

CHAPTER FIVE

MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA

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The play, based on the Electra complex, tells the tragic end of the Mannon family. Two main women characters are dominant in the play.

Christine is a woman of forty, strikingly good looking, the daughter of a NewYork doctor. She was the wife of Ezra Mannon, a Brigadier - General and the mother of Levinia and Orin.

Her face was unusually handsome, rather than beautiful. She was not loyal to her home. She could see no romance in Ezra, as it was experienced by her in the beginning. She was not happy in the Mannon house. She found the Mannon house, painted white as ' a whited ' sepulchre ' She, in that home, considered her marriage as a loveless marriage with Ezra Mannon. She says, regarding the Mannon house,

CHRISTINE...Each time I come back after being away it appears more like a sepulchre! The 'whited' one of the Bible-Pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray ugliness! It was just like old Abe Mannon to build such a monstrosity as temple for his hatred.⁵⁰

Christine's notorious behaviour was due to her mixed parentage, as sheaffer puts it ;

Her appearance as striking her as her personality reflected her mixed parentage - the army officer and the servant woman. She had long hair, a glorious golden red, a fine large body, good legs, and the narrow feet of an aristocrat. Her face was something else again. Overripe cheeks, outsize mouth, a pudge of a nose and eyebrows so pale they were scarcely visible, giving her light blue eyes a naked look. All in all, the body of a goddess with the face of a peasant.⁵¹

Such type of a woman, not being happy in her husband's home, was constantly in search of happiness. She found that happiness in the love affair with Captain Adam Brarnt. This was the adultrous behaviour, but her disturbed mental state found it proper.

50 The Plays of Eugene O'Neill. (NewYork: Random House 1949), p.17.

51 Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright' (Boston : Little, Brown, 1968), p.321.

Abe Mannon's younger brother, David, loved Marie Brantome a French Canadian Governess. Adam Brant was their son. Abe had driven them away from home, he pulled down his house and in its place constructed a new one^{as} he would not live any longer at the place where his brother had disgraced the family by his adulterous behaviour.

Christine supposed herself to be a child of nature. She decorated the grim mansion with flowers. She was romantic by nature, but her husband was of the puritan type. She expected too much from him. All this forced her to transfer her love to Captain Adam Brant.

Now her love affair had caused a scandal all over the town. The reputation of the Mannons now met with the dust Christine used to go to NewYork to meet Adam, regularly. All this was discovered by her daughter and made her restless. Now she started making a secret of her affair from her daughter. She was at first head over heels in love with him, but once married it all turned into a deep hatred, as it can be seen in her own words;

CHRISTINE. I loved him once - before I married him - incredible as that seems now! He was handsome in his lieutenant's uniform! He was silent and mysterious and romantic! But marriage soon turned his romance into disgust!⁵²

52 The Plays of Eugene O'Neill. (Random House; NewYork, 1949) p.31.

It was in response to her inherent fascination^{of} romance and adventure that she took to Adam Brant. But on his part he responded to her love in order to revenge upon the Mannons. But later on it resulted into his real love for her.

Christine was notorious for her behaviour, because she constantly visited captain Brant, for her sexual satisfaction. For this even her daughter hated her. Christine charged Lavinia that she wanted Adam Brant herself and it is for that she was trying^{to} alienate him from her mother. When Lavinia threatened that she would disclose all this to her father, Christine reacts ;

CHRISTINE. But if you told your father, I'd have to go away with Adam. He'd be mine still. You can't bear that thought, even at the price of my disgrace, can you ?

LAVINIA... It's your evil mind !

CHRISTINE.. I know you, Vinnie ! I've watched your eversince you were little, trying to do exactly what you're doing now ! You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin ! You've always schemed to steal my place !⁵³

These two characters, Christine and Lavinia are revealed through their behaviour. Their love-hate relationship is the central part of the action here.

Lavinia reminded her that she (Christine) was five years older than her father and still she was indulging in such adultrous deeds. To this she promised her that, she would never see Adam Brant again. But never kept it and kept on meeting him as usual Adam Brant and Christine planned the murder of Ezra. She was very adamant for this, though Adam was not ready to do this. She planned to poison her husband.

In reality when ever Ezra Mannon returned home, she used to make an impressive show of her love for him. But at the same time . She very boldlyproclaims her love for Adam Brant. She was very clever. Before that she had attempted the marriage of Lavinia to Peter in order to remove the obstacle in her way; but it failed. Lavinia told her that she would not get rid of her that way. She was not marrying anyone. She had got her duty to father.

