

EVE, THE APPLE, AND EUGENE O'NEILL:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF O'NEILL'S CONCEPT OF WOMEN

APPROVED:

Lee W. Miller
Major Professor

Jack K. Crogg
Minor Professor

E. S. Clifton
Director of the Department of English

Robert B. Toulouse
Dean of the Graduate School

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OF O'NEILL'S CONCEPT OF WOMEN

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By

Kay H. Mazaher
Kay H. Mazaher, B. A.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Eugene O'Neill was undoubtedly one of the most controversial literary figures of the twentieth century. He has been called everything from an immature, frustrated melodramatist to the greatest dramatic genius of our century. A moderate and more realistic evaluation is, perhaps, to call O'Neill one of the most significant pioneers of the American Theater, for O'Neill's greatness grew out of his passionate desire to dramatize expressionistically the conflict between conscious ideals and subconscious forces, a struggle which is at the very core of man's self-existence. In attempting to achieve the expression of this conflict, O'Neill created a new theater in America.

The theater in America at that time was composed of melodramas, like The Count of Monte Cristo, in which the hero struggles against the villain and wins. O'Neill felt that man was his own villain and that it was the dramatist's duty to portray man's struggle within and without himself. Both Ibsen and Strindberg had begun dramatizing modern man and his problems by the middle 1800's. Being an ardent admirer of Strindberg's ideas and technique, O'Neill turned to ". . . Strindberg's 'expressionistic' dramatic style of

distortion of action, speech and scene.¹ In so doing, O'Neill brought modern drama across the ocean to the American stage.

The major theme in O'Neill's plays is man's struggle to find a purpose for existing and by that very struggle, to justify his existence. To O'Neill man has within him two conflicting forces that are at war with each other. One of these forces may be called broadly the Life Force, man's subconscious instinctive nature, or as O'Neill said, ". . . the Force behind--(Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it--Mystery certainly)"² The other force, which is many times tragically opposed to the Life Force, is man's conscious desires, his struggle to succeed in life, to find outward satisfaction in life. These two forces, of course, are interrelated. In other words, although man desperately tries to fashion himself after his conscious ideals, he ironically acts according to his subconscious or instinctive desires, and if he suppresses these subconscious or instinctive desires and seeks to act against them, he becomes hopelessly split against himself. [To O'Neill, then, life is ". . . the one eternal tragedy of Man in his

¹John Gassner, The Theater in Our Times (New York, 1954), p. 253.

²Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day (New York, 1936), p. 199.

glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression."³]

O'Neill used many forms of expression in dramatizing man's conflict with the Life Force. In the beginning, he expressed the conflict as being between reality and illusion--man's primitive nature versus his romantic ideals. Within the scope of this conflict was man's attempt to know himself, to belong to a purpose, to rise above his basic drives and attain self-realization and perfection. In this struggle man wrestled on the edge of the abyss, for in his struggle to "belong," to acquire, to possess, he bordered on denying the presence of the Life Force and sought to make of himself his own creator and, ironically, became his own destroyer. In these early plays the romantic ideal took upon itself the cloak of reality. For example, to Robert Mayo in Beyond the Horizon, the only beauty in life is the mysterious escape from reality to the dream beyond. His tragic flaw is his inability to reconcile himself with life, to his own imperfections and weaknesses. It is significant to note that at this phase of his writing, O'Neill felt that the struggle was worthwhile and that without the struggle Robert Mayo would have had no real experience in life above that of existing in an animal state.

³Ibid.

In his use of masks, an expressionistic form which can be traced throughout his works, O'Neill developed another form of expression of the universal conflict in man's nature. Man has two selves--one which he presents to his fellow man-- and one which is the real self. In the modern world, O'Neill felt that society through its unnatural laws has forced man into isolation. Man's primitive, natural self has been condemned as ugly and base. Therefore, man must wear a mask to the world in order to find acceptance. However, either consciously or subconsciously, the inner man is completely overpowered by his outer mask. This outer man, he may be called, seeks material possessions and ultimately becomes proud by his acquisition of these possessions. He feels that he is guiding his own destiny, is reaching out toward fulfillment through his own will to power. In order to do this, however, man must suppress his inner desires--his natural longing to love, to create (sexually and spiritually), to express life. In The Great God Brown actual masks are used to show the conflict between the creative artist Dion (with his Pan-like mask) and the materialist Billy Brown. In Strange Interlude the thought-monologue replaces the masks, and in Mourning Becomes Electra. O'Neill shows the actual change in the faces of the characters as the conflict progresses.

Of most significance, however, is O'Neill's use of the Man versus Woman conflict to express the life-giving, life-destroying Force behind human existence. This conflict

dominates most of his plays in one form or another, and his treatment of his women characters is both brutal and conversely sympathetic. Although O'Neill's attitude toward his women characters does not remain constant throughout his plays, there is a definite progression in his concept of women and their relationship to the protagonist in the plays. From their initial submissiveness in the earlier plays to their dominance in the later plays, women represent the Life Force to O'Neill.

Broadly speaking, the Man versus Woman conflict is expressed through the Freudian Mother-Father conflict. The Father image was to O'Neill the indestructible symbol of God the Father--the puritanical Force that seeks to crush the life-giving Mother through suppression of all that she stands for. The Father is hard and proud; in his pride he thinks himself his creator and possessor. He can make or ruin, create or destroy. His pride, his fatal flaw, seeks to suppress the amoral, submissive Life Force which is symbolized in the Earth Mother. In O'Neill's later plays the Father symbolizes Death.

(The development of the symbolical Earth Mother, then, may be called the integration of the Life Force into one character.) In O'Neill's early plays she is the distant, loving, protecting mother to the protagonist. (She is the warm, natural expression of life, whether she be a prostitute or the human mother. But as the character of the Mother

develops, she becomes more than a means for procreating the species. She also becomes the Seductress, the impelling Life Force which draws the protagonist into identifying himself with her in opposing the life-destroying, suppressive God the Father. She unites in the pagan plays with the wife and mistress and becomes the one Woman--the symbol of fertility.) However, she is in her fascination to man her own destroyer, for in seeking life man must suffer and struggle, only to lose to God the Father in the end. If man had denied life by allying himself with God the Father, he would not have known this suffering, this struggle.

At last, the Mother in order to defeat the Father becomes the Destroyer. She takes on necessarily the pride and possessiveness of the Father. She exploits man to gain her own ends. Thus, the Life Force in man becomes dually the Death Force through the Mother image, and the only escape then for the sufferer is a withdrawal from life to the death of God the Father.

The progressive development of the Mother concept and the Father concept is, of course, revealed through the characters in the plays. The lines between the submissive, protecting Earth Mother, the Earth Mother as mistress as well as Mother combined in the Seductress, and the combined Mother-Mistress-Destroyer are not sharply drawn. The variations are sometimes almost indistinguishable. But the progression is toward the portrayal of the woman as Destroyer,

and as she grows, the Father becomes weaker. O'Neill's men and women characters, as the plays progress, gradually draw from one another their weaker qualities so that toward the last of his plays the protagonist, instead of retreating to the warm protection of the Mother, must find peace with the life-denying Father.

To the student of modern drama, O'Neill's concept of women is most significant when viewed in the light of O'Neill's Strindbergian approach. Many of Strindberg's themes are concerned with the eternal battle of the sexes, wherein love (sex) is the blind, enslaving passion of man which destroys man's higher spiritual ideals. O'Neill's women grow into this Strindbergian woman as O'Neill found them increasingly significant in the life of his protagonist. O'Neill's women, however, are driven to their roles as Seductress-Destroyers in self-defense. Unlike Strindberg, O'Neill strikes a note of compassion in his treatment of women; and his treatment, although cynical, shows a greater insight into the causes of the conflict, thus making woman a tragic figure rather than simply an instrument by which man is destroyed. Strindberg viewed the battle from the point of view of the tragic protagonist. The student of drama will find an interesting parallel in O'Neill's view of the tragic heroine in his later plays.

In summary, O'Neill's characterization of women from the loving, submissive Mother in the early plays to the

Mother turned Destroyer in the later plays shows a definite pattern of development in concept and attitude. It is the purpose of this paper to outline this development through a chronological examination of the women characters in eight of O'Neill's major plays--Beyond the Horizon, The Straw, Anna Christie, Welded, Desire Under the Elms, The Great God Brown, Strange Interlude, and Mourning Becomes Electra.

As has been stated, to O'Neill life is ". . . the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression."⁴

The value of this study of O'Neill's concept of women, then, lies in its revelation of a crucial aspect of the struggle, for the chief method which O'Neill used to show the conflicting forces within and without the individual was by dramatizing the Man versus Woman conflict. (Through the embodiment of the forces of nature in woman, O'Neill sought to show man's struggle for possession and self-realization and against the primitive forces of woman which provoke man's natural desires to love and create.) Therefore, an examination of the development of O'Neill's concept of woman from a symbol of submissive love, comfort and hope into a possessive, destructive force against man reveals O'Neill's growing pessimism about man's ever achieving any conscious purpose in

⁴Ibid.

life. Instead, O'Neill, through the development of his female types, concludes that man is doomed from birth to be a victim of the "Force behind," and woman is the instrument of that Force which draws him toward his inevitable destruction.

It is important to emphasize here that the study is chronological, the plays being examined in the order of their conception, rather than publication. Moreover, plot, technique, theme and character are referred to as a means of aiding the reader to understand the female types developed in the plays.

For the purpose of clarity, the paper is divided into six chapters, including this introductory chapter. The second chapter deals with O'Neill's life in order to suggest the life experiences from which O'Neill's views were formed. The main body of the paper is divided into Chapters III, IV, and V. Each of these chapters deals with O'Neill's changing concept of women according to the particular developing or developed concept presented. Chapter III, entitled "The Beginning," discusses the Mother concept; Chapter IV, "The Garden," is concerned with the transition of the Mother into the Seductress and Seductress-Destroyer; and Chapter V, "The Curse," concentrates on O'Neill's final concept of woman--the Destroyer. The sixth and final chapter comments further on the significance and value of O'Neill's concept of women in his works, as illustrated in the plays included in this study.

As critical background for the present study, all secondary sources containing references to O'Neill's women characters have been carefully consulted. Several writers have been of great assistance in developing the ideas embodied in this paper. Through her discussion of O'Neill's conflict between illusion and reality, in Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension Doris Falk has gone far in recognizing and analyzing O'Neill's use of the conflict between man and woman, especially as found in Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra. Edwin Engel's discussion of character types in his book The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill has also been a valuable aid in supplying insight into O'Neill's concept of women. Special acknowledgement must be given to Sophus Winther's Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study. Its general discussion of O'Neill's works has aided in presenting a broad understanding of all of O'Neill's characters. The discussion of O'Neill's life is based on Groswell Bowen's Curse of the Misbegotten.

The following articles are especially helpful in throwing light on various aspects of O'Neill's portrayal of women in his plays: Doris Alexander, "Psychological Fate in Mourning Becomes Electra," Publication of Modern Language Association, LXVIII (1953); Doris Alexander, "Strange Interlude and Schopenhauer," American Literature, XXV (May, 1953); Ray W. Battenhouse, "Mourning Becomes Electra," Christendom, VII,

(Summer, 1942); and Harry Sheehy, "Eugene O'Neill's Lost Moderns," University of Kansas City Review, X (Autumn, 1943).

The paper, however, relies primarily on an analysis of the plays themselves. The standard three-volume edition of O'Neill's works published by Random House has been used for reference, and all footnote references to published plays will be to this edition.

(It seems evident that women and their relationship to men had special significance for O'Neill. His own life revealed his inability to establish a stable and satisfying relationship with women. They dominated his existence, and he knew it. He both loved and hated them for their power over him, and his treatment of the women characters in his plays reveals his conflicting emotions. Whenever woman remains passive and giving, O'Neill sympathizes with her plight in life; but when she seeks to possess her man and demands that he, too, must give, O'Neill is brutal toward her.)

It seems probable, then, that O'Neill's changing concept of women, as reflected in his plays, derives directly from the experiences of his own troubled life.

CHAPTER II

LIFE

Eugene O'Neill was born into the theater. His father, the well-known actor James O'Neill, had created and played for years the role of Edmund Dantes in The Count of Monte Cristo. James, whose family had migrated from Ireland during the potato famine of the nineteenth century, was in most respects a good man and a devout Catholic. Those who worked with him thought him to be a warmhearted, quiet man, who dressed and acted like a gentleman. He was generous and loyal to friends. Perhaps James' greatest fault was his love of money, even to the point that he often unconsciously sacrificed those he loved to keep it.

James O'Neill met his future wife, Ella Quinlan, in 1875. Ella was attending a Catholic boarding school in Connecticut, and she was at that time seriously considering becoming a nun. In fact, she had already had a "mystical experience," and it had been only through the discouragement of her Mother Superior that she had not already taken her vows. Ella was a pretty girl and rather plump; she had a high forehead, long straight nose and curling lashes. Her eyes were large and dark brown. She was both sensitive and delicate, as were her features, and she imparted these characteristics to her son, Eugene O'Neill.

In 1877 James and Ella were married. One year later Jamie was born to the union, and in 1884 the second child, Edmund, was born, only to die six months later. On October 16, 1888, Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born. Ella never fully recovered from Edmund's death and Eugene's birth. The doctor attending her gave her drugs to ease her pain, and she became a drug addict.

(Ella had a tremendous influence on O'Neill's personality and his attitude toward the other women in his life. This influence is tragically revealed in O'Neill's autobiographical play, Long Day's Journey into Night, written in 1940. Ella, like Emma Tyrone in the play, was hypersensitive. She was a dreamer, an idealist, a lovely symbol of feminine grace. Her complete submission to O'Neill's father was characteristic of her inability to act independently. Having been raised under the protective wing of her family and the Catholic Church, she did not know how to make decisions. Moreover, her family background of upper middle class respectability gave her a certain feeling of superiority, and she refused to associate with the people of the theater. Therefore, she had no friends; and inasmuch as the O'Neills traveled constantly, she could not have the security of a home. The O'Neills did have a summer house in New London, Connecticut, but actors were not accepted by the local citizenry, and Ella refused to fraternize with the families of fellow actors. Her

alienation became more complete because of her drug addiction, and for many years she was a stranger even to her family.

But Ella's greatest disappointment in life was her isolation from the Church. Being a devout Catholic, she believed that by marrying an actor she had separated herself from the Church. Moreover, her drug addiction caused her to suffer intense guilt, and while it provided an escape from reality, it also sharpened her bitter feeling that she had closed the door to forgiveness. James, although he tried to make her life happy, was incapable of helping her, because he could not give her a sense of security and purpose in life. By nature he was dominating, she submissive, and as he forced his way of life on her, she withdrew into a dream world.

In childhood O'Neill learned of his mother's illness and the death of Edmund. He felt responsible for his mother's sickness and rebellious against his father's domination of his mother. (In his early plays O'Neill reveals his attitude toward his mother. She is the frail, delicate woman, the overpowered victim of male brutality.) Eileen Carmody in The Stray is the heroine to whom things happen. She is the all-sacrificing mother, eager to love, to help, to die for her "children."

Perhaps the only guidance that Ella was able to give O'Neill was toward the Catholic Church. At the age of seven, Eugene O'Neill was placed in a Catholic boarding school at Riverdale, New York. No one can be sure just how great an

impact his Catholic training had on his later ideas, but it is safe to say that he never overcame entirely the view of God as a judge and the belief that, although man has freedom of choice, "God knows the future of all his creatures."¹ This conflict between free will and predestination no doubt had much to do with O'Neill's later belief that man was doomed to destruction.

After finishing Betts Academy, a preparatory school, O'Neill entered Princeton in 1907, where he accomplished little except to be suspended for drinking. He resigned after his freshman year.

In New York O'Neill met Kathleen Jenkins, a nice young girl from a good New Jersey family. They became infatuated with each other and married. Immediately both families condemned the folly of the marriage, and O'Neill was forced by his father to leave New York. He went to Central America with an expedition in search of gold but contracted malaria and came home. After a brief visit with his son, Eugene, Jr., born to Kathleen during his absence, he went out and got drunk. He never saw Kathleen again. They divorced in 1912, and in his deep depression over the affair, O'Neill tried to commit suicide.² Years later, after O'Neill had become successful, he educated his son. Kathleen was the only woman

¹Croswell Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten (New York, 1959), p. 18.

²Ibid., p. 26.

in O'Neill's life toward whom he felt no animosity, nor did he feel any bitterness toward Eugene, Jr.; Shane and Oona, his children by a later marriage, were not so fortunate.

Thus, by the age of twenty-one, O'Neill had had a real taste of life. He had been raised in theater dressing rooms, had learned the austerity of religion, and had seen quite a lot of the world. His one try at marriage had been brief and unfulfilling. He viewed women as the victimized creatures of a man's world. But his second and third marriages were to change this attitude toward women as well as to mold the course he was to follow for the rest of his life.

O'Neill met his second wife, Agnes Boulton, in New York in 1917. A year later they were married. O'Neill's attachment to Agnes was the most intense of his life. Both were artists; both, shy, sensitive, and temperamental. Agnes, aware of O'Neill's fears and needs, tried to make a home for him. She tried to be the mother of his children and the mistress of his life. During their marriage O'Neill wrote some of his best plays, for example, Anna Christie, Desire Under the Elms, The Great God Brown, and Strange Interlude. Certainly the plays written during this period of his life do not contain the negativism found in the later plays. Woman during this period takes on the image of not only the Mother, but also the Earth Mother and the Seductress.

But O'Neill did not want to share Agnes' love with anyone. When he proposed to her, he told her that he wanted her alone, "in an aloneness broken by nothing, not even by children."³ "I don't understand children," he said. "They make me uneasy and I don't know how to act with them."⁴ The trouble between O'Neill and Agnes was brought out vividly in Welded. Stark Young, noted critic, remarks:

I knew that Gene's personal life in the period that Welded came out of had not been all smoothness, not between two such vivid temperaments as he and Agnes, his wife, for all the love between them, and I felt that this play was in the nature of a confession and a benediction.⁵

Finally, in 1927, O'Neill left Agnes and the children in Bermuda and went to New York, where he took up his relationship with Carlotta Monterrey, a famous actress whom O'Neill had met in the summer of 1925. Shortly thereafter, he decided to separate from Agnes permanently, and he and Carlotta "escaped" to France in 1929. His guilt immediately took the form of hatred toward Agnes. He told everyone whom he knew that she was spreading tales about him, trying to gain sympathy. But as Groswell Bowen aptly remarks in his biography of O'Neill,

Actually, the only real indictment O'Neill could make against Agnes was that she existed. . . .

³Agnes Boulton, Part of a Long Story (New York, 1958), p. 68.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Stark Young, "Eugene O'Neill: Notes from a Critic's Diary," Harper's Magazine, CXXIV (June, 1957), 70.

For, after all, no matter how much he told himself that he needed another love, Eugene O'Neill was still a man who had deserted his wife and children and had run off to seek his own separate happiness.⁶

In the beginning, Carlotta was O'Neill's retreat from the responsibility of being a husband and father. Carlotta herself said:

. . . he never said to me, "I love you, I think you are wonderful." He kept saying, "I need you. I need you." And he did need me, I discovered. . . . He talked about his early life--that he had had no real home, no mother in the real sense, or father, no one to treat him as a child should be treated--and his face became sadder and sadder.⁷

Carlotta gave O'Neill the protection and love of a mother to her son. She thought he had a right to be protected, and she felt it her duty to protect him. She was a strong, determined woman, beautiful and meticulous in every respect. She told him what to wear; she tried to select his friends and through the years managed to alienate him from all of his former associates. During their marriage his attitude toward society changed, and his plays became morbidly pessimistic. The women characters in his plays took on the cloak of the Mother turned Destroyer--and Carlotta was his mother. Seemingly, he realized that she was suffocating him by her intense, selfish possession of him, but he also realized that he was incapable of living without her.

⁶Bowen, pp. 186-187.

⁷Ibid., pp. 176-177.

In 1943 O'Neill suffered a stroke which left him with incurable palsy. He had finished Mourning Becomes Electra, Ah, Wilderness, The Iceman Cometh, Moon of the Misbegotten, and Long Day's Journey into Night. His career was finished. Carlotta had also managed to alienate him from his children. Shane, who had so loved his father, found nothing but discouragement from him and turned into a drug addict. In 1950 Eugene, Jr., whose brilliant mind had been wasted in loneliness, committed suicide. Oona, the strongest of O'Neill's children, married Charles Chaplin, a man old enough to be her father and who perhaps helped to fill that gap in her life.

Carlotta and O'Neill separated in February, 1951, but O'Neill went back to her in May. He had contracted Parkinson's Disease and was so helpless that Carlotta had to wait on him hand and foot. On November 27, 1953, he developed pneumonia and died. No one attended the funeral except Carlotta and O'Neill's nurse. Moon of the Misbegotten, cast in 1947, was the last O'Neill play to be staged until after his death. From then until 1956, when Long Day's Journey into Night was released in New York, O'Neill was to some extent forgotten.

O'Neill's life was, of course, the manifestation of his personality. To many people he represented many different things. Physically he was like all his heroes, and he

described himself in describing Edmund in Long Day's Journey into Night:

Edmund looks like both his parents, but is more like his mother. Her big, dark eyes are the dominant feature in his long, narrow Irish face. His mouth has the same quality of hypersensitiveness hers possesses. His high forehead is hers accentuated, with dark brown hair . . . Edmund's hands are noticeably like his mother's, with the same exceptionally long fingers. They even had to a minor degree the same nervousness. It is in the quality of extreme nervous sensibility that the likeness of Edmund to his mother is most marked.

Never having had a home, O'Neill did not have within him the sense of "belonging," and his characters suffer the same fate. Early in life he discovered that his birth had caused his mother's drug addiction, and he felt himself a curse on his family. Moreover, his father's overbearing nature caused constant friction between them. He hated the false sentiments of his father's plays. As he said, "Virtue always triumphed and sin always got its just deserts. It accepted nothing halfway; a man was either a hero or a villain, and a woman was either virtuous or vile."⁹ Until O'Neill became a success, his father showed no faith in him and was quoted as asking O'Neill's first wife, "What do you want to be married to Eugene for anyhow? He's nothing but a no-good drunken bum!"¹⁰

⁸Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night (New Haven, 1956), pp. 19-20..

⁹Bowen, p. 17.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 25.

It is true that until his bout with tuberculosis in 1912-1913 O'Neill did not have a purpose in life. As he said of his experience in the sanitorium:

My mind got the chance to establish itself, to digest and evaluate the impressions of many past years in which one experience had crowded on another with never a second's reflection. At Gaylord I really thought about my life for the first time, about past and future. Undoubtedly the inactivity forced upon me by the life at the san forced me to mental activity, especially as I had always been high-strung and nervous temperamentally.¹¹

But those who knew him in New London spoke well of him. Judge Frederick P. Latimer, who owned the New London newspaper and who had given O'Neill his first chance to write, admired O'Neill's intense desire " . . . to be himself however heaven and hell conspires to rob him of that birthright."¹² Latimer, who was very close to O'Neill at that time, gave a vivid picture of the young idealist:

. . . I thought he was the most stubborn and irreconcilable social rebel I had ever met. . . . I thought it astonishing how keen was his wit, what a complete iconoclast he was, how richly he sympathized with the victims of man-made distress¹³

Yet, O'Neill could not accept criticism from others. Barrett Clark's comment in his biography of the successful O'Neill, "That such fame had already done him some harm cannot be doubted,"¹⁴ enraged O'Neill, and he made Clark omit the comment. Even to casual acquaintances, such as John V. A.

¹¹Ibid., p. 54.

¹²Ibid., p. 55.

¹³Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 160.

