

The Nature of Guilt in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*

Noorbakhsh Hooti^{1,*}; Rashin Fakhri²

¹Razi University, Faculty of Arts, English Department, Kermanshah, Iran
Assistant professor.

²Student of English Literature (BA), Razi University, Faculty of Arts,
English Department, Kermanshah, Iran
Email: rashinfakhri7@yahoo.com

*Corresponding author.
Email: nhooti@yahoo.com

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to scrutinize the nature of guilt in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, which seems to be an inevitable torturing elements of the modern man. Indeed guilt is a preventive obstacle, which keeps on poking and undermining Present by reviving Past. Sense of guilt may lead to depression, isolation and revenge, pretence and egotism. This study displays these elements by analyzing the characters of the play in different contexts.

Key words: O'Neill; Guilt; Egotism; Isolation

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INTRODUCTION

This study gives a vivid picture of a world of contrast, duality and binary opposition; love and hatred, forgiveness and revenge, loyalty and disloyalty. By showing family as the center of attention in this play; the researchers want to introduce family as the basic factor in forming individual's personality. In this play, past does not become a past but keeps on moving as a round character till the end of the story. The sense of guilt and shame, selfishness and revenge and the consequences of these feelings like

out of control hostility, isolation, murdering and suicide are the most prominent problems, which all belong to modern era, which are quite tangible in this play.

SETTING AND THE IMPACT OF O'NEILL'S LIFE ON THE PLAY

Dismal atmosphere in which the story takes place pushes us towards the anticipation of an awaiting melancholic mood, for instance, the house in which the family lives gives us the sense of depression and isolation. O'Neill displays the condition of the family and its members by showing a large, secluded house that is unique and far from the village. In the starting we may get the aura that he wants to bring into picture the life of some deserted and reclusive people. But slowly through literary symbols he shows us the impending events in the next scene; for instance when Ezra returns from war is night – a night full of mystery; everything is warning a looming bad event: the looks, the words and the darkness. As a matter of fact we can say that showing the calmness before the storm is his strategy in this play; in most cases before any tragic event there is a sense of calmness, for instance this can be seen when Ezra or Adam Brant are supposed to be murdered, before the quarrel between Lavinia and Orin and Orin's suicide. This strategy is repeated so many times that in the middle of the story we can figure out when an important event is going to happen.

The dim and depressed atmosphere of the play is influenced by the writer's time and life. The effects of the situation and family in which O'Neill has grown up and his imaginary sense of guilt for his mother's death are tangible in his play. His disintegrated family and sense of guilt made O'Neill know the problems of these kinds of families and people who are guilt-stricken. As Hooti and Maleki (2009, p.9) claim,

O' Neill's own harrowing experiences in life had endowed him with a tragic hallucination, very close to that of the Greek

dramatists. Tragedy was to him the very texture and rhythm of life. O'Neill found that his tragic sense of life could not be expressed through the cheap more passionate and intense form of expression.

His life and experiences has tremendous effect on most of his plays but about *Mourning Becomes Electra* we cannot ignore the impact of war as well. As we know O'Neill has seen the World War II. Two of the characters, Ezra and Orin, are in the war and their absence disintegrates family more and more. Because of their absence and especially Orin, Christine falls in love with a man, as Christine tells Lavina,

Well, I hope you realize I never would have fallen in love with Adam if I'd had Orin with me. When he had gone there was nothing left— but hate and a desire to be revenged— and a longing for love! And it was then I met Adam. I saw he loved me— (O'Neill, 2006, p.31, henceforth O'Neill)

From what happens in their absence it can be perceived that O'Neill finds the war responsible for family collapse and disintegration; the war which is deemed as a socio-moral duty, as Lavina says "It was his duty as a Mannon to go! He'd be sorry the rest of his life if he hadn't." (ibid)

FAMILY AS MAIN CORE OF THE SOCIETY

Family has been always known as the safest shelter for man. The smallest society in which man is brought up and his personality is shaped. So it can have profound impact on how he thinks, behaves and lives. In O'Neill's play, we have a family in which life is dead. The following dialogue between Christine and Mannon supports the claim,

Christine: Why are you talking of death?

