



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.4. 2020 (Oct-Dec)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

EUGENE O'NEILL'S CRITICISM OF "PURITAN GRAY UGLINESS"  
IN *MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA*

ABIRA BHOWMICK

Post-Graduate student, Department of English, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, India

Email: [abirabhowmick19@gmail.com](mailto:abirabhowmick19@gmail.com)



Article information

Received:03/10/2020  
Accepted: 28/10/2020  
Published online: 02/11/2020  
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.4.44](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.4.44)

ABSTRACT

Famed American playwright Eugene O'Neill explored in his works human emotions such as guilt, fear, ambition, desire, psycho-pathological issues – and offers a realistic portrayal of humanity. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill derives much inspiration from Greek tragedies of *Oresteia trilogy*, and replaces the importance of the Greek supernatural forces with the inner struggles, passions and tormenting human adversities in order to make it more suitable for the twentieth century American audience. O'Neill here invokes the notions of Puritanism, and presents them in a vague, and dubious manner to the extent where they become dispensable. The curse of the House of Atreus in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is substituted by the curse of sin, death, and damnation on the Mannons and religion itself- the very source of peace for many, seems to be hostile towards its believers in this play. While the characters preach idealistic moral, ethical values they in fact engender further crimes and sufferings, both physical and psychological. Like his *Desire Under the Elms*, *Mourning becomes Electra* also emphasizes upon follies of human life, and how Puritan repression and its iron-bound customs worsen the situation for many. This paper aims at analysing how O'Neill subtly criticizes the rigorous Puritanism through various imagery, by portraying a constant inner plight and self-contradiction in the characters.

**Keywords:** Puritanism, tragedy, American civil war, work-ethic, repression of flesh, death, sin.

Introduction:

Religion has always occupied quite a large portion of World History, fueling various events, reflecting the values and morals of a society at a given point in time. In the history of England, there's been much dispute over religious theories, resulting in variant discourses like Catholicism, Protestantism, Calvinism etc. Puritanism emerged during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, as a negation of Catholic liturgical practices. Looking to purify the corruption of the Church of England, Puritanism brought a significant change in English history, establishing the Protectorate. But it was not only England that saw this revolutionary shift in government, Puritans also left for

New England, during the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. They started what is known as the Great Migration, settling in various North American Colonies such as Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth colony and so on.

Now this immigration occurred for various reasons, most important of them being their idealistic religious practices, and their faith of being God's chosen. The Puritans believed in a mission, to build the lost paradise and restore the wilderness into a new Garden of Eden. Except for attending to the glory of God, the "American dream" also played a huge role in their establishment. The idea of hard work for profits, material accumulation and new opportunities, in the New World was looked upon as a sign of God's benevolence. American Puritans essentially believed Calvinism to be their theological foundation, and accepted the total depravity of humankind, as a consequence of Adam's original sin. They interpreted predestination and salvation of a selected few to be the absolute, and Bible as the law.

#### Discussion:

In terms of its impact on contemporary literature, as Darrel Abel suggests, 17<sup>th</sup> century in New England was the great century of Puritan literature. While Puritan literature was artistically wrought, it attempted to portray the strenuous reality: to some extent they were just as "realistic" as modern naturalism, even though they had a distinct perception of reality. From the 17<sup>th</sup> till 20<sup>th</sup> century: the period when Eugene O'Neill was writing there have been several writings that represent this Puritan view of life and death and everything in between.

American Historian Edmund Morgan precisely explores the Puritan dilemma of remaining pure while living in a corrupt world, while another historian Perry Miller has elaborated upon it as the fundamental guide to life in the guise of a doctrinal theology. One must mention Arthur Miller while talking about O'Neill's contemporaries, as he famously portrayed a restrictive puritan society in his play *The Crucible*. Even poet Stephen Crane, as James Cox and Amy Lowell view, had borrowed his form from the Bible.

Eugene O'Neill took up an ambitious project in writing this play *Mourning Becomes Electra* and it infuses different themes in quite a tumultuous backdrop. O'Neill here adapted the framework of Greek Oresteia trilogy, and used it in the context of 1930's New England. Like Oresteia, O'Neill's play is also structured as a trilogy: "Homecoming", "The Hunted", "The Haunted". One must note how the play deals with themes that are mostly "negative" such as death, revenge, hubris, adultery- suggesting the futility of human existence. The play has been regarded as one of O'Neill's best works, with almost 150 stage performances.

Written in 1931, it is important to keep the contemporary American society in mind, while O'Neill first published this play. The time is popularly known as of Great Depression, due to the 1929 Wall Street Crash which was the largest stock market crash in American history. So far America had seen their civil war, World War I, and while the world was recovering from the trauma- the second one was about to occur. So, the contemporary political, social and economic ambience was not something peaceful or fit for aesthetics, rather it was highly depressing and intense for the ordinary people.

In terms of religion Robert T. Handy identifies a degree of religious tension in the US from around 1925. Theorist Daniel Fleming asserts that territorial conquest for Christianity through conversion is no longer needed, rather it is now that the church must aid in lessening materialism, racial injustice, war and poverty. Handy supplements and concludes that the Great Depression and its consequential societal havoc marked the end of the dominance of religion in American life.

