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O Neill Mourning Becomes Electra

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Eugene O'Neill's Masterpiece: Mourning Becomes Electra

When Eugene O'Neill set out to write his monumental trilogy **Mourning Becomes Electra**, he aimed to do nothing less than transplant the raw, mythic power of ancient Greek tragedy onto American soil. Completed in 1931 and first performed at the Guild Theatre in New York City, this sprawling work represents perhaps the most ambitious achievement in American dramatic literature. O'Neill took the foundational structure of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and reimagined it within the claustrophobic, repressed world of a New England family in the aftermath of the Civil War. The title itself offers a haunting double meaning: mourning literally becomes Electra, the character of Lavinia Mannon, while also suggesting that grief is a fitting, almost beautiful costume for a soul marked by tragedy from the start. For anyone seeking to understand the full scope of O'Neill's genius, **Mourning Becomes Electra** remains an essential, if demanding, work of art.

The Genesis of a Modern Greek Tragedy

O'Neill had long been fascinated by Greek tragedy, particularly the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. He saw in these ancient plays a psychological depth and a confrontation with fate that modern drama had largely abandoned. In the 1920s, he began experimenting with Freudian psychology, masks, and expressionistic techniques in plays like *The Great God Brown* and *Strange Interlude*. By the time he turned to the *Oresteia*, he was ready to synthesize his psychological interests with classical form.

From the Oresteia to New England

Aeschylus's trilogy tells the story of the House of Atreus: Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia, his wife Clytemnestra murders him in revenge, and their son Orestes kills his mother to avenge his father. O'Neill transposed this bloody family saga to the Mannons of New England, a wealthy shipping family in the years immediately after the American Civil War. The Mannons are haunted by their own past sins, buried secrets, and a puritanical repression that masks deep, destructive passions.

Instead of Agamemnon, we have Ezra Mannon, a stern general who returns from war to a wife who despises him. Christine Mannon becomes the Clytemnestra figure, beautiful, cold, and secretly in love with a sea captain named Adam Brant. Lavinia Mannon, the Electra of the title, is her father's daughter, rigid, judgmental, and fiercely jealous of her mother's relationship with Brant. Orin Mannon, the Orestes figure, returns from the war psychologically scarred and morbidly attached to his mother.

Structure and Scope of the Trilogy

Mourning Becomes Electraunfolds across three full-length plays, each running approximately two hours. Together, they create an epic that rivals the scope of its ancient source material.

Homecoming (Part One)

The first play establishes the Mannon household as a place of frozen emotions and unspoken resentments. The town whispers about the Mannon curse, a pattern of betrayal and death that seems to repeat across generations. When Ezra Mannon returns from the Civil War, hoping to rekindle his marriage, Christine is already plotting his murder with her lover Adam Brant. The climax comes with Ezra's death by poison, staged to look like a heart attack. Lavinia, alone, suspects the truth.

The Hunted (Part Two)

Lavinia forces her brother Orin to confront what their mother has done. Orin, already fragile from his wartime experiences, is torn between his love for his mother and his loyalty to his sister. Together, they track Christine and Adam, eventually cornering Brant on his ship and killing him. When Christine learns of her lover's death, she takes her own life. The siblings are left alone, burdened by guilt and a horrible new intimacy born of their shared crime.

The Haunted (Part Three)

The final play explores the aftermath of revenge. Orin and Lavinia attempt to escape their past by traveling to the South Seas, but the tropical paradise cannot wash away their guilt. Orin becomes consumed by a morbid obsession with documenting the family's crimes and blames Lavinia for manipulating him into murder. He eventually follows his mother's path, taking his own life. Lavinia, now the last of the Mannons, makes a final, chilling decision: she will seal herself inside the family mansion, refusing to perpetuate the Mannon line or allow its ghosts to escape into the world.

Character Analysis: The Core of Mourning Becomes Electra

Lavinia Mannon as the Modern Electra

Lavinia is one of O'Neill's most complex female characters. She begins the play as a stiff, puritanical figure, resentful of her mother's beauty and sexuality. Yet her repressed desires are as powerful as Christine's open ones. When she forces Orin to kill Brant, she is motivated not just by justice but by jealousy: she wanted Brant for herself. By the end, Lavinia has become a kind of living tomb, deliberately imprisoning herself in the house where all the Mannons have died. She chooses mourning as her permanent identity, and the title's suggestion that mourning "becomes" her takes on tragic irony.

Christine Mannon: The Clytemnestra of New England

Christine is not a straightforward villain. She is trapped in a loveless marriage with a man who, she believes, killed her son in all but body (their first son died young, and Orin returned from war as a stranger). Her affair with Adam Brant is her only escape, a desperate grasp at life and passion. When she chooses suicide over facing her crimes alone, it is a moment of tragic dignity.

Orin Mannon: The Guilty Orestes

Orin carries the psychological weight of the entire play. His experiences in the Civil War have left him with a morbid fascination with death and a profound emotional dependence on his mother. After killing Brant and driving Christine to suicide, he cannot live with what he has done. His final gesture is to write a history of the Mannon family, a confession that he hopes will expose their sins to the world.

