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## THE MAN AND THE MASK; A PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY OF EUGENE O'NEILL'S *MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA*

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### **Abstract:**

*The paper attempts to analyze Mourning Becomes Electra, a trilogy by Eugene O'Neill from the perspectives of psychoanalysis, a post structural theoretical approach. It shows how far Freudian, Jungian, and Lacanian approaches are applicable to the characters and actions of the play in three parts. An analytical attempt is made to psychoanalytically explain the hidden motives behind the speech and actions of the major characters. The significance of "the life like mask" pasted on to faces of the characters as well as to the temple like house of the Manon family which is the setting of the play has been explained. The Freudian concepts of latent content, manifest content, the Heimlich, the unheimlich, the nachtraglichkeit have been interpretatively applied to the text. The Jungian concept of the collective unconscious is applied in it as well. The text's psychoanalytical interpretation in the paper gets more richer with the introduction of French Freud Lacan's semiotic version of psychoanalysis. Julia Kristeva's notion of "the semiotic" and "the symbolic" has also been brought in to make the interpretation comprehensive.*

**Key words:** *Desire, Oedipal complex, Electra complex, mask, imaginary, symbolic.*

Eugene O' Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a seminal work which is open to deep psychological probing and analyses. The text, along with its tell-tale settings, is one of such psychological richness and suggestiveness that one is tempted to read it on the lines of psychoanalysis, a theoretical approach introduced into the domain of contemporary literary theory by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan. Psychoanalysis, as a theoretical proposition, first and foremost presents the concept of "unified subject or personality as a problematic one". It espouses the principle that "the subject is always in the process and capable of being other than it is". This goes to show that the human beings essentially possess split personalities or fragmented selves. In other words, all individuals at once cultivate two distinct selves; one private and the other public or in Freudian terms one "the latent content" and the other "manifest content. Every individual takes recourse to the mask to disguise the latent content in him. Therefore, mask is a crucial literary trope in a psychoanalytical text. In the trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* mask is used frequently as a literary trope. The temple like residential "edifice of the Manon family, which is also the setting of the play, is represented as having a white mask. The white mask which is made of the white portico having six columns is "pasted into the building in order to disguise its latent content, that is, "grey ugliness". All the major characters in the play- Christine, Lavinia, Seth, Ezra Manon put on "life like masks" to hide the latent content beneath their manifest content. Behind the mask there lurks the original self of each of the characters above; the stranger self which is the bundle of inexpressible "desires". Mask, here, can be as a symbolic representation of Freudian "ego", an intermediate stage of psychosexual development, which tries to negotiate the conflicts between the insatiable demands of the "id", the storehouse of libidinal and other innate desires, and "the superego", the guardian of social standards of morality and propriety. Christine wears the facial mask in order to disguise her libidinal desire for her son Orin. On the other hands, her daughter Lavinia's facial mask helps her to hide her deep desire for

her father Ezra Manon as she frankly claims that her father “needs me more”.

The palatial building in which the “rich and exclusive Manon family lives symbolizes the vast unconscious self of each of its family members. The vast building represents “the id” in Freudian terms or “the imaginary state” in the Lacanian sense, where all the repressed libidinal and innate desires of the Manon family members do have a free play. Their conversations in the house are highly marked by expressionism. When Christine and Lavinia come out of the house, they put on their facial masks to repress their antagonism which comes irresistibly to the fore as and when they enter into the grey mansion. This is amply clear when the mother and the daughter appear before the townsfolk Amos, Louisa, and Minnie in first act of *Homecoming*, the first part of the trilogy. The tall six white columns of the portico which is like a big mask pasted onto the mansion, in a way, represents the bars or codes of language through which human wishes and desires are expressed in mediated version as per the demands of “the reality principles”. The description of the Manon “edifice” as “temple of death and hate” is highly significant. According to Freud, the repressed desires find their disguised expression through songs, jokes, arts, and, above all, literature. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* the song plays a vital role. When the first part of the play begins, the song “John Brown's Body” is heard sometimes distinctly and at times faintly. Seth Beckwith, the gardener of the Manon family, also enters singing the song “Oh, Shenandoah, I long to hear you”. The song is a disguised form of expression of libidinal desires not only of Seth but also, in extension, of Christine and her daughter Lavinia. Christine longs for Brant who is her son Orin's substitute and Lavinia longs for her father. Christine's clandestine relationship with Adam Brant who is Orin's lookalike is psychoanalytically significant. Her repressed libidinal desires for her son find a disguised gratification through this liaison with Adam Brant who is Orin's “displacement”. The antagonistic, jealous relationship between Lavinia and her mother Christine in the play can be ascribed to the Electra complex. According to Carl Jung, the daughter's craving for her father at the unconscious level contributes to the formation of an emotionally entangled love triangle involving mother, daughter and father. When Ezra Manon arrives home from the battlefield, Lavinia, the daughter of Manon tries to “possess” him snatching him away from his wife Christine. In Act Two of *Homecoming*, Christine goes to the extent of asserting that Lavinia, her daughter, “wanted to be the wife” of her father. These instances clearly suggest the relationship between Ezra Manon and his daughter and is highly conditioned by Jungian Electra complex. Freud, while exploring the etymologies of the German terms “heimlich” and “unheimlich” in his essay on “the uncanny” (1919), discovers that the sense of “heimlich” as “belonging to the house” produces the associated meanings of being concealed, made secrets, or kept from sight. And he explains the meanings of “unheimlich” as “uncanny, unfamiliar, frightening”. The trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* abounds in Freudian *heimlich* and *unheimlich* elements. Christine's adulterous relationship with Adam Brant who always makes her think of her son Orin, Lavinia's secret craving for her own father, Ezra Manon's one time crush for Brant's own mother Brantome who was a Canuc nurse girl, Adam Brant's hidden dreams of “the Blessed Island of naked girls”, Orin's concealed desires for his own mother Christine who hatches a secret plot to murder her husband constitute the *heimlich* of the text. On the other hand, these hidden elements come close to, if not to become identical with, the *unheimlich*, that is, the uncanny, the unfamiliar, the frightening as Freud claims in the above mentioned essay that meanings of the two opposite terms - *heimlich* and *unheimlich* - are, at a certain point, very close indeed with the *unheimlich* being some way or another a subspecies of the *heimlich*. To speak plainly, the innate libidinal desires of Christine, Lavinia, Brant, Ezra, Orin are at once secret being hidden from the public sight and unfamiliar, uncanny as those desires are kept under repression in their unconscious selves.

