

Mourning Becomes Electra* by Eugene O'Neill: Aeschylus and Plato's Cave to Create a Dark Drama?

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To once again examine Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* from the perspective of the classical tradition is not necessarily an impossible task, but it would appear at this stage to be at least a quite risky endeavour. The fundamental debt this work owes to Aeschylus,¹ and to a lesser degree to Sophocles² and Euripides,³ has been widely recognised and analysed since the premier performance on 26 October, 1931.⁴ This was the legacy on which the American playwright based his trilogy (*Homecoming*, *The Hunted*, and *The Haunted*) to reveal the deep-seated motives that give rise to a hostile and tormented relationship between family members. In effect, the Mannon family saga, New England and the Grecian architecture of its great mansions, and the American Civil War form the contemporary framework of the mid-19th century setting of the tragedy of the Atrides⁵ presented in the form of a psychological drama with characters marked by

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¹ See, for example: Clark 1932; Corbin 1932; Knickerbocker 1932; Brie 1933. See also, concerning similarities and dissimilarities: Young 1964; Travis 1988, 331-63; Dymkowski 1995, XII-XXII. Some authors have even pointed in other directions, that is, Shakespeare rather than Aeschylus: Frenz – Mueller 1966.

² Besides Sophocles' *Electra*, it seems obvious that O'Neill also takes into account the Freudian reading of *Oedipus Rex* as a reference that explains the relationship, with obvious incestuous connotations, between Lavinia Mannon and her father, Ezra Mannon, and that of Orin Mannon with his mother, Christine Mannon

³ As Travis 1988, 342 quite correctly indicates: «In some thematic respects, *Mourning Becomes Electra* is closer to Euripides than to Aeschylus, owing to the Euripidean treatment, its psychological interest and the incorrigible self-justifications for acts of violence in which Euripides' *Electra* and Clytemnestra engage. The incest motif also has its strongest source in Euripides' *Orestes*». In effect, in the *Oresteia*, *Electra* appears briefly in the *Choephoroe* to encourage Orestes, whereas in the play by Sophocles she is the leading character, and in Euripides' tragedy she shares the leading role with her brother. O'Neill, in contrast, elevates *Electra* to the category of an absolute heroine (see, for example, Dymkowski 1995, XVI). With respect to the similarities between Euripides, see also Nagarajan 1962, 154.

⁴ At the Guild Theater in New York under the direction of Philip Moeller; Alla Nazimova played Christine and Alice Brady, Lavinia. Robert Edmond Jones designed the set, and the performance lasted from 4:00 to 10:30 pm. For more details about the premier, see Wainscott 2000, 108 f.

⁵ The writing of *Mourning Becomes Electra* must be evaluated in a historical perspective. The play belongs to a large group of modern dramas based on Greek themes by authors such as Giradoux, Hugo von Hofmannsthal (Arthur Symons translated his *Electra*), Eliot, Sartre, and Shaw, among others. All these works form a part of the twentieth century Greek revival, another example of which was the new translation of Euripides' *Alcestis* by D. Fitts and R. Fitzgerald (see Travis 1988, 341; Sheaffer 1973, 336; Floyd 1981, 185).

a family heritage as inescapable as destiny itself.⁶ The play is so devastating that it is reasonable to wonder whether any possibility remains for catharsis or whether, on the contrary, the spectator will remain forever anchored in terror and fear.⁷

The title of this work refers to an absolute tragedy, one offering no possible escape or solution, bereft of any hope beyond the mere fact of having fallen so far that one can fall no further – having plunged into that Nietzschean abyss that cannot be illuminated by reason⁸ – and the fact is that, as O'Neill himself confessed, the experience of writing *Mourning Becomes Electra* was for the author an almost inhuman effort, a hell, and an experience that left him «moved and disturbed spiritually», with the sensation of having had «a valid dramatic experience with intense tortured passions beyond the ambition or scope of other modern plays».⁹

⁶ «I meant *Mourning Becomes Electra* to be a modern psychological treatment of the Greek theme» (Letter to Sophus Keith Winther, May 1, 1934, Travis – Bryer 1988, 432). And, similarly: «Don't get the idea there is a lot of Greek stuff in this. There isn't much a matter of fact. I simply pinch their plot, as many a better playwright has done before me, and make of it a modern psychological drama, realistic and not realistic at the same time. I use the plot because it has greater possibilities of revealing *all* the deep hidden relationships in the family than any other and because Electra is to me the most interesting of all women in drama. But I don't stick to the plot even. I only use some of its major incidents. The rest is my own» (Letter to Brooks Atkinson, August 16, 1931, Travis – Bryer 1988, 368). Concerning “psychological fate”, see also Alexander, 1953.

⁷ I am referring, of course, to Aristotle, *Po.* VI: «ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περραίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν» («Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of certain magnitude... it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions», translated by Fyfe 1965). O'Neill, however, warns us about the necessarily different parameters of tragedy in contemporary theatre: «As for Aristotle's 'purging', I think it is about time we purged his purging out of modern criticism... what modern audience was ever purged by pity and terror by witnessing a Greek tragedy or what modern mind by reading one?... We are too far away, we are in a world of different values! As Spengler points out, their art had an entirely different life-impulse and life-belief than ours. We can admire while we pretend to understand—but our understanding is always a pretense! And Greek criticism is as remote from us as the art it criticizes. What we need is a definition of Modern and not Classical Tragedy by which to guide our judgements. If we had Gods or a God, if we had a Faith, if we had some healing subterfuge by which to conquer Death, then the Aristotelian criterion might apply in part to our Tragedy. But our Tragedy is just that we have only ourselves, that there is nothing to be purged into except a belief in the guts of man, good or evil, who faces unflinchingly the black mystery of his own soul!» (Letter to Brooks Atkinson, Friday eve, June 19, 1931, Travis – Bryer 1988, 390).

⁸ «The basis for O'Neill's tragic vision is profoundly Nietzschean. For Nietzsche, life remains unfathomable and his dominant image to portray the world is an abyss into which one cannot see due to its immense size and depth. Reason and intellect fail to shine light into the abyss. *The Birth of Tragedy* vilifies Socrates as a logical thinker who cannot adequately explain existence through reason» (Brietzke 2001, 164). See also LaBelle 1973.

⁹ Estrin 1932, cap. *Eugene O'Neill. George Jean Nathan / 1932*, p. 126. The psychological stress continued even after success was achieved: «After the unprecedented critical acclaim to *Mourning Becomes Electra* I was in bed nearly a week, overcome by the profoundest gloom and nervous exhaustion» (Letter to Lee Simonson, May? 1934, Travis – Bryer 1988, 435). «The truth is that, after *Electra* I felt I had gone as far as it was in me to go along my old line... I felt a need to liberate myself from myself, so to speak – to see and express, if possible, the life preserving

This was, therefore, a definitely singular *poiesis* or creative process that gave rise to a tragedy that communicates defeat.¹⁰ If we study O'Neill's body of work, we see that despair does not always inundate the stage,¹¹ but to deny that despair is one of the salient features of his work would be pointless and absurd, so that citing a number of passages that illustrate this aspect – some of the most striking among them found in a single work – is no difficult task.

Sometimes he emphasizes the lack of meaning of human life: «If Life had meaning... as... a simple sentence... But it has no meaning... And death is no more than a muddy well into which I and a dead cat are cast aside indifferently!»¹² (Deborah, in *More Stately Mansions* – 3.343 f.). The same character wants to convince herself that «Life is not the long dying of death...» (3.370), while Simon sees life as «...a silly disappointment, a liar's promise, a perpetual in-bankruptcy for debts we never contracted», such that, it becomes a mirage or long wait and «when finally the bride or the bridegroom cometh, we discover we are kissing Death» (3.528). Sometimes he surprises us with an element that is a clear tribute to his admired Oscar Wilde or, in other words, with a paradox contrived to relate two things difficult to associate. Simon believes, for example, that in our wills we should express gratitude to anyone who should murder us because «the murderer, I think, possesses the true quality of mercy» (3.529).

At other times, O'Neill presents humans as mad beings irremediably condemned to error: «... We're all poor nuts, and things happen, and we just get mixed in wrong, that's all» (Anna in *Anna Christie* – 1.1015). Or he loudly proclaims the privilege of non-existence: «The best of all were never to be born» (Larry, in *The Iceman Cometh* – 3.582).¹³ And he even makes use of the profuse stage directions

forces in other aspects which I knew from experience to be equally illustrative of the fate in human beings' lives and aspirations» (Letter to Kenneth MacGowan, October 16, 1933, Travis – Bryer 1988, 423).

¹⁰ And, nonetheless, at the same time he reveals all the vital force that his new wife, Carlotta Monterey O'Neill, was able to infuse into him, making love triumph over life. In the dedication of the manuscript of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, of which 50 copies were printed and sent to his friends, he writes: «... These scripts are like us and my presenting them is a gift which, already, is half yours. So, in hopes that what this trilogy may have in it may repay the travail we have gone through for this sake – I say I want them to remind you that I have known your love with my love even when I have seemed not to know; that I have seen it even when I have appeared most blind; that I have felt it warmly around me always (even in my study in the closing pages of my heart) sustaining and comforting, a warm, serene sanctuary for the man after the author's despairing solitude and inevitable deceits – a victory of love over life. Oh, mother and wife and mistress and friend! – And collaborator! I love you» (Estrin 1990, 216)

¹¹ For example in *Days Without End*, *Lazarus Laughed*, *The Straw*, and *Ah! Wilderness*.

¹² All quotes are taken from O'Neill, Eugene, 1988, and the number in parenthesis refers to this edition.

¹³ Editors generally make the point that here O'Neill's work draws on "Morphine" by Heinrich Heine (see, for example, *Sämtliche Schriften*, Breigelb (ed.), Munich, 1968-76, XI, 333). At this point, it is also worthwhile recalling Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* 1224-7: μή φῦναι τὸν ἅπαντα νι / καὶ λόγον· τὸ δ', ἐπει φανῆ, / βῆναι κείσ' ὀπόθεν περ ἦ / κει πολὺ δεύτερον ὡς τάχιστα (Not to be born at all / Is best, far best that can befall, / Next best, when born, with least delay / To trace the backward way, translated by Storr 1968). Compare this with Theognis 425-8 (in West 1989): πάντων μὲν μὴ φῦναι ἐπιχθονίοισιν ἄριστον, / μηδ' εἰσεῖν αὐγας ὄξεος ἠελίου, / φῦντα δ' ὄπως ὄκιστα πύλας Αἴδαιο περιῆσαι / καὶ κείσθαι πολλὴν γῆν

in his work to introduce characters, as he does Ruth in *Beyond the Horizon*, renouncing *stricto sensu* all hope: «She remains silent, gazing at him dully with the sad humility of exhaustion, her mind already sinking back into that spent calm beyond the further troubling of any hope» (1.653).

Marked by a profoundly tragic vision of human existence,¹⁴ O'Neill with *Mourning Becomes Electra* joins the long list of Western playwrights whose work not only affords a glimpse of an underlying Greek legacy in general, but also frequently takes the form of a Greek tragedy in the strict sense, notwithstanding, of course, the inevitable adaptations to different historical settings. In fact, the fate of O'Neill's *Electra* is the darkness of a sepulchral mansion – a house-tomb constructed to accommodate hate – where she is to be hounded until her death by a host of family demons. As a result, it is logical that the Erinyes of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* – consubstantial as they are with darkness – should become both an inevitable and a useful reference. The Erinyes are, let us recall, «goddesses of the nether world» («κατὰ χθονὸς θεαί», v. 115);¹⁵ «and in festal robes of pure white I have nor lot nor portion» («παλλεύκων δὲ πέπλων ἀπόμοιρος ἄκληρος ἐτύχθην», v. 352); «... awful and inexorable to mankind, pursuing our appointed office dishonoured, despised, separated from the gods by a light not of the sun» («... σεμναί / καὶ δυσπαρήγοροι βροτοῖς, / ἄτιμ' ἀτίετα διόμεναι / λάχρη θεῶν διχοστατοῦντ' / ἀνηλίω / λάμπρα», vv. 383-7); «my appointed place is beneath the earth and in sunless gloom» («... ὑπὸ χθόνα τάξιν ἔχουσα / καὶ δυσήλιον κνέφας», vv. 395 f.); and they are also «Night's dread children» («... Νυκτὸς αἰανῆ τέκνα», v. 416).

