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Seth's Role as the Chorus

INOUE Kazuyoshi

Introduction

*Mourning Becomes Electra*¹ denotes a close relationship to the Greek drama, as the title indicates. In terms of trilogy form the play is primarily based on Aeschylus' trilogy *Oresteia*. It is apparent that Eugene O'Neill intended to re-create an American version of the *Oresteia*, having Electra as a central character instead of Orestes. This is because O'Neill speaks of Electra as "the most interesting of all women in drama" in a Letter to Robert Sisk, August 28, 1930 (*Selected Letters* 368). As for the purpose of writing this play, O'Neill wrote in his *Notes and Extracts from a Fragmentary Diary, Spring 1926* that he was trying here: "to get modern psychological approximation of the Greek sense of fate into such a play, which an intelligent audience of today, possessed of no beliefs in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by."² Moreover, from the *Notes* O'Neill was not satisfied with the ending of the Greek tragedy, why the chain of fated crime and retribution ignored her mother's murderess. Therefore it is obvious from the *Notes, November 1928* that O'Neill's *Electra* was written about "Electra's life after the murder of Clytemnestra" and gave her a "tragic ending worthy of [her] character."³

As for the ending of *Electra*, there are mixed reviews: the representative critics commending O'Neill are Jean Chothia and Virginia Floyd. Chothia maintained that "[t]he final sequence of *Electra* has unexpected integrity" (108); Floyd acknowledged in *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* "the supreme gesture of atonement in the canon, more dramatic even than Parritt's leap to his death in *The Iceman Cometh* or

any of the other suicides" (403). Here is O'Neill's coherent argument for applying the Greek concept of crime and retribution to that of Lavinia.

On the other hand, there are other critics who dismiss *Electra*. The most strident is Eric Bentley, who denounced O'Neill in his article "Cultural and Psychological Gas," saying "'the Greek dream' – the desire to be an Aeschylus – has been his nightmare" in terms of the characters being over life-size, "by inflation with gas, cultural and psychological" (76). Allardyce Nicoll valued the play less, saying "This is rather a magnificently presented case-study than a powerful tragic drama" (759). I object to these interpretations by asserting that *Electra* is a modern tragedy.

In this thesis I will demonstrate that *Electra* is a modern tragedy by considering the significance and function of the chorus.

1. The Identity and the Function of Seth

The chorus was a central feature of Greek drama. It had a personality and had an important function. The function of the chorus was to observe and comment on the action of the actors, forward the action, evoke sympathy for the heroes, and draw the audience into the stories. We may safely say that the chorus was closely related to the author in terms of communicating his idea to the audience.

O'Neill introduced the concept of the chorus into *Electra*, where O'Neill had townsfolk play the part of the chorus, chiefly as background. They appear at the beginning of each play: "*These last three are types of townsfolk rather than individuals, a chorus representing the town come to look and listen and spy on the rich and exclusive Mannons*" (264);⁴ O'Neill's introduction of townsfolk in "The Hunted," Part Two, and "The Haunted," Part Three, of the Trilogy is almost the same as that of above-cited "Homecoming," Part One. Kuniomi Yamauchi appropriately explains that *Electra* is characterized by carrying a double meaning of "a chorus," which denotes "the chorus" in a theater terminology as well as "a group" (182). I agree with him on that

point. In fact townsfolk perform the role of the chorus by their observance, suspicions and criticism toward the exclusive Mannons.

Although we have dealt with the chorus composed of townsfolk, it is my aim in this thesis to focus particular attention on Seth Beckwith, the Mannons' gardener, and to have this play examined from his viewpoint. Since Seth is not the central character and he has few speaking parts in the play, he tends to be erroneously considered a minor character. However, I assert that Seth plays an important function as the main choral figure. For example, Seth leads Lavinia to find out Captain Adam Brant's true identity by giving her some hints of his facial resemblance to the male Mannons. This example shows that Seth manipulates the action of the play, which helps the author to forward the plot. Moreover, he is proud of the amount of information that only he is allowed to access about the Mannons: "Somethin' I calc'late no one'd notice 'specially 'ceptin' me" (469). These examples demonstrate that Seth is placed as near as O'Neill in terms of his function as a manipulator of the plot and of his amount of information – his omniscient elements. In other words, Seth is the main choral figure on whom the image of the author is projected. What is most important is that his appearance on stage is preceded by singing an old sea chanty, "Shenandoah," which strikes the keynote of this play. The chanty "Shenandoah" foreshadows the fate of principal characters. This explains why Seth plays such a function of the main choral figure as the chorus in Greek drama does. As for "Shenandoah" I will discuss later in the third chapter of this thesis.