Hence writing a play during such time, O'Neill naturally passes on this sense of tumult, air of despair and scepticism to his *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

However, the play itself is actually set in nineteenth century, the backdrop of American Civil War (1861-1865); an aspect of American History that has been much talked about. Several characters in this play are involved in the US military, for instance Ezra Mannon is the Brigadier General, Peter Niles is a captain in the US artillery and Orin Mannon is the first lieutenant of infantry in the Union Army.

Now one may wonder how is American Civil War so relevant in a discussion on American puritanism. It's because the religion, according to Harry Stout, was the primary fuel that kept the war going. He is of the opinion that although it emerged as a solely political, constitutional dispute over secession, it later gradually turned into a war of religious significance like that of the Crusade by "millennial nationalism" with seemingly no end. Another historian Drew Faust flips this equation other way round and says If religion did not drive Americans to war, then war drove Americans to religion as its justification. "The war's staggering human cost demanded a new sense of national destiny," in *The Republic of Suffering* she writes, one that had to legitimize the price that men paid with their lives. Suddenly America became a nation blinded by Gospel and warmongers and charmed by a president whose eloquence made things sound like a sermon. political problems and assessments were no longer to be dealt with rationality, but to be obeyed as if the Sermon on the Mount.

So, Christianity was readily allied with the waging of a war, continuing for such a long span of time. American soldiers sang *Yankee Doodle* and *Glory, glory, hallelujah!* as the monstrosity of such a war had to be backed up by moral, spiritual arguments, that would provide justifications for such tragic business. Stout talks about the North Americans who had almost permit themselves to wage a war in the name of absolutist holiness. Colonel James Montgomery too mentioned in his speech that the Southerners must fear the threat of this war, or else they might be swept away by the wrath of God. After Abraham Lincoln acceded to the presidency, the country seemed to rejoice in the glory that north has organized for society: "vital heart, liberty", while the South was reprimanded for their not-so-old history of slavery. Such a speech that says "compromise is a most pernicious sham"- is always irresistible to a country that is barely established, yet to be flourished in its full potential. The eloquence of the president almost instigated people to believe in the war, people who were already vulnerable only to two- the God and the President. The discourse of death, being central to Puritan dogmas, corresponded with the hierarchy of patriarchal, autocratic government. "Memento Mori" was implemented as a tool to depict inevitability, and increase social and religious discipline.

Thus, beginning from this Civil War, American Puritanism became imprinted deeper and deeper into the devastation, and to some extent, reduced the larger implications of Christianity. The anxiety caused by this association of religion with civil war has remained strong ever since, and made it difficult for religion to address the American public life, even when it probably could have done good. Alfred Kazin mentioned "Never afterward would Americans North and South feel that *they had been living Scripture.*"

Parts of this above quotation must be taken into consideration as central characters of this play do. In *Mourning becomes Electra* O'Neill weaves a grim and shabby picture of puritanism, which can be understood by the male characters as mentioned previously. Ezra Mannon is the stoical father-figure in this play, while Peter and Orin appear much juvenile. Ezra Mannon has been a soldier throughout his life, and even after being elected a mayor, he resigned to join the army again. Seth mentions that it was his father Abe Mannon, who introduced him to this military pursuit and one must also remember the strict Puritan belief that Abe Mannon proclaimed in his life. So, one can easily assume that Ezra Mannon waged and fought in the war, commanded with a Puritan rigidity that he inherited from his father.

Now to discuss Orin and Peter's attitude towards this war, right after Orin is home in Act 1 of "The Hunted", he remarks "everything has seemed queer since I came back to earth "- as if the state of war was something out of the world. This can be interpreted in both ways, as the Puritan idea of civil war to be a divine, Godly venture, or as a morbid, hellish affair where the earthly morals, and ethics cannot be employed. This is an interesting line as it suggests the ambivalence that Orin carries within himself throughout.

Orin sums up the warfare as he says "Let them batter each other's brains out with rifle butts and rip each other's guts with bayonets!" and he complains quite cynically of how women wave their handkerchief, to bid farewell to their "heroes". He rejects such romanticized vision of the soldiers as he recalls how he has been trained to kill- for a living. He sees the brutality of war and points at the long-lasting impact that it leaves on one's psyche. Orin couldn't possibly forget the blood and gore even though the war is over: implies that a war

never truly ends! It lives within the survivors. Peter Niles also shares the same opinion as he says “None of us liked it any more than you did”.

This above discussion regarding how the Mannons’ view warfare and their opinions can be deconstructed in the light of Puritanism. One can link this to the Puritan work ethic that had a significant impact on the ever-growing United States. Puritan work ethic has been much quoted by many industrialists, such as in Ashton’s account of the Industrial Revolution. Max Weber argues it even encouraged the young America to strive and achieve economic success. The idea promoted by Puritans was of hard and honest toil, often motivated by guilt, the guilt of “original sin”. Puritans hoped that by perseverance and hard work one can redeem the sin, and possibly reach a spiritual salvation.