However, in the case of a tragic heroine for whom O'Neill reserves the terrible privilege of experiencing death-in-life in a house-tomb that she herself seals, the reference to the Erinyes involves a serious inconvenience: their eventual metamorphosis into Eumenides. Orestes, *Electra*'s brother and the chief protagonist of the last play in Aeschylus' trilogy, leaves for the temple at Delphi, the navel of the world, under the protection of Apollo, who will take responsibility for Orestes' execution of his mother Clytemnestra. However, Apollo fails to persuade the ill fated daughters of the Night of the rightness of Orestes' acts, and it is Athena who finally resolves the conflict in his favour: «This man stands acquitted on the charge of murder» («ἀνὴρ ὃδ' ἐκπέφευγεν αἵματος δίκην» – 752).¹⁶

It only remains for the Chorus of Erinyes not to scorn the numerous advantages they will obtain from the city of Athens and to invoke the radiance of the sun to transform their essential darkness into the light of life: «I make my prayer... that the radiant splendour of the sun may cause to burgeon from the earth, in bounteous

ἐπαμυστάμενον. And also with Epicurus, *Ep. to Menoecus*, 126 f. (Usener 1966): πολὺ δὲ χείρων καὶ ὁ λέγων καλὸν μὲν μὴ φῦναι, φύντα δ' ὅπως ὄμισα πύλας Ἄϊδαο περῆσαι.

¹⁴ Greatly influenced by his own personal history; see for example Dymkowski 1995, V-XI; Black 1999 and 2000.

¹⁵ Trad. Herbert Weir Smyth, 1963.

¹⁶ «Aeschylus was writing for a society in which drama was intimately connected with the social, political, and religious life of the community... with the divine intervention of Apollo and Athene, Aeschylus reconciles the old and the new order of divine justice and represents the city-state as the protector of human dignity and of individual freedom and security» (O'Neill 1963, 487 f.).

plenty, blessings that give happiness to life!» («ἐπισσύντους βίου τύχας ὀνησίμους / γαίας ἐξαμβρῦσαι / φαιδρὸν ἀλίου σέλας» – 924-6).

O'Neill had already confessed that the writing of *Mourning Becomes Electra* had been a long, ugly and hellish experience full of spiritual commotion and violent and tormenting passions. It is therefore clear that while he based his Electra on the Greek model, he had necessarily to go beyond this model if his ultimate aim was to scale the great heights of tragedy.¹⁷ O'Neill did not wish to see his Electra, after taking vengeance on her own mother, almost disappear into «a nice conventionally content future (married to Pylades, according to one version of the legend!)».¹⁸ In the modern psychological chain of destiny, she deserves a better tragic fate, and, therefore, «I flatter myself I have given my Yankee Electra an end tragically worthy of herself!¹⁹ ... She is broken and not broken! By the way she yields to her Mannon fate she overcomes it. She is tragic!».

Therefore, very aware – and proud – of his ability, the playwright transcends the Greek model. I wonder, however, whether the vast Greek heritage of Western culture did not still have something of value to offer him, the Platonic image of the cave perhaps? With the help of this image, present in both the mind of the writer and of the cultured reader or spectator, the tragedy of O'Neill's classical Electra – also the new Yankee Electra – is clearly magnified. If, as I indicated at the outset, I considered it risky to once again examine *Mourning Becomes Electra* focussing on the links with Aeschylus, a relationship that has always been accepted, I would now have to recognise that, for obvious reasons, the hypothesis I have just expounded entails an additional risk. In effect, since this image is never explicit in the text, I cannot demonstrate *stricto sensu* its underlying presence in the playwright's mind.²⁰ Nonetheless, having, of course, reviewed the whole body of O'Neill's theatrical work, I will take a risk and appeal to the critical judgement of the reader, asking

¹⁷ Among other reasons, because Aeschylus and O'Neill each solve the problem of Nemesis in a different way: «Whereas Aeschylus had solved his much different problem of Nemesis with a nice point of social law and with the aid of divine wisdom... O'Neill set out to solve his problem in an essentially different manner... there is only one sphere of order left: the autonomous order of the individual human character... Man is totally responsible for justice. Each man provides his own Nemesis» (Long 1968, 174). However, Young (*loc. cit.*) perceives the presence of the Eumenides in the psychological experience of the audience at the end of the drama.

¹⁸ Letter to Brooks Atkinson, Friday eve./ June 19, 1931, Travis – Bryer 1988, 389 f. In fact, whenever O'Neill was criticised for accentuating life's futility or its sordid side, he answered as follows: «As for this type of play having a depressing effect, or accentuating the futility of human endeavour. I do not agree with any such opinion. We should feel exalted to think that there is something – some vital, unquenchable flame in man which makes him triumph over his miseries – over life itself. Dying, he is still victorious. The realization of this should exalt, not depress» (Estrin 1990, 53).

¹⁹ J.E. Barlow adds, «*Mourning Becomes Electra*... is his first work – and indeed one of very few in his canon – to explore relationships between women in any depth» (Barlow 2000, 168).

²⁰ Actually, when using this image as a comparative reference, authors usually think of *The Iceman Cometh*: «The four-act play is set in Harry Hope's bar – its 'two windows... so glazed with grime one cannot see through them' – on the West Side of New York in the Summer of 1912. The characters, who inhabit the rooms above the clingy saloon, recall the chained prisoners of Plato's *Republic*, whose obstructed vision could perceive only shadows or reflections on a cave wall rather than objects of the world of daylight» (Vogliano 1999, 77; see also pp. 86 and 88).

him or her to evaluate the plausibility, and above all, the possible dramatic benefit that might be derived from such a reading. Thus, I begin.

The context of the dramatic development of events is as follows: Orin and Vinnie Mannon have driven their mother, Christine Mannon, to suicide after Orin has executed her lover Captain Brant. However, Orin has been tormented for days by feelings of remorse, and Vinnie, the inflexible Electra of the play, is obliged to prop up her Orestes, who is too weak and on the brink of psychological shock.

(Vinnie): «It isn't good for you staying in this stuffy room in this weather. You ought to get out in the fresh air». (Orin): «I hate the daylight. It's like an accusing eye! No, we've renounced the day, in which normal people live – or rather it has renounced us. Perpetual night – darkness of death in life – that's the fitting habitat for guilt! You believe you can escape that, but I'm not so foolish!... And I find artificial light more appropriate for my work – man's light, not God's²¹ – 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». (V): «Your work? What Work?». (O): «Studying the law of crime and punishment,²² as you saw...». (V): «It's so close in here! It's suffocating! It's bad for you! (She goes to the window and throws the shutters open and looks out) It's black as pitch tonight. There isn't a star». (O): «Darkness without a star to guide us! Where are we going, Vinnie?». (II, 1027)

Is there sufficient evidence here to afford a glimpse of the underlying presence of the Platonic image of the cave in this conversation between Orin and Vinnie Mannon? First, it would be intellectually dishonest as well as absurd to try to ignore the moral nature of the dialogue, with guilt, punishment, and God as its chief protagonists. In fact, it suffices to cite pertinent passages from the *Old Testament* to provide convincing evidence of this:

«... σὺ ὁ λύχνος μου, κύριε / καὶ κύριος ἐκλάμψει μοι τὸ σκότος μου» («... You, Lord, are my lamp / and the Lord will illuminate my darkness» – 2 S. 22:29); «... σὺ φωτιεῖς λύχνον μου, κύριε / ὁ θεός μου, φωτιεῖς τὸ σκότος μου» («... You, Lord, will illuminate my lamp / my God, you will illuminate my darkness» – Ps. 17:29); «... ἀνακαλύπτων βαθέα ἐκ σκοτούς, / ἐξήγαγεν δὲ εἰς φῶς σιάων θανάτου» («... revealing the deep things from the darkness, He brought the shadow of death into

²¹ God, and, a few lines above, «the accusing eye». In addition to the eye of God in *Genesis* that sees everything and therefore discovers Adam and Eve's original sin, we also note that the Greeks believed that human actions did not go unnoticed by a higher power. The Sun, for example, is the seeing eye and looks with the help of its rays (*Hymn to Demeter*, 22-7, Allen 1920); it sees and hears everything (for example *Il.* 3.277 or *Od.* 11.109, Allen 1920); it is an all-seeing orb (*A. Pr.* 91, West 1990). It goes without saying that soon it is the eye of Zeus that sees all (for example, *Hes. Op.* 265-70, Merkelbach – West 1990). It is Zeus who sees the destiny of all things (*Sol. Elegy to the Muses*, 9-16, West 1992), etc.

²² The reference to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* is indisputable, and O'Neill much more readily admits this influence than that of Freud or Jung: «I am no deep student of psychoanalysis. As far as I remember, of all the books written by Freud, Jung, etc., I have read only four, and Jung is the only one of the lot who interests me. Some of his suggestions I find extraordinarily illuminating in the light of my own experience with hidden human motives. But as far as influence on my work goes he has had none compared to what psychological writers of the past like Dostoevsky, etc. have had» (Letter to Clark, Barrett H., June 6th 1931, Travis – Bryer 1988, 386).

the light» – *Job*. 12:22); «... μή ἐπίχειρέ μοι, ἢ ἐχθρά μου, ὅτι πέπτωκα· καὶ ἀναστήσομαι, διότι ἐάν καθίσω ἐν τῷ σκοτεινῷ, κύριος φωτιεῖ μοι» («... do not gloat over me, my enemy, because I have fallen. I shall get up, because, if I sit in the darkness, the Lord will illuminate me» – *Mic*. 7:8 (the translations are mine)).²³

However, if we wish to make a very safe literal interpretation, we must conclude that faith in God’s illumination and the triumph of the divine light over human tragedy is absolute, but that O’Neill, for obvious reasons, fashions a different ending. In these texts, God, not man, is the lamp, and, when reference is made to the lamp of man, (and not the lamp-man), this is to make it clear that nothing would exist without the divine light that nourishes it. With respect to shadows, God banishes the most tragic of shadows, that of death itself, because He is the Life and the Light, the light that will not allow man to remain in darkness. By contrast, in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, dark despair and the shadow of death are never dispelled. Ezra Mannon, Adam Brant, Christine Mannon and Orin Mannon are never illuminated or saved by the divine light; they live and die in the tragic darkness that appears to have always been their lot. And O’Neill has even reserved for Lavinia Mannon the torment of a long death-in-life spent in the self-imposed darkness of a house-tomb. Naturally, one might think that the dramatist has merely presented the obverse side of the biblical texts – although not explicitly – while confirming that they are his only reference. However, my hypothesis is that the notion of the underlying presence of the Platonic icon can serve to better elucidate the tragic dimension of O’Neill’s text than would the simple affirmation of an express intention to contradict the biblical texts.

In effect, after contrasting the human and the divine sphere – the light of man and the light of God – the writer abandons the particular drama of the Mannon family to focus on the drama that all human beings face when they discover they are condemned to darkness and thus embark on a difficult process of self-knowledge that is not contemplated in the texts we have just cited, but is nonetheless comparable to the Platonic gnoseological journey from the darkness of the cave to the light outside, to the light of the Idea. The discovery is so overwhelming that the humans appear to be able only to convince of a «feeble» personal effort to understand themselves, probably aware, because of the failures of an entire lifetime, that the light has been denied to them. However, in this dark kingdom – or non-explicit cave – a symbol of the life of humans, there is no fire projecting shadows on a wall, but rather the humans themselves are a «lamp burning out in a room of waiting shadows». What shadows? We know – if we turn our thoughts once again

²³ Rahlfs 1979. I restrict my references to the *Old Testament* because in 2.937 we read, «... the Mannon’s way of thinking. They went to the white meeting-house on Sabbaths». However, in view of O’Neill’s Catholic education – see, for example, Black, Stephen A. “Celebrant of loss”, in Manheim, 2000, 7 –, and with respect to the hatred of the light, we note in the Gospel According to Saint John (3.20 f.): πᾶς γὰρ ὁ φαῦλα πράσσων μισεῖ τὸ φῶς καὶ οὐκ ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα μὴ ἐλεγχθῆ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ· ὁ δὲ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα φανερωθῆ αὐτοῦ τὰ ἔργα ὅτι ἐν θεῷ ἐστὶν εἰργασμένα (Everyone who practices evil hates the light, and will not come into the light in order that his deeds may not be exposed. But whoever does the truth comes into the light, in order that his deeds may be seen as having been done in harmony with God [the translation is mine]).

to the family saga – that the portraits of bygone Mannons hanging on the walls of this closed room are in fact shadows or ghosts that await the moment of triumph, but, if we return to the feeble effort of self-knowledge mentioned above and, consequently, to the ‘lamp-men’ and ‘lamp-women’ who cannot burn with intensity, the shadows must also be the element of themselves that they can see and project in the absence of a clear and powerful light to which they have no access and which does not burn in them. Prisoners, therefore, in the shadowy room or cave in which it is their lot to live, the brother and sister eventually bear and accept the entire weight of the law of crime and punishment, while humanity as a whole, which O’Neill decides to mention, despite not having been born into such an ill-fated family, also lives in a tragic darkness that is inherent to its state.