Weaver, who was a student in Baker's 47 Workshop with O'Neill, his conflicting personality traits were apparent:

There was something apparently irresistible in his strange combination of cruelty around his mouth, intelligence in his eyes, and sympathy in his voice and eyes. . . . He was hardboiled and whimsical. He was brutal and tender, so I was told. . . .¹⁵

Later, however, Weaver sharply criticized the change in O'Neill as a result of his success.

To critics O'Neill was not only a great writer, but he was also a delicate soul that needed to be championed. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant described O'Neill as looking like ". . . some trusting child who has grown up into a strange world."¹⁶ Bessie Brewer, novelist and friend of O'Neill, also thought of O'Neill as a stranger to this world:

As for Gene, when I think of him I always see his eyes. They were always turned inward. . . . As you talked with him, you entered into another life. . . .

Gene was a person of love, not just personal love. . . . He always left on them [people he met] the imprint of his purity. . . .

Gene starts in a world of pain. He created a world of love and pain everywhere he went. He had in him the poetry of life, the poetry of passion. Of course, he was destroyed in the end. This kind of poetry cannot be translated into ordinary life. As for what happened to his children, he couldn't help them because he couldn't help himself.¹⁷

The paradoxical side of O'Neill's nature, however, is most vividly brought out in his relationship with the women

¹⁵Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 166.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 170.

in his life. As a young man in New London, he was recalled as being "loving, but not aggressive about making love."¹⁸ Several women during his Greenwich Village days have stated that "he was not a ladies' man in the usual sense of the term, but 'lovable,' not exactly sensual, and capable of treating women as friends. 'When you'd meet him,' one of them has said, 'he was like a loving brother.'¹⁹ Yet later, after O'Neill's death, both Agnes and Carlotta expressed the view that he was a strange mixture of both cruelty and tenderness. His moods changed quickly, and he could be a loving husband one minute and violently brutal the next.

Taking an over-all view of the women in O'Neill's life and plays, it is obvious that O'Neill was drawn to strong women. All of his tragic heroines, for example, Anna in Anna Christie, Nina in Strange Interlude, Abbie in Desire Under the Elms, and Lavinia in Mourning Becomes Electra, dominate their male counterparts. Except for Anna, all are vicious in the possession of their men. O'Neill recognized man's inability to overcome them. He characterizes Robert Mayo in Beyond the Horizon as a man who "would throw away his instinctive dream and accept the thralldom of the farm for-- why, for almost any nice little poetical craving--the romance of sex, say."²⁰

¹⁸Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 92-93.

²⁰Eugene O'Neill, "A Letter From O'Neill," New York Times (April, 1920), cited in Barrett Clark, The Man and His Plays (New York, 1929), p. 95.

Men and women were locked in the battle of the sexes. Yet O'Neill, too, had to fight the battle. He needed love of all kinds, yet he could not give love in return, for O'Neill was afraid to give himself to others. His fear of rejection, perhaps stemming from his childhood loneliness, made him an intensely jealous lover and husband. He could not allow his women to share their love for him with any other. Thus, he rejected Agnes and her children. O'Neill could give his last dollar to a drunken bum, but he could not give even a little of himself to those who really loved him. He could not transmute his universal love to individual love. He was indeed a lonely man, a man who hated man's isolation but who isolated himself from his family, his friends, and his society.

CHAPTER III

THE BEGINNING

Although O'Neill's concept of women altered and grew as he experienced life, several dominant characteristics prevail in all of his portrayals of women. From his initial concept of woman as Mother, O'Neill retained in all his women characters the maternal protective instinct toward the manchild. This protectiveness does not extend to the mother-daughter relationship, but it is an oppressive Freudian factor in influencing the personalities and actions of O'Neill's male protagonists.

Moreover, with the exception of the pure Earth Mother type as found in Welded and The Great God Brown, all of O'Neill's women are selfishly possessive. In the early plays their possessiveness does not wield the power over the course of action pursued by the protagonist as is evidenced in the later plays, for example, Strange Interlude, primarily because women in the early plays are not prominent as individuals in shaping the lives of the protagonists. As O'Neill recognized woman's power over man, however, her desire to possess man's soul and body becomes one of her most dangerous characteristics.

Another outstanding characteristic of O'Neill's women is that they lack the complexity of nature so pronounced in O'Neill's protagonists. That is to say, even O'Neill's most complicated heroines, for example Nina in Strange Interlude and Lavinia in Mourning Becomes Electra, do not have the depth of soul, as it were, that, for example Dion Anthony in The Great God Brown is endowed with. Woman is a spiritually simple creature; she does not recognize the ambivalence of man's nature nor that of her own, and she is rarely torn between romantic aspirations and reality. And it is for this reason that she reaches such majestic proportions in O'Neill's final concept of her, since, unlike man, she possesses unity of purpose, which enables her to defeat man's attempts to rise above the reality of life which she represents.

Lastly, O'Neill's woman is the symbol of love, or sex, or both. In short, she is the Life Force against which man struggles to find individual significance and meaning. And in this respect, no matter how minor a role woman may have in an O'Neill play, she nevertheless demands attention. It is from this seed of conviction that O'Neill gradually envisioned woman as the dominating factor that destroyed man's dreams. With this compelling weapon woman in the later plays dominates the action and the outcome of the play.

O'Neill's early women characters, in addition to the traits outlined above, possess certain notable traits peculiar to his initial concept. First of all, O'Neill

portrays woman as a weak, submissive creature, clinging to man as a source of strength, without which her life has no meaning. Her weakness is exemplified by her simplicity; that is, she can understand only the quest for the attainment of concrete goals in life and utterly fails to recognize man's need to find spiritual value in life.

Similarly, the early woman is a passive creature. Life's experiences happen to her; she does not cause them to happen. Although she is a prominent factor in man's final defeat, she does not consciously challenge his domination over her, nor does she realize that she is a tool that Fate uses to destroy man. The strength of her power over the protagonist is, therefore, a natural strength occasioned simply by the instinctive desire of the protagonist to respond to her love.

Finally, woman in the early plays is not a dominating character in the action of the play, or if she does have a primary role, she is not realistically portrayed. Her presence in the play is important only as it is needed as the symbol of the Life Force. She is an image of the promise of love and purity to the protagonist. O'Neill could not at that time portray woman as an individual with human weaknesses. She is, in the early plays, a distant, loving mother, promising to comfort, love, and protect, yet without individual qualities of good or evil.

Three of O'Neill's major plays have been chosen to illustrate his early concept of woman--Beyond the Horizon, The Straw, and Anna Christie.

Beyond the Horizon, written in the winter of 1918, represents O'Neill's first major dramatic achievement. Mrs. Mayo and Ruth Mayo, the two female characters presented in the play, are illustrative not only of O'Neill's early illusionary vision of woman but also of the seeds from which his later women emerged.

The second play to be considered is The Straw, written in the spring of 1919 only a few months after Beyond the Horizon, in which O'Neill's idealistic image of the Mother is glorified in the character of Eileen Carmody.

The third play, Anna Christie, was written in the summer of 1920, over a year after The Straw. It shows a definite change in O'Neill's concept of woman. Anna Christopherson, the play's heroine, is different from Mrs. Mayo, Ruth, and Eileen, in that for the first time she challenges man's idealism. Thus, while still being endowed with some of the qualities of the earlier woman, Anna suggests a new female type, the Earth Mother, for which O'Neill forsook his initial concept of woman for a more dynamic symbol of life.

Beyond the Horizon portrays man's attempt to find happiness through the realization of his romantic ideals. The effort is a tragic one because man is incapable of losing

the bonds of reality in order to pursue his dreams. The struggle is embodied in three characters--Robert Mayo, his brother Andy, and his wife, Ruth.

The play takes place on a small New England farm owned by the Mayo family. As the play opens, Robert, Andy, and Ruth are presented in harmony with their true natures. Robert, the dreamer, is about to set sail with his uncle on a voyage which will take him out of the menial existence of the farm into the beauty beyond the horizon. Andy, a son of the soil, is making plans to fulfill his life on the farm by marrying Ruth, settling down, and living with the beauty of the farm around him. Ruth is the prize that comes with the farm, and Andy has seemingly won her simply by virtue of his natural love of farming and desire to remain at home.

Suddenly, however, Ruth discovers that it is Robert whom she loves. His poetic declarations to her excite her emotions, and she sees Robert shrouded with mystery and enchantment. Robert is at once confused and overcome by her love for him. He has admitted his love for her without realizing the possible outcome of the admission, and, thus, when Ruth begs him to stay on the farm and marry her, he lingers a moment. But he is won over by her tears. Andy's dreams are crushed by Robert's revelation to the family that he will stay on the farm and marry Ruth. Impulsively, Andy declares that he will take Robert's place on the ship.

Thus, the decisions are made, and the characters must bear the consequences of their impulsive choices. The future of the entire Mayo family is decided in one swift moment of emotional folly. Mr. Mayo, who is enraged by Andy's decision to leave the farm, dies a year later. When he dies, Mrs. Mayo loses all her strength and becomes a body without hope. The farm slowly decays into a pig sty under the inept supervision of Robert. The marriage is, of course, a miserable failure, since Ruth cannot understand Robert's inability to make her life prosperous, and Rob, therefore, no longer has even his love to sustain him. Andy is successful, but he gambles in wheat instead of growing it, and he, too, loses spiritual satisfaction. The only salvation in the course of events is the birth of Mary to Rob and Ruth, and this, too, turns to tragedy by her death.

At the end of eight years the tragic cycle is completed. Rob has almost completely lost contact with reality and is dying from a lung infection. Andy returns to a once thriving farm now ruined by neglect. He finds Rob at the point of death nurtured by an apathetic wife who, since her first realization that Andy no longer loved her, has ceased to care about life. Ruth is so indifferent that she admits the misery of the marriage to a horrified Andy. But Rob reminds Andy that Ruth, too, has suffered and that his dying is not punishment but release. At last in dying Rob is free to

wander, and he leaves Andy with the task of finding himself again and rebuilding his life with Ruth.

So it is that Rob, the symbol of universal man, seeks to lift himself above his menial existence in order to find the peace and perfection promised "beyond the horizon." But in setting these ideals and in dreaming these dreams, man overlooks his basic desires and needs. He ignores reality, or as O'Neill calls it, the Life Force. Hence, the tragedy of Beyond the Horizon lies in the ambivalence of man's nature. For man has within him two sides to his nature--his basic desires and needs, and his spiritual or idealistic yearnings. He is, in fact, split against himself. He cannot ignore either side, since to forsake his ideals would require the denial of his spiritual significance, and to deny reality is to tempt Fate.

Nevertheless, man does tempt Fate; he does reach out to attain self-realization and perfection. And he fails miserably. It is interesting to note, moreover, that Fate employs woman as the instrument for defeating man's objectives. Because of love, symbolized first in Mrs. Mayo and sexually in Ruth, both Rob and Andy are unable to realize their dreams. The emphasis in this play is placed on the latter relationship. However, only through a study of all four characters can full recognition be given O'Neill's early concept of woman, her relationship to man's struggle and her significance in the scheme of things.

Rob's character is clearly that of the typical O'Neillian hero: "There is the touch of the poet about him expressed in his high forehead and wide, dark eyes. His features are delicate and refined, leaning to weakness in the mouth and chin."¹ Moreover, because of his nature to dream and to seek spiritual significance in life, Rob is out of harmony with the practical business of farming. As Andy says to him, "Farming ain't your nature. . . . You--well, you like the home part of it, I expect, but as a place to work and grow things, you hate it."² But Andy's understanding goes no further. Recognizing this, Rob tries to explain to Andy why he wants to sail beyond the horizon:

Supposing I was to tell you that it's just beauty calling me, the beauty of the far off and unknown, the mystery and spell of the East which lures me in the books I've read, the need of the freedom of great wide spaces, the joy of wandering on and on--in quest of the search which is hidden over there, beyond the horizon?³

Rob, then, has no practical considerations whatsoever for making his voyage. His dreams are his reality, lending to his natural physical weakness; and as long as he is left to his dreams, he is safe from the snares of life. However, he is vulnerable, and love brings him back to reality. When Ruth suddenly declares that she loves him and not Andy, Rob

¹Eugene O'Neill, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York, 1954), III, 81.

²Ibid., p. 84.

³Ibid., p. 85.

is stunned. He is not prepared for this turn of events, but he gives in to her pleas, as O'Neill points out, ". . . with happy hopefulness," exclaiming:

Perhaps after all Andy was right--righter than he knew--when he said I could find all the things I was seeking for here, at home on the farm. I think love must have been the secret--the secret that called to me from over the world's rim⁴

But Uncle Scott puts the whole matter in its proper perspective: "I'm ashamed of you, Robert, to go lettin' a little huggin' and kissin' in the dark spile your chances to make a man out o' yourself."⁵

However, Rob feels that he has ". . . found a bigger dream,"⁶ and with childlike optimism he marries Ruth. Reality is a hard taskmaster, though. Three years elapse, and at the beginning of Act II, Rob's dreams have turned into a nightmare: "His eyes are dull and lifeless His lips drawn down at the corners give him a hopeless, resigned expression. The three years have accentuated the weakness of his mouth and chin."⁷ The farm is going to ruin under his inept management, and he hates it, as he exclaims to Ruth: "Oh, those cursed hills out there that I used to think promised me so much! How I've grown to hate the sight of them! They're like the walls of a narrow prison yard shutting me

⁴Ibid., p. 92.

⁵Ibid., p. 102.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., p. 119.

in from all the freedom and wonder of life!"⁸ Neither has love sustained him. In truth, Rob recognizes within him the fact that Ruth no longer loves him, and she defeats him completely when she admits that she loves Andy. Rob has nothing left except Mary, their daughter. Moreover, Mary has inherited Rob's physical weakness, and even she is taken away from him. In spite of all this tragedy, Rob is unable to see that he has been defeated by going against his own nature. He is completely incapable of facing reality. He blames God, ". . . if there was a God,"⁹ for Mary's death, and the farm for ruining his happiness with Ruth.¹⁰ Only in his dying moments does he find happiness, as he tells Andy not to feel sorry for him: "Don't you see I'm happy at last--free--free!--freed from the farm--free to wander on and on--eternally. . . . It's a free beginning . . . I've won my trip--the right of release--beyond the horizon!"¹¹

Rob's tragedy is accentuated by Andy's failure. For Andy is a son of the soil, as Rob says: "You're a Mayo through and through. . . . You're as much a product of it [the soil] as an ear of corn is, or a tree."¹² Like his father, Andy is strong and practical. He plans to marry Ruth and the farm.

⁸O'Neill, Plays, III, 125-126.

⁹Ibid., p. 148.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 149.

¹¹Ibid., p. 167.

¹²Ibid., p. 84.

Consequently, when Rob announces that he and Ruth will marry, Andy's world collapses. His impulsive declaration that he will go to sea in Rob's place enrages Mr. Mayo, who knows that Andy belongs on the farm: "You lie when you say you want to go 'way--and see thin's! You ain't got no likin' in the world to go. . . . You're running against your own nature, and you're goin' to be a'mighty sorry for it if you do."¹³ Andy, too, realizes he is courting disaster, but he cannot bear to see Rob and Ruth together: ". . . It'll all turn out for the best--let's hope. It couldn't be helped--what's happened."¹⁴ But then he declares, "I feel dead."¹⁵

O'Neill's description of Andy in Acts II and III shows Andy's gradual spiritual decay. In Act II Andy's "old easy-going good-nature seems to have been partly lost in a breezy, business-like briskness of voice and gesture."¹⁶ Ruth and the farm no longer appeal to him, and he is anxious to get back to Argentina to make his fortune. By Act III his metamorphosis is complete: "His eyes are keener and more alert. There is even a suggestion of ruthless cunning about him."¹⁷ But his true nature, though suppressed, rises up again. He admits that he wants to come home and "really live

¹³Ibid., p. 106.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 153.

again.¹⁸ Finally, his failure is pinpointed by the dying

Rob:

I've been wondering what a great change was in you. . . . You--a farmer--to gamble in a wheat pit with scraps of paper. There's a spiritual significance in that picture, Andy. (He smiles bitterly) I'm a failure and Ruth's another--but we can both justly lay some of the blame for our stumbling on God. . . . You've spent eight years running away from yourself. . . . You used to be a creator when you loved the farm. You and life were in harmonious partnership.¹⁹

Fate has been challenged and has won. Both Rob and Andy have been drawn into tragedy by their own aspirations for happiness, which are blocked by the compelling love they feel for Ruth. For it is Ruth who convinces Rob to stay on the farm. It is she who has flirted with Andy, whom she casts aside indifferently. And it is her desire to possess both the poetry of Rob and the security of Andy that causes the failure of all three.

Ruth does not consciously destroy, however. Her character does not indicate ruthlessness and cunning manipulation. Rather, she is a pretty young farm girl whose practical approach to life is in keeping with her heritage. For her, the farm is her world, and beauty is the natural flow of day to day living and dying. The world beyond holds no fascination for her, and she comments to Rob the evening before his departure, "It's a shame you're going--just at this time, in

¹⁸Ibid., p. 156.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 161.

spring, when everything is getting so nice."²⁰ Ironically, she uses this argument to persuade Rob to stay: "Please, Rob! We'll be so happy here together where its natural and we know things."²¹

Ruth does, however, momentarily recognize a certain beauty in Rob's world. Indeed, it is this faint cognizance of poetic longing that captures her heart. She is "oharmed by his low, musical voice. . . ,"²² declaring, "Oh, Rob, how could I help feeling it? You tell things so beautifully!"²³

The spell, though, is quickly broken, and Ruth returns immediately to reality. She is concerned with living, and she soon realizes that Rob does not have the power to make life happy for her. Rob is weak, and Ruth hates weakness. She "shudders" when Rob reflects about his sickly childhood but is impressed when he picks her up and carries her down the road after they have decided to marry. Moreover, her mind cannot reach beyond her concrete surroundings. When she sees that Rob cannot make a living on the farm, she hates him, because he is to her no longer a symbol of masculine strength:

What do you think--living with a man like you--having to suffer all the time because you've never been man enough to work and do things like other people. . . . I s'pose you think I ought to

²⁰O'Neill, Plays, III, 88.

²¹Ibid., p. 92.

²²Ibid., p. 89.

²³Ibid., p. 90.

be proud to be your wife--a poor, ignorant thing like me! (Fiercely) But I'm not. I hate it! I hate the sight of you. . . . If I hadn't been such a fool to listen to your cheap, silly, poetry talk that you learned out of books! If I could have seen how you were in your true self--like you are now--I'd have killed myself before I'd have married you!²⁴

Her frustration has turned to defiant bitterness, and she literally destroys Rob with her statement and her further admission that she loves Andy. Andy now represents to her all the strength man should have to be a vital creature. Andy will come home and make things right again, she is sure. But Andy, too, has changed, and he laughs at his early boyhood love for her. Ruth is defeated; love has cheated her, and she no longer has anything to hold on to.

By the beginning of Act III Ruth's ". . . pale, deeply-lined face has the stony lack of expression of one to whom nothing more can happen, whose capacity for emotion has been exhausted."²⁵ Like Rob, she has completely withdrawn from life. She no longer hates Rob, nor is she capable of love. As she explains to Andy, "There's a time comes--when you don't mind any more--anything."²⁶ Only one emotion remains within her--her basic selfishness, for she outwardly shrinks away from Rob in terror when she is told he is dying. In these last moments he looks to her for some feeling of regret, or at least compassion, but her only thought is her own terror of having to witness death.

²⁴Ibid., p. 127. ²⁵Ibid., p. 144. ²⁶Ibid., p. 156.

For Ruth there can be no release, since she can no longer suffer. Her punishment is the punishment of withdrawal. Even Andy's promise to start over has no meaning for her: "She remains silent, gazing at him dully with a sad humility of exhaustion, her mind already sinking back into that spent calm beyond the further troubling of any hope."²⁷

In summary, on its surface the play presents the lives of two young men whose dreams are shattered by their love for a woman. But the problem goes deeper than Rob's fatal marriage to Ruth. Both brothers in loving Ruth are seeking the same love that was given them by Mrs. Mayo. While drawn sexually to Ruth, they also seek the comfort, love, and protection of the mother. Ruth also seeks love and protection in the strength of man. In this respect, then, Ruth is like Mrs. Mayo, in that Mrs. Mayo is able to protect and love only so long as Mr. Mayo is alive to sustain her strength. Therefore, although a minor character in point of action, Mrs. Mayo is, nevertheless, of primary significance in the relationships between Ruth and the two brothers.

Mrs. Mayo's influence on the events that take place in the play may be found in the expository matter rather than through any direct action she may take. O'Neill's stage

²⁷Ibid., p. 169.

description of her, for example, quickly introduces her to the reader:

Mrs. Mayo is a slight, round-faced, rather prim-looking woman of fifty-five who had once been a school teacher. The labors of a farmer's wife have bent but not broken her, and she retains a certain refinement of movement and expression foreign to the Mayo part of the family.²⁸

Moreover, Rob is immediately identified as his mother's son: "Whatever of resemblance Robert has to his parents may be traced to her,"²⁹ the alliance indicating a sensitivity not found in James Mayo or Andy, who is a carbon copy of his father.

Like any mother, Mrs. Mayo is upset because Rob is about to leave home. It is soon evident, however, that her concern stems not only from worry about Rob's welfare but also from fear that his leaving will create a void in her life:

MRS. MAYO. (her lips trembling) I wish Robbie weren't going.

MAYO. . . . There, Katey!

MRS. MAYO. (rebelliously) Well, I do wish he wasn't.

SCOTT. You shouldn't be taking it so hard, 's far as I kin see. This vige'll make a man of him. . . . and it'll give him a trade for the rest of his life, if he wants to travel.

MRS. MAYO. But I don't want him to travel all his life. You've got to see he comes home when this trip is over. Then he'll be all well, and he'll want to--to marry. . . and settle down right here. . . . I never realized how hard it was going to be for me to have Robbie go--or I wouldn't have considered it a minute.³⁰

²⁸O'Neill, Plays, III, 94.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., p. 96.

She is not thinking, as Andy reminds her, of Rob's desires, only that it will be hard on her for him to go. And she defends her selfish feelings as being mother love: "(on the verge of tears) 'It's all right for you [Scott] to talk. You've never had any children. You don't know what it means to be parted from them--and Robbie my youngest, too.'"³¹ The full scope of her selfish desires is brought home when Rob makes his fateful announcement that he is not going to sea. The other members of the family are amazed by the announcement and recognize the error in judgment. But Mrs. Mayo "rushes over and throws her arms about him," crying, "I knew it! I was just telling your father when you came in--and, oh, Robbie, I'm so happy you're not going!"³²

Her selfish possessiveness is further intensified in her everprotectiveness. When Rob enters the living room in Act I after taking Ruth home, Mrs. Mayo reprimands him for not wearing a coat out at night. This gesture in itself is not an indictment except that O'Neill's stage instructions direct Mrs. Mayo to speak "as if she were speaking to a child."³³ Recognizing this, Scott quips back at her: "God A'mighty, Kate, you treat Robert as if he was one year old!"³⁴ She also tries to allay the ensuing quarrel between Andy and Mr. Mayo: "(rushing to Andy and putting her arms about him

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., p. 100.

³³Ibid., p. 99.

