appear side by side. In the opening scene, there is a detailed description of the Mannon House that I have interpreted as symbolic, the order of language which upholds the traditions of the House. And immediately it is followed by a chanty sung to describe the longing and desire for the unknown. It reads:

“ Oh, 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”¹⁴

The idea of separation between the symbolic and real is represented as the spatial distance between the longing and the object of longing. Shenandoah would never be able to cross the wide Missouri since the gap in Lacanian terms remains inaccessible. Unlike Greek tragedy where the desires are fulfilled, here the desire remains unfulfilled.

If the Mannon House represents the symbolic in the play, then the South Sea island represents an object of desire, the real that can never be reached. All the Mannons nurture the desire to go to this island because it affords peace, happiness and sin has not yet been discovered there. The idea of an idyllic world where sin has not yet been discovered is symbolic of a pre lingual, pre lapsarian world that remains distanced from the symbolic. On his homecoming, Ezra Mannon is the first one to share the dream of going to the South Sea island to resurrect his dead marriage. In the symbolic world, love is contaminated by guilt. It can flourish only in the absence of linguistic structures like sin and puritanism. Ezra desires:

I want to find what that wall is marriage put between us!
 You've got to help me smash it down! We have twenty good
 years still before us! I have been thinking of what we could do
 to get back to each other. I have a notion if we'd leave the
 children and go off on a voyage together—to the other side of
 the world---find some island where we could be alone a while.
 You'll find I have changed Christine. I am sick of death! I want
 life! May be you could love me now.¹⁵

Ezra cannot abide by the demands of the House which had a stultifying effect on the soul. Moreover, love is not allowed in the Mannon House. Hence a strong desire to escape to the unknown, the spatially removed reality that cannot be captured through the symbolic. The Christian notion of catholic guilt that views Adam Eve relation as the source of evil and sin signifies the symbolic. The desire can be fulfilled only if it remains out of the symbolic or language. Prior to this Adam Brant had also shared his notion of the Island which is submerged in the primitive innocence and the idea of sin has not yet been discovered on the island. Lavinia, under the influence of the House, conceals her burning desire for Adam Brant thereby labelling the island contaminated with the dirty dream of love. In a long conversation between Lavinia and Adam, we come to know how the symbolic and real contest each other.

Lavinia: (*in a dry, brittle tone*) I remember your admiration for the naked native women. You said they had found the secret of happiness because they had never heard that love can be a sin.
 Brant: (*surprised—sizing her up puzzledly*) 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.¹⁶

Brant's description of the island clearly draws a difference between the earthly existence, the symbolic order and the pre lapsarian existence, the real. The discovery of the idea of sin caused a split between the imaginary, the idyllic and the real by the symbolic intervention of language. Throughout the play, the longings are not fulfilled. And the chantyman reminds us of the distance between the lover, the subject and the beloved the object that remains away from the human reach because of the wide river Missouri.

The Real gets its fullest theoretical expression in the Orin Mannon when he desires to have a reunion with the imaginary, the Mother figure. On his homecoming, Lavinia informs him of the roles of Adam Brant and Christine in killing Ezra Mannon. Orin does not like his father. His love is tilted more towards the female parent. This I interpret as the split between the imaginary and the symbolic. For Orin, Christine represents, the imaginary, the ideal. And Ezra Mannon represents the symbolic, the territory of Father where he has to abide by the social structures and strictures. He participated in the war because he was forced by the symbolic i.e. both Ezra and Lavinia expected him to participate in the war in the name of patriotic duty and the Mannon code of honour. On his return, he discovers that the Father had been murdered. Hence there exists a vacuity in the symbolic order creating a chance to return to the Imaginary or the Real in the form of Christine. In a long speech, he shares his desire of inhabiting the Real, the unknown with the Mother figure, Christine.

Someone loaned me the book. I read it and reread it until finally those islands came to mean everything that wasn't war, everything that was peace and warmth and security. I used to dream I was there. And later on all the time I was out of my head I seemed really to be there. There was no other but you and me. And yet I never saw you, that's the funny part. I only felt you all around me. ...But you needn't be provoked at being an island because this the most beautiful island in the world--- as beautiful as you, Mother.¹⁷

Orin finds no difference between the Mother and the island. It is interesting to note here that for Orin the island was less beautiful than Christine. She serves as the metaphor to describe the beauty of the island. And in an ecstatic moment, he finds a union between the island and the Mother. The imaginary, the Mother figure has united with the Real. For a brief moment, the split between the imaginary and the symbolic ceases to exist. The island, thus becomes the representation of desires and longings. All that cannot be represented through the symbolic finds its expression in the Real i.e. the Blessed Island.

Conclusion

My research has led me to conclude that an essential loneliness is inherent to modern existence. The characters in O'Neill struggle to get free of the stultifying effects of modern civilization. But time and again they fail. In Greek tragedy the sublimation is promised to human beings through suffering. They commit tragic errors. But ultimately they are redeemed through a process of suffering. After blinding himself, Oedipus disappears in *Oedipus at Colonus*. He is not cursed any more. The sufferings have helped to redeem and rise high in life. But Lavinia's efforts to regain the blissful existence, the pre-lingual real is thwarted by the ghosts of the past. Mourning is the fate of Lavinia as the gap between the imaginary and the real is eternal. Our entrance into language is a permanent curse and we as human beings are doomed eternally to experience the split.

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End Notes

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