Plato saw this cave – which he describes in the first chapters of book VII of his *Republic* – as an image ‘applicable’ to his idealist or ideocentric philosophy,²⁴ a way of illustrating the passage or elevation of the soul from the material to the intelligible world, from matter to Idea.²⁵ His message is, therefore, positive, even

²⁴ ‘Myth’, ‘simile’, ‘fable’, and ‘allegory’, are some of the terms used to make an interpretation of Plato’s cave. Heidegger 1988, 18, for instance, writes: «Wir sprechen von einem ‘Gleichnis’, sagen auch ‘Sinn-Bild’. Das heisst: ein sichtbarer Anblick, so freilich, dass das Erblickte allsogleich ein Winkendes ist. Der Anblick will nicht und nie für sich allein stehen; er gibt einem Wink: dahin, dass es etwas und was es bei diesem Anblick und durch diesen Anblick zu verstehen gibt. Der Anblick winkt, – er lenkt in ein zu Verstehendes, d. h. in den Bereich von Verstehbarkeit (die Dimension, innerhalb deren verstanden wird): in einen Sinn (daher Sinn-Bild)». The translation of this text is obviously a risky one. I do not dare to affirm – though I do not deny it – that ‘*Gleichnis*’ means here ‘allegory’ as Sadler says in his translation into English (2000): «We speak of an ‘allegory’, also of ‘sensory image’ (Sinn-Bild), of a sort that provides a hint or clue. The image is never intended to stand for itself alone, but indicates that something is to be understood, providing a clue as to what this is. The image provides a hint – it leads into the intelligible, into a region of intelligibility (the dimension within which something is understood), into a sense (hence sensory image)». On the contrary, in my opinion it is unquestionable that ‘*Sinn-Bild*’ refers to an image endowed with meaning, if, as read, we must go from the contemplation to the realm of what is intelligible («Bild, äusserer gegenstand als ausdrück irgend eines sinnes»), *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, – Grimm 1984. And in its turn, ‘Bild’ in the *Platon-Lexikon. Begriffswörterbuch zu Platon und der platonischen Tradition* – Schäfer 2007, 29 – takes us to *eikón*). Therefore, I would dare to say that «sensory image» is not a suitable translation for both ‘*Sinn-Bild*’ in Heidegger’s text. Plato says «this image then... we must apply». It is, consequently, a προσασπτεία εικών that Plato does not seem to consider ὑπόνοια, the real Platonic term for ἀλληγορία.

²⁵ Pl. R. 517a-d: «This image (εἰκόνα) then, dear Glaucon, we must apply as a whole to all that has been said, likening the region revealed through sight to the habitation of the prison, and the light of the fire in it to the power of the sun. And if you assume that the ascent and the contemplation of the things above is the soul’s ascension to the intelligible region, you will miss my surmise, since that is what you desire to hear. But God knows whether it is true. But, at any rate, my dream as it appears to me is that in the region of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good, and that when seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this». «I concur», he said, «so far as I am able». «Come then», I said, «and join me in this further thought, and do not be surprised that those who have attained to this height are not willing to occupy themselves with the affairs of men, but their souls ever feel the upward urge and the

though he sees man as a being who feels his way blindly, at least until the great leap occurs. If I am not mistaken, therefore, O'Neill, a playwright but not a philosopher, adopted the image and discarded the message since in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and in a good part of his oeuvre, humans are tragic beings by nature and are therefore condemned to live with black misfortune, or, what amounts to the same thing, with the frequent overturning or *katastrophé* of all their brief episodes of happiness. Trapped by an inexorable fate, they are prisoners whose lot is to live in the dark depths of a world, whose luminous Reality they will never perceive until they attain 'the light of God' (Orin) – the Christian reference for the zenith of immutable Ideas – or, simply, that desired light that our playwright, after all just another human, seems to always glimpse dimly through many veils.

Naturally enough, the very fact of daring to speak of an underlying image in O'Neill's work implies the assertion that the author was aware of it, among other reasons, because the capital importance of this image in the work of some of his intellectual mentors, such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde, would free me of the obligation to question this assertion, which I am not going to do. But I will lay this subject aside for further treatment. At this point, the task is to indicate to what degree some of the essential themes of Platonic philosophy – or more precisely, of Platonic sensibility or character – touching on darkness, light, the flight from the prison of the material world, are not at all alien to O'Neill's work.

In the first place, it is interesting to note how frequently O'Neill refers to a series of topics:

- To the walled-in souls of humans: «She is very pale. Her big dark eyes are grim with the prisoner-pain of a walled-in-soul...» (referring to Evans' mother in *Strange Interlude* – 2.680)
- To life seen as solitary cell: «Tragic is the plight of the tragedian whose only audience is himself! Life is for each man a solitary cell whose walls are mirrors» (Lazarus, in *Lazarus Laughed* – 2.572 f.)
- To women and men being prisoners owing to the very fact or having been born: «Enuf to gimme life for! I was born, see? Sure, dat's de charge... I was born, get me!» (Yank, in *The Hairy Ape* – 2.160)
- To all the walls and prisons that suffocate dreams: «... one desire in my heart... to put the whole rim of the world between me and those hills, and be able to breathe freely once more!» (Robert, in *Beyond The Horizon* – 1.614 s.)
- To incarceration in cities, forever bereft of woods and hills, of sky and stars, in short, of life: «Out into the woods! Upon the hills! Cities are prisons wherein man locks himself from life. Out with you under the sky! Are the stars too pure for your sick passions?» (Lazarus, in *Lazarus Laughed* – 2.573-4)

yearning for that sojourn above. For this, I take it, is likely if in this point too the likeness of our image (ἑικόνα) holds», translated by Shorey 1970.

Thus, it is clear that humans are prisoners²⁶ and darkness is therefore their lot: «And my mother? I remember a sweet, strange girl, with affectionate, bewildered eyes as if God had locked her in a dark closet without any explanation» (Dion in *The Great God Brown* – 2.496). This darkness could perhaps be illuminated by the New Testament Saviour, since he said, «come unto me all ye who are heavy laden and I will give you rest», but Dion does not believe it: «Blah! Fixation on old Mama Christianity! You infant blubbering in the dark, you!» (2.496).

Even more so, they like to conceal themselves in the fog where everything ceases to be real and becomes a mere simulacrum «She has hidden deeper within herself and found refuge and release in a dream where present reality is but an appearance» – stage direction referring to Mary in *Long Day's Journey into Night* – 3.772), where life hides from itself («Everything looked and sounded unreal... That's what I wanted – to be alone with myself in another world where truth is untrue and life can hide from itself» – Edmund in *Long Day's Journey into Night* – 3.795 f.), where, as if in a gilded cage, it is possible to take refuge to free oneself from the external oppression.²⁷ In other words, they like to take refuge in dreams where reality becomes appearance («I know you become a coward you'll grab at any lousy excuse to get out of killing your pipe dreams... So you've got to kill them like I did mine» – Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh* – 3.670 f.).

They are prisoners, yes, but at times they appear to retain the anamnesis of the ideal, since they are also capable of yielding to 'platonic love', and here O'Neill does not avoid the adjective: «Yes, I can imagine how the platonic must appeal to Dion's pure, innocent type!» (Brown, in *The Great God Brown* – 2.501); «What!... platonic heroics at my age!... wouldn't I give anything in life to see them desire me?» (Marsden, in *Strange Interlude* – 2.768 f.).

By contrast, in the line with classic Christianity of both Platonic and neoplatonic inspiration, O'Neill is sometimes even able to present the unlucky life of men and women as a strange interlude composed of unreality – of shadow or simulacrum if you will – before their souls rid themselves of the impurity of the flesh that so materially and so abominably stains the whiteness of spiritual purity: «... let's you and me forget the whole distressing episode, regard it as an interlude... in which our souls have been scraped clean of impure flesh and made worthy to bleach in peace» (Marsden, in *Strange Interlude* – 2.817), to which Nina responds, «Yes, our lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father!» (Nina. *Ibidem*)²⁸

Thus, when one of his characters adopts a truly Platonic idealist bent, Beauty is always the final objective, certainly distant and unknown, but in the end the promise of real freedom, of access to an open space where the suffocations of the prison

²⁶ Moreover, it is highly indicative that some scholars of O'Neill's work when dealing with his biography decide to include a chapter entitled *The Imprisoned Person*, as is the case in Dubost 1997, cap. 2.

²⁷ «Tragic vision is the Dionysian nightmare of night and fog, confusion and doubt. O'Neill's characters grope and flail and stumble in the dark, afraid to turn on the light, or having done so, they fear to confront what appears before them. The inability to see, or to gain visual proof of what one sees, creates a context for tragic events» (Brietzke 2001, 169).

²⁸ It hardly need be noted that this energetic vision of God does not appear to absolve the creatures of the need to purify the flesh.

disappear: «It's just Beauty that's calling me, the beauty of the far off and unknown... the need of the freedom of great wide spaces... the secret which is hidden just over there, beyond the horizon» (Robert, in *Beyond The Horizon* – 1.577).

And if just a moment ago we saw that life is in fact a strange interlude, then neither should it surprise us that man is a stranger who never feels at home. He can never feel at home, in effect, until death or isolated moments of ecstasy and mystical union with the All, God, or Life in itself, situate him, after a necessary process of abstraction, in some space beyond the immediate physical world where the veils that obscure reality making it a shadow, simulacrum, appearance, or reflection, are finally lifted. For example, in *Long Day's Journey into Night* Edmund asks his father if he wants to hear about two of the most significant visions he had on the high sea: the first when he was drunk with the marvellous spectacle of the sea and belonged without past or future to life itself «... within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself! To God, if you want to put it that way»; the second when he was swimming out to sea and became like «a saint's vision of beatitude. Like the veil of things as they seem drawn back by an unseen hand. For a second you see—and seeing the secret, are the secret». In the end, however, his situation remains very similar *mutatis mutandis* to that of the prisoners in the Platonic cave, because «Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone, lost in the fog again, and you stumble on toward nowhere...» (3.811 f.).

In *Welded*, we even have a brief tribute, indisputable in my opinion, to the myth of the three genders in the speech of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, better known as the myth of the androgyne.²⁹ Although modern biology has acquainted us with the phenomenon of cell division, it has never advanced the claim that these cells might retain the desire to return to their origins and fuse their respective forms into a single form. While scientific biology does not encroach upon the terrain of myth, literature has no scruples whatsoever about calling upon it for help. Thus, Eleanor mentions matrimonial disputes, but her husband Cape thinks that they should be proud of them; after all, it all began «... with the splitting of a cell a hundred million years ago into you and me, leaving an eternal yearning to become one life again». (E): «At moments – we do». (C): «Yes!... You and I – year after year – together – forms of our bodies merging into one form» (2.239)³⁰.

²⁹ I agree Dubost when he says, «Everyone is seeking unity with the other person and through their lover's quest we recognize the myth of the androgyne developed by Plato» (Dubost 1997, 104).

