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Tragedy in the Modern American Theater

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In 1886, referring to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the major nineteenth-century American critic and cultural arbiter William Dean Howells wrote that "whoever struck a note so profoundly tragic in American fiction would do a false and mistaken thing," inviting American writers to "concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American" (Howells 1993: 35). In the decades since then, Howells's words about the "smiling aspects," taken out of context, have become a cultural shorthand for the putative inability of Americans to fully understand the tragic vision of human experience, and therefore, for the failure of American literature to encompass fully developed tragedy as a genre.

Although none of them remain in the contemporary repertoire, there were in fact a number of tragedies written by Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many had native subjects, such as the demise of the "noble savage." Several raised the historical figures of the new nation to tragic status. The most popular, from Thomas Godfrey's *The Prince of Parthia* (1767) to George Boker's *Francesca da Rimini* (1855) and William Young's *Pendragon* (1881), focused on subjects that were remote from the audience, both chronologically and geographically. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, eclipsed by popular melodrama and, later, the domestic realism favored by Howells and other Progressive critics, contemporary tragedy was hard to find on the American stage.

In 1949, when Arthur Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman*, he felt it necessary to explain his chosen genre in the *New York Times*. "In this age few tragedies are written," he said, and offered his account of the cultural explanations for the near-absence of tragedy in the mid-twentieth-century American theater:

> It has often been held that the lack is due to a paucity of heroes among us, or else that modern man has had the blood drawn out of his organs of belief by the skepticism of science, and the heroic attack on life cannot feed on an attitude of reserve and circumspection. For one reason or another, we are often held to be below tragedy – or

> tragedy above us. The inevitable conclusion is, of course, that the tragic mode is archaic, fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly, and where this admission is not made in so many words it is often implied. (Miller 1996: 3)

It is true that American playwrights who chose tragedy as their genre were writing against cultural expectations in the twentieth century, but the absence of tragedy was not quite so complete as this account suggests. In fact, a revival of the genre was taking place during the period from 1925 to 1960, which produced the United States' most distinguished tragedies, including *Death of a Salesman* and several other plays by Miller. It began with Maxwell Anderson's intense interest in reviving verse drama on the modern stage and the renewed interest in tragedy among modernist playwrights like Eugene O'Neill, who were influenced by Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).

Maxwell Anderson

A poet, critic, and former college professor, Maxwell Anderson did not shy away from making pronouncements on literary matters. In several essays, he clarified his decision to write in verse for the contemporary theater and his application of Aristotle to modern tragedy. He wrote in "Poetry in the Theatre" that "the best prose in the world is inferior on the stage to the best poetry" (1939: 34). Anderson wrote several verse tragedies on historical subjects, including *Elizabeth the Queen* (1930), *Mary of Scotland* (1933), and *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1948), which enjoyed both critical and popular success, and were made into successful Hollywood movies. It was the verse plays he wrote on contemporary subjects, such as *Night over Taos* (1932), *Winterset* (1935), and *Key Largo* (1939) that he thought more difficult and more daring, however. He wrote that he was attempting to "establish a new convention" by treating a contemporary tragic theme in verse, "more of an experiment than I could wish, for the great masters themselves never tried to make tragic poetry out of the stuff of their own times" (1939: 38). There is no denying that Anderson was unsuccessful at establishing a convention for the modern theater, but many critics attest that he succeeded in creating contemporary tragedy with *Winterset*, and the popular success of his historical verse plays paved the way for playwrights like T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry.

In describing his approach to tragedy, Anderson left no doubt that he followed Aristotle. He described his fundamental rule for the writing of a serious play in an essay entitled "The Essence of Tragedy" (1938): "A play should lead up to and away from a central crisis, and this crisis should consist in a discovery by the leading character which has an indelible effect on his thought and emotion and completely alters his course of action" (1939: 7). For Anderson the hero's discovery of "some element in his environment or in his own soul of which he has not been aware – or which he has not taken sufficiently into account" was "the mainspring in the mechanism of a modern play" (1939: 6). What's more, he thought that the hero's discovery must lead to his personal redemption through suffering. In a revised version

of the essay published in 1947, Anderson personalized the experience of the tragic hero even further, declaring that "the story of a play must be conflict, and specifically, a conflict between the forces of good and evil within a single person." Along with the personalization of the tragic experience went its moralization. Anderson explained that, in a modern play, the protagonist "must represent the forces of good and must win, or, if he has been evil, must yield to the forces of the good, and know himself defeated" (Anderson 1947: 25).