O'Neill introduced the character of Seth into the play to make *Electra*, a modern psychological drama, "realistic and not realistic at the same time" (*Selected Letters* 368). For, Seth is the only person that can move in and out of the Mannons. He serves as a connector between the reality of the outside world represented by the chorus of townsfolk, which sees without really seeing or understanding, and the true reality of the inner world of the Mannon souls behind their protective

"life-like mask[s]", which give us a sense of unreality. Especially, as far as Electra is concerned, O'Neill intended to create such a modern Electra figure with a "tragic ending worthy of [her] character." As a result of it, O'Neill's Electra figure seems to be too abstract to be real. This is confirmed by Alice Brady, actress playing the role of Lavinia, who told: "Personally I feel that Mr. O'Neill meant Lavinia to be a symbol rather than a living, breathing human being who buys hats and gloves and eats lamb chops" (Gelb 748). Moreover, Edward L. Shaughnessy argues that "[b]ecause the Mannons are modeled on mythical figures, they tend perforce to seem larger than life," and that "these characters slip too easily into abstraction and thereby lose something of plausibility" (109).

We may say that Seth relates the impenetrable death-like Mannons to the world of the living of townsfolk, thus producing "the dramatic illusion of reality" (Carpenter 132).

2. Seth's Relationship with Lavinia

In considering Seth' relationship with Lavinia, we should focus our attention on interaction between them, often accompanied by his key word "Ayeh." I will explore what Seth represents to her by analyzing the meaning of his "Ayeh."

a. The following scene is the one where there is interaction between them over the news of Ezra Mannon's homecoming.

LAVINIA. (*grimly*) I hope so. It's time.

SETH. (*with a keen glance at her – slowly*) Ayeh.

LAVINIA. (*turning on him sharply*) What do you mean, Seth?

SETH. (*avoiding her eyes – evasively*) Nothin' – 'cept what you mean.

.....

LAVINIA. (*again starts – then slowly as if admitting a secret un-*

derstanding between them) I went to New York, Seth.

SETH. Ayeh. That's where I thought you'd gone, mebbe. *(then with deep sympathy)* It's durned hard on you, Vinnie. It's a durned shame.

LAVINIA. *(stiffening – curtly)* I don't know what you're talking about.

SETH. *(nods comprehendingly)* All right, Vinnie. Just as you say. ("Homecoming," Act I, 268 emphasis added).

Seth's first "Ayeh" indicates his empathy for Lavinia. The underlined portion shows that Seth is privy to Christine's infidelity, which he knows is Lavinia's cause of worry. He is a kind of an omniscient author.

b. The following scene is the one where there is interaction between them over Adam Brant.

LAVINIA. *(abruptly)* Well? What is it about Captain Brant you want to warn me against? [...] I want to know all I can about him because – he seems to be calling to court me.

SETH. *(managing to convey his entire disbelief of this statement in one word)* Ayeh.

LAVINIA. *(sharply)* You say that as if you didn't believe me.

SETH. I believe anything you tell me to believe. I ain't been with the Mannons for sixty years without learning that. ("Homecoming," Act I, 275)

Seth's "Ayeh" indicates his disbelief, as the stage direction says. Seth makes Lavinia know that he is all-seeing the truth about Adam (Christine's lover.)

c. The following scene is the one where there is interaction between them over Ezra's love and hate toward the servant girl Marie Brantôme.

LAVINIA. (*in a low voice, as if to herself, staring at the house*) It's all so strange! It frightens me! (*She checks herself abruptly – turns to Seth, curtly*) I don't believe that about Father. You've had too much whiskey. Go to bed and sleep it off. (*She walks up the steps again.*)

SETH. (*gazes at her with understanding*) Ayeh. ("Homecoming," Act III, 299-300)

Seth's "Ayeh" indicates his empathy for Lavinia, because he understands her fright at the family fate which she feared she inherited from her father.

d. The following scene is the one where there is interaction between them over Christine's shooting herself.