³⁴Ibid.

protectingly) 'Don't mind him, Andy dear. He don't mean a word he's saying!'"³⁵ As the argument grows more bitter, Mrs. Mayo tries harder to protect Andy from James' rage: "(coming from Andrew to his father, puts her hands on his shoulders as though to try to push him back in the chair from which he has risen) 'Won't you be still, James? Please, won't you?'"³⁶

Subtly, then, O'Neill suggests the motherly environment of Rob and Andy. She has cuddled and protected them throughout their childhood. In Ruth they seek the combined love of the mother and wife. But while Andy would have found these qualities in Ruth because he is strong and would demand submission and love, Rob's weakness turns Ruth into a frustrated and, finally, apathetic mate. Mrs. Mayo also reacts in this way. In the beginning of Act II she has, because of the death of Mr. Mayo, "become a weak mask wearing a helpless, doleful expression of being constantly on the verge of comfortless tears."³⁷ Her only hope is the return of Andy, for although she still loves Rob, she is no longer able to help him: "Maybe Robbie'll manage 'til Andy gets back and sees to things."³⁸ Then she reflects: "I wonder if he's changed much. He used to be so fine-looking and strong. (With a sigh) Three years! It seems more like three hundred."³⁹

³⁵O'Neill, Plays, III, 106.

³⁶Ibid., p. 107.

³⁷Ibid., p. 112.

³⁸Ibid., p. 115.

³⁹Ibid.

Even so, Rob apparently clings to her until her death, since Ruth tells Andy in Act III that Rob ". . . never took any interest since way back when your Ma died."⁴⁰

In essence, O'Neill has suggested rather than outwardly established the power of Mrs. Mayo over the lives of Rob and Andy, since she takes practically no active role in the events of the play, nor does she consciously seek to cause misfortune or wield power over her brood. In truth, O'Neill himself did not perhaps recognize the significance of her presence, for she has a very minor role and does not develop fully as an individual. It is on this very point that stress should be placed at this time, inasmuch as her very lack of individuality reveals the inability of O'Neill to portray woman as an individual, especially as a mother. For although O'Neill had had many contacts with women by the time of writing this play and was at that time married to Agnes, nevertheless, either he had failed completely to understand the female mind and personality, or he did not consciously recognize woman's significance to the life of man.

In either case, the result is the same. Mrs. Mayo is a sympathetically portrayed mother who has sought to protect and to retain possession of her offspring. She is not a vicious woman, nor does she consciously seek to wreck the lives of her children because of her selfishly possessive

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 155.

nature. But the very fact that her sons look to her for protection and are caught by one who symbolizes her love and promise of protection indicates that she is one of the innocent tools by which her sons are eventually destroyed.

Ruth, her successor, is equally an unconscious tool of destruction. A simple farm girl, Ruth finds strength in loving a strong man, and her frustration and bitter repulsion of Robert are the result of her complete inability to understand or protect him. She is not an admirable character, but she alone cannot be blamed for the tragedy. She represents love and life's reality, but like Mrs. Mayo, her significance as an early O'Neill woman lies in her embodiment as a passive symbol of the Life Force, rather than as a determined challenger of man's idealism.

In The Straw O'Neill glorifies love and sacrifice as the answer to man's search for meaning in life. Thus, O'Neill contends in this play that man can find purpose in living only through unselfish love and sacrifice, the recognition of which by the protagonist brings exaltation and hope. Opposing the forces of love and sacrifice, as symbolized in the character of Eileen Carmody, are the intellectual cynicism and isolation of Stephen Murray, the young O'Neillian protagonist.

Essentially, the play revolves around Eileen Carmody, a pretty young Irish girl of the lower working class. The oldest of four children, Eileen has had the responsibility of

being the mother to her brother and sisters since the death of her mother a year before the play opens. Partly because of her delicate nature but most of all as a result of too much work, Eileen has developed tuberculosis, and her doctor insists that she be sent to a sanatorium. Bill Carmody, Eileen's father, is enraged by the pressure brought upon him to finance private care for Eileen, and he submits only after the doctor threatens to report him to health authorities if he does not have her committed immediately. Eileen's fiance, Fred Nicholls, is horrified by the knowledge of her sickness, and, by his attitude, it is understood that he will promptly break off the engagement at the earliest opportunity.

Sadly Eileen leaves her "children" and is admitted into the sanatorium. In her loneliness she is quickly befriended by Stephen Murray, a handsome young fellow patient. Discovering his desire to write, she immediately suggests that he write while at the sanatorium and volunteers her services as a typist. By Act II Eileen has fallen hopelessly in love with Murray, who is so wrapped up in himself and his successful sale of a story that he does not and will not acknowledge her love. Moreover, Murray is well and is about to be released from the sanatorium. Once more finding herself faced with loneliness, hysterically Eileen admits her love to Stephen. When at the end of Act II Stephen leaves, Eileen is sent back to bed. Although she has thus far progressed in her fight against her illness, she now gives up fighting.

Act III shows Eileen's complete relapse and hopeless condition. She is past helping at the sanitorium and is about to be sent to the State Farm where she will surely die. Miss Gilpin, one of the nurses, summons Eileen's family and Stephen to her bedside. The arrival of Mr. Carmody with his new bride, formerly Mrs. Brennan, and Mary, Eileen's favorite sister, only serves to depress her already apathetic attitude because of their complete isolation from her. When Stephen comes, she cheers up, only to be crushed completely by the all too certain realization that he still does not love her. However, when Miss Gilpin informs Murray that Eileen is dying because she does not want to live without his love, Murray at last recognizes his responsibility to Eileen. He goes back to her and tells her that he loves her. Suddenly he realizes that he really does love her. In order to hide the seriousness of her condition from her, he also tells her that he is sick again and that they will go together to another sanitorium where they will both get well together. When Miss Gilpin tells him that there is simply no hope that Eileen will recover, Stephen defies her and proclaims that he will never lose hope that together he and Eileen will win!

The theme of the play, then, is that man's quest to find meaning in life is the quest to find love and the sense of belonging. Yet man struggles against his own nature to love and to sacrifice in that he seeks to escape from giving love; in effect, he seeks to escape from experiencing life.

Man casts aside his natural desires and refuses to give of himself, declaring that responsibility and love will keep him from realizing his dreams. So man wanders forth isolated from love and thereby isolated from a part of himself. Instead of finding purpose in self-realization, he finds nothing but emptiness and frustration. Finally, he is defeated by his betrayal of that part of his nature which seeks emotional expression. His intellectual illusions have blinded him to his need to express life, and in the end he retreats from the ego which has driven him to complete futility. He denies self for a hopeless love, and by his self-denial and self-sacrifice, he finds himself and life.

The symbol of love and life to which man returns is presented in woman. Eileen Carmody is undoubtedly the most idealistic portrayal of woman to be found in O'Neill's works. As Edwin Engel has commented,

Unique among O'Neill's tragic females, she is in possession of all the feminine virtues--except charm--and possessed by none of the destructive tendencies that made life so disagreeable for . . . the later heroines, and the people with whom they were associated.⁴¹

For Eileen is O'Neill's idealistic concept of the Mother.

She has all the physical characteristics of O'Neill's Mothers:

The oval of her face is spoiled by a long, rather heavy Irish jaw contrasting with the delicacy of her other features. Her eyes are large and blue,

⁴¹ Edwin A. Engel, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953), p. 36.

confident in their compelling candor and sweetness; her lips, full and red. . . droop at the corners into an expression of wistful sadness . . .⁴²

Throughout the play she reveals an almost angelic sweetness. Moreover, because of her purity and goodness, she is incapable of seeing ugliness in others. She does not, for example, see the selfish miserliness in her father. Bill Carmody is a complete contrast to the "delicacy" of Eileen. He has coarse, regular features. Furthermore, "the expression of his small, blue eyes is one of selfish cunning."⁴³ Carmody does not understand his daughter, nor does he sympathize with her illness: "If she is [sick]," he claims, "it's her own fault entirely--weakenin' her health by readin' here in the house."⁴⁴ His primary concern is that "if Eileen goes to the hospital, who's to be takin' care of the others, and mindin' the house when I'm off to work?"⁴⁵ It is significant to note here that O'Neill's portrayal of Carmody is pathetically close to his own feeling about James O'Neill, for O'Neill could not portray the Father with any other characteristics. Bill Carmody is one of O'Neill's early protests against the Father, who is always an insensitive, coarse, ignorant, miserly person, who, either consciously or unconsciously, seeks to destroy his family in order to gain his own ends. In this early play Carmody's miserliness

⁴²O'Neill, Plays, III, 344.

⁴³Ibid., p. 332.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 337.

causes Eileen's illness, and his refusal to put her in a private sanatorium when Hill Farm can no longer keep her is a certain sentence to death.

The contrast between Carmody's selfish nature and Eileen's goodness is made even more evident by the fact that it is Carmody who introduces Eileen to the audience in Act I. He complains to Fred Nicholls that he would not let Eileen go to the sanatorium if she herself had not insisted upon going: "It's all that divil's notion he [the doctor] put in her head," Carmody grumbles, "that the children'd be catchin' her sickness that makes her willin' to go."⁴⁶ And when Eileen appears, she further reveals her nature by her lack of concern for her own needs. Unlike her father and Fred, who are thinking only about how Eileen's sickness affects them, Eileen, ironically, thinks only of them: "You mustn't worry, Fred. Please don't! It'd be so much worse for me if I thought you did."⁴⁷ In explaining why she is going, she adds, "I didn't want to at first. I knew how hard it would be on Father and the kids--especially little Mary. (Her voice trembles a bit) And then the doctor said if I stayed I'd be putting them all in danger."⁴⁸

Eileen's selflessness, then, sets her apart from her predecessors, Mrs. Mayo and Ruth Mayo. She is naively pure

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 343.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 346.

⁴⁸Ibid.

and wholesome. However, although not destructively so, Eileen possesses all the characteristics that distinguish O'Neill's over-all concept of woman.

For example, as the Mother image, Eileen is singular in her self-sacrificing nature. But along with O'Neill's other mothers, she displays a strong desire to protect her "offspring," and consequently, she reveals a possessive attitude toward their dependency upon her. In Act I she exclaims to her father as he leaves her at the sanitorium:

Be sure and kiss them all for me--and bring them out to see me as soon as you can, Father, please! And don't forget to tell Mrs. Brennan all the directions I gave you coming out on the train. I told her but she mightn't remember--about Mary's bath--and to give Tom his--⁴⁹

And Eileen's reply to Carnody's retort that Mrs. Brennan can do her work without Eileen's instructions further indicates Eileen's possessive feeling about her role as mother: "Her work! (She seems at an end of her tether--wrung too dry for further emotion.)"⁵⁰ Later, after she has met Murray, she tries to explain to him how her absence will affect the children:

I've four of them--my brothers and sisters--though they're not what you'd call babies, except to me. I've been a mother to them now for a whole year--ever since our mother died. (Sadly) And I don't know how they'll ever get along while I'm away.⁵¹

⁴⁹O'Neill, Plays, III, 355.

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 355-356.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 360.

Cynically, Stephen sees the fallacy in her illusion of being all-essential to the children, but Eileen continues: "(with the same superior tone) 'It's easy for you to say that. You don't know how children grow to depend on you for everything. You're not a woman.'"⁵²

Having lost the children, Eileen's need to mother is directed toward Stephen. She encourages him to write and types his stories for him. When he is released from the sanatorium, however, her purpose for living goes with him, and she desperately admits her love:

You mustn't feel sad or anything. It's made me happier than I've ever been--loving you--even when I did know--you didn't. Only now--you'll forgive me telling you all this, won't you, dear? Now, it's so terrible to think I won't see you any more. I'll feel so--without anybody.⁵³

Her admission is made with the hope that he will not leave, in spite of the fact that adventure calls him. In this respect, Eileen is almost selfish in the intensity of her need to possess his love. But her desperate wish for Stephen to remain with her is not actually selfish possessiveness. It stems from her natural inability to understand the ambivalence of Stephen's nature. Like all O'Neill's women, she can understand only the part of him and herself that requires love. She cannot understand that his need to wander is a need to ". . . live, and meet real people who are doing things."⁵⁴

⁵²Ibid..

⁵³Ibid., p. 391.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 369.

For without Stephen's love and an opportunity through him to give her love, she no longer has purpose in living. When Stephen steps on the scales that will determine whether he is released from the sanitorium, O'Neill describes the climax of Eileen's conflict:

She stares straight ahead, her eyes full of anguish. . . . The balance rod hits the top smartly. He has gained. . . . Eileen seems to sense this outcome and her head sinks, her body sags weakly and seems to shrink to a smaller size.⁵⁵

Eileen's decline by the beginning of Act III indicates the apathy in which she lives. Her imminent death is checked momentarily only by Stephen's return to her. She at once finds new life in the belief that he is sick again and needs her: "(with a little cry of alarmed concern, she stretches out her hands to Murray protectingly) 'Poor Stephen--dear!'"⁵⁶ Once more she can protect and possess: "We'll be all by ourselves. . . . I knew New York wasn't good for you--alone--without me."⁵⁷ At the end of the play her completion as Mother is indicated in the final lines of the play:

(turning and greeting him with a shy smile of happiness as he comes and kneels by her bedside) Stephen! (He kisses her. She strokes his hair and continues in a tone of motherly, self-forgetting solicitude) I'll have to look out for you, Stephen, won't I? From now on? And see that you rest so many hours a day--and drink your milk when I drink mine--and go to bed at nine sharp when I do--and obey everything I tell you--and--⁵⁸

⁵⁵O'Neill, Plays, III, 382.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 414.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 412.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 416.

Thus, Eileen possesses all of the dominant characteristics of O'Neill's women. She is both possessive and protective, although these characteristics as manifested in her are not, as they are in most of O'Neill's women, destructive ones. Moreover, like all of O'Neill's women, Eileen is incapable of understanding Stephen's need to wander, to detach himself from the reality of life. Finally, as the symbol of love, Eileen fulfills her role in the scheme of things. Most important, however, is the fact that O'Neill's portrayal of Eileen is unique in that she is not only the symbol of love, but also the symbol of self-sacrificing love.

Not only does Eileen possess the traits found in all of O'Neill's women, but also she exhibits the specific traits that mark her as an early creation. Strikingly apparent is Eileen's simplicity of nature. She has no spiritual weaknesses. She is not jealous or proud. And for all the lines she speaks in the play, her character is never really developed. She remains from the beginning to the end of the play a pathetic creature of love. Her inner thoughts are never really revealed, or, if they are, their completely unselfish revelations are too pure to be real. Eileen is an ideal being; she is not endowed with human frailties because O'Neill did not understand her--did not and could not create a living mother. She is, therefore, only a shadowy image of sweetness and love.

Eileen's simplicity is further evidenced in the passivity she displays throughout the play. In the very beginning, Carmody likens Mary and Eileen to their dead mother when he says to Mary: "It's the dead spit and image of your sister, Eileen, you are, with your nose always in a book You're a Cullen like your mother's people. They always was dreaming their lives out."⁵⁹ Eileen, then, is a dreamer, always "wishing" that things were different but without the strength to make them so. She "wishes" Stephen were not going, and she "hopes" that he will come back to her, but she does not actively do anything in the play to make these events happen. Instead, events happen to her. She does not cause them to happen, and her character is not changed by them. Therefore, although the play is focused upon her as one of the two primary characters, she does not dominate the action of the play, but, rather, she is the passive recipient of the events in Stephen's life that draw him back to her as the symbol of life.

Stephen Murray is one of the least attractive of O'Neill's protagonists, in that his egotism and cynicism have become such dominating character traits that he has suppressed his natural inclination to feel compassion and love. Indeed, Murray's greatest failing is that he has ceased to participate in life but instead has become a critical onlooker. O'Neill's description of Murray indicates his own dissatisfaction

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 332.

with himself:

His intelligent, large hazel eyes have a tired, dispirited expression in repose, but can quicken instantly with a concealment mechanism of mocking, careless humor whenever his inner privacy is threatened. His large mouth aids this process of protection by a quick change from its set apathy to a cheerful grin of cynical good nature. He gives off the impression of being somehow dissatisfied with himself⁶⁰

Murray's dissatisfaction stems from his failure to make anything of himself. Since he is unable to face this fact, he has blamed his past environment as the cause for his failure. For example, he tells Eileen that he celebrated his admission into the sanitorium because it forced him to quit his job on a small town newspaper: "(With a sudden laugh full of weary bitterness) 'Do you know what it means to work from seven at night until three in the morning on a morning newspaper in a town of twenty thousand people--for ten years?'"⁶¹ Moreover, his bitterness also falls on his family because they don't understand him, he maintains: "From what I've seen that blood-thicker-than-water dope is all wrong."⁶² Murray is so withdrawn from others that he is cynical of Eileen's love for children. He bluntly admits that he does not like babies: "I don't get them. They're something I can't seem to get acquainted with."⁶³ Even though Stephen will not share Eileen's warmth for others,

⁶⁰O'Neill, Plays, III, 348.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 358.

⁶²Ibid., p. 359.

⁶³Ibid., p. 360.

however, he readily accepts her friendship. He admits to her that he wants to write, but, he comments, ". . . like everything else--I never got down to it."⁶⁴ Her encouragement inspires him to write while at the sanitarium, thereby putting purpose into his life. He recognizes somewhat that her faith and love have given him courage enough to succeed, for after he sells his first story, he admits: "They're all typed, thanks to you. That's what's brought me luck, I know. I never had a bit by myself."⁶⁵

Yet, even though he senses Eileen's love, Stephen refuses to acknowledge it. In Act II when he tells her he is about to leave, she cries: "Oh, I'm so glad--for your sake--but I'm selfish--it'll be so lonely here without you."⁶⁶ Stephen halfway tries to console her:

You'll be going away yourself before long.
 (Eileen shakes her head. He goes on without noticing, wrapped up in his own success) Oh, Eileen, you can't imagine all it opens up for me--selling that story. . . . (Feelingly) You don't know how grateful I am to you, Eileen--how you've helped me. Oh, I don't mean just the typing, I mean your encouragement, your faith! The stories would have never been written if it hadn't been for you.⁶⁷

But his acknowledgement of her help goes no further than gratitude. He has drawn from her love and confidence the necessary strength to succeed, but he feels no obligation to her. Moreover, when she meets him the night before his

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 361.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 368.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 369.

⁶⁷Ibid.

departure, the stage instructions indicate Stephen's desire to keep her from telling him that she loves him: "(something in her voice makes him avert his face and kick at a heap of stones on which she is sitting--brusquely)."⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Eileen makes a last effort to make him cognizant of her love for him by telling him that Mrs. Turner suspects that they have become too involved with each other. He "quickly, as if he wishes to avoid this subject,"⁶⁹ starts talking about his plans. Finally, however, he is faced with her admission, and he is overcome. He promises her he will remember her and that he will write: "I will! I swear! And when you get out I'll--we'll--I'll find something--."⁷⁰

He does not write, however, and Eileen gets progressively worse. Stephen's departure to New York is an escape from Eileen as much as a release. His selfishness seeks no help-mate. He wants to live, and, ironically, he has lived for the first time through his association with Eileen. Thus, by leaving her, by rejecting her love, he rejects life and responsibility. He rejects the security of belonging to someone and to something. His description in Act III shows the effect "life" has had on him: "Puffy shadows of sleeplessness and dissipation are marked under his heavy-lidded eyes."⁷¹ Still he refuses to see that he needs Eileen's love.

⁶⁸O'Neill, Plays, III, 385.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 387.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 392.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 401.

When he is told by Miss Gilpin that Eileen's relapse is due to her unrequited love for him, Stephen, nevertheless, admits to her that he doesn't love Eileen, or anyone:

". . . I've never thought much of loving anyone--that way."⁷²

By this statement he admits his complete isolation from emotion and from giving himself. When he sees Eileen, he admits that he has not really done any good writing because it was such "hard work."⁷³ He also admits that his life at the sanitorium was a happy one: "I was--happier than I've been before or afterward."⁷⁴ Finally, he recognizes the importance of Eileen's faith in him: "Is it the fact that I've worked here before--or is it seeing you, Eileen? (Gratefully) I really believe it's you."⁷⁵ Thus, when Miss Gilpin tells Stephen that only his love for Eileen can make her last months happy ones, he recognizes his responsibility to her and declares his love. When he does declare his love and selflessly accepts responsibility for taking care of her, Stephen realizes that he really does love Eileen. In his first act of self-forgetfulness and desire to give himself, Stephen finds himself, for he is able to feel emotion, he is able to love. In this play, O'Neill says, love is the one "straw" to which man can cling for the hope of fulfillment. As Stephen says to Miss Gilpin: "Happiness will cure! Love

⁷²Ibid., p. 409.

⁷³Ibid., p. 404.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 405.

is stronger than-- . . . Oh, why did you give me hopeless hope?"⁷⁶ And she responds: "Isn't all life just that . . . ? But there must be something back of it--some promise of fulfillment--somehow--somewhere--in the spirit of hope itself."⁷⁷

Eileen's love has broken through Stephen's shell, and he at last finds himself in his desire to make her happy. Thus, O'Neill has portrayed the loving, self-sacrificing mother whose desire to give is so consuming that without someone to love, she cannot live. Opposing her warmth are the petty cruelty of her father and the cynical intellectualism of Stephen. These two forces finally destroy her, but through her love Stephen returns to life and thus becomes a whole person through suffering and self-sacrifice. Never again is woman such a positive force for good. Eileen is what woman should be but is not. Briefly, O'Neill conceived of woman both as the victim of man's selfish desire and as the symbol of hope and love. However, although the Mother image recurs in the later plays, for example, Desire Under the Elms and The Great God Brown, her presence as a forceful symbol for good is never recaptured. Instead, woman develops into a more complicated character who not only demands attention as a challenger of man's freedom but who also requires a freedom of her own.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 415.

⁷⁷Ibid.

Anna Christie is the dramatization of man's struggle against the sea--the symbol of life. Anna, the heroine of the play, not only challenges the sea of life, but she also joins forces with it as a worshiper of life. Opposing Anna's love for the sea and for life is Chris, Anna's father. He hates "dat ole devil sea." The sea is responsible for all of his suffering and frustrations. Thus, he shrinks from the sea and worships the land, symbolic of withdrawal and sterility.

The struggle between Anna and Chris suggests also the universal conflict between the Mother and Father, a theme which will grow to such proportions as to dominate the later plays. To O'Neill, the primordial Mother, represented in Anna's universality as the first Earth Mother, symbolizes life and the pagan worship of nature through sex. The Father, on the other hand, instinctively seeks to bar the Mother from living and creating, since to him living means suffering, and he wants only the stagnant peace of withdrawal, thus shielding himself and his own from the forces of Fate. Moreover, Chris's hatred of Mat Burke, Anna's lover, reflects the Father's Freudian desire to possess the daughter's love for himself, so that the creation of new life will not leave him alone. As Chris says to Mat:

Vell--Ay don't vant for Anna gat married. Listen, you fallar. Ay'm ole man. Ay Ay don't see Anna for fifteen year. She vas

all Ay got in veld. And now ven she come on
first trip--you tank Ay vant her leave me 'lone
again?⁷⁸

Besides, Chris rationalizes to Anna: ". . . Ay like for you
marry steady fallar got good job on land."⁷⁹

The first part of the play concerns the reunion of Anna and Chris Christopherson after a separation of fifteen years. Chris, an old Swedish sea dog, has left the sea and is now a captain of a coal barge. He has not seen Anna, his daughter, since he had left her on a farm in the Midwest in order to keep her safely away from the sea. As the play opens, Anna has come to New York to rest after a strenuous two years in a house of prostitution. Although Anna is skeptical of living on a coal barge, Chris convinces her that the fresh air will be good for her health.

Anna soon falls in love with the sea and after two weeks is convinced that she has come home. Chris fears this attachment and has a premonition that something terrible is going to happen. It is then that Chris's barge rescues four men on a life raft. One of the men is Mat Burke, a big, burly Irish stoker, who immediately falls in love with Anna, against the protestations of Chris. Anna recognizes the risk of falling in love with Burke, but she is helpless against it. When Burke asks her to marry him, however, she refuses, since she

⁷⁸O'Neill, Plays, III, 46.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 43.

is too honest a person to marry him without his knowing about her past. He is not satisfied with a mere refusal, though. His ensuing quarrel over her with Chris infuriates her, and she defiantly admits her past. Both men are stunned. Mat threatens her and then leaves, cursing her bitterly. Chris also leaves, headed for the nearest bar in order to drown his sorrows.