Mannon: that's always been the Mannon's way of thinking. They went to the white meeting-house on Sabbaths and mediated on death. Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born. How in hell people ever got such notions! That white meeting-house. It stuck in my mind— clean-scrubbed and white-washed—a temple of death! But in this war I've seen too many white walls splattered with blood that counted no more than dirty water. I've seen dead men scattered about, no more important than rubbish to be got rid of. That made the white-house seem meaningless—making so much solemn fuss over death!(O'Neill, p.56)

A family with four people who live in four different worlds; with different desires, aims and feelings and pretend that they admit and admire the family's values, while they do not seem to understand one another and indeed their goals are in contrast. It is a real specimen of an unstable family with shaky relationships based on hatred, sense of revenge, jealousy, grudge, duality, betrayal, pretence and arrogance.

Mother hates her daughter because she hates her husband; in a conversation between mother and her daughter, this sense of indifference and non-belonging is

vividly tangible.

Lavina: So I was born of your disgust! I've always guessed that, Mother—ever since I was little—when I used to come to you—with love—but you would always push me away! I've felt it ever since I can remember—your disgust. Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate you!

Christine: I tried to love you. I told myself it wasn't human not to love my own child, born of my body. But I never could make myself feel you were born of anybody but his! You were always my wedding night to me and my honeymoon! (O'Neill, p.30-31)

She gives the following justification about her love towards her son:

Because by then I had forced myself to become resigned in order to live! And most of the time I was carrying him, your father was in army in Mexico. I had forgotten him. And when Orin was born he seemed my child, only mine, and I loved him for that! (O'Neill, p.31)

And about the relationship between the father and his son, O'Neill talks about a far distance, which separates them and their worlds so much that Orin hates his dad and there is not a single sign to show a weak sense of love between them. As Conze (1981, p.31) says "Whatever deeds a man may do, be they delightful, be they bad, they make a heritage for him. Deeds do not vanish without trace."

The only heritage of the irresponsible and selfish parents are two children who are not able to love, to decide and to control their feelings; they are weak and dependent. In fact these children are the victims of modern world and its people in which hatred and revenge are in their most powerful mood. Lavinia tells her mother:

I was born of your disgust! I've always guessed that, Mother—ever since I was little—when I used to come to you—with love—but you would always push me away! I've felt it ever since I can remember— your disgust! Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate you! (O'Neill, p.30)

This is a gift which a kind of mother from the modern world presents to her daughter: disgust! Indeed holding grudge in a long period of time caused a sudden explosion and collapse of the whole family structure.

GUILT AND THE NATURE OF GUILT IN MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA

It is not that easy to give a clear definition of Guilt. It can have different interpretations under different contexts. Indeed the main elements, which lead to the sense of Guilt are the social, cultural, moral and religious values of a society or community. Hence individual is bound to pass through the mentioned values in order to be regarded as guilty or innocent. However, guilt is always a bitter and frustrating sense, which pesters individual's peace of mind. As Hooti and Habibi (2011, p.11) assert,

Guilt is one of the most poignant and devastating senses, which is either perceived or imposed upon for one reason or the other. This perceived or imposed sense keeps on growing

as a poisonous tumor, which ultimately turns into a terminal mental disease, a disease that disowns one from his own self and identity. This sense of loss of identity creates a murky dungeon of non-belonging, where one loses his sense of direction in life.

There is a considerable difference between guilt and shame "Guilt is usually confused with shame." (Singh, 2001, p.43). This is a common error among people to know guilt and shame as unique feelings; however they are distinctive. As Tangney & Dearing (2004, p.24) assert "The fundamental difference between shame and guilt centers on the role of the self (i.e. "who I am")." Guilt involves a more articulated condemnation of a specific behavior (i.e. "what I *did*").