SETH. (*approaching*) Say, Vinnie, did you hear a shot –?

LAVINIA. (*sharply*) I want you to go for Doctor Blake. Tell him Mother has killed herself in a fit of insane grief over Father's death. (*then as he stares, dumbfounded and wondering, but keeping his face expressionless – more sharply*) Will you remember to tell him that?

SETH. (*slowly*) Ayeh. I'll tell him, Vinnie – anything you say. ("The Hunted," Act V, 373)

Seth's "Ayeh" indicates sensing the truth of Christine's death in spite of Lavinia's false explanation. For, when Seth heard a shot from the house in the midst of singing, he instinctively knew the truth, and changed some words of "Shenandoah" from "I'm bound away / Across the wide – [Missouri]" to "She's far across the stormy water," which suggested that Seth prayed for the repose of Christine's soul. His "Ayeh" let Lavinia know that he forgives her alleged crimes.

e. The following scene is the one where there is interaction between

them over Lavinia's decision to self-incarcerate.

LAVINIA. [...] I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! [...] I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die! (*with a strange cruel smile of gloating over the years of self-torture*) I know they will see to it I live for a long time! It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born!

SETH. (*with grim understanding*) Ayeh. And I ain't heard a word you've been sayin', Vinnie [...].

LAVINIA. (*turns to him sharply*) You go now and close the shutters and nail them tight.

SETH. Ayeh.

LAVINIA. And tell Hannah to throw out all the flowers.

SETH. Ayeh. ("The Haunted," Act IV, 423-4)

The first "Ayeh" indicates Seth's resignation about inevitability of the Mannon fate of crime and retribution. Seth's statement that "I ain't heard a word you've been sayin', Vinnie" indicates that it sounds like bravado to hide his sense of defeat, because he was too helpless to save her from her death-oriented spirit. Hereafter he became a mere servant, ceasing to be her guardian. This is demonstrated by Seth's perfunctory reply expressed in the second and the third "Ayeh." This is true of Lavinia's part. Since the flowers belong to Seth, Lavinia's command to throw them out suggests that she unilaterally breaks off relationship with guardian-like Seth. Only master-servant relationship remains.

These examples of Seth's "Ayeh" show that (1) he is omniscient, (2) he is Lavinia's confidant, (3) he forgives her alleged crimes. It becomes clear that Seth is Lavinia's guardian. Seth's proper advice for her course of action and his full support for her (in spite of her alleged involvement in the crimes) show something like motherhood toward

children. Seth watching Lavinia close her eyes at Act Four of "The Haunted" reminds us of Cybel, Earth Mother. I agree with Michael Manheim, who rightly pointed out Seth as "a kind of Earth Mother" (86), but my opinion is that Seth is a Satyr-like Earth Mother. As for Satyr-like the reason is attributable to his similarity to Satyr in terms of his appearance "beard," his drinking and lechery, and his function as the chorus like that of the Satyr in a satyr play. O'Neill made the most effective use of Seth's Satyr-like aspect at Act One of "The Haunted," where Seth's chorus created comic relief. As for Earth Mother, Seth's chanty "Shenandoah" stands for Eternal Recurrence. However, Lavinia declined what Seth represented, eternal life, because she decided to expiate all the crimes committed by the ancestral Mannons as well as her own. Her atonement is to suffer death-in-life for the rest of her life in the darkness of despair, the prospect of purgation being nowhere in sight. Satyr-like Seth failed to give Lavinia motherly comfort as an Earth Mother should.

3. The Meaning of Seth's Chanty "Shenandoah"

O'Neill refers to his "Shenandoah" as "theme song – its simple sad rhythm of hopeless sea longing peculiarly significant – even the stupid words have striking meaning when considered in relation to tragic events in play" (*Selected Letters* 379-80). We will discuss "Shenandoah" from the three viewpoints: a. the function of the chorus, b. the plural meanings of the word "bound," and c. the interpretation of the full meaning of the chanty. We will begin with the viewpoint of the function of the chorus.

a. The function of the chorus

Seth's chanty corresponds to the chorus in Greek drama. We will analyze the meaning of his chanty "Shenandoah."