Two days later, Anna, left alone, has made plans to return to New York and to her former occupation. The hope that Mat will come back has delayed her departure. Chris is the first to return, disheveled and sick from continuous drinking. After begging her forgiveness, he tells her that he has signed on the steamer Londonderry in order to provide her with an adequate income so that she will not have to return to prostitution. Then Mat comes back, admitting that he is unable to forget her; after she swears that he is the only man that she has ever loved, he asks her to marry him. The three of them then attempt to celebrate, although all feel the ominous presence of the sea outside, waiting.

The character of Chris is the portrait of an old man, who, having been beaten by life, has retreated from it and is content to spend the rest of his days cursing "dat ole devil sea" for all his misfortunes. As Mat says to him: "The sea give you a clout once, knocked you down, and you're not man enough to get up for another, but lie there for the

rest of your life howling bloody murder."⁸⁰ Chris's lack of understanding of himself and life is at once comic and pathetic, and while his eyes are described as ". . . twin-
kling with simple good humor," his mouth reflects that he is ". . . childishly self-willed and weak, of an obstinate
kindliness."⁸¹ Like all of O'Neill's Fathers, Chris ". . . is
a short, squat, broadshouldered man of about fifty."⁸²

Chris's retreat from the sea has been brought about by his fear that he will be drawn into the sea by the tragic Fate that had claimed the men of his family before him. He tells Anna that it is the sea that had killed her mother, for she had died of loneliness waiting for him to come home. He, in turn, always spent his money and signed on for another voyage instead of coming home: "Ay don't know why but dat's way with most sailor fallar, Anna. Dat ole' devil sea make dem crazy fools with her dirty tricks."⁸³ Moreover, it is the sea that has kept Chris from having Anna with him while she was growing up. As he explains to Larry and Marthy, his waterfront mistress: "Den when her moder die ven Ay was on voyage, Ay tank its better dem cousins keep Anna. Ay tank its better Anna live on farm, den she don't know dat ole devil sea, she don't know fa'der like me."⁸⁴ But Larry's humorous

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 43.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 22.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

reply about Anna's future is all too prophetic: "(with a wink at Marthy) 'This girl, now, 'll be marryin' a sailor herself, likely. It's in the blood.'"⁸⁵

Thus, in Chris's mind the sea is threatening ominously to reclaim him and his Anna, and her immediate love for the sea confirms his darkest fears. Finally, when Mat and Anna fall in love, Chris is sure that the sea is to blame for their meeting. When Anna tells both of them about her past, Chris cries out:

Ain't your fault, Anna, Ay know dat. . . . It's dat ole devil sea, do dis to me!" (He shakes his fist at the door) It's her dirty tricks! . . . If dat Irish fallar don't ever come, you don't never tal me dem tangs, Ay don't never know, and everytang's all right.⁸⁶

Chris's escape to the bottle after Anna's confession is further evidence of his retreat from life. He did not want to know about her past--did not want the responsibility that that knowledge would certainly place upon him. Even after knowing, he fails her again, for he signs up on a steamer going out to sea, choosing to run rather than to stay home and try to make a life for her. His selfish desire to keep her with him has been replaced by a desire to escape when he is faced with the responsibility for her past and future. He would do anything rather than know himself. She understands him, however, and says: "But, for Gawd's sake, don't

⁸⁵O'Neill, Plays, III, 9.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 62.

you see you're doing the same thing you've always done? . . . But what's the use of talking? You ain't right, that's what. I'll never blame you for nothing no more."⁸⁷

The conflict between Anna and Chris is intensified by the Freudian conflict between Mat and Chris. Unlike Chris, Mat is willing to wrestle with life. Mat is big, egotistical and proud. Like Anna, he loves the sea, but his love is the love of challenge. When Chris says that Mat is a liar about the hypocrisy of those who live on the land, Mat replies:

'Tis not. . . . But you know the truth in your heart, if great fear of the sea has made you a liar and coward itself. (Pounding the table) The sea's the only life for a man with guts in him isn't afraid of his own shadow! 'Tis only on the sea he's free, and him roving the face of the world, seeing all things and not giving a damn for giving up money, or stealing from his friends⁸⁸

Yet although Mat shows contempt for Chris's fear of life, he, too, is unable to face the responsibility for life that Anna's confession forces him to face. His love for Anna is the love for an ideal which he believes she represents. For in one breath he swears his undying love for her to Chris: "Death itself wouldn't make me forget her;"⁸⁹ yet after she admits her past and begs him to believe that his love has made her clean, he rages: "Glane, is it? You slut, you, I'll be killing you now!"⁹⁰ As the symbol of man he, like

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 66.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 48.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 47.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 60.

Chris, is the cause of Anna's fall, yet he, too, is destroyed by her confession:

I'm destroyed entirely and my heart is broken in bits! I'm asking God Himself, was it for this He'd have me roaming the earth since I was a lad only, to come to black shame in the end, where I'd be giving a power of love to a woman is the same as others you'd meet in any hooker-shanty in port⁹¹

Man, then, cannot and will not face the reality of life unless compelled to do so through the love of woman. Both Mat and Chris seek escape when faced with the realization that their symbol of ideal beauty has clay feet. Moreover, they do not try to understand her misery but can only wallow in self-pity. Anna alone understands life and is determined to live. In her character the play is unified, since it is her struggle to find her place in the scheme of things that forces Mat and Chris to forget self and meet her need for perceptive love.

It may be seen, then, that Anna, like those before her, is the victim of man's egotism and pride. Yet, she is no longer a passive victim, but, rather, her determination to live and love compels man to live, thus making her the victimizer as well as the victim. At the end of the play both Mat and Chris sense the foreboding trickery of the sea when they discover that they have signed on to the same steamer:

CHRIS, (speaks with somber premonition) It's funny. It's queer, yes--you and me shipping on same

⁹¹Ibid.

boat dat way. It ain't right. Ay don't know--
it's dat funny way ole devil sea do her verst dirty
tricks, yes. It's so.

MAT. (Nodding his head in gloomy acquiescence--
with a great sigh) I'm fearing maybe you have the
right of it for once, devil take you.⁹²

But Anna declares:

Aw, say, what's the matter? Out out the gloom.
We're all fixed now, ain't we, me and you? (Pours
out more beer into his glass and fills one for her-
self--slaps him on the back) Come on! Here's to
the sea, no matter what! Be a game sport and drink
to that! Come on!⁹³

For Anna combines not only the self-sacrificing and loving
Mother image but also the positive symbol of life. She seeks
not to protect from life but to offer life. In Anna is
found the first Earth Mother, for she does not fear life,
she covets it, and her response is life in its most primitive,
natural form. Unlike Chris, she does not blame her suffering
on others, but, rather, she recognizes and accepts the good
and evil in the world, courageously determined not to be
beaten but to win against the forces of Fate. As she says
to Chris: "It ain't your fault, and it ain't mine, and it
ain't his neither. We're all poor nuts and things happen
and we yust get mixed in wrong, that's all."⁹⁴ Anna is the
first strong woman to be found in O'Neill's plays. She is
the noblest of all his women, because she sees the world as
it is, and she fights it with the only weapon she has, that

⁹²O'Neill, Plays, III, 78.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 65.

is, her desire to live and to create. Anna loves the sea. In Act I, the land has made Anna's face "hard and cynical."⁹⁵ But in Act II, "she looks healthy, transformed, the natural color has come back to her face."⁹⁶ Moreover, she exclaims to Chris:

. . . I feel so--so--like I'd found something I'd missed and been looking for--'s if this was the right place for me to fit in. And I seem to have forgot--everything that's happened And I feel clean, somehow And I feel happy for once--yes, honest!--happier than I have ever been anywhere before!⁹⁷

Regardless of her sexual promiscuity, Anna is pure in spirit. Furthermore, that O'Neill still held to his feeling for the loving Mother is indicated by the maternal characteristics found in Anna. Her desire to mother Burke is shown in their first meeting on the coal barge, after he is picked up at sea. Even in his weakened condition, Burke tries to kiss Anna, and she pushes him away with such force that he falls against the bulwark and is momentarily knocked unconscious. She at once forgets her anger, "kneels down beside him and raises his head to her knee."⁹⁸ When Chris senses that Anna is responding to Burke's declarations and tries to make Burke go to the forecabin, Anna intervenes immediately and gives up her bunk to Burke. She even lets him lean on her as she leads him to her cabin. Moreover,

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 13.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 25.

⁹⁷Ibid., pp. 28-29.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 33.

Mat is the first man whom Anna loves, but even though she recognizes that he is her only chance for happiness, she refuses to marry him because of her past:

If I'd met him four years ago--or even two years ago--I'd have jumped at the chance And I would now--only he's such a simple guy--a big kid--and I ain't got the heart to feel him.⁹⁹

As a new type, Anna's physical characteristics differ from those of her predecessors:

She is a tall, blonde, fully-developed girl of twenty, handsome after a large Viking-daughter fashion but now run down in health and plainly showing all the outward evidences of belonging to the world's oldest profession. . . . Her clothes are the tawdry finery of peasant stock turned prostitute.¹⁰⁰

She is not, then, the small, refined, delicate Mother with dreamy eyes, as were Eileen and Mrs. Mayo. Instead, she is a peasant, large and buxom, following the pattern of the later Earth Mothers. Moreover, unlike the pure Mother, Eileen, she is not a virtuous young creature but a prostitute who has known life and is hardened to it. And even though she regrets her profession, O'Neill's sympathetic treatment of her foreshadows his belief in the natural primitive outlook toward sex found in the pagan plays. Anna is certainly not condemned for her past, but, rather, man is blamed because he seeks to ignore his own creation. Mat brags about his conquests all over the world, but he is not ready to accept a vanquished

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 13.

one. Anna challenges his double standard: "You been doing the same thing all your life, picking up a new girl in every port. How're you any better than I was?"¹⁰¹ Indeed, Anna makes it clear that man is responsible for making her what she is: "It was men on the farm ordering and beating me-- and giving me the wrong start. . . . Gawd, I hate 'em all, every mother's son of 'em!"¹⁰² And when Mat and Chris finally force her to tell them of her past, she rages:

First thing is, I want to tell you two guys something. You was going on's if one of you got to own me. But nobody owns me see?--'cepting myself. I'll do what I please and no man, I don't give a hoot who he is, can tell me what to do! I ain't asking either of you for a living. I can make it myself--one way or other. I'm my own boss.¹⁰³

Then, defiantly, she adds:

I was in a house, that's what!--yes, that kind of a house--the kind sailors like you and Mat goes to in port--and your nice inland men, too--and all men, God damn 'em! I hate 'em! Hate 'em!¹⁰⁴

In spite of her seeming hardness and hatred toward men, Anna shows through her nature that she is capable of deep and lasting love. She immediately responds to Chris's obvious humility about his failure as a father: "touchèd but a bit embarrassed) 'Don't bawl about it. There ain't nothing to forgive anyway.'¹⁰⁵ And even when Mat curses

¹⁰¹Neill, Plays, III, 73.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁰³Ibid., pp. 56-57.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., pp. 58-59.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 65.

her and threatens to kill her, she pleads:

And if I told you that yust getting out in this barge, and being on the sea has changed me and made me feel different about things, 's if all I'd been through wasn't me . . . and I sized you up as a different kind of man--a sea man as different from the ones on land as water is from mud . . . I wanted to marry you and fool you, but I couldn't. Don't you see how I've changed? . . . Will you believe it if I tell you that loving you has made me--clean?¹⁰⁶

Finally, Anna's strength wins over the shallowness of Mat and Chris, and they, too, are compelled by her love to face life. In Anna, O'Neill envisioned a new woman, whose love is not only a symbol of hope but of challenge. Anna's love spurns the sham and hypocrisy of illusion, and through her honesty man can find love without shame and guilt. Thus, while Anna still retains the early characteristics of woman in her maternal desire to love and to sacrifice for man and in her role as victim of man's selfish desires, her portrayal indicates O'Neill's increasing focus on women as individuals. Anna, like all of O'Neill's women characters, is the symbol of love to man. She possesses, moreover, a unified purpose in living, that is, her desire to compel man away from his idealism to meet her need for love and fulfillment. Most important, however, is Anna's place in the development of a new O'Neillian female type--the Divine Harlot. For Anna is the warm, earthy Life Force, who opposes that part of man which seeks to escape from life by denying life.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., pp. 59-60.

CHAPTER IV

THE GARDEN

Out of the portrayal of Anna Christie emerge two definite O'Neillian concepts of woman--the Seductress and the Earth Mother. The Seductress is the girl-woman to whom man is drawn in search of partnership and love and in whom he seeks to find fulfillment and happiness. Yet, although offering fulfillment, the Seductress is incapable of satisfying man's desires, since she, too, seeks her own identity. Moreover, the Seductress has become masculine in her need to possess man's soul as well as his body. The Earth Mother, on the other hand, seeks nothing from man. She is the eternal symbol of fertility and warmth, to whom man can retreat from the possessiveness of the Seductress. She is the personification of sex, which she offers freely to man.

O'Neill thus separates into distinct characters the traits of womanhood. Feeling that woman was no longer willing to remain submissive but was, instead, actively compelling man to her in constant struggle for possession, O'Neill created the Earth Mother to symbolize the warmth, understanding and protection of the Mother, whose desire to comfort all men is manifested in her instinctive sexual promiscuity.

Three plays have been chosen to illustrate the development of these two female types--Welded, Desire Under the Elms, and The Great God Brown.

In Welded, completed in 1923, O'Neill presents the marital struggle of Michael and Eleanor Cape to possess each other while fighting against each other to retain their individual identities. It is Michael who seeks a unity of souls, to which Eleanor refuses to succumb. Both retreat, Michael to "Woman," a prostitute, and Eleanor to her agent John, who symbolizes the Father image.

Desire Under the Elms, one of O'Neill's best plays, is truly his most pagan play. Written in 1924, it is a drama of the struggle between the natural, creative Mother and the Puritan Father to win the protagonist son. Abbie Putnam, the heroine of the play, embodies both the creative force of the Earth Mother and the possessiveness of the Seductress, resulting in the most desirable woman O'Neill ever created. Moreover, this is the first play in which the struggle between the Mother and the Father becomes the dominant theme, a theme which becomes all absorbing in many of the later plays.

The third play in this group to be considered is The Great God Brown (1925). One of O'Neill's most ambitious works from the standpoint of technique, it portrays man's disunity, which is brought about by his desire to create, in

a world seeking to suppress and destroy creativeness. Thus, Dion Anthony, the protagonist, must wear the mask of Pan in order to find protection against the stagnant materialism of Billy Brown and the Puritan hypocrisy of Margaret, his Seductress-wife. Only in Cybel, the Divine Harlot, does Dion find love and understanding, and to her, as the symbol of the Mother, does Dion finally return--a return to the warmth of the womb.

Doris Falk has said in her interpretation of Welded: "Love between the sexes becomes man's greatest hope and his greatest threat. It conquers loneliness and the sterility of egotistical isolation, but also . . . it is the lovers' mutual attempt to rob each other of freedom."¹ Indeed, it is in Welded that O'Neill first concentrates on the eternal struggle of the sexes as the all-consuming struggle in man's life, for in Welded woman faces man as a challenging force, determined to be the possessor as well as the possessed.

Eleanor and Michael Cape are both bound by a passion for each other which tortures them, for they are unable to recognize that each has his own individuality and separate creative power. Therefore, both are violently jealous of the forces outside themselves which separate them--Michael of Eleanor's past loves and success as an actress, and Eleanor of Michael's work as a playwright. Moreover, Michael's idealism demands

¹Doris V. Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick, 1958), p. 87.

a unity of souls as well as a physical unity, and Eleanor refuses to submit to his ideal. She is a realist, and she recognizes that Michael's ideal is inhuman, that he is murdering their marriage by his insistence that it be ". . . guarded from the commonplace."²

The setting for the play reflects the struggle between the two egos. Throughout the play only two lights are used onstage, and they are focused on Eleanor and Michael. As O'Neill states in his stage instructions: "These two circles of light, like auras of egoism, emphasize and intensify Eleanor and Michael throughout the play."³ The entire play takes place in one evening in the lives of Michael and Eleanor Cape. Michael, a prominent playwright, returns home after spending several weeks in the country working on his latest play. He is met by Eleanor, and their reunion reveals the intensity of their love for and dependency on each other. Their ensuing conversation further reveals the struggle between them for possession. Finally, in their quest for "renewal" of their marital ideal, they awaken a mutual need for consummation. However, their inward world is interrupted by a knock on the door. In spite of Michael's plea to ignore the knock, Eleanor breaks the spell and goes to the door. The caller is John, their agent, who has dropped by to inquire

²O'Neill, Plays, II, 448.

³Ibid., p. 443.

about the progress of Michael's new play. Sensing the tension between the lovers, John leaves. Michael at once attacks Eleanor for seeking to escape from a completion of their union, and in his rage, he brings up her past affairs, her dependency upon his work for success, and finally, suggests a present intimacy with John. Eleanor retaliates by exclaiming that her acting has made his plays successful, that both owe their success to John, and that she had offered herself to John long ago, but that he had spurned her offer because he knew that she did not love him. Hysterical by her admission, Michael almost chokes her into unconsciousness and then leaves, swearing to destroy his love forever.

Eleanor also leaves in search of freedom and goes to John. After trying unsuccessfully to give herself to John, she realizes that she is hopelessly bound to Michael and his ideal, but at last she realizes that it is her love for him which binds her and not his will to keep her bound. Michael, whose retreat to a prostitute named "Woman" is as equally ineffectual, nevertheless learns through her blind acceptance of life that life is pain and suffering and failure and that regardless of what Eleanor is or does or will do, he loves her and cannot live without her.

They return to each other, both refusing again to yield to the other's demands; yet both have learned to accept the struggle, and in the end they unite in the crucifixion of self and ideal in the consummation of life.

The struggle between Michael and Eleanor is an outward manifestation of the struggle raging within each of them. Michael, the young creative playwright, was born to suffer:

MICHAEL is thirty-five, tall and dark. His unusual face is a harrowed battlefield of super-sensitiveness, the features at war with one another--the forehead of a thinker, the eyes of a dreamer, the nose and mouth of a sensualist. One feels a powerful imagination tinged with somber sadness--a driving force which can be sympathetic and cruel at the same time. There is something tortured about him--a passionate tension, a self-protecting, arrogant defiance of life and his own weakness, a deep need for love as a faith in which to relax.⁴

Michael's need to make of love "a faith in which to relax" has led to the battle he now wages against Eleanor's realism. When she tells him that his ideal is inhuman, he cries: "Our marriage must be a consummation demanding and combining the best in each of us! Hard, difficult, guarded from the commonplace, kept sacred as the outward form of our inner harmony!"⁵ Momentarily, he persuades her to forget everything but their moment of truth, but John's appearance saves her from complete self-annihilation. After John leaves, Michael bitterly comments: "Ruined now--gone--a rare moment of beauty! It seems at times as if some jealous demon of the commonplace were mocking us. (With a violent gesture of loathing) Oh, how intolerably insulting life can be!"⁶ When Eleanor tries to make him understand why she cannot give herself completely,

⁴Ibid., pp. 443-444.

⁵Ibid., p. 448.

⁶Ibid., p. 452.

he retorts that she, too, demands, but that she is unwilling to give: "At every turn you feel your individuality invaded-- while at the same time, you're jealous of any separateness in me. You demand more and more while you give less and less."⁷

So complete is his bitterness that he turns to her past promiscuity in order to hurt her. She does not deny her past, but, rather, enraged that he needs a lie to exalt his ideal, she crushes him by admitting that she once offered herself to John, and that, although he refused her then because he knew that she did not love him, it is John whom she loves now and who is her lover. Michael cannot face this admission, and he leaves, raving:

Gone! All our beauty gone! And you don't love him! You lie! You did this out of hatred for me! You dragged our ideal in the gutter--with delight! (Wildly) And you pride yourself you've killed it, do you, you actress, you barren soul! (With savage triumph) But I tell you only a creator can really destroy! (With a climax of frenzy) And I will! I will! I won't give your hatred the satisfaction of seeing our love live on in me--to torture me! I'll drag it lower than you! I'll stamp it into the vilest depths! I'll leave it dead! I'll murder it--and be free!⁸

But in Michael's search for revenge he finds his moment of truth. "Woman," his salvation, becomes his salvation in fact. O'Neill's first Divine Harlot, "Woman" is a stupid, cowlike symbol of fertility, and her acceptance of life teaches Michael acceptance. As he sees the limits to which

⁷O'Neill, Plays, II, 453.

⁸Ibid., p. 460.

she has gone, he says: "You're all the tortures man inflicts on woman--and you're the revenge of woman! . . . You're the suicide of love--of my love--of all love since the world began!"⁹ He kisses her, but she pushes him away, declaring triumphantly: "Well, I'm glad one of youse guys got paid back like you oughter!"¹⁰ He begs her forgiveness, for all men, when he realizes that she also gives to her man, who beats her and sends her out to degradation:

CAPE. But you love him, don't you?
 WOMAN. Sure. I'm lonesome.
 CAPE. Yes. . . . Why did you smile when you said he'd beat you, anyway?
 WOMAN. I was thinkin' of the whole game. It's funny, ain't it?
 CAPE. (slowly) You mean--life?
 WOMAN. Sure. You got to laugh, ain't you. You got to loin to like it!
 CAPE. Yes! That's it! . . . To learn to love life--to accept it and be exalted--that's the one faith left to us!¹¹

Like Michael, Eleanor, too, must reconcile her need to possess and to love with her desire for spiritual freedom. As O'Neill's first true Seductress, Eleanor displays a masculine need to find individual fulfillment while still retaining the compelling, feminine traits that draw man to her as the symbol of love. Thus, the girl-mother-mistress is combined in the Seductress with an opposing masculine need for self-expression, to the end that she can neither find self-satisfaction in her wrested freedom, nor can she satisfy that idealism in

⁹Ibid., p. 475.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 478.

man which requires her to submit completely to his need for love as a faith in which he can relax.

Eleanor's description foreshadows the struggle within and without her:

Her face, with its high, prominent cheek-bones, lacks harmony. It is dominated by passionate, blue-gray eyes, restrained by a high forehead from which the mass of her dark brown hair is combed straight back. The first impression of her whole personality is one of charm, partly innate, partly imposed by years of self-discipline.¹²

The feminine side of Eleanor seeks to attain Michael's ideal. Like Michael, she began to live when they met and fell in love: "Your love saved me," she tells him. "I lost myself. I began living in you. I wanted to die and become you."¹³ But Eleanor sadly recognizes the impossibility of their ideal: "Sometimes I think we've demanded too much. Now there's nothing left but that something which can't give itself. And I blame you for this--because I can neither take more nor give more . . ."¹⁴

Thus, Eleanor pleads with Michael to leave her with that "something" which she cannot give. But when he refuses and demands all, she relents momentarily. John's coming, however, saves her, which she later admits to Michael:

It's so beautiful--and then--suddenly I'm being crushed. I feel a cruel presence in you paralyzing me, creeping over my body, possessing

¹²O'Neill, Plays, II, 443.