Ezra was a patient of heart disease. When he heard of the adultery of his wife with Adam Brant, he became restless. He demanded the medicine and christine gave him the poison. As a result he died.

While dying he pointed towards Christine and he said to Lavinia "she is guilty not the medicine". (p-63).

In this modern Psychological drama Mannon's fate is seen at work as Falk puts it ;

.... The same spirit has animated Marie, whose pagan, life loving attitude still lingers in Christine and Lavinia, symbolized for the men in rich, 'Copper - Gold ' hair of all these women. Christine's acceptance of sexuality has been embittered by Ezra's Puritanism - distorted into a possessive passion, but to her husband, lover and children, she still represents release and sinlessness.⁵⁴

Christine, killed Ezra and it was known to Lavinia. In fact she did it on purpose.

The peculiarity of Christine was that whenever she was in difficulty, she tried to arrange the marriage of her children. After this murder she unsuccessfully tried to arrange the marriage of Orin with Hazel. She wanted to escape from her sin by arranging the marriage. She told Orin that she was not guilty, even though Lavinia had held her responsible for that.

When Orin and Lavinia were by the deadbody of Ezra, in his room. They heard Christine coming. On purpose Lavinia put the box of poison on the deadbody. When Christine saw that she was terribly shocked. It was just to confirm Christine's crime.

To revenge this murder, Orin and Lavinia followed Christine on her way to Captain Brant. There on board the ship they saw Brant in the company of Christine when she left him

54 Doris Falk, Eugene O'Neill and The Tragic Tension.
(New Brunswick, N.J. Rutgers Uni., Press, 1958), p. 131.

in a hurry; Orin with the help of Lavinia shot Adam Brant dead.

Christine was reported regarding the murder of Brant by Orin. She was terribly shocked to listen to it, but at the same time it was impossible for her to escape. Now she was totally exposed, and what is more she was brought to such a state by her own deeds. She could now realize that she alone was responsible for the death of Ezra as well as Adam. But she lacked the strength required to bear it all. At long last she put in end to her own life in order to get rid of this torturing.

The main drawback of Christine was that she always longed for beauty and youth.

Christine disliked the word 'duty'. The reason why Lavinia was not marrying was that she had 'her duty to father'. Many times in that house she had heard this word.

Ezra was not seen as a loving husband but as the caretaker of the family by her. Eventhough, she was the mother of the family, she rejected that role of hers. As it is described by William Young;

Christine is a tragic figure because she possesses more of a mind of her own and realizes, nevertheless, that she has wasted much of her time. She doesn't fully realize, however, what the past has done to her, how cruel she has become. For much of the play Christine underestimates the Mannon Curse - to be forever tied to one's dead relatives because of an unwillingness to face the truth of about one's living relatives.⁵⁵

55 William Young, 'Mother and daughter in Mourning Becomes Electra', The Eugene O'Neill News Letter (Summer fall - 1982).

Christine responded to Ezra's love and openness very slowly, as he took quite some time to understand her.

As the central tragic figure of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Christine seems to have gone to the extreme. The hatred she cherished was the result of the birth of Lavinia. As it is stated by John Alvis:

Christine's demand for an ill inevitable love causes her to hate not only her husband, who indeed is an unamiable man, but also her daughter, merely because the daughter was born in the time of the mother's painful disillusionment with marriage.⁵⁶

She was 'outsider' in the sense that she did not come from Mannon family. She came from those people who love only themselves or the images of themselves. If she loved Brant it was because of the fact that he was the son of another Mannon only.

In short Christine was such a type, that she saw the things only in terms of her happiness and that was the tragedy of her life.

Lavinia, the character symbol for Greek Electra, is the only daughter of Christine and Ezra.

56 John Alvis, "On the American Line : O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra and the Principle of founding" The Southern Review.

Lavinia remained defiant even in her acceptance of suffering. Her self surrender had the character of challenge. She remained in the grip of fury.

She was victorious, as Alvis puts it,

Lavinia's victory over herself is austere in view of its costs, her chance for happiness is minimal and the benefit to others offered by her self-control has the character of evil avoided rather than of enjoyed O'Neill has his tragic heroine turn away from the public setting back to the house.⁵⁷

In this play the central character is Lavinia, all the actions move round her. Without this character the play would have been impossible. She is indeed the maker of the dramatic situations.

She was always in a mental tension. She struggled for the things to happen according to her own desire.