- (1) "Shenandoah" at Act One, "Homecoming," Part One of the Trilogy.

The chanty foreshadows, and comments on, Christine's mind. "[M]y rolling river" shows her passions, repressed by Puritan Ezra, fluctuating in search of an outlet. Christine's romantic love for Ezra before her marriage turned into "disgust" (315). As a result, her natural passions had been blocked because of his Puritan thinking of sexuality as sin. Now that Christine has Adam as her lover, there is conspiracy swirling in her mind how to be liberated from her husband on his return home. Therefore we may say that "Shenandoah" suggests Christine's aspiration for fulfilling the romantic dream of love with her ideal lover.

(2) "Shenandoah" at Act Three, "Homecoming," Part One of the Trilogy.

As far as the plot is concerned, the chanty foreshadows Ezra's imminent death. It is noteworthy that Seth adds two brief lines "Oh, Shenandoah, I love your daughter / A-way, my rolling river" (298) to his "Shenandoah." The disputed point is whom "your daughter" represents. There is a topic of conversation between Seth and Lavinia about the personality of Marie Brantôme. Seth explains: "She was always laughin' and singin' – frisky and full of life – with something free and wild about her like an animile. Purty she was, tool (*then he adds*) Hair just the color of your Maw's and yours she had" (299 emphasis added). From Seth's description of her we learn that Marie represents pagan life. He further says that all the male Mannons loved her, Ezra being no exception. In a word we identify "your daughter" as Marie. We can also include Christine in "your daughter," because she is the image of Marie in both appearance and mentality. That explains why Ezra married Christine, the look-alike substitute for Marie in his statement: "Only your hair is the same – your strange beautiful hair I always –" (307 emphasis added). It is obvious that the underlined portion means Marie, whose image is indelible in his mind from childhood. Leonard Chabrowe pointed out the color of the hair as "to symbolize the cause-and-effect pattern of psychic incest" (145). Therefore we may interpret the sentence "I love your daughter" as showing that Ezra expresses

his love for Christine as Marie's substitute. Likewise it goes without saying that the sentence "I love your daughter" also means that Adam expresses his love for Christine as his mother's [Marie's] substitute.

Now back to the perspective of Christine. When Christine heard Ezra's genuine love for the first time since marriage, she had an inner conflict, but it was too late to reverse her murderous intention. She had chosen to realize love with Adam rather than to restart with Ezra. Therefore we may safely state that "Shenandoah" suggests Ezra's death, and that "my rolling river" suggests her vacillating conflict, which finally resolved in murdering her husband.

(3) "Shenandoah" at Act Five, "The Hunted," Part Two of the Trilogy.

The chanty foreshadows Christine's imminent death. Orin and Lavinia returned home after killing Adam, and Orin informed Christine of Adam's death. As a result, she agonized herself over his death so much that she committed suicide. When Seth sang "Shenandoah" half-way until "wide" of the phrase "across the wide Missouri," he heard a shot from inside the Mannon house. Since Seth is in a position of knowing instinctively what has happened, he changed impromptu some words of "Shenandoah" to the sentences "She's far across the stormy water / Way-ay, I'm bound away –" (373), thus praying for the repose of Christine's soul. Chaman Ahuja commended "these varied uses of chanty in such poignant moments" as "masterstrokes of O'Neill's ironic genius" (135). Therefore we may say that "Shenandoah" suggests Christine's death.

(4) "Shenandoah" at Act Four, "The Haunted," Part Three of the Trilogy.