Indeed shame-prone individuals are more likely to pin the blame on others (as well as themselves) for negative events and more prone to bitter, resentful kind of hostility, yet guilt-prone individuals appear better able to empathize with others and to accept responsibility for negative interpersonal events and are less prone to anger like Ezra who accepts he is guilty for the distance between him and his wife:

I came home to surrender to you—what's inside me. I love you.
I loved you then, and all the years between, and I love you now.
I wouldn't blame you. I guess I haven't said it or showed it
much— ever. (O'Neil, p.57)

So in illustrating guilt, we should consider both shame-free guilt and guilt with the sense of shame. Alf Ross in his book *On Guilt, Responsibility and Punishment* uses a simile to give a beautiful definition of a guilt-stricken person, "a man who feels guilty is like a house divided against itself. It is as if he suffered from acute schizophrenia in a definite part of his mind. He is somehow unable to find his identity." (p.19)

In fact man carries his sin like a burden on his shoulder from the past into the present. Not being able to fragment the time, he cannot unload himself from this heavy burden so that he is always enchained to his past self-made lock up. He cannot put up with such a situation and consequently is bound to suffer and "suffering will change you, but not necessarily for the better. You have to choose that. And it was the choosing that made all the difference." (Cardeiro, 2008, p.5)

Indeed, the major reason that a man cannot be released from the tormenting chains of the past is that he does not find himself capable enough to forgive himself. On the other hand, when he is forgiven by inside, he will be forgiven by outside too. He is perverse enough to insist that there is no way out for him and he cannot continue with impunity. He does not find himself deserving enough to be loved and to be forgiven. As Orin tell Lavina "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—and confess." (O'Neil, p.160) In fact modern man is waiting for a Godot to come and save him. He finds himself reprehensible with no attempt to "atone

for his guilt or obtain forgiveness for it." (Ross, 1975, p.16). It shows that lack of self-esteem can easily push one to a gummy swamp.

Indeed the modern man is growing physically but mummifying mentally, ignoring that a mummy is just useful for museums not for real world. He has enchained himself within the fossilized metanarratives, which give birth to guilt, shame, consternation, confusion, hostility and fear.

The modern man is lost in his world, a strange world with no present and full of remorse and horrible nightmares. His present is dissolved within his past. He lives in a world without present.

Coelho (2002, p.108) says: "The secret is in the present. If you pay attention to the present, you can improve upon it. And if you improve on the present, what comes later will also be better."

The sense of guilt seems to be an integral part of the ever grumbling nature of the modern man, the man who finds himself drowned in the oozy ocean of helpless worries. This guilt-stricken sense is quite vivid in the play, as Lavina Orin says, "Oh, God! Over and over! Will you never lose your stupid conscience! Don't you see how you torture me you're becoming my guilty conscience, too." (O, Neil, p.160)

Hence the sense of guilt keeps on poking one's conscience where people are judged by who they were, not who they are. This kind of judgment glues people to their dark dungeon of past where they grope for a possible solution, but all in vain since the sense of shame and guilt exacerbates their situation and they are thwarted by these frustrating feelings.

In general we can divide people into four categories:

1- The first group is formed by people who are so timid and unfaithful that they cannot tolerate their situations, thus they find death as the only way to be rescued. Indeed they prefer suicide to resistance.

2- People of the second group are those who are full of rage and always desire to stir up old hostilities and never confess to their sins. Under no circumstances they accept their guilt and always blame others for interpersonal negative events. In fact they deceive themselves and as Imam Ali says: "The most hurt person is the one who deceives himself." (2002, p.86-henceforth Imam Ali). They are too coward to admit their guilt; they keep on passing the fault to others in order to justify their own wrong doings.

3- The third group of people accepts their guilt and find themselves reprehensible and look at the rest of their life as the punishment. Unfortunately they cannot quell the destructive feelings of shame and are sure that they deserve to be sentenced.