³⁰ There are some explicit references to Greek philosophy in O'Neill's works, such as in *Days without End* when Father Baird explains that John «was running through Greek philosophy and found a brief shelter in Pythagoras and numerology» (3.122). In my opinion, the reference to Heraclitus is implicit in the following passage from *The Fountain*. (Voice): «God is a flower / Forever blooming / God is a fountain / Forever flowing». (John): «O God, Fountain of Eternity, Thou art the All in One, the One in all – the Eternal Becoming which is Beauty!» (2.226). It is also worth noting that one of the principal characters in *Strange Interlude* is a Classics professor, and O'Neill's son also took a degree at Yale University (see, for example, Black 1999, 371).

On the use of the Platonic image of the cave by O'Neill's intellectual mentors,³¹ I will merely cite once again Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche.³² In the case of Wilde, we should note his paradoxical thinking, which, on this subject, is clearly revealed in the skill and imagination with which he makes a case for the pressing need 'to leave' and at the same time 'to enter' the cave.³³ We will begin with the dialogue between Cyril and Vivian in *The Decay of Lying*. Vivian has tried to make Cyril understand that, contrary to general opinion, life imitates art rather than vice versa. Cyril has just admitted the truth of this proposition, but wishes Vivian would at least acknowledge that «Art expresses the temper of its age». Vivian, however, maintains that «Art never expresses anything but itself» since, «remote from reality, and with her eyes turned away from the shadows of the cave, Art reveals her own perfection...».³⁴

The fidelity to the Platonic model is so strong here that it might not enter our heads that the model could be overturned; however Wilde proceeds to do this in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a work that greatly impressed O'Neill, obsessed as he was with the subject of masks.³⁵ Sibyl confesses to Dorian that, before she knew him, living as she did immersed in the theatre, acting was the only reality in her life, but she now realizes that she «... knew nothing but shadows, and... thought them real. You came... and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is». Thanks to Dorian, therefore, she came to know «... something of which all art is but a reflection. You had made me understand what love really is», and, consequently, she has grown weary of «... shadows». Dorian's reaction is so horrifying that it leads her to suicide: «You have killed my love... You used to stir my imagination... you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art... You are shallow and stupid».³⁶ It is perfectly clear that in this case the underlying model is the same. However, Dorian's words utterly contradict the spirit of the Platonic image and the passage in *The Decay of Lying* cited above. In effect, in that conversation we are told that art belongs to a higher sphere far from the shadows of the cave. Dorian also believes this, that art is superior, and wants Sibyl to continue her dedication to art. However, if she wants to

³¹ In regard to the philosophical and literary references in Eugene O'Neill's work, see, for example, Törnqvist 2000. In the Tyrone family library in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, for example, we find works by Shakespeare, Balzac, Zola, Stendhal, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Engels, Kropotkin, Max Stirner, Ibsen, Shaw, Strindberg, Swinburne, Rossetti, Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Kipling, Dumas, Victor Hugo, etc. (3.717).

³² Also, in light of the recognized influence on O'Neill of the works of Ibsen and Strindberg, I cite the following articles in regard to these two playwrights and the Platonic image of the cave: Østerud 1993, and Lipman-Wulf 1974.

³³ See, for example: Gilabert 2006, 254-8.

³⁴ Nietzsche 2003, 1087.

³⁵ «A work which made an indelible impression on me was Wilde's *Dorian Gray*» (Estrin 1990, 10). «One book that left on him, in his words, an 'indelible impression' was Oscar Wilde's study of fastidious evil, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. At that disturbing age when man is hardest driven by his goat's hoof and hunger, Eugene came across the book at a particularly impressionable time; increasingly fascinated by the seamy side of life and working toward a jaundiced view of the human animal – all this on top of his early romanticism – he felt some identification with the decadent hero of Wilde's miasmatic tale» (Sheaffer 1968, 117 f.).

³⁶ Nietzsche 2003, 71 f.

stop being an artist, it is precisely because she has left behind the prison of falsity inherent in that profession. Thus, Dorian is asking her, quite paradoxically, to remain wedded to art in the dark cave rather than emerge into the light of reality. And, should we still doubt this interpretation, believing we have ended up in confusion, the great aesthete's final words confirm that this is not the case – that we have been right all along – since the shadowy cave, according to Dorian, is the natural habitat of «dreams and shadows» and Sibyl never should have become «shallow». One further note: the man who is insisting that art, which is alien to reality, should remain in the cave is himself a deceptive apparition or mask who lives in the outside world while his true face remains shut up in his house! No comment.

Turning now to Nietzsche, suffice it to say that there was a constant *agón* between him and Plato that wavered between respect and rivalry³⁷ although Nietzsche's anti-Christian and anti-Platonic attitudes are often emphasised: «The opening passages of Zarathustra are no less anti-Platonic than they are anti-Christian... Zarathustra repeats and revives a received group of images and metaphors so as to invest them with a new significance».³⁸ The foreword to *Ecce Homo* is, nonetheless, quite significant in that it deals with what Nietzsche saw as the Platonic lie: «The lie of the ideal has till now been the curse on reality; on its account humanity itself has become fake and false right down to its deepest instincts».³⁹

It makes perfect sense, then, that in the chapter entitled «How the 'true world' finally became a fable» («Wie die 'wahre Welt' endlich zur Fabel wurde») in the *Twilight of the Idols (Götzen-Dämmerung)* he should explain the history of an error with a happy ending:

«History of an error: 1. The real world, attainable to the wise, the pious, the virtuous man –he dwells in it, he is it. Oldest form of the idea, relatively sensible, simple, convincing. Transcription of the proposition 'I, Plato, am the truth'!... 6. We have abolished the real world: what world is left? The apparent world perhaps?... But no! *With the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!* (Mid-day; moment of the shortest shadow; end of the longest error; zenith of mankind; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA» (translated by Adrian Caro. Nietzsche 2006).⁴⁰

Nonetheless, on the topic of immediate concern, the Nietzschean adaptation of the Platonic image of the cave, the most useful recourse is to cite the opening

³⁷ See, for example, Woodruff 2007, 3.

³⁸ Gooding-Williams 2001, 51, 53.

³⁹ Nietzsche 2007, 3 («Die Lüge des Ideals war bisher der Fluch über die Realität, die Menschheit selbst ist durch sie bis in ihre untersten Instinkte hinein verlogen und falsch geworden...» – Nietzsche 1962, 1065 f.)

⁴⁰ Nietzsche 1968 («Geschichte eines Irrtums: 1. Die wahre Welt, erreichbar für den Weisen, den Frommen, den Tugendhaften, – er lebt in ihr, er ist sie. (Älteste Form der Idee, relativ klug, simpel, überzeugend. Umschreibung des Satzes, Ich, Plato, bin die Wahrheit'...)... 6. Die wahre Welt haben wir abgeschafft: welche Welt blieb übrig? die scheinbare vielleicht?... Aber nein! mit der wahren Welt haben wir auch die scheinbare abgeschafft! (Mittag; Augenblick des kürzesten Schattens; Ende des Längsten Irrtums; Höhepunkt der Menschheit; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA» – Nietzsche 1962, 963).

paragraphs of the foreword to *Thus Spake Zarathustra (Also sprach Zarathustra)*, the book O'Neill always kept to hand and read again and again, a book that never disappointed him.⁴¹ The Nietzschean superman would arrive paradoxically when the Light renounced the absolute transcendence with which Plato had endowed it. An ineffectual Platonic light in the last analysis since it waits until someone appears and drags one of the prisoners by force up the steep and difficult slope to the outside. In contrast, the Light, Zarathustra's sun, descends into the cave because it is precisely the fact of illuminating it that guarantees its happiness, in the same way that, to reveal the superman, Zarathustra must first descend⁴² and remain faithful to the earth.⁴³

«You great star! What would your happiness be if you had not those for whom you shine? For the years you have come up here to my cave: you would have tired of your light and of this route without me, my eagle and my snake... Behold! I am weary of my vision, like a bee that has gathered too much honey... For this I must descend into the depths... Behold, I teach you the overman! The overman is the meaning of the earth! I beseech you, my brothers, *remain faithful to the earth* and do not believe those who speak to you of extraterrestrial hopes! They are mixers of poisons whether they know it or not».⁴⁴

⁴¹ «What you say of *Lazarus Laughed* deeply pleases me, particularly that you found something of Zarathustra in it. *Zarathustra*, although my work may appear like a pitiable contradiction to this statement and my life add an exclamation point to this contradiction, has influenced me more than any book I've read. I ran into it, through the bookshop of Benjamin Tucker, the old philosophical anarchist, when I was eighteen and I've always possessed a copy since then and every year or so I reread it and am never disappointed, which is more than I can say of almost any other book (that is, never disappointed in it as a work of art, aspects of its teaching I no longer concede)» (Letter to Benjamin De Casseres, June 22, 1927, Travis – Bryer 1988, 246).

⁴² Note that in *Mourning Becomes Electra* the heroine also has to descend – to enter or incarcerate herself in the family mansion – in order to confront her own fate. The image or pattern is the same for Wilde, Nietzsche and O'Neill (if my hypothesis is accepted), and all three writers draw on the attribute with which Plato endowed it – its applicability – and adapt it to their own purposes.

⁴³ «Linked to the motif of descent, the cave and the sun are central images shared by both texts, but with different meanings. In Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave, the philosopher who has ascended is at first blinded by the light of the sun, then learns to see a higher level of reality, but finally must return to the cave to try to liberate those imprisoned inside. But recall how they receive their liberator: 'If they were somehow able to get their hands on and kill the man who attempts to release and lead up, wouldn't they kill him?'» (*Rep.* 517a). By contrast, Zarathustra lives happily alone in his cave and descends only after ten years there to give humanity his offering. As Gooding-Williams writes, «Plato's sun hovers above the cave and its dwellers whereas Zarathustra's sun comes up to the cave in which he resides» (*ZDM* 51). He takes this difference to mean an «emphasis on the sun's temporal trajectory» that implies a challenge to «the Platonist view that the source of all value (for Plato, the world of forms) transcends the world of time and appearances» (*ZDM* 51)» (Woodroof 2007, 7).

⁴⁴ Nietzsche 2006, 3-6 («Du grosses Gestirn! Was wäre dein Glück, wenn du nicht die hättest, welchen du leuchtest! Zehn Jahre kamst du hier herauf zu meiner Höhle: du würdest deines Lichtes und dieses Weges satt geworden sein, ohne mich, meinen Adler und meine Schlange... Siehe! Ich bin meiner Weisheit überdrüssig, wie die Biene, die des Honigs zuviel gesammelt hat... Dazu muss ich in die Tiefe steigen... Seht, ich lehre euch den Übermenschen! Der Übermensch ist der Sinn der Erde... Ich beschwöre euch, meine Brüder, bleibt der Erde treu und glaubt denen nicht, welche euch von überirdischen Hoffnungen reden! Giftmischer sind es, ob sie es wissen oder nicht» – Nietzsche 1962, 279 f.). And the ending refers back to the

Mourning Becomes Electra

Thus far, I have established the basis of my hypothesis; now I will try to demonstrate its plausibility. Philosophical rigour demanded a close reading of O'Neill's entire dramatic work to search for affinities with Platonism in general and with the philosophical notion of the Platonic cave in particular. What now remains to be demonstrated is whether the assertion that this image underlies the *poiesis* of *Mourning Becomes Electra* can add value to the reading of the play; or, in other words, what remains to be seen, as I have already pointed out, is whether this image – because the cultured spectator or reader also sees it in this way – effectively helps to depict the tragic magnitude of the story dramatized on the stage. If theatre is contemplation (θέασις),⁴⁵ in this case another image would be superimposed on that which we already see, while we take note of the dramatic effect of such a manoeuvre.