For Anderson, then, tragedy was essentially a moral genre, based on the redemption of the hero through suffering. Like Aristotle, Anderson thought that "the hero who is to make the central discovery in a play must not be a perfect man. He must have some variation of what Aristotle calls a tragic fault . . . and he must change for the better" (1939: 8–9). The reason Anderson consistently gave for his insistence on the protagonist's being on the side of the good was the audience. He insisted that

> what the audience wants to believe is that men have a desire to break the moulds of earth which encase them and claim a kinship with a higher morality than that which hems them in . . . the theatre at its best is a religious affirmation, an age-old rite restating and reassuring man's belief in his own destiny and his ultimate hope. (1939: 13–14).

For Anderson, modern tragedy presupposed the same conjunction of desire for spiritual transcendence with striving for ethical behavior as modern Christianity. It must affirm both humankind's essential sinfulness and the promise of redemption and union with the divinity that Christianity affirms. His essentially Christian understanding of the genre is reflected in his essay "Yes, by the Eternal": "The last act of a tragedy contains the moment when the wheel of a man's fate carries him simultaneously to spiritual realization and to the end of his life" (1939: 51–2).

The execution of Anderson's ideas is clear in *Winterset*, his tragedy based on the notorious 1927 execution of anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti for the murder of a paymaster they were supposed to have robbed. Anderson was consumed by the miscarriage of justice in the case, and had treated it more directly in his realistic play *Gods of the Lightning* (1928), but in *Winterset* he wrote a verse tragedy about a chain of events that might have occurred after the execution. In the play, 17-year-old Mio Romagna has dedicated his life to proving what he believes to be the truth, that his father was wrongfully executed for robbery and murder. The play centers on Mio's interaction with the Esdras family, when he comes to ask them about new evidence suggesting that there was a witness to the crime. The family consists of the son Garth, who did witness the murder by members of the gang he belongs to, but, in order to save his own life, did not speak up to save Romagna; his father, who has taught him that it is "better to tell a lie and live" (20); and his young sister Miriamne, who falls in love with Mio and must eventually choose between telling the truth and saving Mio from the gang, or telling a lie and saving her brother from the law.

Anderson sets Mio and Miriamne against a group of characters who represent degrees or gradations of evil. At one end of the scale is Trock Estrella, who actually killed the paymaster. Trock represents an unthinking evil, formed by a youth spent in the hands of the criminal justice system. Motivated by pure self-interest, Trock is determined to kill anyone who would put him in danger of being locked up again. The next degree of evil is represented by the moral relativism of two old men, the Jewish intellectual Esdras and Judge Gaunt, who presided over the trial that sent Bartolomeo Romagna to his death. These men have been so jaded and corrupted by experience that they reject all moral absolutes. Esdras counsels his guilt-ridden son Garth to keep silent about the murder, saying, "you bear no guilt at all – / unless you wish" (19), for guilt does not exist until he names it. Garth's instinctive moral sense will not allow him to accept his father's rationalization. But he has fallen into a suicidal despair, feeling that he is damned anyway and "dying inside" every day because he "sat here and let [Romagna] die instead of me / because I wanted to live!" (17). Garth has concluded that life is worthless and means "to get it over" and "take some scum down with me" (17), but he is paralyzed by weakness and fear when he has the chance.

The conflict between good and evil that Anderson said must take place within the hero is divided between the two young people, Miriamne and Mio. Forced to choose between saving her brother by supporting his lie or telling the truth that will keep Mio out of danger, Miriamne supports Garth, telling Mio, "he's my brother. / I couldn't give them my brother" (109). While Miriamne cannot sacrifice her brother's life, she can give up her own. When Mio is killed by Trock Estrella's gang, Miriamne is driven to walk into the gang's machine-gun fire. Acting out of her rudimentary understanding of morality, Miriamne succeeds only in showing the pathos of her desire to cancel her guilt for endangering Mio's life by giving her own. It is only the hero Mio who is allowed to learn anything in the course of the tragedy. When Mio hears the truth about the trial from Judge Gaunt and Trock Estrella, it is salvific, as is his love for Miriamne. But his redemption comes with his real understanding of the values his father lived for. His realization is of the transcendent and eternal nature of love. As Mio is dying, he repeats to Miriamne his father's last words to him, "I love you, and will love you after I die" (131). After both of them have died, Esdras, acting as a choral figure, calls on them to forgive him and Garth, and to "forgive the ancient evil of the earth / that brought you here" (133).