4- In contrast to people of three groups mentioned above, the forth group of people can extract themselves from the past and think about their lives with a relieved mind of egregious events. The ability to distinguish the

differences among yesterday, today and tomorrow allows them to eliminate the sense of guilt and shame and to see today as an opportunity to start again. They believe life is in becoming not in being. For them past is a part of history and present is the life that they are involved in and future is the desire to be achieved.

To analyze the characters of O'Neill's play we have classified them into the groups above.

All the characters of this play are in common in one feature and that is the sense of guilt but because of different traits their feedbacks to this feeling differ from one another. But one thing is clear, as Imam Ali says, (2000) envy and fear are known as two of factors of sin and these can be mentioned as the basic factors of their guilt. While analyzing characters we make an attempt to illustrate these factors.

Tangney & Dearing believe, "Guilt is the feeling that you know what you've done and by your standards it is wrong." (2004, p.10)

To support the above statement we can say Orin is aware of what his sin is and he cannot subdue his conciseness and conscience-stricken world. He knows his sense of guilt occasioned by the crime he has committed under the duress and influence of his sister. But that crime was actually against his love to her mother and he found himself and Lavinia guilty for the death of their mother and they think that they are to be punished:

Orin: How else can I be sure you won't leave me? You would never dare leave me—then! You would feel as guilty then as I do! you would be as damned as I am! (*then with sudden anger as he sees the growing horrified repulsion on her face.*) Damn you, don't you see I must find some certainty some way or go mad? You don't want me to go mad, do you? I would talk too much! I would confess! (*then as if the word stirred something within him his tone instantly changes to one of passionate pleading.*) "Vinnie? Let's go now and confess and pay the penalty for Mother's murder, and find peace together." (O'Neil, p.175)

Orin murdered Adam out of envy and his apprehension of losing his mother. He could not endure the death of his mother and finds suicide as the only way to be forgiven:

Orin: (in a pitiful, pleading whisper). Vinnie! (*He stares at her with the lost, stricken expression for a moment more—then the obsessed wild look returns to his eyes—with harsh mockery.*) another act of justice, eh? You want to drive me to suicide as I drove mother! An eye for an eye, is that it? But—(*He stops abruptly and stares before him, as if this idea were suddenly taking hold of his tortured imagination, and speaks as if hypnotized.*) yes! That would be justice—now you Mother! She is speaking now through you! (*more and more hypnotized by this train of thought.*) yes! It is the way to peace—to find her again—my lost island there—(*with excited eagerness now, speaking to the dead.*) Mother! Do you know what I'll do then? I'll get on my knees and ask your forgiveness—and say—(*His mouth grows convulsed, as if he were retching up poison.*) I'll sa, I'm glad you found love, Mother! I'll wish you happiness—you and Adam! (*He laughs exultantly.*) you've heard me! You're here, in the house now! You're calling me! You're waiting to take me home! (*He turns and strides towards the door.*) (O'Neill, p.176) He is classified into the first group.

The character that is close to be classified into the

second group is Adam Brant; a person who knows that Mannon and especially Ezra Mannon is guilty for his mother's death. Her mother died of sickness and starvation when he had left her, as Brant tells Lavinia "She'd written to Ezra asking for a loan but he never answered her. He deliberately let her die. I swore on my mother's body I'd revenge her death on him.....He is as guilty of murder as anyone he ever sent to the rope when he was a judge!" (O'Neil, p.25)

But actually he is the guiltiest of all about his mother since he had left him for years but obviously he is not brave enough to confess his sin, so he is going to turn the table and prove the other are guilty and plans to take revenge.