¹³Ibid., p. 447.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 448.

it so it's no longer my body--then grasping at some last inmost thing which makes me me--my soul--demanding to have that, too! I have to rebel with all my strength--seize any pretext! Just now at the foot of the stairs--the knock on the door was--liberation. (In anguish) And yet I love you! It's because I love you! If I'm destroyed, what is left to love you, what is left for you to love?¹⁵

But Michael reminds her of her possessive jealousy of his work, which she denies, angrily declaring that he owes much of his success to her. This provokes him to recall his bitter jealousy of her past loves, and when she sees that he wants her to deny her past, she flaunts it in his face, requiring him to accept her behavior as part of her struggle to find fulfillment, or to deny his love completely. When she sees that he believes her confession that John was not her lover, she is furious, because she knows that he has grasped her confession rather than to accept her for what she is.¹⁶ She denies she loves him, but he grabs her and kisses her, and she again submits. But her strength returns when she realizes his triumph--she--thinks--she remembers, and she lashes out:

(Her whole tortured face expresses an abysmal self-loathing, a frightful hatred for him)
 No! You can't crush--me! (Her face becomes deadly calm. She speaks with intense, cold hatred)
 Don't kiss me. I love him. He was--my lover--
 here--when you were away!¹⁷

¹⁵Ibid., p. 453.

¹⁶Sophus Keith Winther, Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study (New York, 1934), p. 137.

¹⁷O'Neill, Plays, II, 460.

The full wrath of her being thus exposed, Eleanor also retreats in search of freedom. And as Michael's retreat to "Woman" is symbolic of retreat to the Mother, so Eleanor's retreat to John is symbolic of retreat to the Father,¹⁸ and John the Father is waiting. Yet, Eleanor cannot free herself of her love for Michael. When John kisses her, her body trembles "with revulsion."¹⁹ Finally, he tells her to go home, and she confesses: "Upstairs--if I could have gone-- I might have been free. But he's trained me too well in his ideal. . . . It's broken me. I'm no longer anything. So what does it matter how weak I am?"²⁰ Then suddenly she realizes, "My love for him is my own not his! That he can never possess! It's my own. It's my life!"²¹

So it is that the Seductress learns that in spite of her desire to be loved without being possessed, her desire simply to love is greater than all other desires, and she turns to Michael, "with a low tender cry as if she were awakening to maternity."²² Michael's dream is fulfilled, as he says: "I love you! Forgive me all I've ever done, all I'll ever do."²³ But Eleanor, the Mother at last, responds: "No--forgive me--

¹⁸David W. Sievers, Freud on Broadway (New York, 1955), p. 104.

¹⁹Neill, Plays, II, 464.

²⁰Ibid., p. 469.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 488.

²³Ibid., p. 489.

my child, you!"²⁴ In her moment of self-forgetfulness she becomes the combined mother-mistress-wife. She ascends the stairs and beckons to Michael. He cries, "My own!" She reaffirms, "My lover!" And, finally, he says, "My wife!" She forms a cross with her hands which he joins in the prayer, "We love."²⁵

In the end, Eleanor is able to fulfill her role as the symbol of love, but only after Michael has also been humbled to the reality which she has forced him to acknowledge.

It may be seen, then, that woman's relationship with man has grown increasingly complex and that woman has taken on dominant character traits which threaten man's idealistic concept of love. No longer seeking fulfillment outside of love's limitation, as did Robert and Stephen, Michael has made love his ideal, but instead of finding Eleanor a willing partner, he finds a new being seeking her own freedom outside of love. Thus, Eleanor, still possessive in her desire for creativity and love, has adopted from man his need for self-expression. Moreover, lacking man's sensitivity, imagination, and spirituality, she scorns man's desire for spiritual unity, so that "Woman" becomes necessary to complete the picture of woman ". . . as a passive, powerfully docile source of physical creation."²⁶

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Falk, p. 86.

As one noted critic has stated, "Desire Under the Elms celebrates the divinity of nature, the triumph of pagan naturalism over the indurated religion, the victory of the mother and son over the father."²⁷ There are, then two conflicts within the framework of the play. That is, the two forces embodied in Abbie Putnam and Ephraim Cabot represent not only the struggle between Puritanism and paganism but also the primordial conflict between the mother and the father. Ephraim, the hard, proud Puritan Father, in taking Abbie as his wife, must vie for her possession with his son, Eben. Eben, whose hatred for his father stems from his unhealthy love for his dead mother, feels for Abbie not only the love of the son for the mother but also the carnal desire for woman. Thus, in substituting Abbie for his mother and thereafter by taking her as a woman, he has committed moral incest, but at the same time he has fulfilled the mythological cycle of nature in the victory of the son over the father for the possession of the mother.

In his first play dominated by the Mother-Father conflict, O'Neill deals with primitive characters whose thoughts correspond with their actions, characters who have not yet been polluted by the domination of a society which suppresses their instincts. These characters are free to act according to their instinctive drives, and they can, therefore, find fulfillment.

²⁷Engel, p. 126.

The setting for the play is a farm in Puritanic New England in the year 1850. Ephraim Cabot, the owner of the farm, is returning from the city with his new bride. His sons, Peter, Simeon and Eben, recognize that by their father's recent marriage they have lost their rights to the farm, and Peter and Simeon set out for California to escape the drudgery of the farm which now has no meaning for them. Eben, however, remains, determined to repossess the farm to avenge his mother's death. Abbie Putnam, his new step-mother, is, he discovers, a sensuous young woman for whom he soon feels a conflicting passion of desire and hatred. Finding Eben a more desirable Cabot than her new husband, Abbie seduces Eben. She desires not only to win his love but also to provide Ephraim with a son to inherit the farm.

Abbie is successful in convincing Eben that his mother's spirit will rest if he submits to his desire for her. Abbie bears Eben's son, and Ephraim declares to Eben that Abbie and her son will inherit the farm. Eben is enraged by the news, because he realizes that Abbie has won the farm through her power over him. However, Abbie no longer wants the farm alone, for she loves Eben. Unable to convince him that she loves him and will not rob him of his rights, she smothers the child, believing that its death will make Eben love her again. Instead, Eben is horrified by her crime and runs off to get the sheriff. Meanwhile, Abbie tells Ephraim about the murder and confesses that Eben is the child's father.

Ephraim's spirit is momentarily beaten by her confession, and having nothing left to work for, he goes off to turn the stock out, declaring that he will burn the house and leave the land to God. By the time Eben returns, he has had time to realize that Abbie has killed the child out of love for him. He asks her forgiveness and reaffirms his love for her. When the sheriff comes, Eben gives himself up with Abbie, and they are united at last.

Because of the natural environment in which these characters move, they are closely associated with two aspects of nature--the earth and the animal kingdom. Ephraim, who identifies himself with his God (an image of himself), is associated with the stones on his land. As he tells Abbie in Part II:

God's hard, not easy! God's in the stones! Build my church on a rock--out o' stones an' I'll be in them! That's what he meant t' Peter! . . . Stones, I picked 'em up an' piled 'em into walls. Ye kin read the years of my life in them walls, every day a hefted stone, climbin' over the hills up and down, fencin' in the fields that was mine, whar I'd made thin's grow out o' nothin'--like the will o' God, like the servant o' His hand. It wa'n't easy. It was hard an' He made me hard fur it.²⁸

His pride in the possession of his farm has become so excessive that he is no longer able to think of himself without believing that his self-image of God the Father is guiding his destiny. He prays to his Puritanic God, his cruel, lonesome, unbending God who condemns sex for any other

²⁸O'Neill, Plays, I, 237.

purpose than producing another like one. Yet, underneath, Ephraim is still the primordial father. He does not let his faith in his harsh God stand in the way of his lust. Indeed, God directs his path; He calls him to take another wife:

"Then this spring the call come--the voice o' God cryin' in my wilderness, in my lonesomeness--t' go out an' seek an' find!"²⁹ Ephraim, under his mask of the Puritan God-image, is still a pagan. The call of spring arouses his desire, and thus he goes out and finds the Earth Mother, whom he associates first with the animal kingdom and then with the earth. In Part II, Scene I, he says to Abbie, "Yer two breasts air like two fawns; yer navel be like a round goblet; yer belly like a heap o' wheat. . . ." ³⁰ Then in Scene II he says, "Sometimes ye air the farm an' sometimes the farm be yew."³¹

And Abbie is a true Earth Mother. In her personality the play is unified.³² She is driven by two needs--her desire for possession and her sexual desire. Her desire for possession is evident by her marriage to Ephraim. When Eben tells her that the farm belonged to his mother and is now his, she replies, "Yewr'n? We'll see 'bout that! (Then strongly)--Waal--what if I did need a hum? What else'd I

²⁹Ibid., p. 238.

³⁰Ibid., p. 232.

³¹Ibid., p. 236.

³²Clark, p. 152.

marry an old man like him fur?"³³ She then continues, "This be my farm--this be my hum--this be my kitchen!"³⁴ Eben is enraged by her challenge, but she "walks up to him-- a queer coarse expression of desire in her face and body-- slowly, 'An' upstairs--that be my bedroom--an' my bed!"³⁵ Eben is hypnotized by her physical desirability. He is, however, determined to fight her for possession of the land; yet, in order to do so, he must also fight his sexual desire for her. She, too, must control her own passion. This she cannot do, since she is above all an Earth Mother, a pagan symbol of sex, and she allows her desire for Eben to overshadow all other desires. In doing so, she conquers Eben's will to fight, and both succumb to their passion.

Thus, in fulfilling her first desire, Abbie satisfies her second one and so combines her desires into one purpose, to love and to create. She is the human manifestation of the elms--the pagan symbol of fertility--which ". . . bend their trailing branches over the roof [of the Cabot house]. They appear to protect and at the same time to subdue."³⁶ At the beginning of the play Abbie is described as ". . . buxom, full of vitality. Her round face is pretty but marred by its rather gross sensuality. There is strength and obstinacy in

³³O'Neill, Plays, I, 226.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 226-227.

³⁶Ibid., p. 202.

her jaw, a hard determination in her eyes"³⁷ When she falls in love with Eben, she becomes the soft, submissive, all-sacrificing mistress-mother, who has realized her desires and has not fought against them. Her whole being is absorbed in her love for Eben, and to her, God the Father has no strength or being.

In Eben exist both the parental images. He has inherited both the pride of the father and the love of the mother. From the beginning of the play he denies his association with God the Father. He says, "I hain't his'n--I hain't like him--he hain't me! . . . I'm Maw--every drop o' blood!"³⁸ But his half-brothers, Simeon and Peter, see the pride and possessiveness of Ephraim in him, and Simeon tells Ephraim, "Eben's a chip o' yew--spit 'n' image--hard 'n' bitter's a hickory tree! Dog'll eat dog. He'll eat ye yet, old man!"³⁹ Ephraim had married Eben's mother for land and had not only worked her to death but had also denied and suppressed her spiritual and sexual needs. Her unfulfillment requires revenge, as prophesied in the setting by the description of the elms: "There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption."⁴⁰ But although Eben is "soft"⁴¹ like his mother, he is still his father's son. While he declares his alliance with her, he, nevertheless, wants to possess

³⁷Ibid., p. 221.

³⁸Ibid., p. 207.

³⁹Ibid., p. 222.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 202.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 222.

everything that Ephraim possesses, his prostitute--his land--and, above all, Abbie. When he takes Min, his father's prostitute, Eben tells his half-brothers: "What do I care fur her--'ceptin' she's round an' wa'm? The p'int is she was his'n--an' now she b'longs t' me!"⁴² Moreover, after he talks Simeon and Peter into signing their share of the farm over to him in exchange for Ephraim's money, Eben says: "It's Maw's farm agen! It's my farm. Them's my cows!"⁴³

Finally, when Eben takes Abbie, he says that he does so to avenge the unfulfilled desires of his mother: "It's her vengeance on him--so's she kin rest quiet in her grave!"⁴⁴ And, indeed, in possessing her, he satisfies one of the needs of the mother's spirit--sexual gratification--for it seems to rest. Yet, avenging his mother is only half of the victory. The next day he shakes hands with Ephraim, and, laughing, he says: "I'm bossin' yew! . . . I'm the prize rooster o' this roost!"⁴⁵ Furthermore, in Abbie are combined both Eben's need to be protected by his mother and his desire to gratify his natural sex drives. And although he hesitates to enter into this incestuous love affair, she helps him to integrate his needs when she says:

I'll take yer Maw's place! I'll be everythin' she was t' ye! Let me kiss ye, Eben! (She pulls his head around. He makes a bewildered pretense of

⁴²O'Neill, Plays, I, 214.

⁴³Ibid., p. 217.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 243.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 246.

resistance. She is tender) Don't be afeered! I'll kiss ye pure, Eben--same's if I was a Maw t' ye
(They kiss in restrained fashion. Then suddenly wild passion overcomes her. She kisses him lustfully again and again and he flings his arms about her and returns her kisses. Suddenly . . . he frees himself from her violently and springs to his feet. . . .) Don't ye leave me, Eben! Can't ye see it hain't enuf--lovin' ye like a Maw--can't ye see it's got t' be that an' more--much more--a hundred times more--fur me t' be happy--fur yew t' be happy?⁴⁶

At this point, Abbie becomes the Life Force, which she has proclaimed herself to be at the beginning of Part II when Eben denies his desire for her:

Ye been fightin' yer nature ever since the day I come--tryin' t' tell yerself I hain't purty t' ye. . . . Nature--makin' thin's grow--bigger 'n' bigger--burnin' inside ye--makin' ye want t' grow--into somethin' else--till ye're jined with it--an' it's your'n--but it owns ye, too--an' makes ye grow bigger--like a tree--like them elums. . . . Nature'll beat ye, Eben. Ye might's well own up t' it fust 's last.⁴⁷

Only after Eben has given himself up with Abbie for smothering the child does he really become united with his mother against the Father. When Abbie tells him that she has killed their son, he declares that she did it to deny him what was his; but he has grown to love her in spite of his material desires, and his sacrificing himself with her frees him at last from the influence of the Puritanic God the Father. He has now become whole.

Ironically, the life-giving Mother--the Life Force--has, in freeing Eben by giving him life, destroyed him, but together

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 243.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 229.

they have idealistically defeated the Father. Their love has raised them above the tragedy of their situation. They have lived and suffered. They have, in denying a physical existence, found life in finding the purpose for living. As Doris Falk has said, "In the young couple's fulfillment of their desire and in the transmutation of sex to love, reality has finally asserted itself, has struck through the illusory mask of pride."⁴⁸

Abbie is, then, the Divine Harlot in her pagan acceptance of sex as the natural expression of life. She is the complete embodiment of O'Neill's early concept of woman as both mother and mistress, in that she symbolizes both the protective love of the eternal Earth Mother and the pagan lust of the temple prostitute. Yet, Abbie's desire for possession of the farm and of Eben is the destructive force of the Seductress, a possessiveness which she must sacrifice in order to find fulfillment with Eben. When she smothers her child, her sacrifice is complete, and her character integrated. Thus, by overcoming her desire to possess, Abbie attains fulfillment and becomes, in the end, the combined mother-mistress-wife.

The Great God Brown is the portrayal of man's struggle to live and to create in a society requiring obedience to its unnatural laws of morality and conduct. Moreover, his struggle is further complicated by his desire to find acceptance in

⁴⁸Falk, p. 98.

his society. In order to obtain acceptance, however, man must conceal his true self--his innocent longing for love and freedom to love, since those around him cannot endure his idealism; their laws require them to despise man's instinctive desires as ugly and base, since these desires deny the need for pride and material success. Pure love requires complete self-sacrifice, and the ideals and goals of society demand that its followers seek first the kingdom of material wealth and self-aggrandizement.

In order to protect his inner self from society's contempt, man must, therefore, wear the mask of Pan to hide himself from his fellows. Having thus hidden his inner purity, he is now faced with finding something to which he can retreat and in which he can believe, so that his outer mask will not subdue his inner need for love and gradually murder it. Unable to accept the harshness of society's distortion of Christianity into a Puritan worship of the Father God of judgment, fear, and shame, man turns to the warmth of the Mother--the pagan Earth Mother, whose warmth and wisdom give him strength to die.

The play begins at the graduation dance of three of the play's leading characters--Dion Anthony, William Brown, and Margaret. Mr. Brown and Mr. Anthony, the fathers of the two boys, have decided that the boys are to go to college to study architecture so that they may join the partnership of Anthony and Brown. Meanwhile, Billy, who has pursued

Margaret out into the moonlight, confesses his love for her. However, she is oblivious to his declarations and admits her love for Dion, or, rather, the Pan-like mask which she believes Dion to be. In spite of his obvious envy of Dion, Billy goes off and tells Dion that Margaret loves him. Dion rushes to her, throwing off his mask of Pan and confessing his love for her. She does not recognize the true Dion, however, and shrinks from him in horror. Bitterly replacing his mask, he demands her submission, and they consummate their moment of passion.

Five years elapse. Dion has quit college upon his father's death and has married Margaret. With the money his father has left him, he has taken Margaret to Paris, where they have had three children and where Dion has studied art. Feeling that he has failed in his desire to be a great artist and having run out of money, Dion has brought his family home. He now spends his time in dissipation, and Margaret, unconscious of his inner struggle, goes to Billy Brown and indirectly asks him if he will hire Dion as a draftsman. Billy, who still loves Margaret and who has heard of Dion's escapades, goes off to look for Dion. He finds him in the parlor of Cybel, a prostitute. Billy scolds Dion for his profligacy and drags him out of Cybel's home. He then offers Dion a job, and Dion agrees mockingly to go to work for him. Two years go by. Dion's talent has made Billy very successful. Dion spends

most of his time at Cybel's, the only place to which he can retreat without his mask. (Out of his envy of Dion, Billy, too, goes to Cybel.) When Dion realizes that his time has come to die, he says goodbye to Cybel, tries in vain once more to reveal his true self to Margaret, and then goes to Billy. After brutally making Billy admit his superficiality and envy of Dion all these years, Dion removes his mask for the last time and dies. Billy buries him, puts on his mask and goes off to claim his inheritance of Dion's family and diabolically artistic talent.

Two months later the result of Billy's masquerade is shown in the torture expressed in his true features. Dion's mask is murdering him, for he, too, wants to make Margaret and his clients see the evil in the mask. When he cannot, he appears in Dion's mask and declares that he has murdered William Brown. He runs home ahead of the pursuit by the police to arrest him as Dion Anthony, the murderer of Billy Brown. When he arrives, Cybel comes to him, and he tells her that he is too tired to go on. He shows himself once more in Dion's mask and is shot by his pursuers. Before he dies, Cybel takes off the mask and comforts him in his last moments by giving him the reassurance of life in the eternal love of the God of laughter and of love. Ironically, Margaret clings to the mask forever--finding her faith in

the memory of a personality created as a revenge upon her and her society for their denial of truth and love.

↓ The tragedy which the false ideals of our society impose upon man is illustrated in the destruction of the inner man by the outer mask he is forced to wear in order to find acceptance. Both Dion and Billy are destroyed by the mask--yet in a different way. From the very outset of the play Dion's character remains the same. His inner self is symbolic of purity and truth. Indeed, he is lost. By his very nature he finds himself born into a world of falsity and pride, and no matter where he turns, he cannot find affirmation of the love and faith in life which he seeks. Instead, he finds fear and rejection, shame and denial of love. Therefore, he must wear the mask of Pan in order to protect himself, as he tells Billy:

One day when I was four years old, a boy sneaked up behind when I was drawing a picture in the sand he couldn't draw and hit me on the head with a stick and kicked out my picture and laughed when I cried. It wasn't what he'd done that made me cry, but him! I had loved and trusted him and suddenly the good God was disproved in his person and the evil and injustice of Man was born! Everyone called me cry-baby, so I became silent for life and designed a mask of the Bad Boy Pan in which to live and rebel against that other boy's God and protect myself from His cruelty.⁴⁹ ↓

Thus, Dion is described in the Prologue:

His face is masked. The mask is a fixed forcing of his own face--dark, spiritual, poetic, passionately

⁴⁹O'Neill, Plays, III, 295.

supersensitive, helplessly unprotected its child-like, religious faith in life--into the expression of a mocking, reckless, defiant, gayly scoffing and sensual young Pan.⁵⁰

The mockery of the mask terrifies him, for it imprisons him and forces him to deny the creative side of his nature:

(with a suffering bewilderment) Why am I afraid to dance, I who love music and rhythm and grace and song and laughter? Why am I afraid to live, I who love life and the beauty of flesh and the living colors of earth and sky and sea? Why am I afraid of love, I who love love? Why am I afraid, I who am not afraid? Why must I pretend to scorn in order to pity? Why must I hide myself in self-contempt in order to understand? Why must I be so ashamed of my strength, so proud of my weakness? . . . Why was I born without a skin, O God, that I must wear armor in order to touch or to be touched?⁵¹

Billy's destruction by the mask, on the other hand, is a positive destruction, in that the pain and suffering caused by his wearing the mask result in the birth of understanding and of love within him. In the Prologue he is the symbol of the average young man--unconscious of any of the deeper currents of life and promising to carry on the false ideals and materialistic aims of his society: "He is blonde and blue-eyed with a likeable smile and a frank good humored face, its expression already indicating a disciplined restraint. His manner has the easy self-assurance of a normal intelligence."⁵² As an adult he has fulfilled his goals: "He has grown into a fine-looking, well-dressed, capable, college-bred

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 260

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 264-265.

⁵²Ibid., p. 257.

American business man . . ."⁵³ It is the dying Dion who first awakens Billy and makes him acknowledge the failure of his life. He taunts Billy into admitting his love for Margaret, but after Billy's admission, Dion proclaims:

"(with terrible composure) 'No! That is merely the appearance, not the truth! Brown loves me! He loves me because I have always possessed the power he needed for love, because I am love!"⁵⁴ Brown is so enraged by Dion's words that he tries to choke him, and when Dion does die, Brown cries:

At last! (He stares at Dion's real face contemptuously) So that's the poor weakling you really were! No wonder you hid! And I've always been afraid of you--yes, I'll confess it now, in awe of you! Paugh! (He picks up the mask from the floor) No, not of you! Of this! Say what you like, it's strong if it is bad! And this is what Margaret loved, not you!⁵⁵

By Act III, however, after having worn the mask for a month, Billy ". . . reveals a suffering face that is ravaged and haggard. . . tortured and distorted by the demon of Dion's mask."⁵⁶ And he realizes with hopeless despair: "Now I am drinking your strength, Dion--strength to love in this world and die and sleep and become fertile earth . . ."⁵⁷ Finally, he realizes the ugliness of the mask, the mocking evil of its power. When he finishes a design on the capitol building which will make him famous, his understanding of

⁵³O'Neill, Plays, III, 274.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 298.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 299.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 305.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 307.

himself, The Great God Brown, and the mask is reflected in his real face, now ". . . sick, ghastly, tortured, hollow-cheeked and feverish-eyed."⁵⁸ Looking at the plan, he cries: "Ugly! Hideous! Despicable! Why must the demon in me pander to cheapness--then punish me with self-loathing and life-hatred? Why am I not strong enough to perish--or blind enough to be content?"⁵⁹

The pain and suffering Dion experiences, which later are experienced even more poignantly by Billy, are most acutely inflicted by Margaret as the symbol of death-in-Puritanism.⁶⁰ That is, Margaret, as l'eternal feminin, is the promise of fulfillment and love, and it is to her that Dion turns first for life. Yet, because she does not recognize the inner man, she denies him his desire to love and comfort without shame. When Billy tells Dion that Margaret loves him, Dion cries:

O God in the moon, did you hear? She loves me! I am not afraid! I am strong! I can love! She protects me! Her arms are softly around me! She is warmly around me! She is my skin! She is my armor! Now I am born--I--the I--one and indivisible--I who love Margaret! (He glances at his mask triumphantly--in tones of deliverance) You are outgrown! I am beyond you! (He stretches out his arms to the sky.) O God, now I believe!⁶¹

But his hopes are crushed when she shrinks from his unmasked face; so he puts back on his mask and makes Pannish love to her. Then he bitterly exclaims: "Cover your nakedness!

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 314.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Wather, p. 45.

⁶¹O'Neill, Plays, III, 266.