The first detail to come to our notice throughout *Mourning Becomes Electra* is that clear intense light has been virtually banished, and I believe we must ask ourselves why. Unlike Plato, O'Neill does not ask us to imagine – but rather asserts – that this tragic world of ours, and thus our tragic lives, are irremediably dark. The following quotes recount the chronology of the action of the play, and the intensity of the lighting of the scene in which this action takes place: «On a late afternoon in April, 1865... It is shortly before sunset and the soft light of the declining sun...» (2.893); «Ezra Mannon's study... The walls are plain plastered surfaces tinted a dull grey» (2.914); «Outside the sun is beginning to set and its glow... As the action progresses this... darkens to sombreness at the end» (2.914); «It is about nine o'clock at night a week later. The light of a half-moon falls on the house, giving it an unreal, detached, eerie quality» (2.928); «It is a moonlight night two days after the murder of Ezra Mannon» (2.951); «It is a night two days after Act Two – the day following Ezra Mannon's funeral. The moon is rising above the horizon off left rear, its light accentuating the black outlines of the ship» (2.984); «... exterior of the Mannon

foreword, «But in the morning after this night Zarathustra sprang from his sleeping place, girded his loins and came out from his cave, glowing and strong, like a morning that emerges from dark mountains» (Nietzsche 2006, 264) («Des Morgens aber nach dieser Nacht sprang Zarathustra von seinem Lager auf, gürtete sich die Lenden und kam heraus aus seine Höhle, glühend und stark, wie eine Morgensonne, die aus dunklen Bergen kommt» – Nietzsche 1962, 558).

⁴⁵ In a different, but in my view related, sense it may be worth noting that, «Lavinia, like Oedipus, wills herself to remain alive, to contemplate who she is, what she has done, and what fate may require of her. She accepts the finality of death» (Black 1999, 371). «Another reason I like the last play best is that to me it contains the deepest inner drama... It drags its drama out of fresh depths, and in a manner less externalized than in the other plays. It works more inwardly. The 'anatomizing of Orin's soul' you object to is certainly not out of the 'beaten path' of my intent in this drama. It is part and parcel of it! And his 'intellectualization' in Act Three is the essential process by which he, being Orin, *must* arrive at his fate and view it so he can face it» (Letter to Brooks Atkinson, Friday eve, June 19, 1931, Travis – Bryer 1988, 246).

house. It is the following night. The moon has just risen» (2.997); «It is shortly after sunset» (2.1007); «All glow has faded from the sky and it is getting dark» (2.1009); «Peter has lighted two candles on the mantel and put the lantern on the table... In this dim, spotty light the room is full of shadows. It has the dead appearance of a room long shut up... In the flickering candlelight the eyes of the Mannon portraits stare with a grim forbiddingness» (2.1016); «Ezra Mannon's study – on an evening a month later» (2.1026); «... the sitting room... Two candles are burning... shedding their flickering light on the portrait of Abe Mannon above» (2.1034); «It is in the late afternoon of a day three days later... Soft golden sunlight» (2.1045).

Aristotle maintains in his *Poetics* that a tragedy is a representation in which the characters act or «do» (δρῶσιν), that is, they are drama or action.⁴⁶ But as drama is obviously no stranger to light, we must in this case perceive a clear and sovereign intention – in the end, like that of any other playwright – to darken the drama, to situate it in the realm of the setting sun just before dusk, or in the realm of the dim light of the moon or the darkness of night. Is this an easy way to magnify a particular family tragedy or is it, on the contrary, a literary transposition of a deeply held belief? And, in the latter case, what belief? Perhaps we live and act, we are δρῶμα day after day, mostly under the light of the sun; however, given that we are always threatened by the allegorical – or not so allegorical – darkness of tragedy, would it not be advisable – and this is what O'Neill appears to suggest – to elude the falsity of the light and situate ourselves definitively in the sphere of the darkness of a misfortune consubstantial with humankind? If, as the Greeks believed, humans are only fortunate beings (εὐτυχεῖς) at the best of times⁴⁷ on whom fortune smiles only on rare occasions, and not at all happy beings owing to the constant threat of death, catastrophe or unexpected overturning of the general situation,⁴⁸ why not recognize darkness as the true lot of human beings as Plato did in his image of the cave?⁴⁹ Thus, in principle, the dramatic benefit of also understanding this play from the perspective of the well known Platonic image of the cave may be no less valuable.

Another element O'Neill uses to emphasise the continual human contact with fictions, simulacra, or, if you will, shadows of reality – a situation that can be

⁴⁶ See note 8.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Hdt. 1.26-32; Hude 1988.

⁴⁸ In this respect, O'Neill does not diverge from the Greeks in that the common people in his play react to the sudden death of Ezra Mannon in the following way: (Mrs Hills): «What a tragedy to be taken his first night home after passing unharmed through the whole war!» (Borden): ... «It's like fate». (Mrs Hills): «Maybe it is fate. You remember, Everett, you've always said about the Mannons that pride goeth before a fall and that some day God would humble them in their sinful pride» (2.953).

⁴⁹ It may be worth highlighting the paradox that supposes that the Greeks – and O'Neill is well aware of this – associate the climax of the tragedy with the anagnorisis (ἀναγνώρισις), that is, the moment when all of the veils that have until that point obscured understanding are finally lifted (ἀνά), confirming that the tragedy is also diaphanous light or a capturing without shadows of the tragic essence of human life.

perfectly equated with that of the Plato's prisoners – is the mask. Using the mask, the Greeks visually illustrated the tragic or comic nature of the characters in their plays, and it seems evident that they never doubted the dramatic effect of this device,⁵⁰ in clear contrast to contemporary theatre, which places primary importance on the facial expression of the actors. From a clearly psychological perspective, O'Neill gives the mask the additional function of becoming an image of a fictional world, that of things and people, where practically nothing or no one is what they seem or as they are portrayed. He considered that modern theatre goes could perfectly well accept masks: «I believe people will come to accept them in the theatre» because «people recognize, from their knowledge of the new psychology, that everyone wears a mask... thousands of them».⁵¹ The mask is therefore a solution to the problem of how to express the hidden conflicts of the mind, since O'Neill himself asks: «what, at bottom, is the new psychological insight into human cause and effect but a study in masks, an exercise in unmasking?».⁵²

Therefore, if everyone wears a mask, how it is that humans do not recognise that they are condemned to the dissimulation or lie – shadow, if you will – of a false world, thus playing out the endless tragedy of living lost and confused confronted by illusions that barely allow them to understand the world, or, as Orin said, to understand themselves?⁵³

We can start with the white mask that dissimulates the dark and gloomy aspect of the Mannon mansion, which, despite appearances, is not a Greek temple built to house a new – in fact, ancient – devotion to the sacred, but rather a mask that is incongruent because it emits no pagan luminosity, but rather conceals the narrow, gloomy, often petty, moral sense of its occupants: «... the white Grecian temple portico... is like an incongruous white mask fixed on the house to hide its sombre grey ugliness» (2.893); «... an incongruous mask fixed on the sombre, stone house» (2.928); «... a mask in the moonlight» (2.951).

However, undoubtedly the worst masks are those that conceal the true nature of the protagonists in the drama, who, by O'Neill's hand, rather than being living beings, are imitations of life, as though everything associated with the house of Mannon were false or simply a simulacrum of that which could have been and is

⁵⁰ Quite in contrast to contemporary objections: «Why not give all future classical revivals entirely in masks? *Hamlet* for example. Masks would liberate this play from its present confining status as exclusively a 'star vehicle'... But I anticipate the actors' objection to masks: that they would extinguish their personalities and deprive them of their greatest asset in conveying emotion by facial expression. I claim, however, that masks would give them the opportunity for a totally new kind of acting, that they would learn many undeveloped possibilities of their art if they appeared, even if only for a season or two, in masked roles... the mask *is* dramatic in itself, *is* a proven weapon of attack. At its best, it is more subtly, imaginatively, suggestively dramatic than any actor's face can ever be» (cited by Sheaffer 1968, 318).

⁵¹ Estrin 1990, 111 f.

⁵² Cit. in Sheaffer 1968, 317.

⁵³ Ezra's reaction to the bedroom he shares with his wife is in this respect illustrative: (Ezra to Christine): «It isn't my heart. It's something uneasy troubling my mind – as if something in me was listening, watching, waiting for something to happen... This house is not my house. This is not my room nor my bed. They are empty – waiting for someone to move in! And you are not my wife! You are waiting for something!» (2.943).

not.⁵⁴ Thus, the vitality of Seth, the gardener, is false: «... He has (Seth) a gaunt face that in repose gives one the strange impression of a life-like mask...» (2.894). Christine's beauty is not real: the observer is struck by the strange impression she gives in repose «of being not living flesh but a wonderfully life-like pale mask... as if it was a mask she'd put on» (2.896). The same is true of Vinnie: «... one is struck by the same strange, life-like mask impression her face gives in repose» (2.897). Finally, Ezra is not really a man: «One is immediately struck by the mask-like look of his face in repose, more pronounced in him than in the others»; on the contrary, his movements suggest those of the statues of military heroes: his air «is brusque and authoritative», and his deep voice «has a hollow repressed quality, as if he were continually withholding emotion from it» (2.931).⁵⁵

Thus, if I may be allowed to return to the Platonic image, I would venture to say that all of these characters are mere shadows of a personality that they conceal; they are professional role-players acting out appearances; they are prisoners inside a cave-mask that envelops-covers them, making it difficult to identify them.⁵⁶

The natural sphere of knowledge is life, the realm of the living, the upper world, while death is the lot of the Mannons. Of all the Mannons, Ezra is – until Lavinia's final entombment – the emblematic example of this. It was the war – and its legacy of death – that, paradoxically, allowed him to think of life: «... in this war... Death was so common, it didn't mean anything. That freed me to think of life». However, the *modus cogitandi* of the family is contradicted even by the white splendour of a Greek temple which, as we have seen, never manages to satisfy their pagan expectations. To celebrate the Sabbath, the Mannons went to the white meeting-house «and meditated on death. Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born...!» (2.937). On seeing his father's dead body deprived of the light of life, Orin recognizes the death that he had always detected in him because, like one of the occupants of the Platonic cave, Ezra had always been a prisoner, a captive of a statuary coldness: «Death sits so naturally on you! Death becomes the Mannons! You were always like the statue of an eminent dead man... looking over the head of life without a sign of recognition» (2.975).

⁵⁴ «This mask functions as a kind of death mask, as if the Mannons were not quite alive... Portraits of the Mannon family, too, all possess the same mask-like quality that suggest death and lifelessness» (Brietze 2001, 64).

⁵⁵ See also (Stage direction. When Orin tells Christine that they have killed Brant), «Lavinia stands at the left of the steps, rigid and erect, her face mask-like» (2.1000). (Stage direction. After Brant's death.) «Christine continues to stare blankly in front of her. Her face has become a tragic death-mask» (2.1001).

⁵⁶ A belief with clear family connotations: «... he had grown up in a family that showed certain faces among themselves and different ones to the outside world... His father, so far back as he could remember, had always masked personal sorrow and professional worry under a hearty exterior... Eugene O'Neill did not have to look to Aeschylus and Sophocles for tragic models, masked or unmasked; he found them, both naked to the soul and masked, in his own family» (Sheaffer 1968, 317).

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To Christine he confesses that death allowed him to think of life but, in doing so, he found himself surrounded by walls, the nature of which he is unable to explain: «... there'd always been some barrier between us – a wall hiding us from each other!». However, the worst of all is that he himself has shut off within himself something that wanted to bring out into the light and is unable to: «Something queer in me keeps me mum about the things I'd like most to say... Something keeps me sitting numb in my own heart...!» (2.938 f.). He wanted to win his wife's love, but only gets her body;⁵⁷ he wanted to be a lover, but the light of kindness and tenderness cannot penetrate his dark personal prison, and he continues to be a husband with an icy dignity who inspires disgust.

Since this is a Greek-inspired contemporary tragedy, we intuit that Ezra Mannon carries with him some tragic guilt that will always accompany him and will finally demand due expiation. This is a good time therefore to recall that Adam Brant, captain of the clipper *Flying Trades* and Christine's lover, is the son of David Mannon, the brother of Abe Mannon – Ezra's father – and Marie Brantôme, a Canadian nurse hired by Abe to take care of his sick daughter. David fell in love with Marie, who became pregnant, and Abe, who will later tell us he also desired her, threw both of them out of the house because they have brought dishonour on the family. He then demolished the old Mannon house and ordered the construction of the current family mansion. David and Marie both met tragic ends: he committed suicide and she died in poverty after begging Ezra for help, to no avail. As a result, Adam Brant developed an insuperable antagonism to those who are in fact his own family, because, after his father's suicide, he leaves home at age seventeen to work in the merchant marine, and when he returns years later to New York, his mother is in the throes of death. This is undoubtedly the stain or tragic guilt that marks the Mannon family and is what makes them incapable of love. And this is so because they did not wish to render due homage to innocent love and were unable to recognize its absolute sacredness because they were conditioned by a prevailing ethical code that considered such love to be immoral and shameful. Even the adulterous but luminous love that unites Christine Mannon and Adam Brant is sacred because there is nothing in it of the impure coldness of the «dark and walled-in» Ezra.