By affirming the transformational and transcendent character of love, Anderson elevates the virtue of *caritas* over that of justice, which, he implies, is inevitably corrupted in its human execution by the base desire for revenge or the human frailty of those who administer it. The tragic universe that he represents is a Christian one in which suffering is inevitable and death is inescapable, but redemption is possible. He wrote that the theater has the capacity to bring all the arts together "in a communal religious service. Any other art, practiced separately, can be either moral or amoral, religious or pagan, affirmative or despairing. But when they come together in the theater they must affirm, they cannot deny" (1947: 32). Anderson's tragedy affirmed a

belief in a definable good and evil and the possibility for salvation, even for those who have succumbed to evil in various guises.

Eugene O'Neill

While Anderson's tragedy is fundamentally grounded in Aristotle, this is not the case with that of the United States' greatest playwright, Eugene O'Neill. In 1928, when O'Neill was asked by an interviewer who his literary idol was, he replied: "The answer to that is in one word – Nietzsche" (Estrin 1990: 81). This had been true since 1907, when O'Neill was first introduced to Nietzsche's work. The most important of Nietzsche's books for O'Neill was *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883–5). In 1927, he wrote to fellow Nietzschean Benjamin DeCasseres that the book had "influenced me more than any book I've ever read" (Bogard and Bryer 1988: 246). But this was by no means the only one of Nietzsche's works O'Neill studied carefully. He read and made copious notations in several of Nietzsche's works during his Greenwich Village period, most importantly *The Birth of Tragedy*, and the presence of Nietzsche's ideas in O'Neill's work has been well documented. Gerhard Hoffman articulates the consensus of critics: "Nietzsche's influence on Eugene O'Neill was probably greater than on any other English-speaking playwright" (1995: 197). The influence of Nietzsche on *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), *Strange Interlude* (1928), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), *The Fountain* (1925), and other plays has been noted, but it is most evident in two tragedies written during O'Neill's most intense period of modernist experimentation: *The Great God Brown* (1926) and *Lazarus Laughed* (1928).

O'Neill wrote in 1942 that he considered *The Great God Brown* "one of the most interesting and moving" plays he had written because it succeeded "in conveying a sense of the tragic mystery drama of Life revealed through the lives in the play" (Commins 1986: 205). The play centers on a fundamental Nietzschean division. Defining realms of art, Nietzsche suggests, Apollo is "the transfiguring genius of the *principium individuationis*," while "under the mystical cry of exultation of Dionysus the spell of individuation is burst apart and the path to the Mothers of Being, to the innermost core of things, lies open" (2000: 86). O'Neill's play is an enactment of the tragic myth that Nietzsche describes as "a transformation of the wisdom of Dionysus into images through the artistic means of Apollo," ending in "the fraternal bond between both artistic deities in tragedy" which produces "the highest original artistic joy in the womb of the original Unity" (2000: 118–19). In *The Great God Brown*, Dion Anthony is a Dionysian artist, while Bill Brown is an Apollonian architect. O'Neill explained that his characters reflect Nietzsche's idea of the self and the anti-self:

> Dion Anthony – Dionysus and St. Anthony – the creative pagan acceptance of life, fighting eternal war with the masochistic, life-denying spirit of Christianity as represented by St. Anthony – the whole struggle resulting in this modern day in

> mutual exhaustion – creative joy in life for life's sake frustrated, rendered abortive, distorted by morality from Pan into Satan, into a Mephistopheles mocking himself in order to feel alive; Christianity, once heroic in martyrs for its intense faith now pleading weakly for intense belief in anything, even Godhead itself. (Clark 1929: 160–1)

While Dion is an artist tortured by the division of his soul, Bill Brown "is the visionless demi-god of our new materialistic myth – a Success – building his life of exterior things, inwardly empty and resourceless, an uncreative creature of superficial preordained social grooves, a by-product forced aside into slack waters by the deep main current of life-desire" (Clark 1929: 161). In the play, Dion as a boy puts on a mask which is "*a fixed forcing of his own face – dark, spiritual, poetic, passionately supersensitive, helplessly unprotected in its childlike, religious faith in life – into the expression of a mocking, reckless, defiant, gayly scoffing and sensual young Pan*" (O'Neill 1982: 1.260). O'Neill said that this mask is "not only a defense against the world for the super-sensitive painter-poet underneath it, but also an integral part of his character as the artist" (Clark 1929: 161). The world not only is blind to the artist beneath the mask, but "sneers at and condemns" the Pan mask it sees.