But considering how cynical and sceptic Orin or Peter feel about their “duty”, it contrasts the Puritan idea of complete devotion to hard work. Time and again, Orin has mentioned how he has been taught and trained to believe certain things, think in a certain way. This idea of not truly liking one’s duty, yet to forcefully persist is a very subtle way of criticizing the uncompromising Puritan work-ethic, while establishing a framework of patriarchy. This also sets the tone about the mundanity of contemporary American life where most ordinary folks had no choice but to rely on their governing authority- waiting for their command to kill or to die.

In somewhat a different manner, captain of the clipper “flying trades” Adam Brant also represents this same ambiguity regarding his work ethic. In the first act, Lavinia mockingly asks him about his tall, white clippers which he supposedly loves the most, even more than a woman. Again, one can see the very Puritan attempt of idealizing industrial toil over human love for flesh or any carnal “temptation”. Interestingly, Adam had to draw a comparison between his clippers and women in order to measure his love or devotion towards one of them. It’s almost like reiterating the idea that to be conscientious one must rebuke bodily desires. Even when Adam says, “Women are jealous of ships.” Or in the Act II of “Homecoming” when Christine says “You’ll never dare leave me now, Adam--for your ships...”: the strange juxtaposition between women and ship continues. These are few of those instances in the play, that might be O’Neill’s clever ploy to hint at Puritan emphasis upon labour, and denial of flesh.

Adam’s response, however, pulls this discussion in a completely different direction. “But I meant, before I met you.”, he acknowledges of the possibilities that he can in fact give in to his desires, credited to his upbringing “I wasn't brought up that strictly”. O’Neill here clearly points at the Puritan obligations that are usually enforced upon a person, at the cost of the suppression of natural human tendencies. The following conversation between Adam and Lavinia explores this conflict of desire-reality, natural- unnatural, public-personal.

To bring out this conflict O’Neill carefully employs one of the most vivid imagery in this play: Blessed Isles. The islands have been described with superlative adjectives, given the connotation of Paradise and Garden of Eden. Perhaps it can be read as yet another method for O’Neill to criticize the mechanical work-ethics of the Puritans, as readers will find out throughout the play the isles stand out, in contrast to the somber lifestyle of the characters.

Adam mentions of the South Sea island as where he was shipwrecked. Convenient, as the isles also wreck his weary schedule, free him from the unbending materialistic pursuit and offer him a relaxation in the lap of nature. the islands here represent an escape from the present and is complete opposite to the contemporary New England. This is the reason why most characters find the islands so fulfilling, of the visions that they cannot avail in their reality.

Ezra asks Christine, “I’ve got a notion if we’d leave...to the other side of the world...You’ll find I have changed.” Brant says in admiration for the native women- “they had never heard that love can be a sin” as if “They live in as near the Garden of Paradise before sin was discovered as you’ll find on earth.” Both feel that the islands will provide them a shelter to resort to, away from the Puritan restrictions that society has imposed

upon them. Both seem to realize that the island is like opposing the hemisphere that they live in, and this is the reason that what is frowned upon in their society is a reason for joy in the blessed isles.

The change that Ezra talks about is important here, because to live here in the islands he would need to unlearn first. This echoes with what Adam says- "the surf on the barrier reef singing a croon in your ears like a lullaby!" The islands take up the role of a tender mother comforting and lulling her child to sleep. This association of mother-child, although takes a different turn in this play, generally suggests a sense of purity, naivety and even what Locke calls "Tabula Rasa". In the core of this isles is the essence of childhood and innocence, all that mankind was before the "original sin". So, by returning to the islands, all the characters would be able to undo their Puritan notion of total depravity, find themselves relieve, and re-live. This can also mean that O'Neill's attempt was to indicate the shallowness of Puritanism and their stress on "purity", for else there should be no need for such strongly religious characters to resort to the islands in order to recover and become joyous if they could attain it from being devotedly Puritan.

Orin also offers his vision of the isles in Act II "The Hunted", as a warm and peaceful refuge for him, contrasting the macabre warfare he has been involved in. at some point he says about Melville's *Typee* that "I read it and reread it until finally those Islands came to mean everything that wasn't war". Although O'Neill does not discuss more about the book, but one should know that *Typee* is about the Polynesian life, life in lands such as Tahiti, Typee valley, Maori and so on. Ronald T. Curran writes about this "Orin read his own interpretation of primitivism into the novel. For him Typee Valley, Tahiti or Imeeo became literally his mother." Again, back to the much desired "purity" that Orin strives for, to be able to disregard his traumatic memories from the Mexican war. The island is almost like a provocateur, in the sense that it invokes emotion that otherwise lies buried, here to remember Puritanism actually endorse repression of emotions. Orin then, counters the training of his Puritan father, and dirty dreams of greed and power through his isles, as they set him free to imagine and visualize and finally create a new reality of his own.

It is to be noted how each character has taken the liberty to imagine the island and occupy them in distinct ways, at the cost of discarding the geographical existence of the islands. The islands simply become to the Mannons a safe place, that promise them emotional and physical comfort. Human emotions that the Puritan Mannons cannot practice in public- love, peace, joy, freedom, etc. are now no longer luxury here in the equilibrium of isles. This is why they are all able to build their own islands, as the saying goes "mind over matter", Lavinia says to Peter "We'll make an island for ourselves on land...", Orin equates image of his mother with the island. While this can initiate the reading of oedipal complex in the play, this shall also pose the question that how are the characters able to make islands in their minds! Is it possible that even the most stringent of the puritans in this play is unconsciously eager to let go of the faith?