O'Neill constructs a tragedy of characters closed within themselves with their guilt and also imprisoned by strict moral codes that are puritanical and little given to the forgiveness they preach. It is understandable, therefore, that he created in literature a world at odds with the light and characters spiritually as dark as the prison where

⁵⁷ (Ezra to Christine): «Your body? What are bodies to me? I've seen too many rotting in the sun to make grass greener! Ashes to ashes, dirt to dirt! Is that your notion of love? Do you think I married a body?... You were lying to me tonight as you've always lied! You were only pretending love! You let me take you as if you were a nigger slave I'd bought at auction! You made me appear a lustful beast in my own eyes! – as you've always done since our first marriage night! I would feel cleaner now if I had gone to a brothel! I would feel more honour between myself and life!» (2.944). Concerning dependence in this aspect of *Mourning Becomes Electra* from *What is Wrong with Marriage* by Hamilton – MacGowan 1929, see Alexander 1953.

they live. The light is outside the 'cave', and the ethical and psychological liberation of its prisoners will only be possible with the help of the illuminated. Adam Brant, a romantic Byronic figure⁵⁸ shaped by the freedom of the indomitable sea, tries to free Christine Mannon, even though he will fail and pay for the attempt with his life, executed by her children Orin and Vinnie, who are jealous of their father's honour. For their part, the brother and sister Peter and Hazel, uncontaminated by any family guilt, could have saved Orin and Vinnie were not their almost insulting innocence and goodness⁵⁹ too immaculate to not in the end shame those who, according to the prevailing ethical codes, were essentially impure.⁶⁰ The tragic knot will never be undone; there will be disasters, deaths and, in the case of Vinnie-Electra, a self entombment in life as she remains confined in the dark house-tomb-cave that will be her abode until death. The tragedy is total; the light of God never triumphs, but rather the darkness of man. There are, however, two tragic heroines, mother and daughter, two prisoners surrounded by waiting shadows, and they will both attempt to claim the rights afforded by the goddess Felicity. In fact, they want to go outside (Christine) or will go outside (Vinnie) through the steep and difficult climb of personal freedom until they reach paradise, a paradise too distant geographically, however, for us not to foresee the ultimate failure of the attempt.

Christine Mannon opens herself to the love of her lover, and the playwright wants her to be youthful, elegant, voluptuous, sensual, and fond of light colours.⁶¹ She allows herself to be seduced by Brant's tales, she desires the death of her cold husband, and she gives in to the fascination of the Blessed Islands of the South Seas, a land of innocent nakedness, of guiltless love, of peace; in short, a place blessed by the happiness of the primitivism proclaimed by Rousseau:⁶² «... And we

⁵⁸ (Peter): «He's such a darned romantic-looking cuss. Looks more like a gambler or a poet than a ship's captain» (2.902); (Vinnie): «... he did tell me the story of his life to make himself out romantic... He's sailed all over the world – he lived on a South Sea Island once, so he says... That's his trade – being romantic!» (2.902); (Stage direction): «... he gives the impression of being always on the offensive or defensive, always fighting life. He is dressed with an almost foppish extravagance, with touches of studied carelessness, as if a romantic Byronic appearance were the ideal in mind» (2.907).

⁵⁹ (Stage direction): «Hazel is a pretty, healthy girl of nineteen... One gets a sure impression of her character at a glance – frank, innocent, amiable and good... Her brother, Peter, is very like her in character – straightforward, guileless and good-natured» (2.899).

⁶⁰ (Orin to Vinnie): «She's another lost island! It's wiser for you to keep Hazel away from me, I warn you. Because when I see love for a murderer in her eyes my guilt crowds up in my throat like poisonous vomit and I long to spit it out» (2.1028). «Peter and Hazel are representatives of the 'normal world', a world where moral values still hold and which affirms its moral order... It is not that they resist the destructive influence of the Mannons, they simply remain untouched by it... in their goodness, they will never give way to the kind of hatred and murderous revenge we are made to witness in the Mannons» (Michel 1981, 53 f.).

⁶¹ (Stage direction): «... is a tall striking-looking woman of forty but she appears younger. She has a fine, voluptuous figure and she moves with a flowing animal grace. She wears a green satin dress... which brings out the peculiar colour of her thick curly hair... her mouth large and sensual» – 2.896).

⁶² «The play is a modern version not only of the Oedipal tragedy in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy but also of the failure of the doctrine of chronological primitivism in a culture dominated by

will happy... on your Blessed Islands!...». (Brant): «... the Blessed Isles – Maybe we can still find happiness and forget... There's peace and forgetfulness for us there» (2.992). Who knows, even, whether she is not following the example of Marie Brantôme, the victim of the Mannon's 'sacrilege', free, wild, and innocent like the paradisiacal women of whom she has heard tell?⁶³ And, of course, New England and the Blessed Isles represent the contrast of spiritual darkness and light, or, if we accept the Platonic image as a reference, the interior and the exterior of a dark cave that some of the inhabitants want to leave behind them forever. Brant admired those naked women. He said that they lived «near the Garden of Paradise» or, what is the same thing, that their essential quality was that «they had never heard that love can be a sin» (2.909).

However, Christine-Clytemnestra will never see the Blessed Isles and will pay a very high price for emerging into the light from the institutional prison of marriage, in which her spirit and vitality were being suffocated. She murders her own particular Agamemnon, but Vinnie-Electra avenges the death of her father and forces Orestes-Orin to execute Egist-Brant, who had come to court her in order to be closer to her mother. The Erinyes, or feelings of remorse, torment Orin, and it is Vinnie, much more like Christine than she thought, who chooses to search for peace in the Blessed Islands. And a miracle occurs: Vinnie at last finds the light of pagan innocence. Orin, on the other hand, walled-in and dark like all the Mannons, scandalized, recounts the story to Peter, and personally reproaches Vinnie; but she gives her own version and talks about honesty, purity, freedom, mystery, beauty, natural love,⁶⁴ love-beauty, the here and now and not the hereafter, loving life and hating death. The «waiting shadows» no longer envelop her, and, refuting Orin, she believes she now understands it all and understands herself.⁶⁵ In the light of the

Puritanism. Rousseauistic primitivism underlies the various concepts of the Blessed Isles in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, but O'Neill's primary emphasis is upon the chronological aspect of Rousseau's mode of primitivism – that earlier stages in human existence were better or wholly good» (Curran 1975, 373). Note that Orin tells his mother that he has read Melville's *Typee* (1846) (2.972). In any case, «... the islands fail for three important reasons: first of all, guilt is best relieved through some form of public confession in one's own community rather than privately and in isolation from it; second, Brant's epithet, 'Blessed Isles', borrows an adjective the Christians connotations of which belie the islands efficacy... Finally, the islands must fail because they represent a happiness that can be gained only through the sacrifice of one's identity» (p. 376).

⁶³ (Seth referring to Marie Brantôme): «She was always laughin' and singin' – frisky and full of life – with something free and wild... Purty she was, too!» (2.929).

⁶⁴ In clear contrast to her earlier rejection of love: «I don't know anything about love! I don't want to know anything!... I hate love!» (2.901).

⁶⁵ She has freed herself of the excessive bound that tied her to her father, another prison in which she had been confined almost all her life: «I can't marry anyone, Peter. I've got to stay at home. Father needs me... he needs me more» (2.901); (Vinnie): «I love father better than anyone in the world. There is nothing I wouldn't do – to protect him from hurt» (2.908); (Christine): «You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin! You've always schemed to steal my place!» (2.919); (Vinnie): «I'm not marrying anyone. I've got my duty to Father» (2.930); (Vinnie): «You're the only man I'll ever love! I'm going to stay with you!» (2.935); (Vinnie to Christine): «I hate you! You steal even father's love from me again! You stole all love from me when I was born!» (2.940). Orin, however, fails to emerge from his prison because, despite killing Brant and causing his mother's suicide, he remains oedipally bound to her forever: (Ezra): «He was out of his head for a long time. Acted as if he were a little boy again... That is, he kept

world and not the light of God,⁶⁶ she has thrust herself out of the cave, not to begin a metaphysical voyage, but rather to make friends with matter and flesh. We know, of course, that, despite this happy interlude, perpetual darkness awaits her, but it is worth it to see her illuminated under the truly special moonlight:

(Peter): «You stopped at the Islands?». (Orin): «We stopped a month... But they turned out to be Vinnie's islands, not mine. They only made me sick – and the naked women disgusted me. I guess I'm too much of a Mannon, after all, to turn into a pagan. But you should have seen Vinnie with the men – ... Handsome and romantic-looking, weren't they, Vinnie?... she was a bit shocked at first by their dances, but afterwards she fell in love with the islanders. If we'd stayed another month. I know I'd have found her some moonlight night dancing under the palm trees – as naked as the rest!... Picture, if you can, the feelings of the God-fearing Mannon dead at that spectacle!... Do you remember Avahanni?» (2.1021 f.).

(Vinnie to Peter): «I've thought of you so much! Things were always reminding me of you... everything that was honest and clean! And the natives on the Islands reminded me of you too. They were simple and fine... I loved those Islands. They finished setting me free. There was something there mysterious and beautiful – a good spirit – of love – coming out of the land and sea. It made me forget death. There was no hereafter. There was only this world – the warm earth in the moonlight – the trade wind in the cocoa palms... the fires at night and the drum throbbing in my heart – the natives dancing naked and innocent – without knowledge of sin!... I want to feel love! Love is all beautiful!... We'll be married soon... and settle out in the country away from folks and their evil talk? We'll make an island for ourselves on land, and we'll have children and love them and teach them to love life so that they can never be possessed by hate and death!» (2.1023 f.).

With a body that has filled out and lost its erstwhile stiffness and a wardrobe that has regained its colours,⁶⁷ how far we now are from the careful design of a Vinnie,

talking to Mother» (2.933); (Christine): «He used to be my baby» (2.955); (Vinnie to Orin): «Don't let her baby you the way she used to and get you under her thumb again» (2.959); (Christine to Orin): «I feel you are really – my flesh and blood! She isn't She is your father's! You're a part of me!... We had a secret little world of our own in the old days... he was jealous of you. He hated you because he knew I loved you better than anything in the world!» (2.968); «Oh, Orin, you are my boy, my baby! I love you!» (2.971); (Christine to Orin): «Oh, if only you had never gone away! If you only hadn't let them take you from me!»... (Orin): «And I'll never leave you again now. I don't want Hazel or anyone... You're my only girl!... We'll get Vinnie to marry Peter and there will be just you and I!» (2.972 f.); (Vinnie to Orin): «Poor Father! He thought the war had made a man of you! You're still the spoiled cry-baby that she can make a fool of whenever she pleases!» (Orin): «But Mother means a thousand times more to me than he ever did!» (2.979); (Orin to Christine after Brant's death): «Mother! Don't moan like that! You're still under his influence! But you'll forget him! I'll make you forget him! I'll make you happy! We'll leave Vinnie here and go away on a long voyage – to the South Seas» (2.1001).

⁶⁶ Christine dares to accuse even God of the loss of innocence. (Christine to Hazel): «I was like you once... If I could only have stayed as I was then! Why can't all of us remain innocent and loving and trusting? But God won't leave us alone. He twists and wrings and tortures our lives with other's lives until – we poison each other to death» (2.956).