Imam Ali warns these people in this way: "Don't chide anyone but your own self." (16) And he further says, "How does he condemn another person for a crime, while he has committed a similar one, or has committed a crime which is even worse?" (140)

Lavinia, from the third group, seems as the guiltiest character a person who is controlled by her emotions and jealousy. She is the victim of her family, she is grown with hatred and cannot love and kills her mother out of envy: "you know damned well that behind all your pretence about Mother's murder being an act of justice was your jealous hatred! She warned me of that and I see it clearly now! You wanted Brant for yourself!" (O'Neill, p.162) and Lavinia answers: "It's a lie! I hated him!" (ibid) Actually she is drowned and conditioned by sins. Imam Ali says to these kinds of people: "One who is controlled by guilt will never win, and the one who wins by badness will be defeated." (327)

In fact Lavinia is defeated; she loses her father, brother and mother, and cannot reach her love, and when she accepts her sins, she cannot forgive herself and finds herself blameworthy to be condemned in the rest of her life.

The representative of forth group is Ezra Mannon who wants to compensate the past and start from scratch. He does not want to stick to the past, though he has witnessed lots of bloodshed in the war but still creates a rosy picture of his future unaware of the murder plot masterminded by his wife and her lover.

I TAKE REVENGE THEN I AM

O'Neill's characters are the symbols of modern man with specific characteristics, which one of the most prominent of them is taking revenge to prove their existence. The metanarratives, which they have made for themselves are based on revenge and they sacrifice everything to achieve their purpose. In fact the sense of revenge is a justification to bury one's sins. It appears when one creates binary opposition and looks at the world around with a sole centralized angle.

"Abide not with dualism, carefully avoid pursuing it;

as soon as you have right and wrong, confusion ensues, and Mind is lost.” (Conze, 1981, p.6) Revenge actually is like a suicide bomb, which ruins both the target and the attacker.

MASKED MODERN MAN

One of the main characteristics of a modern man is the mask he always wears to achieve his goals. Actually modern man does not want to give in and does his best to keep everything under his control. O’Neill highlights this pretentious characteristic of his characters in this play. They are afraid of their real “selves” and are apprehensive of facing the fact. The more they run away from the truth, the more they restrict themselves in their metanarrative and the more difficult it becomes to break the shackles of the fossilized conventions, like Ezra Mannon who knows the one who has made a bridge of separation between him and his wife is nobody else but he himself, so to escape from this truth and that his wife does not love him anymore, he prefers to be thoroughly engrossed in his work to avoid thinking this loss.

ISOLATED MODERN MAN

An isolated individual imprisons himself within a particular way of thinking and expects the world to follow his standpoint. In fact he is a self-centered person who insists on seeing the world from his binoculars, and he firmly and adamantly attaches to his ideas and is inevitably controlled by his notions. Kathleen and Mitchell assert:

A thought is harmless unless we believe it. It’s not our thoughts, but our attachment to our thoughts, that causes suffering. Attaching to a thought means believing that it’s true, without inquiring. A belief is a thought that we’ve been attaching to, often for years. (2002, p.5)

Lavinia is a mentally isolated girl who takes advantage of everything for her benefits and opposes to the opposite thoughts harshly. She is isolated not only in the past but also in her house and is doomed to be forgotten. Actually all the five main characters are isolated in the vortex of time as well as isolated in the dark chambers of their souls.

DEPENDENCY

The other feature of the modern world which O’Neill shows in this play is dependency and its consequences, which is a typical characteristic of modern man. In fact in the modern world dependency has different forms; a modern man may depend on a person, one may depend on money, one on his job, etc. what is important here is the nature of dependency which is not vanished, just its form has changed. What O’Neill wants to show is the aftermath of dependency. Indeed the characters find the

true joy of life in dependency. Dependency may be like a rope hanging from a deep valley for an individual to hold himself but neither that rope is strong enough nor the individual is courageous enough to find a loophole to get away from the impending jeopardy. This typical characteristic is tangible in Christine and Orin. Such kind of dependency comes from love and then changes to attachment but most of the time this attachment is mistaken for love so. When Adam Brant tells that he wants to kill Ezra, Christine tells him: “and then? You would be hanged for murder! And where would I be? There would be nothing left for me but to kill myself!” (O’Neill, p.38) and she does it when her children tell her lover is murdered, or Orin who depends on his mother emotionally cannot not endure the life without her, although dependency is one of numerous reasons of his suicide.