The irony is best represented in the words of Adam when he says "Blessed" isles. The term blessed is used here with regard to the scenic beauty of the moonlight, coco palms, or the clouds on the mountain top. Even the natives have been described as "naked"- as if in Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve roamed about before their "fall". The word "naked" also aligns well with the previously mentioned idea of a child's purity.

But beyond these topographical attributes, the naked inhabitants of the isles represent a certain primitiveness, as Lavinia remarks later, that they are almost unaware of the "original sin". This primitiveness denotes a savage eroticism which can be seen in most characters that dream of these isles. Be it Adam or even Lavinia- they all experience erotic pleasures in their vision of the naked natives. Adam admires the naked native women, and Orin mockingly mentions of Lavinia's liking for one of the islanders named Avahanni. Even while wooing Peter, Lavinia speaks of the isles in a trance-like state. Interestingly Orin takes a very different stance on this matter, as he says "But they turned out to be Vinnie's islands, not mine." Disgusted by the naked women, even jealous of Lavinia's convivial exchange with them, Orin says he is too much a Mannon to be "pagan". Notice how he disapproves of this unrestrained sexuality and links the islands with paganism. So even though "blessed", Orin declares that the Christian connotations of this term can never be applied to the isles as the freedom and license of the flesh that they suggest will not be encouraged by the Puritan Mannons.

Yet, as already mentioned, Orin's innate ambiguity complicates this since he had already found another supplement for the isles: in his mother and Hazel. Both these women, Orin refers to them as his "lost islands". So, while rejecting the flesh he is simultaneously locating the islands in flesh. Just like Adam compares his white clippers with the beauty of a woman, Orin too says about the islands: "as beautiful as you, Mother!", Adam talks of the greens and blues: colours appropriated by Mannon women and his mother Marie Brantome. This certainly extends to be Oedipal complex in this play, and also hints at the Puritan inhibitions, repression of carnal desires.

O'Neill's contemporary radio personality Garrison Keillor remarked in a 1992 record that "Puritans arrived here in 1648 in the hope of finding greater restrictions than were permissible under English law at that time". even though the Puritans often quoted from the *Song of Solomon*, discussed love and marriage- for the most part they were critiquing sexual aspects of life. Marriage bed was to be considered "honourable" (Hebrews 13:4), and as Edmund Morgan writes "Toward sexual intercourse outside marriage the Puritans were as frankly hostile as they were favourable to it in marriage" (*The Puritans and Sex*). He also notices how illicit sexual relationships were becoming more and more common in 19<sup>th</sup> century New England, even under the protective watch of Puritanism. In his *Puritans and Sex*, he also talks about how Puritans even encouraged this marital relationship, "If a husband deserted his wife and remained within the jurisdiction of a Puritan government, he was promptly sent back to her". He highlights another instance where a man practiced abstinence for two years as a self-punishment for abusing his wife before their marriage. so, it's quite astonishing how sex was seen both as pure and punishment, two far ends of a spectrum, depending upon the situation.

One of the play's most prominent feature would be this Puritan repression of sex by the Mannons. In terms of the conjugal life that Ezra and Christine share, it is clear that there has always been a lack of communication which Ezra believes that something "keeps me hiding the things I'd like to show." This notion of hiding emotions, feelings that are essential to his being end up leading to a tragedy. Naturally, hiding and distrust go together, which in this play, almost all the characters practice. In "Homecoming", Act IV Ezra raises questions "This is not my room nor my bed. They are empty--waiting for someone to move in!" as he suspects that Christine might be yearning for someone else. To suspect is also an oft promoted idea of the Puritans, as they mostly believed in suspecting things that are delightful. Most delightful things were to be considered temptation such as the forbidden fruit, and hence must be avoided at all cost.

17th century Puritan minister Richard Baxter was mostly vocal about what he considered the sin of all sins, "flesh-pleasing." He writes "It [flesh-pleasing] is the sin of sins; the end of all sin, and therefore the very sum and Life of all...". This warning is foregrounded upon apostle Paul's words in Corinthians 6:18: "Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body." This is similar to what Ezra says to Christine about their wedding night, "you made me appear a lustful beast in my own eyes! --as you've always done since our first marriage night!". Ezra here refers to Christine's estrangement and how it has made himself suspicious of his own needs. Now again, although Ezra here is blaming Christine to cause such a distance between the two of them, it must be noted that he himself had taken a cold approach to their marital life, which Christine found unsettling and looked for affection elsewhere. Indeed, no one character should be questioned or blamed but it is the repressive morals and ethics they have internalised, that harm their relationship.

In "The Hunted", Act I the continuation of this attitude can be seen when the townfolks are gossiping amongst themselves, about the possible reasons of Ezra's death. The doctor says to one of the visiting members that "it was love killed Ezra!". He is part of the chorus of the Greek structure in this play, and thus represents the society at large. For him to use the word "love" and "kill" under the same breath, it shows O'Neill's depiction of a society where negative connotations can easily beset love. Josiah's response to this with a smirk is also representative of the prohibitions around that contemporary American society had.