The chanty foreshadows the bust-up of Lavinia's prospective marriage and the defeat of her struggle with her family fate. Although she tried to escape from the haunted Mannon house and to fulfill her dream, her marriage with Peter, by decorating the house with "[Seth's] flowers," a symbol of life and happiness, she had to have her servant

“throw out all the flowers” at the end of the trilogy. For, Lavinia was overtaken psychologically by Erinyes, the dead of the Mannons, in the chained family fate of crime and retribution. She recognized her sinfulness in the following scene where she made a slip of the tongue:

LAVINIA. [...] Want me! Take me, Adam! (*She is brought back to herself with a start by this name escaping her – bewilderedly, laughing idiotically*) Adam? Why did I call you Adam? I never even heard that name before – outside of the Bible! (*then suddenly with a hopeless, dead finality*) Always the dead between! It's no good trying any more! (“The Haunted,” Act IV, 422)

There are other signs of her defeat: (a) Lavinia returned to her life-denying spirit in terms of her black dress and military bearing at the beginning of the trilogy, (b) she closes her eyes after she decides to be Mrs. Peter Niles. The underlined portion implies her death wish. In short we may say that “Shenandoah” suggests Lavinia’s defeat, her spiritual death.

(5) “Shenandoah” at Act Four, “The Haunted,” Part Three of the Trilogy.

Since Seth is a guardian of Lavinia, he appears on stage at her spiritual crisis before her, singing the part of his chanty “Oh, Shenandoah, I can’t get near you / Way-ay, I’m bound away –,” skipping the preceding part of it “Oh, Shenandoah, I long to hear you / A-way, my rolling river.” By this O’Neill means that Lavinia ceases to follow her dream of the married life with Peter, “my rolling river” implying her inner conflict. He means that she is facing the reality, the dream’s impossibility, which is demonstrated by the sentence “Oh, Shenandoah, I can’t get near you.” The beauty of her dream is ostensibly her married life with Peter, but on the deep psychological level it is the one with Adam, which is of course impossible to realize because of his death as well as his love for his mother-like Christine, not her. After all Lavinia fol-

lowed the same crimes committed by her father and grandfather pursuing their perverse passions for Marie. Seth knows from the history of the Mannon fate that death is Lavinia's retribution. However, he leaves it unsaid by blank: "I'm bound away –." Seth left her punishment to her free will. As is expected, Lavinia chose to expiate in death-in-life all the crimes committed by the ancestral Mannons as well as her own. Therefore "Shenandoah" can be interpreted as foreshadowing Lavinia's fate.

b. The Plural Meanings of the Word "bound"

In O'Neill's statement of "Shenandoah" he maintained that "even the stupid words have striking meaning when considered in relation to tragic events in play." It is apparent that he meant "bound" by "the stupid words." For, the word "bound" epitomizes the concept of the fate of the Mannons.

Firstly, the Mannons are confined ("bound") to the house of "Hate and Death" from birth by the Mannon Puritanism. Consequently, the Mannon house looks like a prison. O'Neill uses its image on the stage direction: "*The white columns cast black bars of shadow on the gray wall behind them*" (263). The Mannons are in a prison where they were obliged to lead "death-in-life," which is personified by Ezra. He explains about "the Mannons' way of thinking": "They went to the white meeting-house on Sabbaths and meditated on death. Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born." The Mannon house is not only a prison but also "a temple of death" (308), which is referred to "our tomb" (273), "the graveyard" (378), "a sepulchre" (273).

Secondly, it is natural that the incarcerated should yearn for love and life, the opposite of their present way of living, "the dark, prison-like existence of nineteenth-century New England Puritanism" (Raleigh 20). The common place to which they try to escape from the ugliness of American reality is "the South Sea Islands," the image of "the Garden of Paradise" (279). It is also called "the Blessed Isles," which stand for

freedom, peace, love, life, motherhood, etc. As far as “the Blessed Isles” are concerned, neither Ezra nor the pair of Christine and Adam could visit them. Although Lavinia and Orin visited them, they turned out to be “Vinnie’s islands, not mine” (391), as Orin became disillusioned. On her return from the Islands and after Orin’s death, she returned to the old Lavinia in black and masculine bearing. This means that “the Blessed Isles” were an illusion, as it were. Thus O’Neill depicted the vulnerability of human beings, who can not help imagining an impossible beautiful dream of freedom and happiness all the more because the reality is dark and prison-like existence.