Learn to lie! Learn to keep step! Join the procession! . . .
 Be ashamed!"⁶² Even without her mask, she is ashamed and
 begins to cry. Again moved, he tries once more to let her
 see the purity of his love: "I love you with all my soul!
 Love me! Why can't you love me, Margaret?"⁶³ But she is
 again frightened and puts on her mask. Bitterly he puts his
 mask on, saying: "All's well. I'll never let you see
 again. . . . By proxy, I love you."⁶⁴

Margaret's complete lack of understanding is typical of
 the eternal girl-woman type which she represents to O'Neill.
 Her desires are few and simple, her purpose in life being to
 find a mate to use in aiding her to continue the race--in
 allowing her to become the mother to another like herself.
 Moreover, the love she offers is a sordid love, in that it
 is lust which is ashamed of itself. In the Prologue her
 unmasked confession to the moon reveals the superficiality of
 her personality, as she speaks of Dion:

Dion's so different from all the others. He
 can paint beautifully and write poetry and he plays
 and sings and dances so marvelously. But he's sad
 and shy, too, just like a baby sometimes, and he
 understands what I'm really like inside--and--and
 I'd love to run my fingers through his hair--and I
 love him!⁶⁵

She works herself into such a frenzy ". . . until at the end
she is a wife and a mother," and she asserts, "And I'll be

⁶²Ibid., p. 267.

⁶³Ibid., p. 268.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 263.

Mrs. Dion--Dion's wife--and he'll be my Dion--my own Dion--my little boy--my baby!"⁶⁶

Margaret then seduces Dion by boldly offering herself to him not only as the promise of sexual fulfillment but also as the protective mother. And his yearning for the mother leaves him vulnerable. In Act I he recalls bitterly his childhood memories of his father and mother:

What aliens we were to each other! When he lay dead, his face looked so familiar that I wondered where I had met that man before. Only at the second of my conception. After that, we grew hostile with concealed shame. And my mother? I remember a sweet, strange girl, with affectionate, bewildered eyes as if God had locked her in a dark closet without any explanation. I was the sole doll our ogre, her husband, allowed her and she played mother and child with me for many years in that house until at last through two tears I watched her die with the shy pride of one who has lengthened her dress and put up her hair. And I felt like a forsaken toy and cried to be buried with her, because her hands alone had caressed without clawing. . . . The last time I looked, her purity had forgotten me . . . so I shrank away, back into life, with naked nerves jumping like fleas, and in due course of nature another girl called me her boy in the moon and married me and became three mothers in one person, while I got paint on my paws in an endeavor to see God!⁶⁷

Even though in the end he realizes the futility of his love of Margaret, Dion makes one last effort to make her see the depth of his tortured being: "Look at me, Mrs. Anthony! . . . Behold your man--the sniveling, cringing, life-denying Christian slave you have so nobly ignored in the father of

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 264.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 282.

your sons!"⁶⁸ But Margaret, "staring at him with terror," cries out, "Dion! Don't! I can't bear it!"⁶⁹

The suffering of Dion is magnified threefold by the torture which Billy must endure as the beneficiary of Dion's life. The mask gives Brown the license to love Margaret, but her love consumes him, too, for it is Billy Brown whom she really loves but whom she rejects without Dion's mask of Pan. When Brown in his suffering sadly realizes that Margaret will never love him as Billy Brown, he finds temporary satisfaction in realizing that she is happy and that he can now love: "Then I have made you happy . . . ? Then-- that justifies everything!"⁷⁰ And she responds:

Of course it does! I've always known that. But you wouldn't be--or you couldn't be--and I could never help you--and all the time I knew you were so lonely! . . . But now you're here! You're mine! You're my long-lost lover, and my husband, and my big boy, too!⁷¹

Unable to survive under the suppressive life-denying force within Margaret, Dion first and then Billy turn to Cybel, the wise and protecting Earth Mother. She is described as

. . . a strong, calm, sensual blonde girl of twenty or so, her complexion fresh and healthy, her figure full-breasted and wide-hipped, her movements slow and dreamy with the reflected stirring of profound instincts.⁷²

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 292.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 309.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid., p. 278.

The relationship which Cybel is capable of offering to Dion is that of mother, friend, and God. She is the most highly developed of the Earth Mothers, for her role is that of reaffirming the Life Force which the Seductress-girl-mistress has denied, and at the same time offering the mother love which "caressed without clawing."⁷³ The mutual understanding and friendship of Dion and Cybel is kindled at their first meeting. Dion's agony upon "being touched" moves her into a profound sympathy, as she says: "Poor kid! I've never had one, but I can guess. They hug and kiss you and take you on their laps and pinch you and want to see you getting dressed and undressed--as if they owned you"⁷⁴ And he understands the agony of her loneliness, as he replies: "You're lost in blind alleys, But you're strong. Let's be friends."⁷⁵

As the years pass, Cybel offers Dion the solution to his suffering, since her acceptance of life is the natural belief in life as a value in itself. "Life's all right," she tells him, "if you let it alone."⁷⁶ But even she becomes desperate at times when she realizes the tragedy of man's endless struggle for a meaning in life outside of life itself:

Oh, God, sometimes the truth hits me such a
sock between the eyes I can see the stars!--and
then I'm so damn sorry for the lot of you

⁷³Neill, Plays, III, 282.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 279.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 280.

⁷⁶Ibid.

that I'd like to run out naked into the street and love the whole mob to death like I was bringing you all a new brand of dope that'd make you forget everything that ever was for good! . . . But they wouldn't see me, any more than they see each other. And they keep right on moving along and dying without my help anyway.⁷⁷

Finally, the protection Cybel offers Dion gives him strength to love and, in the end, to die: "You're strong," he tells her, "You always give. You've given my weakness strength to live."⁷⁸ But she assures him, "tenderly, stroking his hair maternally) 'You're not weak. You were born with ghosts in your eyes and you were brave enough to go looking into your own dark--and you got afraid.'⁷⁹ Thus, when he starts to leave her for the last time, she comforts him, "Don't get hurt. Remember, it's all a game, and after you're asleep I'll tuck you in."⁸⁰

It is Mother Earth, then, to whom Dion finally returns. Moreover, it is Mother Earth who in the end gives Billy the answer to life's suffering. After Billy in Dion's mask has been shot for the murder of William Brown, Cybel throws ". . . her kimono over his bare body, drawing his head on her shoulder."⁸¹ He snuggles up against her, "gratefully," saying, "The earth is warm."⁸² She tells him to go to sleep.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 286.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 285.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 288.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 322.

⁸²Ibid.

But he is frightened, and she comforts him:

BROWN. . . . It was dark and I couldn't see where I was going and they all picked on me.

CYBEL. I know. You're tired.

BROWN. And when I wake up . . . ?

CYBEL. The sun will be rising again.

BROWN. To judge the living and the dead!
(Frightenedly) I don't want justice. I want love.

CYBEL. There is only love.⁸³

Then he understands that life is suffering and pain and that "only he that has wept can laugh."⁸⁴ Her benediction spoken "with a profound pain" completes the tragic cycle: "Always spring comes again bearing life! . . . but always, always, love and conception and birth and pain again--spring bearing the intolerable chalice of life again!"⁸⁵

The virtues of womanhood, then, as embodied in the girl-woman-mistress of Margaret, have progressed to the point of symbolizing the denial of life rather than its affirmation. As Clara Blackburn has said of Margaret,

She never knows Anthony, the inner man; but she is both wife and mother to Dion, the outer man, whom she loves with a possessive love. As a type character, she is not only the wife-mother, the maternal feminine, but also the possessive female.⁸⁶

Thus, Margaret can fulfill neither Dion's needs nor those of Billy Brown. She cannot and will not protect or comfort. Her purpose is to carry on the race, and in the Epilogue, she is described as having ". . . the sad but contented

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Clara Blackburn, "Continental Influences on Eugene O'Neill's Expressionistic Dramas," American Mercury, XIII (1941), 123.

feeling of one who knows her life purpose well accomplished."⁸⁷ She has in fact contributed greatly to the destruction of both Dion and Brown, yet she is content in her fulfillment. As the eternal female, she is O'Neill's most highly developed Seductress, for her power over man has become so strong that her denial of love strips him of all hope of fulfillment.

In desperation, Dion and Billy turn to Cybel, created by O'Neill to combat their despair. Cybel is the culmination of all O'Neill's sympathetic whores. She offers the love and understanding and faith absent in the Seductress. As Edwin Engel has pointed out:

Anna Christie, having been abstracted into a symbol as the Woman in Welded, picked up in Desire Under the Elms the characteristics of both Abbie, the wanton mother, and Min the whore who was 'warm like the earth,' and now makes her re-entrance in The Great God Brown as the mythical Cybele, Mother of the Gods and great Asiatic goddess of fertility.⁸⁸

As the Earth Mother, not only does Cybel offer man the answer to the meaning of life, but she is the symbol of life itself. She thereby re-establishes man's faith in life that the destructive Seductress, Margaret, has used solely as a means to an end and has then discarded.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 324.

⁸⁸Engel, p. 163.

CHAPTER V

THE CURSE

Having reached their highest peak of development as opposing forces, the Earth Mother and Seductress once again converge in O'Neill's mind. However, O'Neill's final consolidation of the traits of womanhood into one character is not another compelling Abbie; rather, she is an all-powerful negative force. Though feminine in that within her she possesses the same powerful creative force found in Cybel, she is also masculine in her quest for the ideal. Moreover, the suppression of her instinctive desire to love and to create by the puritanical tyranny of God the Father has made of her the Father's disciple, for in her determination to defeat the Father, she inherits the Father's pride.

Thus, O'Neill's final concept of woman is that of man's ultimate destroyer. She is a vampire, for she dominates the men in her life, using them to fulfill her feminine needs and destroying them in order to meet her masculine desire for power and possession. Man is no longer able to withstand woman's lust for power, that has progressively increased in each of O'Neill's later plays. Man has become less and less the central figure around which the plays are built. Indeed, the role of protagonist up to this point had been a masculine

figure, but he has become increasingly dominated by his female counterpart. Upon the death of Dion Anthony, the male protagonist ceases to be the focus of attention; instead, woman dominates the plays. The tragic hero becomes the tragic heroine, a character haunted not only by her natural feminine desires, but also by the increasingly dominant masculine side of her nature.

The discussion of woman as destroyer will be confined to two plays--Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra. Although these plays were written some years before O'Neill's death, it is felt that they, nevertheless, represent O'Neill's ultimate concept of woman, for two reasons. First of all, they were written at the peak of O'Neill's dramatic achievement and at the most crucial personal period of his relationship with the women in his life. Strange Interlude was written during the last two years of his marriage to Agnes, and Mourning Becomes Electra during the first two years of his marriage to his third wife, Carlotta Monterrey. Secondly, with the possible exception of The Iceman Cometh, O'Neill's remaining works were reflectively autobiographical and were not concerned with man's relationship with woman and with the development of these character types as universal symbols.

Strange Interlude (written in 1926-1927) is the dramatization of the creative period in the life of Nina Leeds, the heroine of the play. Faced with the suppressive Puritanism of her father, who frustrates her initial attempt to

find happiness, Nina sets out to find happiness in life by conquering it, by dominating it, to the end that she is unable to react either spontaneously or deliberately to the events which she herself generates. She does, nevertheless, find some degree of fulfillment in the birth of her son, although her final retreat is the retreat from life rather than the tragic exaltation experienced by the heroes of the earlier plays.

Mourning Becomes Electra (1929-1931) portrays the frustration of the heroic quest for the ideal. Though no longer capable of fulfillment even in part, Lavinia Mannon is not forced to retreat, but, recognizing her incapability of overcoming the sterility of her heritage, she elects withdrawal rather than defeat.

Strange Interlude is the dramatization of woman's struggle to pursue her ideals and at the same time to fulfill her role as the Life Force. Nina Leeds, driven by her desire to design her own destiny through manipulating the men with whom she comes into contact, finds that her instinctive need to love and to create must be sacrificed in order to do so. Her struggle, then, is a futile one, for in making herself her own god she must forsake her role as man's refuge and comfort. Nina is, therefore, the Earth Mother dominated by the image of God the Father within her, and her struggle for life against him is a futile one, since she can neither love

ner comfort, create her sacrifice. Without these capabilities she cannot defeat the life-denying Father and in the end retreats to his victorious arms. She has used his weapons in order to conquer him, but in doing so, she has also become the conquered.

The play is concerned solely with the productive years in the life of Nina Leeds. Act I begins several months after the death of Nina's fiance, Gordon Shaw. Nina, who feels that she has lost her one chance to give herself in love, blames her father's jealousy for Gordon's refusal to marry her before he goes to war. In spite of the protests of both Professor Leeds and Charlie Marsden, a close friend and secret admirer, and in order to make up for having denied Gordon physical love before his death, at the end of Act I Nina leaves home to become a nurse in a veteran's hospital.

In Act II Professor Leeds has died, and Nina returns home for his funeral. Charlie, who is eagerly awaiting her grief-stricken return, finds instead that she has become cynical and cold. She brings with her Sam Evans, a weak young man who is also a dedicated worshiper of the ghost of Gordon, and Ned Darrell, a cool young scientist from the hospital. Sam is obviously in love with Nina, and Ned suggests to Charlie that a marriage between Nina and Sam will restore Nina to normalcy. Sam and Nina do marry, and in Act III Nina is momentarily content in the knowledge that she is pregnant. However, Sam's mother warns Nina that

insanity runs in the Evans family and that Nina must not bear the child. Nina subsequently loses the child through an abortion.

Now desperate for a child, Nina persuades Ned in Act IV to give her one, and in Act V she is at last fulfilled through the birth of her son Gordon, so named in honor of the dead hero. Nina's afternoons with Ned have also resulted in their mutual infatuation, and in order to escape, Ned sails for Europe. Charlie, whose presence is felt throughout the play, disturbs Nina's maternal contentment by telling her of Ned's escapades in Europe. However, she is exalted by the end of Act VI when Ned returns to her, unable to forget his passion.

Eleven years elapse, and Act VII presents the rivalry between Ned and the young Gordon, father and son, for Nina's love. In Act VIII Gordon has grown into manhood. He is a handsome young athlete like his namesake and is now a college senior. Moreover, he is in love, and Nina, like her father before her, is jealous. Act VIII takes place at the boat races, in which Gordon participates. On hand are Ned and Charlie, who secretly hope that Gordon will lose, since he represents the dead lover to them. But he wins, and in the excitement, Sam has a heart attack and dies.

Act IX shows the full extent of Nina's jealousy of her son's engagement. Unlike Nina's submission to her father's will, Gordon refuses to submit to her jealous possessiveness.

He goes off with his fiancée, leaving Nina alone. Marsden again comes to comfort her, and at last she is ready for his sexless arms. They marry and retire into the peace of the evening.

Nina's struggle to find fulfillment is dramatized by her effect upon the men in her life. She is viewed in every conceivable relationship with man--daughter, wife, mother, mistress, and friend. Having been dominated by her father and by him deprived of her one chance for happiness, Nina sets out to conquer the Father by making the Mother the God image. In so doing, she does, in fact, defeat her natural father. She marries Sam Evans, a weak man, and takes his friend, Ned Darrell, as a lover. After using Ned to give her a son, Nina destroys him by refusing to marry him, thereby forcing him to deny his fatherhood. Nina is defeated only by her son, Gordon, inasmuch as he refuses to allow her to ruin his life as Professor Leeds had ruined hers. As a result of this defeat, Nina, as the Mother goddess, must submit finally to the death-in-life of Charlie Marsden, as the symbol of the Father.

Hence, it is Professor Leeds who thwarts Nina's initial love affair. A creative, active life is to him revolting. The professor of Greek and Latin at a small college, Professor Leeds lives in the past, determined to keep the earthy smell of sweat out of his existence. O'Neill's description of

the professor's library discloses immediately Professor Leeds' character:

The atmosphere of the room is that of a cozy, cultured retreat, sedulously built as a sanctuary where, secure with the culture of the past at his back, a fugitive from reality can view the present safely from a distance, as a superior with condescending disdain, pity, and even amusement.¹

Moreover, this room is the setting for Act I, and Nina's retreat from the room is symbolic of her rejection of Professor Leeds as the symbol of sterility, for as he tries to talk her out of leaving his house, she thinks to herself, ". . . I'm going . . . never come back . . . oh, how I loathe this room! . . ." ² Furthermore, before she leaves, she shatters his last vestige of reserve when she cries:

Gordon wanted me! I wanted Gordon! I should have made him take me! I knew he would die and I would have no children, that there would be no big Gordon or little Gordon left to me, that happiness was calling me, never to call again if I refused! . . . Why did I refuse? What was that cowardly something in me that cried, no, you mustn't, what would your father say?³

Her frank confession forces him into reality, crushing him, and he admits:

. . . I was jealous of Gordon. I was alone and I wanted to keep your love. I hated him as one hates a thief one may not accuse nor punish. I did my best to prevent your marriage. I was glad when he died. There.⁴

¹O'Neill, Plays, I, 3.

²Ibid., p. 15.

³Ibid., p. 19.

⁴Ibid., p. 20.

The father's rule is ended, and Nina strikes out in quest of life, leaving the professor a broken and lonely man. By rejecting the Father, Nina triumphs momentarily over death. Moreover, her desire to give her body as a sacrifice to love recalls once more Cybel, the earth goddess of The Great God Brown and Desire Under the Elms. It is the refutation of the puritanical morality which the Father represents, for Puritanism is symbolic to O'Neill of the hypocritical, unnatural standard of conduct which requires man to be ashamed of his natural desires, thereby robbing him of sexual and spiritual contentment.

Yet, Professor Leeds' defeat and subsequent death do not free Nina of the Father's influence. Charlie Marsden carries on the Father image in her life. He remains as the symbol of sterility to haunt her. In Act I, she reflects: "Charlie sits beside the fierce river, immaculately timid, cool and clothed, watching the burning, frozen naked swimmers drown at last. . . ."⁵ And he does wait for her to submit at last to the peace of retreat from life; whenever she finds temporary happiness, he appears to crush it. In Act V, Nina is temporarily happy in Ned's confession of love for her. Then Marsden, mourning his mother's death, appears in black, and Nina thinks to herself: "Black . . . in the

⁵Ibid., p. 13.

midst of happiness . . . black comes . . . again . . . death . . . my father . . . comes between me and happiness! . . ."6

In the end, however, it is Charlie to whom Nina returns, since her productive years are over, and she has learned that the happiness life offers is really life itself, with its endless struggles and frustrations. Charlie offers contentment--peace--the evening--as he says to her in the final scene when she admits the Father's victory:

(paternally--in her father's tone) You had best forget the whole affair of your association with the Gordons. . . . So let's you and me forget the whole distressing episode, regard it as an interlude, of trial and preparation, say, in which our souls have been scraped clean of impure flesh and made worthy to bleach in peace.⁷

And she concludes: "Thank you, Father--have I been wicked?--you're so good--dear old Charlie!"⁸

The Father's conquest of Nina, however, is a slow and hard-won battle. In her determination to guide her own destiny, she manages to dominate the lives of the men in her life who seek to find in her as woman the fulfillment of love and desire. Nina treats both Sam Evans, her husband, and Ned Darrell, her lover, as mere puppets to gain her ends.

Sam is the luckier of the two. A weak, rather simple man, he is able to find contentment in the belief that he has sired Nina's son and has, therefore, gained immortality. And

⁶Ibid., p. 98.

⁷Ibid., p. 199.

⁸Ibid., p. 200.

Nina never shatters his illusion. When Mrs. Evans, Sam's mother, tells Nina that she must not bear Sam's child because of the insanity that runs in the Evans family, Nina accepts the burden of protecting him from failure: "Poor Sam . . . she's right . . . it's not his fault . . . it's mine . . . I wanted to use him to save myself . . . I acted the coward again . . . as I did with Gordon . . ."9 Thus, Nina the idealist for the moment acts unselfishly and stays with Sam. But later she thinks:

How weak he is! . . . he'll never do anything . . . never give me my desire . . . if he'd only fall in love with someone else . . . go away . . . not be here in my father's room . . . I even have to give him a home . . . if he'd disappear . . . leave me free . . . if he'd die . . .10

Characterized by the possessive submissiveness of woman in the early plays, Sam becomes both the victim and the victimizer. Behind his back Nina is able to pursue her quest for happiness with Ned, yet because of her pledge to Mrs. Evans, Nina is forced into a secret pursuit of sexual satisfaction. Furthermore, like Billy Brown, Sam represents a status symbol, and Nina grasps his respectability and refuses to relinquish her hold on him. Instead she chooses to keep both husband and lover. In Act VI, when Darrell returns crawling back to her from Europe, Nina reflects: "I couldn't

9O'Neill, Plays, I, 62.

10 Ibid., p. 69.

find a better husband than Sam . . . and I couldn't find a better lover than Ned . . . I need them both to be happy . . ."¹¹

It is Ned Darrell, then, who suffers most for loving Nina. He is the counterpart of Gordon Shaw, Nina's dead fiancee, since he represents the virility and sexual fulfillment that Nina lost when Gordon died. By consummating her passion for Ned, Nina is lulled into a semi-contentment. Ned is a strong man, an ambitious young scientist, who indifferently agrees to siring Nina's child in the interest of Nina's health. The lovers, however, do not anticipate the power of their passion. When Nina greets Ned for the first time after her marriage to Sam, she thinks: "Strong hands, like Gordon's . . . take hold of you . . . not like Sam's . . . yielding fingers that let you fall back into yourself."¹² And their afternoons together turn her attraction into love: "I love you!" she tells him silently. "Take me! . . . what do I care for anything in the world but you! . . . let Sam die! . . ."¹³ And silently he submits, "Christ! . . . touch of her skin! . . . her nakedness! . . . what do I care for anything else? . . . to hell with Sam! . . ."¹⁴ But Ned is unable to accept Nina's challenge, and he escapes to Europe. When he does, he loses her forever, since she recognizes in his humble return that she can dominate him and Sam without disturbing her own little

¹¹Ibid., p. 129.

¹²Ibid., p. 79.

¹³Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁴Ibid.

world of security. He remains in the shadows of her afternoons until the death of Sam. Gordon, their son, sensing the love between Nina and Ned, hates Ned, thus denying him even the love of his own son. As Ned remarks to Nina:

(sardonically) Perhaps he realizes subconsciously that I am his father, his rival in your love; but I'm not his father ostensibly, there are no taboos, so he can come right out and hate me to his heart's content!¹⁵

And in the end, after Sam dies and Gordon leaves, Nina again denies Ned her love. Her passion is gone, and Ned alone stands between her and the peace of the evening. He realizes this, and as he leaves, he says, "I leave you to Charlie. You'd better marry him, Nina, if you want peace."¹⁶ The tragedy of his resignation is finally brought home when he cries, "Oh, God, so deaf and dumb and blind! . . . teach me to be resigned to be an atom! . . ."¹⁷

Nina, then, is a combination of all O'Neill's women--she is Everywoman. She does, on the one hand, desire a fulfillment of her natural drives. She wants to be happy--to love, to sacrifice, to possess, to create. On the other hand, in her denial of the authority of God the Father, she seeks to make herself God the Mother. And God the Mother is ready to exert her own brand of egotism and to exploit all that she possesses.¹⁸ Unlike Abbie in Desire Under the Elms, Nina is

¹⁵O'Neill, Plays, I, 143.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 196.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 199.

¹⁸Falk, p. 125.

split against herself. Her dual desires--to give and to take--cannot be reconciled. In being denied her one chance to sacrifice by loving and bearing children, she rejects all love, conceives a child without love, and then struggles to give life to a male to prove her power. But she cannot be happy in her struggle against God the Father within her.

While Anna Christie and Abbie Cabot integrated their personalities by finding love, Nina cannot express her inner desires. She will not allow herself to love Darrell completely since their love is the natural sexual love of man and woman.