Finally, it is Orin who constantly shames Lavinia and her affection towards Wilkins, Adam, Avahanni, holds her accountable for all the "shameless" acts she must have done with them. In the same manner Orin

interrogates his mother in "The Hunted" Act V and asks how she could possibly love Adam Brant. Other than the Puritan shame of love, referring to Adam as "low swine" is also a reminder of the contemporary socio-economical distinction between aristocrats and proletariats and social barrier that would prevent any affair between them. And, obviously this issue in this play is indicative of Orin's unresolved Oedipal complex that brings about the tragic saga.

Going back to Ezra's questioning of the self as a beast, the blurred difference between his love and lust, his self-renouncing words in Act IV of "Homecoming" might stem from another extremely Puritan practice, the practice of self-examination. Scholars over the years have critiqued this rhetoric of self-reproach which is very commonly found in Puritan dogmas. Sacvan Bercovitch in his *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* analyzed their personal writings and linked the hatred for selfhood with the dilemma of Puritan identity. Because the Puritans believed in total depravity, the only reason for existence was to destroy the self so that God may dwell in them. In *A Treatise of the Soul of Man* John Flavel wrote "...they could not deny the flesh, and now are denied by God". So, the idea was to scrutinize and deny the self to pay for man's original sin, as Bercovitch said Puritans were "convulsed with the nausea of their sins." This self-denial generates the idea of memento mori, and the Puritan obsession with death.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, it is Orin and Ezra who exercise this concept mostly. Orin says to Lavinia in "The Haunted" Act II, that life is all about man's "feeble striving to understand himself". This is also ironic considering in this play Orin remains an indecisive, confused character. From the beginning, his unhealthy obsession with his mother for which Lavinia calls him a "cry baby", and him being controlled by Ezra in the war- it shows Orin completely lacks any self-agency or will. He is easily persuaded by his mother, sister or even Hazel. Both in private or in public, Orin's each movement or action in this play is motivated or instigated by the "other". To some extent, Adam is also similar to Orin as his actions depend entirely on Christine's or his late mother Marie's persuasion. "I wasn't man enough for you!" were Adam's last words, to his clipper "Flying Trades", even perhaps to Marie as well as he failed to avenge her in a fair manner as he had expected. Certainly, a gendered reading of the text would be possible as in how the rhetoric of self-reprehend that specifically the male characters use calls to mind the ideal model of patriarchy, which presides not only over the women in the play but also the men, causing them to perpetually suffer from insecurity and anxiety.

If explored carefully one would notice that most of the characters in this play are flat or one-dimensional characters. As already mentioned, Orin and Adam are both self-contradicting at times. Ezra Mannon is the typical ambitious, stringent Puritan father figure while Christine is constantly in a dilemma, stuck in-between the life she had envisioned and the life she had to live. All these characters can be identified by a common feature, an existential anxiety or "angst". Lavinia is the only character here who showcases some depth and layers to her being. This will be better understood if the architect of the Mannon house can be deciphered first.

For instance, the stage direction in the very beginning describes the house as modelled like a Greek temple, with six tall white columns at the front and a big pine tree right beside. The trunk of pine seems like a black column in striking contrast to the white ones of the portico. This description is rife with subtle symbolism and it hints at the complexities of the narrative. The walls of the Mannon house is grey, a colour of bleakness that spills over the Mannons. Christine complains the most about the architecture as she says in Act I of "Homecoming": "pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan grey ugliness!". This more or less encapsulates the aura of the house and what goes on inside. This line is indicative of the Puritan repression, one that all the Mannons adapt wearing their face as "life-like masks" and keeps hidden what Orin later calls the dirty history of the Mannons. The masks conceal inner pathological struggle, the hollow Puritan foundations that they cling onto when in reality they are lost utterly. For the most part, the house has been termed as a "tomb", a "monstrosity" build by Abe Mannon, "a temple for his hatred", "incongruous white mask", or a "whited sepulchre". It must fascinate the readers how O'Neill chooses words like temple, colour like white in order to depict the building. The purity or piety that one may associate with these words are being used here to express the exact opposite. This house is the mise-en-scene where all the skeletons are kept enclosed and secrets are suppressed- a sort of double repression occurs. Christine's reference to the

Mannon house's masked appearance is an echo of Matthew 23:27- "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean". This particular allusion works strikingly well in the context of this play since Ezra Mannon actually practiced law, and himself seems to agree to this expression. At one point he mockingly says, "That white meeting-house. It stuck in my mind--clean-scrubbed and whitewashed-a temple of death!" referring to the Sabbath house that the Mannons used to visit. O'Neill's description of these architectures as the breeding grounds for falsity are excellent examples of his criticism of Puritanism in this play.