Major Themes in Mourning Becomes Electra

Puritan Repression versus Primal Desire

O'Neill was deeply critical of the Puritan strain in American culture, which he saw as a denial of life's vital, passionate energies. The Mannons are a family that builds walls against emotion, only to find those walls turned into prisons. Lavinia's stiff, upright posture at the beginning of the play gradually gives way to a recognition of her own passionate nature, but by the time she recognizes it, it is too late. The theme is powerfully expressed through the contrast between the dark, oppressive Mannon house and the tropical,

sensual world of the South Sea Islands that both entices and frightens the family.

Fate, Guilt, and Inherited Sin

O'Neill replaces the Greek concept of fate with a modern psychological determinism. The Mannons are not cursed by gods but by their own history, by the sins of their ancestors that play out in unconscious repetition. Ezra Mannon's harshness, Christine's need for love, Orin's Oedipal attachment, and Lavinia's jealousy all arise from family patterns that seem impossible to break. The play asks whether it is possible to escape the past when it lives inside you.

The Masks We Wear

O'Neill was fascinated by the idea of masks, both literal and metaphorical. In the original production, he considered using actual masks for the characters. The Mannon family presents a face of respectability and control to the outside world, while inside they are consumed by hatred, jealousy, and desire. The "mask" of mourning that Lavinia adopts at the end is both a cover and a genuine expression of her inner state.

Critical Reception and Legacy

When **Mourning Becomes Electra**premiered in 1931, it was met with both tremendous acclaim and significant criticism. Audiences marveled at its ambition, its psychological depth, and its sheer dramatic power. Many critics declared it O'Neill's finest work, a successful synthesis of classical form and modern sensibility. The play was praised for its tight construction and its refusal to offer easy answers.

However, not everyone was convinced. Some critics argued that O'Neill's reliance on Freudian psychology was too literal, that the characters were too obviously driven by complexes from the textbook. Others found the trilogy overly long and heavy, lacking the kind of catharsis that Greek tragedy provides. The play's grim ending, with Lavinia shutting herself away from the world, struck some as nihilistic rather than tragic.

Despite these reservations, **Mourning Becomes Electra**has endured as a landmark of American theatre. It won O'Neill his third Pulitzer Prize and cemented his reputation as America's greatest living playwright. The play has been revived numerous times, including notable productions in 1972 starring Colleen Dewhurst as Christine and in 1988 at the Royal National Theatre in London.

Adaptations and Interpretations

Film Adaptation

In 1947, director Dudley Nichols brought **Mourning Becomes Electra**to the screen, starring Rosalind Russell as Lavinia, Katina Paxinou as Christine, and Raymond Massey as Orin. The film condensed the trilogy significantly, running at just under three hours. While it received Academy Award nominations, it struggled to capture the full psychological weight of the play. The Hays Code of the era also forced some softening of the material's more explicit themes.

Operatic Version

In 1967, composer Marvin David Levy created an opera based on the play, with a libretto by Henry Butler. The opera premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York but was not a critical success. A revised version in the 1990s fared somewhat better, but the opera has never entered the standard repertoire.

Why Mourning Becomes Electra Matters Today

Nearly a century after its premiere, **Mourning Becomes Electra**remains a powerful exploration of themes that still resonate: the weight of family history, the psychological cost of repression, the difficulty of escaping inherited patterns of behavior. In an age increasingly interested in trauma, generational patterns, and the

psychology of family systems, O'Neill's trilogy feels strikingly contemporary.

The play also offers a uniquely American vision of tragedy. Unlike the Greeks, whose characters are brought low by hubris or the caprice of gods, O'Neill's characters are destroyed by their own psychology, by the American ideals of self-control and respectability twisted into something monstrous. The Mannon house, with its Greek Revival columns that mask a decaying interior, becomes a symbol of a nation trying to maintain a facade of order while haunted by the sins of slavery, war, and puritanical cruelty.

Conclusion: The Meaning of the Title

The title **Mourning Becomes Electra**works on multiple levels. It suggests, most literally, that mourning is the role that Lavinia Mannon, the Electra figure, must play for the rest of her life. She will become the embodiment of grief for her family. It also suggests that grief has a kind of beauty, a tragic dignity that "becomes" its wearer in the sense of being appropriate or fitting. Lavinia is never more herself, never more powerful or haunting, than when she chooses to live as a monument to the dead.

Finally, the title carries a terrible irony: it is precisely because Lavinia can never move beyond mourning that her life is destroyed. She has become the very mask of grief she chooses to wear. O'Neill offers no comfort, no redemption, no hope that the cycle of Mannon vengeance can be broken through forgiveness or understanding. The best that can be done is to stop the cycle consciously, by refusing to let it continue into another generation. It is a bleak conclusion, but one that has the austere honesty of great tragedy.

For students of theatre, literature, or American culture, **Mourning Becomes Electra**is an indispensable work. It represents the full flowering of O'Neill's ambition and talent, a play that dares to reach for the

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