EGOTISM

O’Neill tries to point at the most significant characteristics of the modern man. One of them which he highlights is arrogance and selfishness, an inseparable feature of the modern man. A modern man is so much selfish that he cannot see anybody but himself. He wants everything for himself and does not think about the others. Jealousy and selfishness seem to be the integral traits of the modern man. He strives ceaselessly to have a strong ‘I’ at any possible cost. In this story we can see such a characteristic in Lavinia who wants to have her father and brother for herself and because of this she takes advantage of every situation to reach her goal. In fact she eliminates everything on her way even if her mother. Whenever an individual convinces himself that his standpoint on life is the best and when he finds himself in an ideologically contradictory context, then he will inevitably push himself in a stressful dungeon of depression and isolation, as Byron Katie in her book with Stephen Mitchell says: the following quotation should be indented:

behind every uncomfortable feeling, there is a thought that isn’t true for us. We have a thought that argues with reality, then we have a stressful feeling and then we act on that feeling, creating more stress for ourselves (Kathleen and Mitchell, p.7-8)

This is Lavinia’s way to achieve her goals: insisting on changing the others’ angle of looks rather than respecting them. This can be perceived as another dimension of modern man’s arrogance who keeps on creating binary oppositions rather than binary concepts, since change he believes that he is always right and others are wrong. Lavinia’s life style gives her nothing but the feeling of compunction and isolation. She wants something that is not hers, but she wants them and she should gain them! So she is aware of the relationship between her father and mother and her brother and mother and does whatever required preventing their relationships. She tries to prove that her mother has never been a good mother and wife.

This is clear in the scene when their parents are speaking after Ezra has come back, she comes to see what they are talking about and when she sees they are in good terms, she tells her mom with hatred and jealousy "I hate you! You steal even father's love from me again! You steal all love from me when I was born! I can't bear it! I won't! It's my duty to tell him (Ezra) about her (Christine) I will!" (O'Neill, p.59) Or when Christine is talking to her son, she intervenes and tries to stop their conversation, or she writes a letter to her father and brother and tells them about Christine's betrayal. She tells Orin: "All I want to do is warn you to be on your guard. Don't let her baby you the way she used to and get you under her thumb again. Don't believe the lies she'll tell you!" (O'Neill, p.79) Actually she thinks that Christine does not deserve her, while Christine thinks otherwise and Christine tells her this truth though she denies it: "you've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin! You've always schemed to steal my place!" (O'Neill, p.33) and what she does when she understands her mother's secret, she shows that she just wants to hold Christine in her hand by threatening her to split the beans. She uses this chance to realize her dream to be the controller of her family and to take revenge on her mother. This is a kind of egotism which a modern man has taken for granted that what he thinks and believes is true. As Adam adamantly claims that Ezra is guilty and should be condemned; he determinedly believes that he claims nothing but the truth.

CONCLUSION

The study makes an attempt to show that O'Neill has a quite close understanding of modern man and his problems. As Hooti and Maleki (2009, p.9) assert,

O'Neill viewed the modern mass man as an uprooted being, uprooted from his own spiritual self, and from his spiritual past as well. And all the lost souls in his drama are drawn from his central human image; they have lost contact with the refreshing currents of Nature, and the remedy lies in a return to the earth-mother. Their dark journeys proceed from, and progress through, the labyrinth of citified woe and mechanized calamity. Frontiersmen all, they are agonists of the spirit engaged in flesh, of the flesh trapped in metal.

The study nicely brings into light the preventive

traits of modernism like arrogance, sense of guilt, revenge, metanarratives and binary oppositions and most importantly the presence of past. Indeed it is in the flashbacks of the past that guilt pops up in the minds and hearts of the individuals. So to have a sound and safe life we should learn to enjoy life in its fragmented form. As Golomb believes "the existential question today is not whether to be or not to be, but how one can become what one truly is" (quoted in Hooti & Ahmadi, 2011, p.140)

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