While this type of love satisfied Abbie, Nina's dual self will not be pacified by this love. As Barrett Clark aptly comments,

With aspirations that can never quite be fulfilled, held in check by inhibitions, driven onward by appetites, she is the incarnation of vitality, a creature that is driven to meddle in the lives of others that her own life may be filled to overflowing. No one is a match for her; nothing arrests her progress¹⁹

Her thirst for life is one continuous struggle to find in other men what she found in Gordon. Darrell calls her quest her romantic imagination, and then bitterly adds, "It has ruined more lives than all the diseases! Other diseases, I should say! It's a form of insanity!"²⁰ And she does destroy Darrell in order to give Sam life. She dominates Marsden because she still needs the Father with her to punish

¹⁹Clark, p. 175.

²⁰O'Neill, Plays, I, 102.

her for her sins against him. Her son, Gordon, is dominated by her until he, too, seeks fulfillment, and she is unable to prevent his leaving her. She has tried to be God; she has tried to manage the lives of those around her. Failing in finding satisfaction through her role as God the Mother and Father, she is defeated. By denying the hardness of the Father, she finds temporary comfort in believing in God the Mother, as she says to Marsden:

The mistake began when God was created in a male image. Of course, women would see Him that way, but men should have been gentlemen enough, remembering their mothers, to make God a woman! But the God of Gods--the Boss--has always been a man. That makes life so perverted, and death so unnatural. We should have imaged life as created in the birth-pain of God the Mother. Then we would understand why we, Her children, have inherited pain, for we would know that our life's rhythm beats from Her great heart, torn with the agony of love and birth. And we would feel that death meant reunion with Her, a passing back into her substance, blood of Her blood again, peace of Her peace! . . . Now wouldn't that be more logical and satisfying than having God a male whose chest thunders with egotism and is too hard for tired heads and thoroughly comfortless?²¹

Just before asserting this desire, she foretells what she will make of God the Mother in denying the Father: "I couldn't believe in Him, and I wouldn't if I could! I'd rather imitate His indifference and prove I had that one trait at least in common!"²²

Because of her imitating the Father, Nina loses in the end. She has succeeded in wrecking her own life and that of

²¹Ibid., pp. 42-43.

²²Ibid., p. 41.

Darrell's. She has worshiped fruitlessly God the Mother created in her Father-dominated image. And she finds temporary fulfillment in this role when she feels the love of her three men united in her:

My three men! . . . I feel their desires converge in me! . . . to form one complete beautiful male desire which I absorb . . . and am whole . . . they dissolve in me, their life is my life . . . I am pregnant with the three! . . . husband! . . . lover! . . . father! . . . and the fourth man! . . . little man! . . . little Gordon! . . . he is mine too! . . . that makes it perfect! . . .²³

But she cannot maintain the status quo, and she again is the frustrated woman of Act I. At only one other time, during her pregnancy, does she assume a calm and serene composure. Only then is she the Earth Mother of Desire Under the Elms:

. . . my child moving in my life . . . my life moving in my child . . . the world is whole and perfect . . . all things are each other's . . . life is . . . and this is beyond reason . . . questions die in the silence of this peace . . . I am living a dream with the great dream of the tide . . . breathing in the tide I dream and breathe back my dream into the tide . . . suspended in the movement of the tide, I feel life move in me, suspended in me . . . no whys matter . . . there is no why . . . I am a mother . . . God is a Mother . . .²⁴

But the days of the worship of God the Mother finally end. When Nina loses Gordon, she realizes that she has lost the struggle. She is too old to begin again. God the Father is victorious, and when Nina turns to Charlie for the promise of peace in the cool of the evening after the passion of her

²³O'Neill, Plays, I, 135.

²⁴Ibid., p. 92.

afternoons, ". . . at last the life-giving and life-destroying tension between the father and mother-images dissolves. Nina has always seen life as 'a strange dark interlude in the electrical displays of God the Father.' Now the lightning has ceased, its opposite charges neutralized in Charlie's sexlessness."²⁵

Nina, then, has inherited both the instinctive creative force of the Mother and the fatal pride and egotism of the Father. She has become the paradoxical duality of death-in-life, and only in her final denial of life can she find peace. The peace she finds, however, is not that of the Mother's womb, but rather the peace of the decay of the tomb in God the Father.

Mourning Becomes Electra reveals the complete deterioration of O'Neill's concept of the romantic ideal. Through the characters created in this trilogy, O'Neill shows the romantic quest in its final death throes, utterly defeated by the forces of Fate. The struggle is dramatized violently through the events in the lives of a nineteenth century New England family, the Mannons. To this Puritan family Fate has several meanings. It is the outward force of their environment and heritage. It is also their inner struggle to express self--to be free to live by natural impulse and desire. Fate is the past enforcing its influence on the

²⁵Talk, p. 126.

present to the end that they are trapped in a whirlpool of contradiction, and each one is forced to choose death or complete withdrawal from life. It is significant that Lavinia Mannon, the tragic heroine, chooses withdrawal, since she alone recognizes no escape--either in the self-sacrifice once open to Abbie, or in Nina's rotting peace of the evening.

Mourning Becomes Electra is the deliberate modern counterpart of Aeschylus' The Oresteia. The three parts into which O'Neill's masterpiece is divided are entitled Homecoming, The Hunted, and The Haunted. The entire trilogy takes place in New England immediately following the Civil War. The Mannon family mansion is the main setting for all three plays. The close resemblance to the Greek cycle is obvious throughout the trilogy. The house of Atreus becomes the house of Mannon. In Part I, Homecoming, Christine Mannon (Clytemnestra) awaits the homecoming of her husband Ezra (Agamemnon) from the war. She dreads his return, since during his absence she has become involved with a handsome sea captain, Adam Brant (Aegisthus), who, unknown to her at the time, is a distant relative of the Mannons. Christine's daughter Lavinia (Electra), through jealousy, becomes aware of the love affair and writes to Ezra and to her brother Orin (Orestes), hinting of Christine's unfaithfulness. Christine, determined not to let Adam go, plots with him to poison Ezra upon his return. When Ezra

returns, Christine follows through with her plot, but Lavinia, who is already suspicious, discovers the empty box of poison and vows revenge of her father's death.

In Part II, The Hunted, Orin comes home for his father's funeral. Like his mother, Orin is gentle and sensitive by nature, and he is inwardly relieved by his father's death. Lavinia, who is like her father and who is also jealous of Orin's love for Christine, realizes that the only way to arouse Orin against Christine to the point of revenge is by convincing him that Christine has deserted him for Adam. Lavinia persuades Orin to follow Christine to Boston, where Christine has gone for a secret rendezvous with Adam on his ship. When Orin sees his mother in Adam's arms, he becomes hysterical with rage, and after Christine leaves, he and Lavinia shoot Adam and make the murder appear the work of a thief. When Christine finds out about Adam's death the next day, she kills herself.

Part III, The Haunted, takes place a year later. Lavinia and Orin are just returning from a long sea voyage, which they have taken in hopes of forgetting the horror of past events. Unable to find happiness even in the primitive atmosphere of the South Seas, they return to the Mannon ghosts. Both have changed. Orin, in the absence of Christine, has become warped and possessive of Lavinia. Lavinia has become a desirable young woman and strikingly resembles Christine. In an effort to find happiness, she at last

responds to the love of Peter Niles, a long-time admirer. But Orin threatens to expose the past to Peter if Lavinia tries to leave him to marry Peter. When he realizes that his affection for Lavinia has become incestuous, he shoots himself as an escape from the horror of his guilt. His death makes Lavinia admit that she cannot escape the Mannon heritage of guilt, and she drives Peter away in a sudden violent burst of passion. She then withdraws into the Mannon house, vowing, as the last Mannon, to punish herself as an atonement for the guilt of all her clan.

The New England setting for Mourning Becomes Electra is a symbolic background for the conflict between Puritanism and paganism that dominates the play. The theme is further carried forth in the members of the Mannon family. Ezra Mannon, as the living head of the Mannons, is the most decadent representation of the Father found in O'Neill's works. He represents death-in-life, since he is incapable of guiltless love and spontaneous emotion. Although he does not appear until Act III of Homecoming, his portrait is described in Act II, and it dominates the occupants of the Mannon mansion from that point throughout the entire trilogy:

He is a tall man in his early forties, with a spare, wiry frame, seated stiffly in an armchair, his hands on the arms, wearing his black judge's robe. His face is handsome in a stern, aloof fashion. It is cold and emotionless²⁶

²⁶O'Neill, Plays, II, 28.

That the portrait has a special living quality is obvious from the fact that all of the other Mannons speak to it as if it were living. Ezra's appearance when he enters the play in Act III further exemplifies the portrait's description in Act II:

One is immediately struck by the mask-like look of his face in repose, more pronounced in him than in the others. . . . His movements are exact and wooden. . . . When he speaks, his deep voice has a hollow repressed quality, as if he were continually withholding emotion from it. His air is brusque and authoritative.²⁷

As the judge, as God the Father, Ezra must carry the burden of isolation. Like Ephraim, in Desire Under the Elms, he is aware of his aloneness, and when he returns to Christine from the war, he, like Ephraim with Abbie, tries to explain to Christine how he feels about himself and the part he is forced to play in upholding the Mannon tradition of death:

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. . . . That white meeting-house. It stuck in my mind--gleam scrubbed and whitewashed--a temple of death!²⁸

Then he pleads, finally: "I'm sick of death! I want life! Maybe you could love me now! (In a note of final desperate pleading) I've got to make you love me!"²⁹

²⁷Ibid., p. 46.

²⁸Ibid., p. 54.

²⁹Ibid., p. 56.

But Christine is unwilling to share the burden of his guilt. Reminiscent of the Earth Goddess, Cybel, who gave Michael Cape and later Billy Brown peace in the knowledge of pure love, Christine, however, is incapable of filling the responsibilities her role imposes upon her. Instead, in her the passive amorality of Cybel has become the aggressive possessiveness so compelling in Abbie. And Christine's seductiveness has developed beyond that of Abbie, for Abbie's possessiveness was merely the desire to own materially. She was able to integrate her needs in order to give Eben strength to experience a greater love than the guilty Puritan lust of the Father within him. Christine, however, seeks to possess a perfect love, and to her the weak faltering Father, who wants to be taught how to love, must be eliminated to make room for the youthful lover.

Christine is the incestuous mother and Earth Mother. Her power over God the Father is appalling; yet in her very nature to possess at all costs, she does, in fact, become his agent, and by reason of the dual negative-positive forces within her, she destroys all happiness in her consuming quest for it.

The description of Christine recalls that of Abbie:

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 thick curly hair, partly a

copper brown, partly a bronze gold, each shade distinct and yet blending with the other. Her face is unusual, handsome, rather than beautiful. One is struck at once by the strange impression it gives in repose of being not living flesh but a wonderfully life-like pale mask Her chin is heavy, her mouth large and sensual, the lower lip full, the upper a thin bow, shadowed by a line of hair.³⁰

One of the townspeople further contrasts her to the Mannons:
 "Folks all hates her. She ain't the Mannon kind, French and Dutch descended, she is. Furrin' lookin' and queer."³¹

After Christine rejects Ezra's appeal for love, he returns to his loneliness. In their bedroom early the morning after his return, he remarks somberly: "This house is not my house. This is not my room nor my bed. They are empty-- waiting for someone to move in! And you are not my wife! You are waiting for something!"³² Although she protests, he goes on:

You were lying to me tonight as you've always lied!
 You were only pretending love! You let me take you
 as if you were a nigger slave I'd bought at auction!
 You made me appear a lustful beast in my own eyes!--
 as you've always done since our first marriage night!
 I would feel cleaner now if I had gone to a brothel!
 I would feel more honor between myself and life!³³

Then she explodes in a fury of hatred: "I loved you when I married you! I wanted to give myself! But you made me so I couldn't give! You filled me with disgust!"³⁴ He begs her

³⁰Ibid., pp. 8-9.

³¹Ibid., p. 8.

³²Ibid., p. 60.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., p. 61.

to stop talking, but she rages on, confessing her affair with Brant, ruthlessly: "He's what I've longed for all these years with you--a lover! I love him!"³⁵ Her confession provokes a heart attack, and when Ezra pleads for medicine, she gives him, instead, the poison. He calls out for Lavinia, and before he dies, points an accusing finger at Christine. Christine admits that she has confessed to him her affair with Brant and that her confession brought on the attack. Grimly Lavinia screams, "I suppose you think you'll be free to marry Adam now! But you won't! Not while I'm alive! I'll make you pay for your crime! I'll find a way to punish you!"³⁶

In his death Ezra thus gains in power. Two Mannons survive to avenge his murder--Lavinia and Orin. The Mannon suppression of love has forced Christine to seek love in Adam Brant. But he, too, is part Mannon, and Christine is, in fact, drawn to him by his resemblance to both Ezra and Orin.³⁷ And Adam falls in love with Christine for her resemblance to his mother, whose love for a Mannon had bound her to a life of misery and poverty. Freudian in conception, the love of Adam and Christine is, then, the product of both love and hatred, and it is destined to be defeated. Christine comments prophetically, "It's as if love drove me on to do

³⁵Neill, Plays, II, 61.

³⁶Ibid., p. 64.

³⁷Ibid., p. 36.

everything I shouldn't."³⁸ But she goes on to plot Ezra's death, and she draws Adam into the plot against his own honor. Adam wants to fight Ezra face to face for Christine, but Christine knows that no one would win by this method, and when Adam holds back, she taunts him cruelly:

If you love me as much as you claim, I should think that would rid you of any scruples! If it was a question of some woman taking you from me, I wouldn't have qualms about which was er wasn't the way to kill her! . . . But perhaps your love has been only allie you told me--to take the sneaking revenge on him of being a backstairs lover!³⁹

The deed is done, but in Act III of The Hunted, both Christine and Adam sense the defeat of their love, and when Christine suggests safety on the Blessed Islands, Brant cries desperately:

(with a bitter, hopeless yearning) Aye--the Blessed Isles--Maybe we can still find happiness and forget! . . . There's peace and forgetfulness for us there--if we can ever find these islands now!⁴⁰

The Blessed Isles, symbolic of natural love and forgetfulness, elude them. Lavinia and Orin loom in front of their path to escape, and when Orin shoots Brant, Christine's quest for love is ended. She has earlier, in Act I, The Hunted, prophesied her fate to Hazel, a young girl who loves Orin:

I was like you once--long ago--before
Why can't all of us remain innocent and loving and

³⁸Ibid., p. 37.

³⁹Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 112.

trusting? But God won't leave us alone. He twists and wrings and tortures our lives with others' lives until--we poison each other to death!⁴¹

The conflict between Christine and Ezra becomes even more complex and violent when displayed by their offspring, Orin and Lavinia. Orin is a weak manifestation of both Christine and Ezra:

There is the same lifelike mask quality of his face in repose His mouth and chin have the same general characteristics as his father's had, but the expression of his mouth gives an impression of tense oversensitiveness quite foreign to the General's, and his chin is a refined, weakened version of the dead man's.⁴²

Clearly Orin is allied with Christine against Ezra until Lavinia convinces him that Christine has deserted him for Brant. When Orin returns home for the funeral, he freely admits to Lavinia that he has no feeling for his father's death: "He was the war that would never end until I died. I can't understand peace--his end!"⁴³ Then he goes on to speak jealously of Lavinia's attachment to Ezra, speaking of Ezra as if he were alive: "She can be soft--on occasion. She's always coddling Father and he likes it, although he pretends--"⁴⁴ Christine interrupts him and demands that he quit talking about Ezra as if he were alive, but Orin continues: "Everything is changed--in some queer way--this

⁴¹O'Neill, Plays, II, 73.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., p. 75.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 81.

house, Vinnie, you, I--everything but Father. He's the same and always will be--here--the same!"⁴⁵

Hence, Orin feels the presence of the Mannon ghosts in the house as he tries to recapture his childhood intimacy with Christine. She has, of course, truly deserted him for Brant because she feels that he deserted her when Ezra forced him to go to war. Yet, she fears his jealousy, and she cunningly convinces him that Lavinia has made up the whole Brant affair out of jealousy toward her. Then she tells him: "I feel you are really--my flesh and blood! She isn't! She is your father's! You're a part of me!"⁴⁶ Orin eagerly agrees. Then she continues: "He [Ezra] hated you because he knew I loved you better than anything in the world!"⁴⁷ They both agree that they are glad that Ezra is dead. Finally, Orin is convinced of Christine's fidelity to him, and he completely confesses his Oedipian love for her when he, like Brant, tells her about the Blessed Isles:

There was no one there but you and me. And yet I never saw you, that's the funny part. I only felt you all around me. The breaking of the waves was your voice. The sky was the same color as your eyes. The warm sand was like you skin. The whole island was you.⁴⁸

Christine is moved and cries: "If only you hadn't let them take you from me!"⁴⁹ But he strokes her hair caressingly, saying: "Oh, Mother, it's going to be wonderful from now on!"⁵⁰

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 85.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 86.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 90.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

Ezra's death, however, instead of making things wonderful for Orin, has brought him into the Mannon fold, for he, now, has become Ezra, and as the Father, he must guard jealously the Mother's love. In Act III, The Hunted, Orin's manner has already become more masterful, more Mannon. He addresses the dead man:

You and I have seen fields and hillsides sown with them [bodies]--and they meant nothing!--nothing but a dirty joke life plays on life! (Then with a dry smile) Death sits so naturally on you! Death becomes the Mannons! You were always like a statue of an eminent dead man--sitting on a chair in a park or straddling a horse in a town square--looking over the head of life without a sign of recognition--cutting it dead for the impropriety of living! . . . You never cared to know me in life--but I really think we might be friends now you are dead!⁵¹

Lavinia enters to shatter his complacency. She tells him that she will prove Christine's affair with Brant, and he cries: "If that's true I'll hate her! I'll know she murdered Father then! I'll help you punish her! But you've got to prove it!"⁵² At this point Christine comes in, and terrified, she says to him: "Why do you look at me like that? You look--so like--your father!" And prophetically, he replies, "I am his son, too, remember that!"⁵³

Christine flees to Adam to warn him, followed by Lavinia and Orin. When Orin sees them together on Adam's ship, The Flying Trades, and hears them plan their escape

⁵¹O'Neill, Plays, II, 93-94.

⁵²Ibid., p. 99.

⁵³Ibid., p. 100.

to the Blessed Isles, his face becomes "distorted with jealous fury."⁵⁴ He kills Brant swiftly and remorselessly when Christine leaves, but after the deed is done, Orin is fascinated by Adam's resemblance to the Mannons, and he reflects to Lavinia: "Do you remember me telling you how the faces of the men I killed came back and changed to Father's face and finally became my own? (He smiles grimly) He looks like me, too! Maybe I've committed suicide!"⁵⁵ Then he admits: "If I had been he I would have done what he did! I would have loved her as he loved her--and killed Father too--for her sake!"⁵⁶ Orin has, in fact, killed Adam for Christine, not in revenge for Ezra's death; yet, he is now the Father, and in his quest for the Mother's love, he has killed love and has denied his own right to love.

In Act V, Orin, now Ezra, maliciously tells Christine that he has killed Adam. Then he cries: "I heard you planning to go with him to the island I told you about--our island--that was you and I! . . . But you'll forget him! I'll make you forget him! I'll make you happy."⁵⁷ When Christine does not answer, Orin becomes distraught and begins to plead with her just as Ezra had done. But Christine, too, is dead, and when she shoots herself, Orin's ghosts begin to haunt him. At the end of Act V he hysterically rages

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 109.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 115.

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 115-116.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 121.

to Lavinia: "I drove her to it! I wanted to torture her! She couldn't forgive me!"⁵⁸

A year later, the reshaping of Orin into the Mannon avenger is complete:

He carries himself woodenly erect now, like a soldier. His movements and attitudes have the statue-like quality that was so marked in his father. . . . The Mannon semblance in his face in repose to a mask is more pronounced than ever. . . . His haggard swarthy face is set in a blank lifeless expression.⁵⁹

Orin has come home to face the Mannon ghosts, and he is terrified that Christine has left the Mannons forever. He comes in dazed from the study and tells Lavinia: "I've just been in the study. I was sure she'd be waiting for me in there, where-- (Torturedly) But she wasn't! She isn't anywhere."⁶⁰ Then bitterly defiant he continues: "Well, let her go! . . . I'm father's! I'm a Mannon! And they'll welcome me home!"⁶¹

A month later his identification with Ezra is revealed clearly with his description: "He looks almost as old now as his father in the portrait. He is dressed in black and the resemblance between the two is uncanny."⁶² He speaks to the portrait: "The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth! Is that what you're demanding, Father? Are you sure

⁵⁸O'Neill, Plays, II, 124.

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 137-138.

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 139-140.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., p. 149.

you want the whole truth?"⁶³ When Lavinia comes in, she tries to ignore Orin's oncoming violence by telling him that he needs light and fresh air. But he replies:

I hate the daylight. It's like an accusing eye! No, we've renounced the day, in which normal people live--or rather it has renounced us. Perpetual night--darkness of death in life--that's the fitting habitat for guilt! You believe you can escape that, but I'm not so foolish!⁶⁴

Lavinia tries to change the subject to Hazel, but Orin tells Lavinia to keep Hazel away from him because her purity makes him want to confess his guilt. Lavinia tells him that he feels guilty because he still loves Christine, but he retorts that Christine was no worse than she is for wanting to marry Peter. Then Orin tells her that she will never leave him because he has written the Mannon history down in a letter, adding, "Most of what I've written is about you! I found you the most interesting criminal of us all!"⁶⁵ He then adds that the "strange hidden things out of the Mannon past combine in you!"⁶⁶

The justice that Lavinia demands for Christine's sins upon the Mannons in The Hunted is called down upon her by Orin in The Haunted. Now in Christine's position as the Earth Mother, Lavinia seeks life and happiness and refuses to bend to the Mannon suppression of love. Orin, having lost the Mother,

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 150.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 153.

⁶⁶Ibid.

seeks revenge on all love. He refuses to allow Lavinia to live, and when she denies her pagan quest for love on their voyage around the world, he maliciously reminds her of her desires. First, he accuses her of desiring the captain of the ship they sailed on, saying that he reminded her of Brant: "You know damned well that behind all your pretence about mother's murder being an act of justice was your jealous hatred!"⁶⁷ Then he mockingly tells her that she loved the islands because she saw that men desired her, especially the islander Avahanni. She admits that she let him kiss her: "He was innocent and good. He had made me feel for the first time in my life that everything about love could be sweet and natural."⁶⁸ Thus provoked, Lavinia then turns on Orin as Christine had on Ezra: "I'm not your property! I have a right to love!"⁶⁹ And as Ezra had, Orin becomes violent: "(reacting as his father had . . .) 'You--you whore! I'll kill you!'"⁷⁰ Then she soothes him, begging him to stop torturing her, as Christine had pleaded in Homecoming, but he replies: "Can't you see I'm now in Father's place and you're Mother? That's the evil destiny out of the past I haven't dared predict! I'm the Mannon you're chained to!"⁷¹

Still Lavinia refuses to give up her desire to live, and Orin gives Hazel the letter confessing all the Mannon

⁶⁷O'Neill, Plays, II, 154.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 155.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

history of violence. He tells her to go away and forget him and that if Lavinia tries to marry Peter, to give him the letter:

She can't have happiness! She's got to be punished! . . . And listen, Hazel! You mustn't love me any more. The only love I can know now is the love of guilt for guilt which breeds more guilt--until you get so deep at the bottom of hell there is no lower you can sink and you rest there in peace!⁷²

Finally, Orin's distorted desire for Christine reaches its climax when he turns to Lavinia as the combined mother and mistress. He intimates that they must stay together forever in the Mannon house as husband and wife. When she cannot believe that he means this, he continues: "How else can I be sure you won't leave me? . . . You'd never dare leave me--then! You would be as damned as I am!"⁷³ When Orin says this, all Lavinia's hatred for him erupts, and she tells him that he is too vile to live, and that he would kill himself if he weren't a coward. He is at first pitifully shaken by her words, but then he sees his escape, and he says: "That would be justice--now you are Mother. She is speaking now through you! . . . Yes! It's the way to peace--to find her again--my lost island--Death is an Island of Peace, too--"⁷⁴

Thus, Orin's escape from the Mannon past is the return to the Mother. Lavinia cannot accept this escape. She is

⁷²Ibid., p. 160.