⁶⁷ (Stage direction): «Then Lavinia enters.... One is at once aware of an extraordinary change in her. Her body, formerly so thin and undeveloped, has filled out. Her movements have lost their

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the true daughter of her father, that is, the stiff, cold, inexpressive, inflexible, square shouldered, black, lugubrious, character with a soldier's bearing, who dominates almost the whole drama, illustrating to perfection her imprisoned life.⁶⁸

We must now judge whether Vinnie's voyage or transition to a naive peace and naive behaviour in the distant, too distant, setting of the Blessed Isles, invalidates, at least for a moment, the truly tragic Electra that O'Neill wanted to create. Once outside the walls, *lato sensu*, that imprisoned her, we must believe that the answer is yes, but we pause to note that this transition occurs after a stay in a different prison, in a prison the Greeks could never recognise, one ordained by Nemesis and involving the inescapable application of a primitive, atavistic, uncompassionate, and cruel Justice – pagan, therefore, rather than Christian.⁶⁹ Vinnie Mannon, O'Neill's Electra, had to avenge the blood of her father and spill the blood of the bastard with whom her mother had dishonoured her father: «Your adultery... I heard you telling hi – “I love you, Adam”... You vile – You're shameless and evil!» (2.916). Day after day – in this case, unlike the Greek heroine – she had to win over the complicity of her own Orestes, a son so oedipally tied to his mother that he resists seeing her as an adulteress and murderer: «If you won't help me punish her, I hope you're not such a coward that you're willing to let her lover escape!» (Orin): «I'll kill that bastard!» (2.979 f.). She could, however make use of the accusation contained in the dying words of her beloved father: «She's guilty – not medicine!» (2.946). Moreover, her bond with her father, as unhealthy as that between her brother and her mother, arouses her cunning: «I suppose you think you'll be free to marry Adam now!... Not while I'm alive! I'll make you pay for your crime!» (2.947). Brant is made to pay for his crime against her father: «He paid the just penalty for his crime... It is justice! It is your justice, Father!» (2.1001 f.), and Vinnie does not deliver her mother to the law to be hung, but rather deprives her of her lover in the hope that she will kill herself: «... But we protected her. She

square-shouldered stiffness. She now bears a striking resemblance to her mother in every respect, even to being dressed in the green her mother had affected» (2.1014); (Stage direction): «She seems a mature woman, sure of her feminine attractiveness. Her brown-gold hair is arranged as her mother's had been. Her green dress is like a copy of her mother's... The movements of her body now have the feminine grace her mother's had possessed» (2.1016); (Peter to Vinnie): «I can't get over seeing you dressed in colour. You always used to wear black». (Vinnie): «... I was dead then» (2.1020).

⁶⁸ (Stage direction): «She is twenty-three but looks considerably older. Tall like her mother, her body is thin, flat-breasted and angular, and its unattractiveness is accentuated by her plain black dress. Her movements are stiff and she carries herself with a wooden, square-shouldered, military bearing. She has a flat dry voice and a habit of snapping out her words like an officer giving orders» (2.897).

⁶⁹ «Her justice is cruel and unyielding. Her justices requires no sacrifice from the judge, no sympathy for the human beings who transgress her iron dictates. She does not comprehend, as yet, mercy. Her law is the law of the claw, the unbending dictates of the blood strengthened by cruelty» (Long 1968, 140. «Sin and punishment make up a part of the blueprint, but the characters are apparently denied the graces of redemption. I am saying that redemption does not take place in *Mourning Becomes Electra*» (Shaughnessy 1996, 103).

could have lived... But she chose to kill herself as a punishment for her crime... It was an act of justice!» (2.1018 f.). The passage to the Blessed Isles is, therefore, Greek and cruel.

This was the consequence of an act of liberation that the prevailing puritanism could not permit. Christine Mannon had the audacity to come to know herself. She had realized that she was imprisoned in a puritan house-tomb disguised as a pagan temple: «I've been to the greenhouse to pick these. I felt our tomb needed a little brightening». And, once this truth had been unmasked and she had perceived its grey darkness beneath the white facade, calling it «... a sepulchre! The 'whited' one of the Bible» (Mt. 23-7) «... pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan grey ugliness!», the only thing left for her to do was to lament that the house pleases and suites her daughter: «Forgive me, Vinnie, I forgot you like it. And you ought to. It suits your temperament» (2.903 f.).

After her liberating experience in the Blessed Islands, Vinnie is even more daring. Since in the end she had been able to emerge into the light, she now needed to close the house-tomb-cave so that it would die, and above all, she needed to shut into the house-tomb-cave all the shadows and ghosts, the enemies of love, that had always lived there in order to suffocate them: «I'll close it up and leave it in the sun and rain to die. The portraits of the Mannon will rot on the walls and the ghosts will fade back into death. And the Mannons will be forgotten» (2.1046).⁷⁰

But the playwright does not lower his guard. O'Neill wants a tragic heroine, a prisoner surrounded by shadows that dream of triumph. Despite her newfound brilliance, Vinnie will never overcome them because they are a numerous, diverse, and tenacious army of Erinyes, who, with a well thought-out strategy, will continue to encircle her until there is no open flank through which she can escape.⁷¹ However, the first person to lay siege to her is Orin himself:⁷² «Were you hoping you could escape retribution? You can't! Confess and atone to the full extent of the law!» (2.1028). Once he has unmasked her, he sees her as she really is: «the most interesting criminal of us all!» (2.1029). He takes it upon himself to open her eyes to her guilt: «I love you now with all the guilt in me – the guilt we share!... let's go now and confess and pay the penalty for Mother's murder, and find peace together!» (2.1042). And thus, she realizes, as he has, that: «The only love I can

⁷⁰ And also, (Peter to Vinnie): «And the first thing is to get you away from this darned house!...». (Vinnie): «Love can't live in it. We'll go away and leave it alone to die – and we'll forget the dead» (2.1050).

⁷¹ In addition to the Erinyes, the play is full of tragic premonitions that undoubtedly heighten the sensation that the characters are besieged: (Ezra): «All victory ends in the defeat of death... But does defeat end in the victory of death?» (2.932); (Vinnie): «I had a horrible dream – I thought I heard Father calling me – it woke me up» (2.946); (Stage direction. Before Brant's murder): «... The Chantyman suddenly begins to sing the chanty 'Hanging Johnny' (with sentimental mournfulness). Oh, they call me Hanging Johnny / Away-ay-i-oh! / They says I hangs for money / Oh, hang, boys, hang!»... (Brant): «Damn that chanty! It's sad as death! I've a foreboding I'll never take this ship to sea. She doesn't want me now – a coward hiding behind a woman's skirts» (2.988); (Christine before Brant's death): «Goodbye, my lover! I must go!... Oh! I feel so strange – so sad – as if I'd never see you again» (2.993).

⁷² In the same way that she laid siege to her mother: (Christine to Hazel): «When I talk to her she won't answer me. And yet she follows me around everywhere – she hardly leaves me alone a minute» (2.956).

know now is the love for guilt which breeds more guilt – until you get so deep at the bottom of hell there is no lower you can sink and you rest there in peace!» (2.1037). She must therefore renounce happiness and take her punishment, as Orin says, «Love! What right have I – or you – to love?» (2.1017). Vinnie replies that there is nothing to confess and calls him a coward; in fact, she is already pushing him towards suicide, and Orin accepts the idea, proclaiming that once he is dead, his last duty to the adulterers will be to recognise on his knees the sacredness of love not sanctioned by any institutional union:⁷³ «Do you know what I'll do then? I'll get on my knees and ask for your forgiveness... I'll say, I'm glad you found love, Mother! I'll wish you happiness – you and Adam!» (2.1042).

But, as I said earlier, there is a whole army of Erinyes: the dead Mannons who, instead of spending the night in the cemetery, spend it in the family home;⁷⁴ Ezra's ghost or evil spirit, dressed as a judge and walking through walls;⁷⁵ all the Mannons and their spirits,⁷⁶ and Orin himself, who has become Vinnie's guilty conscience.⁷⁷ Thus, this Electra is worthy of her classical model. The house-cave-tomb does not swallow her up so soon; before that happens, she will face up to the dead, wilfully forgetting them: «The dead have forgotten us! We've forgotten them!» (2.1015). She stares them in the eyes proudly proclaiming that she has done her duty: «Why do you look at me like that? I've done my duty by you! That's finished and forgotten!» (2.1016). She reproaches Orin-Orestes for his childlike self-inflicted punishment, when, as an adult, he should have expelled the ghosts from his life and banished all sense of guilt. And, above all, after Orin's suicide, seeing the pure Hazel also play the role of an accusing Erinya, she turns on her, cursing; that is, she becomes an unappealable God who pardons herself while telling Hazel to go to the hell of the good people. No, the house-tomb-cave will not swallow her up so soon!

(Hazel): «I'm accusing you! You drove him to it!... I know terrible things must have happened... Look in your heart and ask your conscience before God if you ought to marry Peter!... I know in your heart you can't be dead to all honour and justice... I know your conscience will make you do what's right – and God will forgive you».

⁷³ Even love initially born from a desire for vengeance: (Brant): «I thought... I'll take her from him and that'll be part of my revenge! And out of that hatred my love came! It's damned queer, isn't it» (2.922).

⁷⁴ (Seth): «The graveyard's full of Mannons and they all spend their nights at home here» (2.1008).

⁷⁵ (Silva): «There is ghosts, by God!» (Mackel): «... it'd be only natural if it was haunted. She shot herself there. Do you think she done it fur grief over Ezra's death, like the daughter let on to folks?»... (Small): «God A'mighty! I heard' em comin' after me... an' I seed Ezra's ghost dressed like a judge comin' through the wall... I run». (Seth): «That was Ezra's picture hangin' on the wall, not a ghost...!» (Small): «I know pictures when I see'em... This was him». (Seth): «... this house bein' haunted... But there is sech a thing as evil spirit» (2.1010-3).

⁷⁶ (Orin): «I've just been in the study. I was sure she'd be waiting for me in there.... But she wasn't!... It's only they... They're everywhere!... Well, let her go! What is she to me? I'm not her son any more! I'm Father's! I'm a Mannon! And they'll welcome me home!» (2.1016)... (Orin to Vinnie): «Don't you believe in souls any more? I think you will after we've lived in this house!» (2.1018).

⁷⁷ (Vinnie to Orin): «Oh God! Over and over and over! Will you never lose your stupid guilty conscience! Don't you see how you torture me? You're becoming my guilty conscience, too» (2.1029).

(Vinnie): «I'm not asking God or anybody for forgiveness. I forgive myself!... I hope there is a hell for the good somewhere!» (2.1047-9)⁷⁸

The battle is terrible and even God catches a few blows. Perhaps Vinnie really can confront all of the «waiting shadows» in her house-tomb-cave, but the secondary characters around her, on whom, paradoxically, her salvation also depends, are only armed with scant human forces rather than the energy and resolution that an instinct for vengeance and implacable justice have given her. Ezra, Christine and Orin Mannon are now all dead. In fact, they are too dead for the pure, like Peter, not to respect the laws of mourning. Vinnie wants to marry him immediately because she knows that if the shadows get in the way, the final battle is lost. If she concedes even a small truce to the Mannons, still as present as if they were alive, they will be able to take advantage of it to darken the light of love and incarcerate her in the absolute darkness of the tomb where they live.

As if she were Plato defending his vertical ethical geometry, Vinnie had already warned Peter about the tragedy of allowing verticality to twist when the shadow is about to engulf you. She also wants happiness; she wants to get married; she wants a house with a garden and trees because «I love everything that grows simply – up towards the sun – everything that's straight and strong! I hate what's warped and twists and eats into itself and dies for a lifetime in shadow» (2.1043).