The portrait of Ezra Manon in his bed room represents what Freud would call “the patriarchal law” which tries to suppress the pleasure principles of the imaginary state in Christine, Brant, Orin who try to defy it by the defiant glances at the stern portrait. In Act Two of *Homecoming* when Christine expresses her

clandestine desires for him in the very bedroom of Ezra, she repeatedly sheds defiant glances at the portrait of her husband. This kind of defiance is also noticeable in Lavinia when it comes to dealing with her mother in respect of her father. In Act Three of *Homecoming* Lavinia claims that she loves her father more than anyone else and wants to stay with him for the rest of her life. Here the Electra complex in Lavinia reaches a high watermark. In same Act the sitting positions of Christine, Ezra Manon, and Lavinia on the flight of steps leading to their house is psychoanalytically significant. Christine sits on the top step at the centre and Ezra on the middle step at the right while Lavinia on the lowest step at the left forming physically a triangle which represents the triad of entangled relationship at the psychic level among themselves. The Oedipal complex, which is a key concept in psychoanalysis is found to be working substantially in the trilogy. The “real” reason behind Adam Brant's taking fancy to Christine lies in the fact that the latter resembles the former's mother Brantome in physical appearance. Brant's desire to take revenge on Ezra is driven by his Oedipal desire to possess his “mother” supplanting the “rival father”. On the other hand, Orin's relationship with his mother is explicitly Oedipal one. He always dreams to take his mother to the “Blessed Island” where he desires to live with her in pleasure and peace. He is driven by his Oedipal complexities as well as his dreams of killing his own father over and over again. Orin, on his return from the war tells his mother that he always longs to be with her alone and even feels relieved psychosexually at the death of his father. But his Oedipus complexities do not resolve here. Now he is faced with another Ezra Manon in Adam Brant. Orin kills him to “marry” his mother. Orin's Oedipus complexities get even more complicated when Lavinia, on her return from the blessed island takes up the physical appearance of his mother. Now, in Orin's psyche Lavinia occupies the same psychological and emotional space as did his mother before her death. That's why Orin discourages Lavinia to marry Peter and doesn't pay emotional attention at all to Hazel who loves him.

All the major characters in the play keep referring to the “Blessed Island” where they desire to live with their beloved in bliss being free from the societal restraints and constraints of the Lacanian “symbolic” state of human life and experience. This recurrent reference to the island of “pleasure principles” by Christine, Adam Brant, Ezra Manon, Orin, Lavinia is expressive of the Jungian “primordial images” or the “psychic residues” in their collective unconscious. These primitive impulses form the Lacanian “imaginary state”. Neither the imaginary nor the symbolic can fully apprehend “the real” which remains out there somewhere. Madan Sarup in his book *Jacques Lacan (1992)* observes that “the real is the domain of the inexpressible, of what cannot be spoken about, for it does not belong to language. It is order where the subject meets with the inexpressible enjoyment and death”. The kind of primordial pleasure and enjoyment Lavinia experiences on her month-long sojourn on the South Seas Island and after which she mysteriously assumes the voluptuous physique like her mother is not expressed explicitly in the play. This, along with what Orin writes about Lavinia's enjoyment on the island of naked men and women in a manuscript which remains unrevealed, forms the inexpressible, the unspoken part of the play.

War and death are significant elements in psychoanalysis. Here war metaphorically represents the psychological warfare in which the repressed desires are in constant fight with the reality principles. Ezra Manon and Orin constantly keep referring to the war and death in it. Death metaphorically suggests here the psychological death of the unfamiliar, subdued self which is the bundle of innate and libidinal desires and which one needs to kill repeatedly in order to be a socialized and civilized human being. So, in other words, the socialized and civilized man is a masked man. Beneath the veneer of the civility there lies the self of primitive impulses. That's why psychoanalysis questions the stability of the subject. The subject positions in the play are not fixed. The daughter becomes the mother and the son becomes the father as Lavinia takes up Christine's place in the wake of the latter's death and Orin occupies his father's space after the death of the latter.

Freud introduced the concept of "Nachtraglichkeit" in his study of the so called "Wolf Man". The meaning of the term is the "working through" of trauma. Like the so called "Wolf Man" who witnesses the act of sexual intercourse between his parents at the age of one and a half and whose traumatic experience of this incident gets deferred until he brings a mature sexual understanding to it, "a reader who is innocent of psychoanalysis gets traumatized at the actions and speeches of the characters in the play and his traumatic experiences get differed until he can bring a mature psychoanalytical understanding to them". This is to say, the meaning of the text is the retrospective result of "working through". The minute description of the body language of the characters prior to the delivery of their speeches constitutes what Julia Kristeva would call the "semiotic" that is, the unexpressed, unspoken elements in them. To conclude, the trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* is not merely a domestic tragedy of love and lust but at the psychic level it connotes much, much more than it denotes.

### Works Cited

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