Thirdly, the final destination for which the Mannons are “bound” is death. The Mannon house embodies the curse of the Mannons. Thus the themes of Greek tragedy – crime and retribution, the pursued and the pursuing – are re-created in O’Neill’s work. Ezra is pursued to death by Christine and Adam, they in turn by Lavinia and Orin, Orin by Lavinia, and lastly Lavinia by the dead. We may say that the dead pursuing Lavinia mean, psychologically speaking, Erinyes of obsession. The final destination, for which the Mannons are “bound,” is death. The only surviving Lavinia is defeated by the dead because she failed to fulfill her dream of ideal love, just like the dead who bore a grudge against, and felt frustrated in, their unfulfilled passion in their lifetime, and who haunted the living as evil spirits even after death and finally dragged Lavinia into their company as the culmination of the Mannon fate.

When Seth had Lavinia’s attention turned to the reality and its consequence by singing “Oh, Shenandoah, I can’t get near you / Way-ay, I’m bound away –,” she responded to him, saying “I’m not bound away – not now, Seth. I’m bound here – to the Mannon dead!” (423). She accepts her fate that her final destination is death. It becomes suitable for Lavinia to mourn the dead including herself. The reason why Lavinia mourns herself is that she committed the crime against herself in terms of “castration” (Shimizu 236). She felt “bound” (under obligations)

to do so as "the last Mannon." Thus O'Neill brought Lavinia to a "tragic ending worthy of [her] character." I have mentioned that the destination of the Mannons is death. Therefore Seth's mournful singing of "Shenandoah" suggests that his chanty performs the role of dirge.

c. The Whole Meaning of "Shenandoah"

"Shenandoah" is a traditional American folk song of uncertain origin, dating back at least to the early nineteenth century. There are several interpretations of "Shenandoah": the names of an Indian chief, the Shenandoah River Valley in Virginia, and the Shenandoah River. I will take the interpretation of the Shenandoah River as stated below. This chanty consists of the following four sentences, which I assert imply the tragic fate of the Mannons.

- (1) Oh, Shenandoah, I long to hear you. / A-way, my rolling river.
- (2) Oh, Shenandoah, I can't get near you.
- (3) Way-ay, I'm bound away / Across the wide Missouri.
- (4) Oh, Shenandoah, I love your daughter / A-way, my rolling river!

The first sentence indicates that the Mannons aspire for the beautiful dream of eternal life or Eternal Recurrence represented by the Shenandoah. The second indicates that they cannot fulfill the dream in the ugly reality of materialistic and Puritan society. The third indicates that their defeat of the dream in actual life leads them toward death. We may say that "the wide Missouri" symbolizes the boundary between life and death. It also implies that beyond the Missouri lie gold mines in the West, embodiment of materialism. The Mannon journey "[a]cross the wide Missouri," suggestive of "The Trail of Tears," is the "*Long Day's Journey into Night*" of death in the long run. The fourth and final sentence indicates that although the male Mannons love the daughter of the Shenandoah, they are bound away from her back to the Mannon house of death. That is to say, the daughter of the

Shenandoah symbolizes the river of life, and it is personified by primarily life-loving Marie, followed by Christine and Lavinia as "Mother's daughter." "A-way" implies their separation and their dream's impossibility, namely "dissociation from the springs of life" (Ahuja 128). It also suggests Lavinia's separation from Seth, yielding to death.

"[M]y rolling river" suggests the inner conflicts of the Mannons between dream and reality, resulting in the final triumph of the latter over the former. Even though they go against the stream of their fate by "rolling," it is inevitable that they would be washed away by the eternal flow of the river or be defeated by the Mannon fate. Despite the Mannons' struggle against the stream of their fate, all of them except Lavinia, were completely defeated to death. Lavinia made "[her] glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express [her] instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression."⁵ That is to say, with "a gesture of perfect beauty and tragic serenity" (Clark 123) Lavinia accepts her defeat by "the Force" of the Mannon fate within her; and "[her] glorious, self-destructive struggle" comes to an end. She succeeded in breaking the chain of the Mannon fate at the sacrifice of her life as well as her femininity, which should be considered her victory in defeat, in O'Neill's phrase, "She is broken and not broken! By her way of yielding to her Mannon fate she overcomes it. She *is* tragic!" (*Selected Letters* 390).⁶ We may say that *Electra* should be O'Neill's representative work which embodies his view of tragedy. After attending the performance of Lavinia's tragic and heroic struggle, the audience can experience "catharsis," as defined by Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy in the *Poetics*. Therefore we may reasonably say that this work is a tragedy, a modern one. Since the name "Man-non" suggests Man, the fate of the Mannons might be that of every modern man.