However, he extends this criticism furthermore as he introduces a certain degree of growth to the character of Lavinia and it is actually intermeshed within the structural description of the Mannon house. Firstly, the six white columns of the mansion can be imagined as a reference to the six death in this play. Six of the Mannons have died as mentioned in the course of the narrative, Ezra, Adam, Christine, David, Marie and Orin. All these deaths share the same history, the saga of hate that started from Abe Mannon and they all contribute to this hatred as well. Lavinia is the only one who remains alive against all odds, and even attempts to win against the Mannons. This is where she can be compared to the pine tree, that stands tall like a black column beside the white ones- Lavinia stands in contrast with the rest of the Mannons, tall and evergreen presumably as the death cycle ended with her as the last living Mannon.

One must picture how the pine tree casts shadow on the white column, just as Lavinia overshadows the Mannons. Lavinia is the central figure in this play, and she emerges as the protagonist due to her transformation throughout the tragic narrative. she goes through a character arc that no other characters do, as already discussed they stay flat or one-dimensional characters. Only Lavinia grows and it is possibly O'Neill's most extensive tool to criticize Puritanism. Since the first act, readers can see Lavinia takes after her father. She is devoutly Puritan, who resents love, marriage, all these seem to her "dirty dreams" of men. Her name is syntactically close to Latin word "Lavire" which means to "wash" or purify- and her role in this play is to expiate the sins of her ancestors, by holding onto religion or by denial of it. In Act III of "Homecoming" Christine sarcastically asks Lavinia "isn't beauty an abomination and love a vile thing? And like a true Puritan maiden she denies to marry anyone, as she's got her "duty" towards her father. However, this duty soon comes to an end, when in the Act II of "The Haunted" Lavinia looks at the portraits of Mannons in their sitting room and says harshly: "I've done my duty by you! That's finished and forgotten!" this is a great way to re-introduce Lavinia as she has now entirely changed after her mother. The very woman she used to hate and loathe has become her model now both in terms of her external appearance as well as her outlook on life. She has acquired a more feminine grace, breaking away from her typical stiff, life-less, wooden look. Previously her sartorial choices have always been black, but in this act as O'Neill writes "one would mistake her for her mother" as "Her green dress is like a copy of her mother's". in regards to her internal transformation, Orin rightly points out "Little by little it grew like Mother's soul". it is strikingly noticeable how Lavinia speaks the rhetoric of Christine, utters words that oppose Puritan ethos. Earlier she remarked about Adam, "That's his *trade*--being romantic!"- speaking of love in a capitalistic manner, a sin in this materialistic world that she denied. Yet, the visit to Adam's blessed isles with Orin has changed her view to the point where she says "there was something there mysterious and beautiful--a good spirit--of love--coming out of the land and sea. --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!". Lavinia recalls the islands as the home to innocents, dancing naked on the beach and loving without the awareness of sin. The isles for her is the abode for a prelapsarian love affair, where shame and guilt have no place. What Orin negates as bestial and pervert, Lavinia finds simplicity in them. "I wanted to learn love from him--love that wasn't a sin!" she says referring to Avahanni, perhaps even Adam- man whom her mother fancied, a love that her mother longed. The same tone of longing can be heard when Lavinia addresses Peter: "Can't you forget sin and see that all love is beautiful?". "It made me forget death. There was no hereafter. There was only this world": she quickly renounces the Puritan preoccupation with death and embraces the mortal life, the pleasures of the world that she herself had rejected earlier. Reading these lines, it's seems unbelievable that

these can be spoken by Lavinia. Not only these lines, but the entire exchange between Orin and Lavinia in Act II of "The Haunted" is indistinguishable from the final Ezra-Christine conversation before Ezra succumbs to death. While this is obvious considering the overlapping of personalities in this play is necessary for the Oedipus-Electra complex to manifest, this also topples the order of the Mannon house – causing anarchy where Puritan morals can no longer be valid.

To Lavinia it seems her Mannon identity isn't valid anymore either. She carelessly refers to her ancestors as simply "dead", announcing herself only half Mannon it feels like she was awaiting the moment to free herself of their burden. "trusting the Mannon dead--and they're not to be trusted with love!" perhaps she alludes to Abe Mannon's intolerance towards his brother David's affair and how that initiated an endless chain of catastrophe. At another instance she also says to Peter, "Take me in this house of the dead and love me!... it will shame them back into death", but hopelessly she concludes "Love isn't permitted to me. The dead are too strong!". These are very strong and unimaginable statements coming from Lavinia since the ones she's referring to as "dead" are her own family- her beloved father, brother and all those she felt tenderly for. Even when she speaks to Hazel, she refuses to ask for forgiveness - "I'm not asking God or anybody for forgiveness. I forgive myself!" - a clear refutation of divine or familial authority. This leads her to decide her own punishment which is to shut herself in the Mannon house to be haunted by the dead forever. This is also a peek at her changed soul that reckons the Mannon house to be a punishment, contradictory to how proud she was to be a Mannon, how she loved the Mannon house. "I'll be Mrs. Peter Niles. Then they're finished! Thank God!", Lavinia says in eagerness referring to her ancestors as "they" as if foreign to her. This emphasis on the self, denial of any supreme being to judge, are all parts of Lavinia's intrinsic becoming. She "becomes", something the other Mannons fail at, and drives the narrative. Her "becoming" is most instrumental in bringing out the obscurity of Puritanism, something that O'Neill slowly builds up with dexterity.

