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If I Can Say Mother:

Investigating the Recurrent Motif of Mother as the Lost Island

in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*

Outline

Thesis Statement: In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Eugene O'Neill presents characters' split self, struggling between nature and culture in a strict puritan and patriarchal society and its norms. Paralleling the Greek mythology of Agamemnon and his children, O'Neill also brings out the murder of the father, and his children's revenge as the centre of the play, and more than delineating and focusing on Oedipus complex and Electra complex, O'Neill depicts his modern Orestes and Electra's desire to return to the preoedipal state and to reunite to their primary love object—mother. Deconstructing the Greek belief of fate, doom and justice and the puritan/patriarchal ideologies, O'Neill offers a new perspective for reexamining matricide in the patriarchy.

I. Introduction

A. a quote from the Greek mythology: "It was a son's duty to kill his father's murderers, a duty that came before all others. But a son who killed his mother was abhorrent to gods and to men" (Hamilton 256)

B. the parallel plot in the Greek mythology and *Mourning Becomes Electra*:

1. the wife as an adulteress and a murder of the patriarch, who violates the law of the father and is a threat to the patriarchy
 - a. Christine as Clytemnestra
 - b. Ezra Mannon as Agamemnon
 - c. Adam Brant as Aegisthus
 2. children's revenge on their mother
 - a. Orin as Orestes
 - b. Lavinia as Electra
 3. son's suffering from madness and missing/silence of the daughter
- C. The parallel between the Greek patriarchal society and the modern puritan New England society along with the strict ideological norms and rules
- D. Thesis statement:
1. O'Neill prefers cause and effect and characters' psychological development to the application of Oedipus complex and Electra complex and the desire to return to the preoedipal
 2. Deconstructing the Greek mythology—the Greek belief of fate, doom and justice, murder, revenge, and the puritan/patriarchal ideologies
 3. O'Neill offers a new perspective for reexamining the desire to return to the **mother** and **matricide** in the patriarchy

II. Society in *Mourning*—puritan and patriarchal

- A. **Puritan**: man born to sin and punishment/strict laws and morality enforced
- B. **Patriarchal**: masculine vs. feminine
- C. conflict between **culture** and **nature** (desire)
 1. “conflict between Rousseauism and Puritanism” (Maufort 89)
 2. divided self—first (public) self vs. second (private) self
- D. social and “ideological” surveillance:

“there’d always been some barrier between us—a wall hiding us from each other” (O’Neill 938)

1. **Ezra Mannon**: ironic war (men’s world) and his feminine part (nature)
 - a. **Mexican War**: “When I came back you had turned to your new baby, Orin. I was hardly alive for you any more. I saw that. I tried not to hate Orin. I turned to Vinnie, but a daughter’s not a wife” (O’Neill 939).
 - b. **Civil War** as a spiritual rebirth: “I’m sick of death! I want life!”/ “Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born” (O’Neill 937-8). → “All right, then! I came home to surrender to you—what’s inside me. I love you. I loved you then, and all the years between, and I love you now” (O’Neill 939).
2. **Family** as a microcosm of society and an **ISA**
 - a. characters wearing mask
 - b. house as a tomb
 - c. the portraits:
 - (1) ancestors
 - (2) great men in America (George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and John Marshall)
3. Ideologies handed down

As Althusser argues, “Ideology is a system (possessing its logic and proper rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case) endowed with an existence and an historical role at the heart of a given society” (Goldstein 23).

III. Characters’ confinement and revolt against the Puritanism/Patriarchy

A. feminine vs. masculine and nature vs. culture

1. **Orin**: “He was the war to me— the war that would never end until I died” (O’Neill 958)/“You seem the same to me in death, Ezra! You were always dead to me! I hate the sight of death!” (O’Neill 982)
2. **self and double, and alter-ego**: Ezra, Adam and Orin
 - a. **Orin and Ezra**: “I had a queer feeling that war meant murdering the same man over and over, and that in the end I would discover the man was myself!” (O’Neill 977)

- b. **Adam and Ezra:** “It would be damned queer if you fell in love with me because I recalled Ezra Mannon to you!” (O’Neill 921)

By God, he does look like Father!

This is like my dream. I’ve killed him before—over and over.