Conclusion

It seems reasonable to assume that the dramatists would use the chorus as their spokesmen, when we consider its functions of commenting on the action of the actors, forwarding the action, evoking sympathy for the heroes, and drawing the audience into the stories. This can be applied to Seth, the choral figure. That is to say, Seth is the projection of the author.

It is important to recall that O'Neill's purpose of writing *Electra* was to approximate the Greek sense of fate in terms that a modern theater audience could accept, and also to give Electra, "the most interesting criminal of us all" (400), appropriate punishment, especially for her "matricide." There are some critics who argue that *Electra* reflects O'Neill's own tragic family.⁷ I am saying that *Electra* is a work, which deals with O'Neill's atonement for his "matricide," because "[t]he damned" (403), Lavinia, is considered to be the projection of the author in terms of both "matricide" and "[t]he damned." For, O'Neill's autobiographical play entitled *Long Day's Journey into Night* treats the same theme of the author's damned relationship with his mother: his birth caused her mother's morphine addiction, which signifies "matricide." Therefore it is the author's fated inevitable question how to find a meaning for life in, and to affirm his existence.

Seth's relationship with Lavinia will help us to clarify the meaning of his role as the chorus. We have already identified what Seth represents as a Satyr-like Earth Mother by analyzing his "Shenandoah." However, Seth failed to give Lavinia life-giving embrace. Or rather, she refused it because she realized that her guilt was so great that redemptive death was not allowed her. Her refusal of it is O'Neill's. That is to say, we may safely say that O'Neill is too guilty of his "matricide" to accept "absolution" (Seth's life-giving embrace) at this point of writing this work. Manheim concluded that "O'Neill could at this point envision no solace to his pain, and the end of the play is bleaker than anything in O'Neill, including *The Iceman Cometh* (86). My contention is

that Manheim is basically right on this point.

Seth is innocent, is never involved in any crimes of the Mannons. Moreover, his flowers signify happiness and life, and his “Shenandoah” suggests eternal life. Furthermore, according to Manheim, Seth “might stand for forgiveness of the Mannons” (84) or “existence has value” (84).⁸ On the other hand, O’Neill comes from a damned Irish family and he himself is damned from his birth and guilt-ridden. Therefore the death-oriented author had to question the meaning for his existence and his longing for affirming his life.

It should be concluded, from what has been said above, that Seth’s role as the chorus consists in reflecting O’Neill’s ideal self, alter ego, which embodies both the affirmation of his existence and the hope of his rebirth. That is why O’Neill leaves Seth to the charge of Lavinia’s (O’Neill’s) “coffin” in the Mannon sepulcher with no prospect of her (his) rebirth in sight, until *Long Day’s Journey into Night* appears. The work suggests that Lavinia’s (O’Neill’s) curse was finally paid out, because it was written “with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for all the four haunted Tyrones” (5).

Notes

1. Hereafter the title of *Mourning Becomes Electra* is abbreviated as *Electra*.
2. Cited in Berlin (Basingstoke: 1989: 21).
3. Ibid., 21.
4. Eugene O’Neill. *Three Plays: Desire Under the Elms, Strange Interlude, Mourning Becomes Electra*. New York: Vintage, 1995. 264. Hereafter the page number is indicated in parenthesis in the text.
5. From a letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn published in Quinn’s *A History of the American Drama*, vol. II, F.S. Crofts & Co., 1945. Rpt. *O’Neill and His Plays*. Ed. Oscar Cargill. N. Bryllion Fagin, William J. Fisher. New York: New York UP, 1961. 125-6.
6. Eugene O’Neill. *Selected Letters*. 390. The italic is O’Neill’s.
7. For the representative points of view of the issue, see Floyd, *Assessment* 532-

33; Manheim 76-88; Moorton, Jr. 171-88.

8. For Manheim's view of the issue, see Manheim 84.

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