Towards the end Lavinia views Puritanism as shackles, a hindrance to the expression of the self. This sheds light upon another prevailing theme in this play, the theme of death. Orin says "as if her death had set you free--to become her!" alluding to the Puritan concept of salvation in death. Lavinia too agrees when she talks about the island: "They finished setting me free." So, the isles have ended what started from Christine's death, a process of liberation for Lavinia's soul. In a similar vein Ezra questions Christine accusingly if she's wishing his death: "For death--to set you free!". Jacques Derrida argued in *The Gift of Death*, "the identity of the oneself is given by death," - here for Vinnie this is true as she acquires new meaning of life, though briefly. Also, this accords well with the Puritan belief that true meaning of life must be achieved by meditating upon death which the Mannons seem to follow quite regularly. But it is also problematic if one is to consider the identity of the self in humanistic terms, because then it poses the question- about the split between one's "Christic" and "Adamic" self. Because O'Neill here attempts to denounce certain aspects of Puritanism, the characters seem to contradict their own faith quite often leaving behind their "Christic" duty.

David E. Stannard wrote of a different interpretation in his 1977 book *The Puritan way of death* as he goes, "the Puritans were gripped individually and collectively by an intense and unremitting fear of death, while simultaneously clinging to the traditional Christian rhetoric of viewing death as a release and relief for the earth-bound soul". This is rather true for the Mannons in this play, as most seem to be preoccupied with their ideas of death and including it a part of their daily discourse.

Death occurs in a cyclical pattern in Mourning Becomes Electra. With Ezra's homecoming, death enters the Mannon house, and eventually it hunts and haunts down its preys in frenzied modes of suicide, revenge- until the last living Mannon is trapped in a gyre of wild justice. Orin in Act III "The Hunted" tells his sister, "Death becomes the Mannons!", and to mourn for these deaths, mourning becomes Lavinia- the remnant of Mannon's ugly history. This sets the tone of the play and forebodes that any good outcome cannot be expected, since the Mannons embody death. Their mansion, outlook on life, their theology- all manifest death, and their faith will not bring a salvation or free them from the consecutive tragedies. The way is to meditate on death, and they are forced to do so since it is going to be an everlasting saga for the Mannons. Puritans usually viewed death as either the "King of terrors," or that it would be deliver mortal beings from the misery of their earthly existence into the realm of spirits. Hence Ezra says "Being born was starting to die. Death was being

born": the Mannons spend hours at the white-meeting house awaiting this spiritual elevation, as Allan I. Ludwig in *New England Stonecarving and Its Symbols* writes, "the fear of death gave way to the thrill of spiritual pleasures yet to come as archangels trumpeted the glorious day".

Ezra himself however, deviates from this Puritan musing as "all the time in this war... Death was so common, it didn't mean anything". This is the ambivalence that he takes further when he refuses to make "so much solemn fuss over death!". By adopting a practical viewpoint, accepting mortality and materiality- Ezra contradicts the Puritan emphasis upon death rather than life. Yet, Christine mentions in Act V of "The Hunted" that "God won't leave us alone. He twists and wrings and tortures our lives with others' lives until--we poison each other to death!" she makes it their provision to entangle in the cycle of death. Lavinia too says something similar in the final act, "It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born!"- for being born is to be a part of the sinful legacy of Adam-Eve, the root of all woes.

Orin reiterates the same commonality of death in Act III of "The Hunted", "war meant murdering the same man over and over, and that in the end I would discover the man was myself!". This depicts the inexorable force that youth of America indulged in and ended up destructing themselves. The Civil war that epitomizes brotherhood also celebrates the primal murderous instinct that this play is centred around, a fatal rivalry that tears men apart as they vie for the desire of the "other". "I would have loved her as he loved her-- and killed father too-Maybe I've committed suicide!"- in the course of action this offers a premonition of Orin's suicide as well as a constant normalisation of desire, flesh as Orin counters Puritanism with practicality, that he had to earn on the battleground. Perhaps this is a way for O'Neill to present the futility of religion and their promises of peace in a death-mongering world.

Suicide is another topic looming large over the Mannons in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, like the final nail in the coffin of dead Puritanism. Calvin referred to suicide as 'monstrous', as the Sixth Commandment says, "Thou Shalt Not Kill" including killing of the self. In *Life's preservative against self-killing*, Scottish Calvinist John Sym wrote about the ones who committed suicide "are certainly, and infallibly damned soule and body for evermore without redemption." This is one of the earliest writings to have explored suicide. When in the final act Lavinia mentions "Why can't the dead die!", this evokes the concept of eternal damnation of the souls bereft of God's grace. Thematically it hints at Lavinia's haunted and cursed fate, but it also shows that the dead never found deliverance. Calvin considered suicide as transgressive act which only reprobates commit and not the elects as they would have God's light to guide. John Foxe in his famous *The Acts and Monuments* said that "no man [is] able to bring forth any one example...of any...true Gospeller, that eyther killed himselfe, or shewed forth any signification or apperance of despayre"- so it is not just self-killing but despair and insanity were considered sin too of which in O'Neill's play Orin and David were guilty of. Both being victim to their father's bequest of hate and lies were "out of...head for a long time". So even in their tragic end, O'Neill made them rebut Puritan fascination of death with honour.