⁷³Ibid., p. 165.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 166.

the true Mannon. Her attempt to find love is thwarted by her own realization that she is the last of the Mannons and that she alone can atone for the Mannon crimes against love and life. Lavinia is the culmination of all the Mannons. She, like Orin, is both Ezra and Christine; but unlike Orin, she is more God the Father than God the Mother, and although she destroys the Mother in an attempt to take her place, she is too much Mannon to love, and her end is her withdrawal from life.

In Homecoming, as God the Father, Lavinia's whole appearance is in sharp contrast with Christine:

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 black dress. Her movements are stiff and she carries herself with a wooden, square-shouldered military bearing. She has a flat, dry voice and a habit of snapping out her words like an officer giving orders. But in spite of these dissimilarities, one is immediately struck by her facial resemblance to her mother. She has the same peculiar shade of copper-gold hair, the same pallor and dark violet-blue eyes . . . the same sensual mouth, the same heavy jaw. . . . But it is evident LAVINIA does all in her power to emphasize the dissimilarity rather than the resemblance to her parent.⁷⁵

Not only does Lavinia wear the physical makeup of Puritan ugliness, but she also seeks to condemn all love. When Peter comes to visit her in Act I of Homecoming, she gets furious when he asks her if Orin loves Hazel, and snaps: "I don't know anything about love! I don't want to know anything!"

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 10.

(Intensely) I hate love!"⁷⁶ Moreover, when Adam comes to the house and compliments Lavinia on her resemblance to Christine, Lavinia angrily replies: "What do looks amount to? I'm not a bit like her! Everybody knows I take after Father!"⁷⁷ Lavinia's interview with Brant in the play is subsequent to a former meeting during which she had submitted to a moonlight walk with him and had let him kiss her. Now she knows that he loves Christine, and her jealous hatred of him and Christine plagues her into making him admit that his mother was Marie Brantome, a one-time nurse for the Mannons who had run away with her father's brother, David Mannon. With great satisfaction Lavinia throws up the fact that David Mannon was exiled from the Mannon fold because of his love for Marie. But Adam tells Lavinia that David Mannon had been exiled not because Marie was not good enough for the Mannons, but because Lavinia's grandfather, Abe Mannon, had loved Marie, too, and had exiled David out of jealous envy. When she tries to leave, Adam stops Lavinia, crying, "You're a coward, are you, like all Mannons, when it comes to facing the truth about themselves?"⁷⁸

After Lavinia makes Adam admit his heritage, she goes to Christine and tells her she is going to tell Ezra of Christine's meetings in New York with Adam. Christine retorts knowingly

⁷⁶O'Neill, Plays, II, 14.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 22.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 25.

that Lavinia will not tell Ezra because she wants Adam for herself, and adds: "You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin! You've always schemed to steal my place!"⁷⁹ The truth in Christine's statement comes through all too clearly when Lavinia goes to Adam's body after Orin has shot him, and "speaks to the corpse in a grim, bitter tone: 'How could you love that vile old woman so?' (But she throws off this thought--harshly) 'But you're dead! It's ended!' (She turns away from him resolutely . . .)"⁸⁰ Lavinia's last act as the instrument of Puritanism is the killing of Adam. When Christine shoots herself, Lavinia's duty to her father is fulfilled, and she comments grimly: "It is justice! It is your justice, Father!"⁸¹ Even then, however, she has begun to take Christine's place, for when Orin becomes hysterical over Christine's death, she comforts him: "Sshh! Sshh! You have me, haven't you? I love you. I'll help you to forget."⁸²

The return of Lavinia and Orin from the Blessed Isles reveals Lavinia's complete transformation from the Mannon God the Father to the lovely pagan Mother:

Her body, formerly so thin and undeveloped, has filled out. Her movements have lost their square-shouldered stiffness. She now bears a striking resemblance to her mother in every respect, even to being dressed in the green her mother had effected.⁸³

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 33.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 115.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 123.

⁸²Ibid., p. 124.

⁸³Ibid., p. 137.

She speaks to Orin in a "coaxing motherly tone,"⁸⁴ and when Orin stops on the steps where Christine had sat moaning after Adam's death, Lavinia orders: "That is all past and finished! The dead have forgotten us! We've forgotten them!"⁸⁵ Later in her father's study she speaks to the Mannon portraits in "a harsh resentful voice, 'Why do you look at me like that? I've done my duty by you! That's finished and forgotten!'"⁸⁶

Lavinia has truly become the pagan Mother, and Orin tells her that even her soul has become like Christine's: "I've watched it ever since we sailed for the East. 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."⁸⁷ This new pagan lust finds its prey in Lavinia's long-time admirer Peter Niles. When Peter comes to see Lavinia after her return, she "stares at him with a strange eager possessiveness."⁸⁸ He is, of course, astounded by her change and remarks how well she looks in green as opposed to the black she wore before her voyage. She replies, "with a strange smile, 'I was dead then.'"⁸⁹

Yet, although Lavinia tries to wipe out the past, Orin will not let her forget, and he tells Peter maliciously about

⁸⁴Neill, Plays, II, 138.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 139.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 143.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 141.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 144.

Lavinia's love for the Blessed Isles:

(With resentful bitterness) But they turned out to be Vinnie's islands, not mine. They only made me sick--and the naked women disgusted me. I guess I'm too much of a Mannon, after all, to turn into a pagan. But you should have seen Vinnie with the men--!⁹⁰

And in spite of Lavinia's denial of her feelings for the islands, after Orin leaves, she passionately describes their loveliness to Peter, and in her confession, she recalls the descriptions earlier given by Adam and Orin:

I loved those Islands. They finished setting me free. There was something there mysterious and beautiful--a good spirit--of love--coming out of the land and sea. It made me forget death. There was no hereafter. There was only this world--the warm earth in the moonlight--the trade wind in the coco palms--the surf on the reef--the fires at night and the drum throbbing in my heart--the natives dancing naked and innocent--without knowledge of sin!⁹¹

Lavinia's interlude with love is, however, ineffectual and shortlived. Orin constantly reminds her that she is a Mannon. She looks at him with the same dread that Christine had looked at her and at Orin in Homecoming. She tries to bring life into the Mannon mansion by filling the house with flowers, as had Christine. Finally, however, she must sacrifice Orin, in a last desperate attempt to live. When she hears the shot ending his life, she is in the study, and she turns to the Mannon portraits, saying:

Why do you look at me like that? Wasn't it the only way to keep your secret, too? But I'm through with you forever now, do you hear? I'm

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 145.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 147.

Mother's daughter--not one of you! I'll live in spite of you! (She squares her shoulders, with a return of the abrupt military movement copied from her father which she had of old--as if by the very act of disowning the Mannons she had returned to the fold--and marches stiffly from the room.)⁹²

In Act IV, in spite of her vow, she is again a Mannon: "Her body, dressed in deep mourning, again appears flat-chested and thin. The Mannon mask-semblance of her face appears intensified now."⁹³ Literally, as well as symbolically, Orin's death is the final barrier between Lavinia and life. Peter refuses to marry her immediately out of respect for Orin's memory, and he is tormented by the strange violence in the Mannon family. Moreover, Hazel has told him that Orin had written a letter reflecting on the violent family history, and he is suspicious because of Lavinia's reluctance to discuss it. At last Lavinia sees the futility of her quest for love: "The dead coming between! They always would, Peter! You trust me with your happiness! But that means trusting the Mannon dead--and they're not to be trusted with love! I knew them too well!"⁹⁴ The past intervenes, and Lavinia rejects Peter for self-destruction. Finally, Lavinia orders Seth, her handyman, to board up the house and to tell the maid to throw out the flowers:

I'm not going the way Mother and Orin went. That's escaping punishment. And there's no one left to punish me. I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish

⁹²O'Neill, Plays, II, 168.

⁹³Ibid., p. 170.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 176.

myself! Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison! I'll never go out of see anyone! I'll have the shutters nailed closed so no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die! . . . I know they will see to it I live for a long time! It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born!⁹⁵

Thus, Lavinia and Christine are representations of the final stage in O'Neill's development of woman. Christine, the Earth Mother, is no longer the passive pagan force representing life in harmony with nature. Instead, she is the possessive mother-mistress who destroys all forces which stand in the way of her fulfillment. She draws man to her as the symbol of feminine loveliness and animal grace, but once caught in her web, man becomes powerless to oppose her and is finally destroyed trying to satisfy her needs.

Yet, if Christine destroys as the force of love, Lavinia is even more deadly as the force of hate. Lavinia represents all the forces against which the Mother must struggle in order to find fulfillment. Lavinia is God the Father and God the Mother, and the conflict within her between the desire to possess the Mother's pagan desirability and her will to power inherited from the Father, makes of her an overpowering enemy of love. Like all Mannons, Lavinia yearns for the Mother's love and peace, symbolized in the Blessed Isles, but her Puritan sense of the guilt of

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 178.

all love forces her to destroy the Mother and the Mother's disciples. Yet, Lavinia's very act of justice makes death inevitable for her, since she is forced at last to withdraw from life to expiate her crimes against the Mother.

Lavinia's end is, however, a noble one, since her rejection of love is brought about by the tragic depth of her love and self-sacrifice. She refuses to impose upon Peter the Mannon suppression of life, and she realizes that she is too much a Mannon to love freely. Therefore, she turns upon herself, not choosing the peace of a return to the Mother's womb, but a withdrawal into a living death.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

In essence, Eugene O'Neill was a dramatist haunted by the need to express man's struggle to find positive meaning in life--to reach beyond the realm of his instinctive needs in order to create, to possess, to will his own future. Opposing man's desire to find individual meaning in life is what O'Neill calls the Life Force--the subconscious pre-creative power in man that draws him away from his personal ambitions and bids him fulfill his role in nature.

One of the major devices which O'Neill used to dramatize man's struggle with the Life Force is the man versus woman conflict. Since this conflict is present in most of O'Neill's work, the nature of his treatment of women necessarily plays a vital role in the interpretation of O'Neill's ever-changing attitude toward man's struggle in life. It has been the thesis of this paper that woman represents the Life Force to O'Neill and that O'Neill's concept of woman as the Life Force shows a definite pattern of development. This study thus traces the development of O'Neill's concept of woman and emphasizes the various significant stages in woman's growth which reflect O'Neill's attitude toward man's tragic struggle to find happiness in life.

In order to establish the thesis, eight of O'Neill's plays have been examined chronologically, and from this examination, several specific women character types have been analysed. From this analysis it is clearly evident that as O'Neill's philosophical outlook toward life becomes increasingly pessimistic, woman, as the Life Force in his plays, becomes stronger and more complex. Man's desire to reach an ideal is replaced by his need to find love, while woman, who in the early plays represents love, becomes masculine in her desire for individuality. In the later plays the struggle between man and woman takes the form of the Father versus Mother conflict. The Mother in the early plays is weak and submissive. But as she finds it increasingly difficult to satisfy man's ideal of her, she begins to seek her own individuality. From this point to the end of O'Neill's work, O'Neill constantly seeks a satisfactory concept of woman. The characteristics found in the submissive Mother are used to create two new female types--the Earth Mother, who retains the submissive feminine characteristics of the Mother, and the Seductress, who takes on the masculine desire for power. In the later plays, both the Earth Mother and the Seductress become dominating characters, each as powerful a destroyer as the other; for both seek complete masculine submission to their desires but at the same time are completely incapable of offering fulfillment or selfless love.

The full impact of the growth of woman from a passive symbol of motherhood to a powerful destructive force is most clearly realized when the findings of each individual play are looked upon as component parts of the development of O'Neill's whole concept of woman.

As has been stated, it seems clear that, initially, O'Neill conceived of woman in the role of Mother, either as a natural mother or as the wife-mother. In this role woman's significance lay in her presence in the play as a symbol of protection and of refuge for the protagonist. Robert Mayo in Beyond the Horizon is drawn to Ruth Atkins as the sexual fulfillment of his love for Mrs. Mayo, with whom O'Neill clearly identifies him in contrast to the earthy, realistic Mr. Mayo. Rob forsakes his romantic dream to sail beyond the horizon because of his love for Ruth, only to find that mother love, when transferred to the wife-mother, has lost its protective quality. Ruth seeks in Rob the same feeling of security that he seeks in her, and failing to find it, Ruth's love turns first to hatred and then to apathy. Rob thus fails to find in love either the fulfillment of his romantic ideals or the peace and protection promised in Ruth as the symbol of love.

In The Straw O'Neill continued to view woman as the passive Mother and the symbol of love with instinctively draws man away from his idealistic yearnings. Yet, unlike Beyond the Horizon, in The Straw O'Neill holds up mother love as the

true ideal for which the blind protagonist yearns. Eileen Carmody is the pure Mother. She has no ignoble traits. She is possessive of love, but her passivity bars her from actively vying for man's soul. Stephen Murray, the egotistic protagonist, is free to pursue his quest for individual recognition as a writer. But without Eileen's love, he finds little satisfaction in her voyage toward truth. In the end, he returns to her, and in his willingness to sacrifice self to make her dying moments happy, he finds happiness. O'Neill asserts in The Straw, therefore, that love conquers all. He also graduates woman from a minor character whose prominence is limited to her passive symbolic significance in Beyond the Horizon to a major character whose very being glorifies love and hope to the protagonist.

The creation of the character of Anna in Anna Christie suggests O'Neill's growing awareness of the complexity of woman's role in man's struggle with Fate. In Anna Christie O'Neill reaffirms his belief that woman is universally the symbol of love. However, only certain types of women are capable of offering the comfort and peace man seeks in love. Anna is the first Earth Mother. She is the combination of the Mother with the primitive Earth Goddess, and in O'Neill's plays, she is the Divine Harlot. No longer is O'Neill satisfied with the purely platonic love of the Mother, for she is incapable of understanding man's sufferings--she does

not have the experience of pain and consequent wisdom of life that man needs for understanding. Anna's background as a prostitute enables her to see life as it is, and when she finds love, it is a more profound and selfless love than that of the Mother and the Wife-Mother. From this play throughout the rest of his works, O'Neill's virtuous women are treated with contempt, and the Earth Goddess, Cybele, whose entrance Anna foreshadows, appears in contrast to the selfish, possessive Wife-Mother as the wise friend and comforter to the tormented protagonist. Anna is, perhaps, O'Neill's most noble heroine. In her frank honesty she forces Mat Burke to accept her love on its own merits. Through his need for her, Mat is willing to challenge Fate, and although O'Neill assures the audience that the sea waits to claim its own, Anna is determined not to yield without a struggle.

Two women character types are developed in Welded from the character of Anna, and these types mark the beginning of the growth in O'Neill's concept of woman. The first type is embodied in the character of Eleanor Cape. Eleanor differs from earlier women characters in several ways. She is no longer the simple, ignorant creature represented in Ruth and Eileen, who depend upon love as their whole purpose in living. Furthermore, like Anna, Eleanor no longer passively accepts masculine domination. She recognizes her need for love, but

she recognizes also its limitations, and she is determined to sustain her own individuality. The strength of Eleanor's personality anticipates the future destructiveness of the eternal girl-woman type as manifested finally in The Great God Brown in the character of Margaret Anthony. Eleanor is the first Seductress. She still maintains the possessive characteristics of the Mother which compel man to her, while selfishly desiring her own satisfaction in the marital relationship. Whereas Anna's challenge of man is the plea for mature fulfillment, Eleanor's challenge is an egocentric determination to maintain her own individuality. Because of this, O'Neill felt the Seductress incapable of sacrificing self in order to assist man in coping with the frustrations of his own quest for expression. Thus, O'Neill created the second type--"Woman," the prostitute. Woman's acceptance of the pain and suffering in life gives Michael Cape the solace he needs to return to his struggle to find love with Eleanor. Woman is the abstract symbol of the pagan earthiness so sympathetically portrayed in Anna. Whereas O'Neill found it necessary to avow Anna's essential purity, in Woman he for the first time no longer purports sexual purity to be a quality of goodness. On the contrary, the pagan promiscuity of Woman is enhanced and magnified in his later women as the only saving quality of femininity. The masculine challenging personality of Eleanor he later develops as the Destroyer. The separation of woman into two distinct types shows O'Neill's

growing awareness of the potential power of woman in guiding man's destiny. It also reveals his need to create, even abstractly, a female type whose only purpose in life is to love, as opposed to the masculine modern woman, who cannot integrate her need to possess with her need to love.

In Desire Under the Elms, O'Neill's two female types converge, yet remain separate, in the character of Abbie. In Abbie, the Seductress nature of Eleanor vies with the pagan nature of the Earth Mother, resulting in the appalling sensuality of the incestuous Mother. This conflict within Abbie's own personality is intensified by O'Neill's thematic conflict of the Puritanical Father with his pagan lust for the Mother, whom he rightly identifies with nature. The sterility of Ephraim's union with Abbie reflects O'Neill's concept of the union with death in the suppression of love, symbolized in the spirit of Eben's dead mother. When Abbie sublimates her desire to gain possession of Ephraim's property into a desire to win Eben's love, she conquers to some extent the Seductress traits within her. Still, it is her willingness to fulfill Eben's need for the Mother as well as to satisfy his sexual needs that transforms her into the Earth Mother. Abbie stands alone among O'Neill's women as the complete woman, for she is all things to Eben--mother-mistress-wife. Shameless in her desire, victorious in her defeat of the God of stones, Abbie is unique among O'Neill's women as the virile positive force that gives the protagonist

courage to love. It is also significant to note here that in this pagan play, with all its Freudian implications, O'Neill's increasing pessimism about the romantic quest is transferred from the natural instinct to love to the suppressive Puritanism symbolized in the Father. That is, whereas O'Neill had heretofore created woman as the force in opposition to man's idealistic quest, in Desire Under the Elms man finds it only through surrender to love, and man in the character of the Father represents death-in-life through a denial of the natural creativity of the pagan Mother.

Woman as the pagan Earth Mother in Desire Under the Elms meets man's needs both sexually and spiritually primarily because the primitive and natural environment in which the play is set enables these characters to react according to their instincts. However, modern man must suppress his inner needs in order to adjust to the hypocrisy of civilization. In The Great God Brown O'Neill illustrates what happens to man when society imposes its restrictions upon his pagan nature. Moreover, the girl-Seductress in the character of Margaret is the decadent product of modern civilization that finally destroys the inner man. The development of the girl-Seductress into a destructive force completes the second state of O'Neill's ever-growing fear of feminine power. It may be recalled that in Welded O'Neill introduced two character types. In Desire Under the Elms he developed

the abstract Divine Harlot, Woman, into the living pagan Abbie. Margaret in The Great God Brown shows the contrasting development of the mistress-wife introduced in Welded in the creation of Eleanor. Margaret is devoid of all understanding of the conflict raging within her artist husband, Dion Anthony. Dion accepts her barrenness, marries her, and then wears his mask of Pan for her even though it means his own inner destruction. Finally, Dion's spiritual purity and love are suffocated by the mask, which he wills to Billy Brown, the masculine embodiment of the mediocrity of modern man. Billy's love for Margaret compels him, too, to wear Dion's mask in order to take his place as Margaret's husband. However, Margaret's refusal to recognize Billy as the man beneath the mask leads to Billy's death, also. Margaret is never aware of either Dion's suffering or that of Billy. She recognizes only the Pannish mask of Dion Anthony, and when the mask is dead, she spends the rest of her life glorifying its memory. Like Dion's mother before her, Margaret plays house, selfishly guards her dolls against the world outside, and in the end retains the calm assurance that she has fulfilled her purpose in life.

Yet, Abbie survives in The Great God Brown--not as an individual, however, but as Cybel, the Earth Goddess, the abstract symbol of fertility. Cybel is the sacred cow; she is the wise sister for the tormented artist Dion and the

materialist Billy. O'Neill seemed unable to place in the modern setting a living Earth Mother, for society rejects with shame a completely amoral, pagan woman, and it makes of her a pariah. O'Neill contends, however, that Cybel holds the key to the acceptance of life, since it is to her that both Dion and Billy return for the courage with which to die.

Thus, from Welded through The Great God Brown woman increases in stature to the point that although the protagonist is still masculine, his dependence upon love has become essential for his survival, while woman has reached the status of the independent seeker after life. Man has, then, become the tool of woman's quest for life, and he is helpless to avert her ravaging advancement.

The last two plays under consideration firmly establish O'Neill's absorption with the female personality. In Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra man has become completely subordinated to her needs. He is compelled to seek her approval. He is, in fact, her slave, and he hates himself for his dependence upon her. But if modern man is tortured by modern woman, modern woman is all the more tortured by her own insatiable desires. In Strange Interlude Nina possesses all the alluring feminine traits that make her desirable to the men in her life. She maintains control over all of them throughout the play, yet she is never content in any one role. Only once, in her pregnancy, does

Nina find fleeting happiness as mother-mistress-wife, and when she is forced by time to relinquish control, she regresses to her childhood worship of the Father, who remains the symbol of death in life. Nina is masculine in her desire for power, feminine in her quest for love, and in the combination of these traits she is totally destructive to the men she uses to obtain her goals. There is no self-sacrificing facet in her personality. There is no unselfish motive sustained in the play. She partakes ruthlessly of life, yet remains unsatisfied; and when she returns to the sterile Father in the character of Charlie Marsden, she retires from life, having found only suffering and pain in her adventure and having attributed her failure to the Father's challenge of her right to live.

In Mourning Becomes Electra O'Neill again separates into two characters the Earth Mother and the Seductress, now the destroyer. Christine Mannon is a combination of Abbie and Cybel, and she is more than both of them. She is the beautiful incestuous Mother, who holds under her possessive spell Ezra, the Father God, Adam, her young lover, and Orin, her jealously possessive son. Christine is sympathetically treated only from the standpoint that she alone desires life over the death-in-life symbolized in the Mannons. More possessive than Abbie, Christine not only murders her husband for love but nurtures her son's incestuous desire for her to

the point that he is incapable of any normal reaction of love. Furthermore, Christine's aggressive nature makes her unworthy and incapable of selfless love. No longer, then, does O'Neill conceive of even the Earth Mother as a passive, comforting refuge.

Lavinia is a more noble creation than Christine, in spite of the fact that she is the female counterpart of her Puritan, life-denying Father. She destroys not for love, but as the Father's executioner, and inwardly, like Ezra, she seeks to return to the worship of paganism symbolized in the Blessed Isles. Lavinia is, of course, as ineffectual as the rest of her clan in fulfilling her desire to love, for she cannot escape her heritage of shame. She cannot love without guilt. She cannot, therefore, create. Like Nina, Lavinia is masculine in her quest for life. She refuses to accept the Father's distaste for abandoned love. However, while Nina retained enough of the fertility of the pagan Mother to create and actively participate in life, Lavinia is capable only of desiring life and is completely unable to consummate her desires.

Thus, through an examination of the eight plays selected for this study, an effort has been made to trace woman's role in O'Neill's scheme of things, and in doing so, to show that O'Neill became so engrossed in the nature of woman as to find

her a more fitting subject for tragedy than was man. For in the final analysis, O'Neill's greatest tragedies are concerned not with the tragic hero, but with the tragic heroine.

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