The shadow is for the feeble and the fallen, for the prisoners who lack the instinct to escape. Vinnie now suspects that Orin's tale about her emergence into the light of the Blessed Isles from the shadows of New England has offended Peter's sense of purity, and she asks him, to no avail, to embrace another form of purity, the purity that is innocent of the darkness of sin and proclaims the beauty of any sort of love: «Can't you be strong, Peter? Can't you be simple and pure? Can't you forget sin and see that all love is beautiful?». She begs him for «a little while of happiness – in spite of all the dead! I've earned it!... I want a moment of joy – of love – to make up for what's coming!» (2.1051 f.), but the house-tomb-cave awaits her; and her dead, without scruples, demand the human sacrifice they consider to be their right, the sacrifice of Lavinia Mannon.⁷⁹

However, Peter is protected by the unbreachable walls of an ethical code he has never felt the need to abandon; thus, his conversion to sinless love is impossible. In fact, he wants to condemn it. Plato designed a vertical ethical geometry, exhorting us to emerge from the cave, to ascend towards the luminous Idea. I sincerely believe that the Platonic icon underlies the entire text of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, but only the icon, because the inescapable fate of O'Neill's tragic heroine, consistent with his tragic view of human life is to descend and remain once again in the feeble light of man described by Orin, to return to the shadow or darkness that is an essential part of her. And, therefore, finally convinced that there will be neither

⁷⁸ For a concise review of the attitudes towards God of the characters in O'Neill's plays, see for example: Dubost 1997, 186-95.

⁷⁹ In whom, a change or regression is clearly seen: (Stage direction): «The three days that have intervened have effected a remarkable change in her. Her body, dressed in deep mourning, again appears flat-chested and thin. The Mannon mask-semblance of her face appears intensified now... emotionless expression» (2.1046).

garden nor trees, that the sun will hide itself and that she will never be able to grow strong and straight towards the sun, Vinnie decides to smooth the road for Peter, to embrace her punishment, and to voluntarily turn towards the dark abyss:

(Vinnie to Peter): «Orin suspected I'd lusted with him! And I had». (Peter): «You – you couldn't!». (Vinnie): «Why shouldn't I? I wanted him! I wanted to learn love from him – love that wasn't a sin! And I did, I tell you! He had me». (Peter): «Mother and Hazel were right about you – you are bad at heart... I hope you'll be punished» (2.1052 f.).⁸⁰

Christine Mannon's suicide was in fact a decision in favour of the light, the only effective weapon available to her against the shadowy nature of the moral code that condemned her and against the insufferable punishment that the just wanted to impose on her. We know that O'Neill was a constant reader of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and we also know that «For Nietzsche the tragic spirit equalled a religious faith... Out of the need to justify existence after the death of the old God was born the concept of the superman, the man who welcomes pain as a necessity for inner growth and who, like the protagonists in Greek tragedy, achieves spiritual attainment through suffering».⁸¹ However, this clearly Nietzschean Vinnie, incarcerated in something worse than a prison – a house-tomb, and unwilling to go outside or see anyone, outside the sphere of the sun's light until death, deprived even of the comforting colours of the flowers, subjects herself to the tragic darkness of man. Her action is not, however, a feeble one and it seems that, in a certain way, she comes to understand herself by the simple fact of accepting her own tragic fate.⁸² She will contemplate the shadows of the Mannons and her own shadow, and will accept that a happy life in which pure love triumphs is an Idea too elevated or geographically distant – like the Blessed Isles – to avoid being reduced to a mere simulacrum. She becomes, for O'Neill, a symbol of the human beings for whom the time has come to expiate the very fact of being born and of believing themselves the legitimate occupants of open spaces, when, besieged by a heavy sense of guilt, the tragic obligation of most men and women in this world is to occupy the dark house-tomb-cave:

(Vinnie to Seth): «... I'm bound here – to the Mannon dead!... Don't be afraid. 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 close so no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone

⁸⁰ «O'Neill... emphasizes one facet of Rousseauistic primitivism – the sexual freedom of primitive peoples. The New-England Puritan preoccupation with the evil of sexual pleasure explains the majority of the emotional difficulties in *Mourning Becomes Electra*» (Curran 1975, 374).

⁸¹ Törnqvist 2000, 20. And also Brietzke 2001, 165: «Suffering as the context from which tragedy emerges leads to the individuals ultimate failure or death. Nietzsche views this struggle as spirituality uplifting».

⁸² «The only person Lavinia means to help by sending Peter away and entombing herself in the house is, paradoxically, herself... Raised in a puritanical, military household to believe duty, justice, and honor... Lavinia's self-incarceration as a result of her self-recognition is totally consistent with her headstrong character» (Vogliano 1999, 72, 74).

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!...I know they will see to it I live for a long time! It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born!... You go now and close the shutters and nail them tight... And tell Hannah to throw out all the flowers». (Seth): «Ay» (2.1053).

The corollary of this contemporary Greek tragedy is certainly terrible. Everything suggests that the mourning that becomes Electra is the fate that also becomes the whole human race, or at least all of the societies that have not seen their way to becoming 'blessed islands'. And if this is true, if tragedy is inherent in us and O'Neill wanted to illustrate this using the avatars of a family saga, then Aeschylus' formal Oresteian paradigm is very useful to him, but neither the Choephores nor obviously the Erinyes – the ill-fated daughters of the Night transformed into Eumenides – allow him to give the Yankee Electra the tragic ending that becomes her character.⁸³ And it is precisely on this point that I wanted to emphasize the plausible reference to Plato's image of the cave from book VII of his *Republic*, despite the impossibility of demonstrating *stricto sensu* this plausibility. While it is true that Plato uses this image to transmit a message of hope, it is also true that those who do not share this hope can still borrow the valuable image to adapt it to their own existential credo. From his standpoint of radical pessimism based on the reiterated anagnorisis or realization of the inevitable misfortune and suffering of human beings, the playwright may well equate humans with the prisoners of that singular cave, condemned to live in the dark and only perceive the shadows of a Light-Happiness that they may perhaps only occasionally glimpse.

⁸³ Nonetheless, O'Neill's Electra has been judged, in many ways. One evaluation is that she is a character with a clear moral conscience: «Her justice is cruel... But she does have a clearly moral conscience. Any mourning she may do will truly become her, for she is never completely the victim of her selfish instincts» (Long 1968, 140). She is also seen as an example of the rebirth or redefinition of identity: «I consider that optimism predominates... Beyond the failures, we must see the greatness of a difficult task, which takes the form of an aspiration towards rebirth or a reunion with or redefinition of one's own identity» (Dubost 1997, 225). Another view is that she is a failed tragic character: «There is neither the purification of Orestes, as in the *Oresteia*, nor the spiritual redemption of the tragic hero as in such eminent tragedies as *Oedipus at Colonus* or *King Lear*... In so far as O'Neill fails to achieve this redemption, he fails to express a complete concept of tragedy» (O'Neill 1963, 498). She has even been seen as a perverse and degraded character, totally lacking heroism: «In a tragedy, the outward failure should be compensated for by the dignity and greatness of the protagonist. But where is the halo of spiritual triumph which should envelop Lavinia's self-internment? Is she accepting her fate and giving up the struggle; or is she broken but not bent – a Mannon to the end, even after realizing her responsibility for the murders and suicides: the former is unheroic, the latter makes her appear almost a hardened villain» (Ahuja 1984, 132); «Unhappily, the picture of human life honestly and powerfully drawn by the twentieth-century dramatist exemplifies the ideas which dominate current literature and thought... One of the greatest qualities of our field (Classical Studies) is the power like that of Aeschylus to perpetuate the fact that there are other meaningful, equally 'realistic' analyses which in this same world find order instead of chaos, purpose instead of instability, and elevation instead of degradation» (Pratt 1956, 167).

And, if I am not mistaken, this would be, as I have suggested, a truth of universal application. This assertion would be confirmed by the diverse interplay of resemblances among the members of the Mannon family⁸⁴ – and other characters – throughout *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Let us look at some examples: Vinnie is just like her father,⁸⁵ but everyone agrees that she looks like her mother,⁸⁶ and Brant even believes that she resembles his mother, Marie Brantôme. Brant, in turn, resembles Ezra, Orin, and David Mannon, all of the Mannons in fact.⁸⁷ Ezra looks like his father,⁸⁸ and Orin looks like Ezra.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the most revealing detail is probably found in two confessions made by Orin: in the first, he explains that during the war he had the strange sensation of killing the same man over and over again «and that in the end I would discover the man was myself!» (2.977); in the second, he reveals that he also had this impression just after he executed Brant, even while recognizing that, «if I had been he I would have done what he did! I would have loved her as he loved her – and killed father, too – for her sake!... It's queer! It's rotten a dirty joke on someone!» (2.995 f.).

It is clear, then, that humans, no matter how jealous they are of their own identity, confuse themselves with one another to the point of identifying with one another. They share hopes and, above all, they share the tragedy that is their lot of being unable to reach the definitive Light. Perhaps there are still far corners of the earth that are a like a brief reminder of a paradise lost, but in New England or any

⁸⁴ «The psychological resemblance of the characters in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is in itself an expression of the family fate. Just as the characters are fated to love a counterpart of their parent of the opposite sex, so they are fated to resemble psychologically their parent of the same sex. The Model for this concept can be found in *What is Wrong with Marriage*. Hamilton and MacGowan see a great cause of marital malaise in the absorption of parental personality traits, parental attitudes, by children» (Alexander 1953, 932).

⁸⁵ (Brant to Vinnie): «You're so like your mother in some ways. Your face is the very image of hers. And look at your hair. You won't meet hair like yours and hers... I only know of one other woman who had it. You'll think it strange when I tell you. It was my mother... Yes, she had beautiful hair like your mother's». (Vinnie): «I'm not a bit like her! Everybody knows I take after Father» (2.908).

⁸⁶ (Stage direction): «... one is immediately struck by her facial resemblance to her mother. She has the same peculiar shade of copper-gold hair, the same pallor... the same sensual mouth» (2.897). (Minnie): «She looks like her mother in face – queer lookin' – but she ain't purty like her» (2.898); (Orin to Vinnie): «You don't know how like Mother you've become, Vinnie. I don't mean only how pretty you've grown... I mean the change in your soul... Little by little it grew like Mother's soul... as if her death had set you free – to become her!» (2.1017).

⁸⁷ (Peter): «He reminded me of someone. But I couldn't place who it was» (II, 902); (Seth to Vinnie): «Ain't you noticed this Brant reminds you of someone in looks?... Your Paw, ain't it, Vinnie?» (Vinnie): «Yes, he does». (Seth): «He's like Orin, too – and all the Mannons I've known... he calls to my mind your Grandpaw's brother, David» (2.905); (Stage direction): «One is immediately struck by the resemblance between his face and that of the portrait of Ezra Mannon... Unconsciously he takes the same attitude as Mannon, sitting erect, his hands on the arms of the chair» (2.914).

⁸⁸ (Stage direction): «... the portrait of Ezra's father, Abe Mannon... Except for the difference in ages, his face looks exactly like Ezra's in the painting in the study» (2.951).

⁸⁹ (Christine to Orin): «... Orin! Don't look like that! You're so like your father!...» (2.970); (Stage direction): «Ezra's Mannon's study – on an evening a month later... Orin is sitting in his Father's chair... He has aged in the intervening month. He looks almost as old now his father in the portrait. He is dressed in black and the resemblance between the two is uncanny» (2.1026).

similar community – surely many – far from the Blessed Isles of the South Seas, and farther still from a definitively lost innocence, happiness and pardon are impossible, and the only inalienable right left to us, the playwright seems to say, is that of expiation in order to be able to make the journey towards the kingdom of shadows, to the tomb and death «until you get so deep at the bottom of hell there is no lower you can sink and you rest there in peace».

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Abstract: The fundamental debt of E. O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* to Aeschylus, and to a lesser degree to Sophocles and Euripides, has been always recognised but, according to the author's hypothesis, O'Neill might have taken advantage of the Platonic image of the cave in order to magnify his both Greek and American drama. It is certainly a risky hypothesis that *stricto sensu* cannot be proved, but it is also readers' right to evaluate the plausibility and the possible dramatic benefit derived from such a reading. Besides indicating to what degree some of the essential themes of Platonic philosophy concerning darkness, light or the flight from the prison of the material world are not extraneous to O'Neill's work, the author proves he was aware of the Platonic image of the cave thanks to its capital importance in the work of some of his intellectual mentors such as F. Nietzsche or O. Wilde. Nevertheless, the most significant aim of the author's article is to emphasize both the dramatic benefits and the logical reflections derived, as said before, from reading little by little O'Neill's drama bearing in mind the above mentioned Platonic parameter.

Keywords: Eugene O'Neill, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Aeschylus, Plato's cave, classical tradition.