In Act III of "Homecoming" Ezra wonders "All victory ends in the defeat of death...But does defeat end in the victory of death?". *Mourning Becomes Electra* as a play can be summed up as an answer to this question. Death and defeat are two most frequently explored themes and common occurrences in the entire narrative, and reading through the play one would find the answer. No, defeat doesn't end in death. For the Mannons, defeat rather begins with death. Like discussed already, it is inevitable in the Mannon temple of death, where forebearers contemplate death to escape the mortal miseries of life. Yet, the idealism is defeated as Ezra is shoved in the warfare where dead are no more than dirt, Christine and Orin commits suicide- a Puritan sin, a deplorable act which cannot be performed in front of the audience, Lavinia is left alone- her life amounts to punishment. Ezra Mannon, so "able" is poisoned to death, the mayor of the town doesn't receive the dignified departure he ought to have, even at his funeral he is reduced to mere gossip. For Adam there will be no justice as the newspaper barely feature few lines owing his death to the waterfront thieves: "Brant wasn't important" says Orin. Christine and Orin died cowardly deaths as Lavinia asserts "I'm not going the way Mother and Orin went. That's escaping punishment." in shame, guilt, as tools of "justice" for others. Finally, Lavinia herself is defeated as her life epitomizes death and mourning. She ponders upon "I hope there is a hell for the good somewhere!" and this "somewhere" suggests the unknowability that the

dogma of pre-destination posed. Syntactically a “hell” for the “good”- is almost oxymoronic from a Puritan point-of-view. But as explained each character is defeated in their fatal end, and this discredits the Puritan optimism regarding death and redemption.

#### Conclusion:

Although the high moral ground and inspiring work ethic that Puritanism promoted might be appreciated, yet for a young nation like America, with its advancing society, accumulation of capitalist resources, immigration from various continents, it could not produce the ideal impact like before. Frederick Wilkins notices this change in O’Neill’s New England plays where “humility had turned to pride [...] love had turned to hate or lust [...] selfless fidelity had turned to fevered, self-acquisitiveness [...] cooperation had turned to contentiousness [...] and piety had turned to a morality which was really a prudery stultifying to life and feeling and sensibility [...]”. H.L. Mencken, O’Neill’s contemporary, famously described Puritanism as “The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy”. As discussed earlier, Arthur Miller, Edmund Morgan-most American authors pointed at the antiquated ways of Puritanism, Hawthorne criticized Puritan intolerance towards the Quakers, wrote about the interference of Puritan past upon the liberal present. Wilkins thus suggests, “the only hope seems to lie in rejecting it”, as faith only destroys and dims hope. Perry Miller in his *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* asserts that “Puritanism failed to hold later generation”, because, “children were unable to face reality as unflinchingly as their forefathers”. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* Eugene O’Neill brings all these statements to action, as readers may find time and again Puritanism fails the Mannons and vice versa. As Kant defines tragedy to emerge from the incongruity between two moral imperatives, it seems true in O’Neill’s play. While O’Neill attempts to appropriate classical framework for the modern audience, so he does with Puritanism. In this regard, *Mourning Becomes Electra* is not just a tragedy in literary sense, but also it denotes the tragedy of Puritanism in nineteenth century America of the Mannons.

#### Acknowledgment:

I am sincerely grateful to Dr. Indira Chakraborty Bhattacharya, for this paper wouldn’t have been possible without her informative lectures and support.

\*all act divisions mentioned above are according to the project Gutenberg version of *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

#### References

1. O’Neill, Eugene. *Mourning Becomes Electra: A Trilogy*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1931.
2. <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks04/0400141h.html>
3. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/mourning-becomes-electra>
4. Guelzo, Allen. “Did Religion Make the American Civil War Worse?”. *The Atlantic*, 2015 [online]<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/08/did-religion-make-the-american-civil-war-worse/401633>.
5. Ruland, Richard. Bradbury, Malcolm. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*. Viking Adult, 1991. Print.
6. Miller, Randall M., Stout Harry S., Wilson, Charles Reagan. *Religion and the American Civil War*. Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.
7. Curran, Ronald T. “Insular Typees: Puritanism and Primitivism in *Mourning Becomes Electra*,” in *Revue des Langues Vivantes*, Summer, 1975, Vol. 4, pp. 371-77. [online/print].
8. Dever, Mark. “Christian Hedonists or Religious Prudes? The Puritans on Sex”. *Desiring God*, 2004 [online] <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/christian-hedonists-or-religious-prudes-the-puritans-on-sex>

9. Petra Holubová, The Puritan view of death: attitudes toward death and dying in Puritan New England, master's thesis, 2011, Faculty of Arts, Institute of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures (21-UALK), Charles University, Prague
  10. Stannard, David E. *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. Print.
  11. Huang, Li-hua. "Ephraim Cabot's Puritanism as the Root of His Family Tragedy ". *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 2018, Vol. 8, No. 12, 1661-1668 [online] <http://davidpublisher.org/Public/uploads/Contribute/5c1871a4408b7.pdf>
  12. Miller, Perry. *The New England mind: the seventeenth century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967. Print.
-