Do you remember me telling you know the faces of the men I killed came back and changed to Father’s face and finally became my own? [...] He looks like me, too! Maybe I’ve committed suicide! (O’Neill 905-6)

B. Unmasking the patriarchal definition and myth of “woman”

1. woman potentially as good wife and mother—**Virgin Mary** figure, patriarchal product and guardian:

a. “You acted as if I were your wife—your **property**” (O’Neill 943)/“ as if you were a judge again and I were the **prisoner**” (O’Neill 935)/“ I’ve felt about myself for over twenty years, giving my **body** to a man I—”/ “the wife of a man you hated!” (O’Neill 916)

b. Lavinia as “Puritan maiden” and her black mourning dress

2. woman reduced to a submissive/passive erotic object:

“You were always my **wedding night** to me—and my **honeymoon!**” (O’Neill 917)

IV. Character’s Dream of Escape and the Result as a Pipe-Dream

A. “Mannon” (“Man”)—human nature

B. Examples

1. Leaving

David Mannon: leaves the puritan tomb and patriarchal prison

2. The Blessed Isle

a. Adam Brant: (Adam in **Eden**—innocence)—“Aye— the Blessed Isles—Maybe we can still find happiness and forget” (O’Neill 993)

b. Ezra Mannon (away from social constraints)

- c. Christine (away from social constraints)
- d. Lavinia (away from social constraints and sexual freedom)
- e. Orin—*Typee* and **island as mother**

C. Returning to mother (Christine and Lavinia)

- 1. **loss** of the mother
- 2. children are **motherless** under patriarchal society— birth trauma

D. Pipe-Dream Motif

- 1. Eden
 - a. pressure from society
 - b. responsible for guarding the ideological laws
 - c. O’Neill deconstructs the romantic ideal and dream of the Melvillean island and **redefine Eden**
- 2. womb and alter-egos: Christine, Mary Brantôme and Lavinia
 - a. son: fear of **Oedipus complex** and **castration** and learns to detest his mother: “I’m Father’s! I’m a Mannon” (O’Neill 1017)
e.g. ship = penis and “Brant”
 - b. daughter: **Electra complex** and **fear of homosexuality**
“(in an anguish of jealous hatred) I hate you! You steal even Father’s love from me again! (O’Neill 940)/“You’ve [Lavinia] tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin! You’ve always schemed to steal my place!” (O’Neill 919)
 - c. mother-daughter (female) bond and the formation of female identity and subjectivity: “I’m Mother’s daughter” (O’Neill 1043):

Girls cannot and do not “reject” their mother and women in favor of their father and men, but remain in a bisexual triangle throughout childhood and into puberty. They

usually make a sexual resolution in favor of men and their father, but remain an internal emotional triangle. (Chodorow 140)

V. Unveiling **Matricide** in Patriarchy

A. Matricide justified in patriarchy—

As Irigaray argues, western civilisation is based upon **matricide** in order to ensure men's power and authority, mother (and women) need to be rejected or murdered so as to stabilise the patriarchy: “The substratum is the woman who reproduces the social order, who is made this order's infrastructure: the whole of our western culture is based upon the murder of the mother. The man-god-father killed the mother in order to take power” (Irigaray 47).

B. Dangerous Mother—

devouring womb (island) and the evil amniotic water (sea) which endangers the infant (ship)

C. “Death is an Island of Peace, too—Mother will be waiting for me there—”

(O'Neill 1042)

1. Reunion with mother and Matricide

- a. brings death
- b. murders the mother and reunite through death
- c. wash the guilt with death

VI. Conclusion

A. Deconstruct Greek belief in fate:

“fate, says O'Neill, is what happens to human beings because of what they are, not to what some god tells them to be, and it is the business of the traffic dramatist to show how human destiny reacts upon the individual, the family, the race.” (qtd. Clark 136-7)

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 myself. Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison! I'll never go out or 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! (O'Neill 1053)

I find artificial light more appropriate for my work—**man's light, not God's**—man's feeble striving to understand himself, to exist for himself in the darkness! It's a symbol of his life—a lamp burning out in a room of waiting shadows! (O'Neill 1027)

B. O'Neill's pointing out of the false system and belief the patriarchy

C. foreboding a destruction of the patriarchy

E. Need to reexamine "matricide"

Mother! Do you know what I'll do then? I'll get on my knees and ask your forgiveness—and say—[...] I'll say, I'm glad you found love. Mother! I'll wish you happiness—you and Adam! [...] You've heard me! You're here in the house now! You're calling me! You're waiting to take me home!" (O'Neill 1042)

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