Vinnie, being the only daughter of the Mannons was very proud of her family. She took great pride in great repute of the Mannon men and the Mannon mansion.

By natural affection Lavinia desired something from her father, as Orin desired from his mother, It was not sexual desire, but purely natural affection. This natural pull is the base of Electra complex.

57 John Alvis, ' On the American Line : O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra and the Principle of founding ' The southern Review.

Mourning Become Electra, is based on modern Psychological principles. Oedepus complex (son + mother) and Electra complex (daughter + father) are described here.

She was attracted more towards her father than her mother. ' I have my duty to father I am not going to marry with anyone ' was her saying. She says to Captain Adam Brant;

LAVINIA. I have father better than any one in the world. There is nothing I wouldn't do - to protect him from hurt!⁵⁸

From the beginning her mother pushed her away, whenever she tried to go very close to her. The germs of hatred began to develop. In the beginning, before marriage Christine loved Ezra, who was romantic. Then she disliked her mother. In NewYork when she herself saw the adultrous behaviour of her mother, she accused her for that. She wanted to be superior to her mother - According to christine, she wanted to keep her under her thumb.

But Lavinia's attempts proved fruitless. Charistine planned and worked successfully the ' Killing ' of Ezra Mannon.

Lavinia, expected her to meet Adam Brant and she with the help of Orin killed Brant. The revenge taken by Vinnie is an indication of her hatred towards the adultrous behaviour

58 The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, (NewYork:Random House 1947) p.22.

of her mother and her love for her father.

As her name suggests lightning she burned the things which she thought wrong. In Egil Tornqvist Prof Day analysed the character's name, Lavinia, as follows ;

The heroine Prof. Day suggests, ' is called Lavinia -- because ' Levin' means lightning or electricity ' Lavinia thus directly corresponds with the Electra of the title. The name is however, significant, in yet another sense. According to one theory 'Lavinia ' is derived from Latin lavare ('wash, purify ') This meaning, too, corresponds with the play title; not only does it become Electra to Mourn, it is also her fate to purge the sins of her family, most of all her own, by imprisoning herself in their Puritan 'New England House of Atreus'.⁵⁹

The fate of Lavinia made her maintain the Mannon Pride, but it resulted into a tragic situation. She was always conscious of the family pride.

She was of firm determination and straight-forward in her behaviour. She was an idol of puritanism.

59 Egil Tornqvist, 'Personal Nomenclature in the Plays ' of O'Neill'. Modern Drama Vol.8, year (1966), p.370.

As skinner puts it ;

'Christine's daughter, Lavinia (the Electra of the story is devoted to her father with as almost fanatical attachement and doubly resents her mother's infidelity, partly because she herself is attracted to Brant, who resembles her father and partly because she has always instinctively taken her father's part against her mother, whom she hates and of whom she is inwardly jealous'⁵⁰

When Christine successfully substituted for Ezra's medicine the poison Brant had sent her, Ezra pointed out an accusing finger at christine and said to Lavinia, ' She is guilty not medicine ' (P.63) .

Lavinia cries, ' Father! Don't leave me alone! Come back to me! Tell me what to do! ' (P.64)

Lavinia decided to take revenge for the father's murder and she succeeded.

As Christine accused Lavinia that she wanted to take her place; she wanted to become the wife of her father. When Christine killed herself, Orin was given the mother's love by Lavinia as she played the Mother's role. She took the bewildered Orin in her arms and says ;

60 Skinner, Dana' 'Engene O'Neill: A pots quest,
(NewYork: Longman, Green, 1935), p.213.

LAVINIA . You have, me haven't you ? I love you '
 I'll help you to forget ' ⁶¹

Orin saw Lavinia as neither mother nor sister but as a woman. Orin felt that after death he can join his mother. So he killed himself leaving Lavinia behind as the last survivor of the Mannons.

She told Peter that she was not marrying him. In her mind she was moving about in the company of those dear departed of the Mannons.

After the death of Orin when Lavinia turned to enter the Mannon house, Seth, the old gardner warred her not to enter the house Vinnie said ,

LAVINIA . Don't be afraid. I am not going the way mother and Orin went. That's escaping punishment. And there's no one left to punish me. I am the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself. ⁶²

There was still pride in the soul of Lavinia. All clad in black she remained confined to the four walls of the Mannon house.

61 The Plays of Eugene O'Neill : (New York: Random House 1949), p.124.

62 Ibid., p.178.