After this, "Dion's inner self retrogresses along the line of Christian resignation until it partakes of the nature of the Saint while at the same time the outer Pan is slowly transformed by his struggle with reality into Mephistopheles" (Clark 1929: 161). After Dion dies, leaving "Dion Anthony to William Brown – for him to love and obey – for him to become" (299), Brown appropriates his mask, hoping to capture the creative power with which he has enlivened his architectural designs and the sexual passion that has bound the two women for whom the men are rivals, Margaret and Cybel, to Dion rather than to Brown. He buries Dion in the garden, and, in putting on his mask, thinks, "I am drinking your strength, Dion – strength to love in this world and die and sleep and become fertile earth, as you are becoming now in my garden" (307). As O'Neill explains:

> Brown has always envied the creative life force in Dion – what he himself lacks. When he steals Dion's mask of Mephistopheles he thinks he is gaining the power to live creatively, while in reality he is only stealing that creative power made self-destructive by complete frustration. This devil of mocking doubt makes short work of him. (Clark 1929: 161)

He kills off "William Brown," the successful face that was presented to the world, and becomes "Dion Brown," a temporary union of the Dionysian and Apollonian forces, but he is quickly killed by the "people." As the earth-mother character Cybel says: "They must find a victim! . . . They've got to absolve themselves by finding a guilty one! They've got to kill someone now, to live!" (320). In the moment of death, Brown experiences the temporary lifting of the veil of Maya that Nietzsche describes as a seeing past the phenomena of the world into Unity. As Cybel says her prayer, "Our Father Who Art!," Brown has his momentary ecstatic vision:

> I know! I have found Him! I hear Him speak! "Blessed are they that weep, for they shall laugh!" Only he that has wept can laugh! The laughter of Heaven sows earth with a rain of tears, and out of earth's transfigured birth-pain the laughter of Man returns to bless and play again in innumerable dancing gales of flame upon the knees of God! (322)

Having seen this vision of truth, he dies, leaving Cybel articulating a version of the myth of eternal recurrence. As O'Neill puts it, "out of this anguish his soul is born, a tortured Christian soul such as the dying Dion's, begging for belief, and at the last finding it on the lips of Cybel" (Clark 1929: 162).

While the Christian myth is somewhat buried in *The Great God Brown*, O'Neill made it the central framework for *Lazarus Laughed*, which has been called "the most thoroughly Nietzschean play ever written" (Bridgwater 1972: 189). O'Neill's play is a development of the Lazarus story in the Gospel of John, and its title is an allusion and an answer to the verse that is known for being the shortest in the Bible: John 11.35, "Jesus wept." In the Bible, Jesus is asked to come to Bethany to cure his friend Lazarus, but finding that he is dead and has already been entombed when he gets there, Jesus raises him from the dead. O'Neill called the play "Lazarus Laughed" in answer to "Jesus wept," but the more important verse for him was what Jesus says to Lazarus' sister Martha in John 11.25: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, even if he die, shall live; and whoever lives and believes in me, shall never die."

The play is a representation of the "second life" of Lazarus as O'Neill envisioned it, the result of having been raised from the dead after being privileged to see beyond the veil of Maya. The experience has made him into a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, capable of the affirmation and laughter Nietzsche describes at the end of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. A witness to the miracle in the play says that "Jesus looked into his face for what seemed a long time and suddenly Lazarus said, 'Yes,' as if he were answering a question in Jesus' eyes" (O'Neill 1982: 3.277). After smiling sadly, Jesus had blessed Lazarus, called him "My Brother," and gone away, but Lazarus, "looking after Him, began to laugh softly like a man in love with God! Such a laugh I never heard! It made my ears drunk! It was like wine! And though I was half-dead with fright I found myself laughing too" (277). When Lazarus appears, he explains, "I heard the heart of Jesus laughing in my heart; 'There is Eternal Life in No,' it said, 'and there is the same Eternal Life in Yes! Death is the fear between!'" (279). And so begins the mystical cult of Lazarus, whose followers chant:

> Laugh! Laugh!
> There is only life!
> There is only laughter!
> Fear is no more!
> Death is dead!
> (281)

Laughter is the Gospel of Lazarus, but human beings are not ready to hear it, because, as soon as they are out of touch with Lazarus' living spirit, they forget and begin to fear death, which causes them to kill and behave in other hateful ways. "That is your tragedy," he tells them, "You forget! You forget the God in you!" (289).

The play is an elaborately staged pageant, meant to reflect the classical culture that Nietzsche writes about in *The Birth of Tragedy.* Like Nietzsche, O'Neill placed a great emphasis on the chorus, with a choral scheme based on 49 different masks, typifying both genders in "seven periods of life" and seven "general types of character" in each scene (273). The major conflict of the play is between Lazarus, representing the force of life, and the young Caligula and the Emperor Tiberius, representing the force of death. Caligula, a small monkey-like figure, falls in love with Lazarus, and is constantly attracted by his Gospel, but is unable to escape his fear, finally having to kill Lazarus, "Who taught the treason that fear and death were dead! But I am Lord of Fear! I am Caesar of Death!" (370). Afraid of dying, the elderly Tiberius wants Lazarus to give him hope, "for me, Tiberius Caesar," but Lazarus responds, "What is – you? But there is hope for Man! Love is Man's hope – love for his life on earth, a noble love above suspicion and distrust" (351–2). Tiberius is unable to get beyond the belief that "all laughter is malice, all gods are dead, and life is a sickness" (352). He kills Lazarus, but allows him his last affirmation for the crowd/chorus. When they ask him "What is beyond," he responds, "Life! Eternity! Stars and dust! God's Eternal Laughter!" (367–8), and "*his laughter bursts forth now in its highest pitch of ecstatic summons to the feast and sacrifice of Life, the Eternal*" while "*the crowds laugh with him in a frenzied rhythmic chorus*" (368). This ecstasy is momentary, of course, for it is Caligula who has the last word: "All the same, I killed him and I proved there is death! . . . Forgive me, Lazarus! Men forget!" (371). The momentary lifting of the veil allows for a glimpse into the eternal Unity, but it is the human tragedy that the moment of enlightenment cannot be sustained.

O'Neill wrote to the critic Arthur Hobson Quinn what he thought to be "the deep underlying idea" of *Lazarus Laughed*:

> The fear of death is the root of all evil, the cause of all man's blundering unhappiness. Lazarus knows there is no death, there is only change. He is reborn without that fear. Therefore he is the first and only man who is able to laugh affirmatively. His laughter is a triumphant Yes to life in its entirety and its eternity. His laughter affirms God, it is too noble to desire personal immortality, it wills its own extinction, it gives its life for the sake of Eternal Life (patriotism carried to its logical ultimate). His laughter is the direct expression of joy in the Dionysian sense, the joy of a celebrant who is at the same time a sacrifice in the eternal process of change and growth and transmutation which is life of which his life is an insignificant manifestation, soon to be reabsorbed. And life itself is the Self-affirmative joyous laughter of God. (Bogard and Bryer 1988: 245)

Egil Törnqvist observed a generation ago that "O'Neill considered Greek tragedy (including Euripides) the unsurpassed example of art *and* religion" and that "O'Neill's

oeuvre is in itself a gigantic endeavor to recapture the spirit of Greek tragedy within a modern framework" (1968: 102). This is particularly evident in *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, two plays in which O'Neill used Greek myths familiar from the great tragedies to dramatize one of his most compelling modernist preoccupations, the conflict between the Dionysian spirit of vitality expressed in sexual passion and what he saw as a repressive and puritanical American culture in the twentieth century.

Desire Under the Elms is based primarily on the myth of Hippolytus and Phaedra, but it is combined with others. It focuses on the sexual love between stepson and stepmother, in this case, Eben Cabot and his father Ephraim's newly married young wife, Abbie. O'Neill also draws on the Oedipus myth in his allusion to Eben's attachment to his dead mother, and his famous description of the set in which two enormous elm trees "bend their trailing branches down over the roof" of the house, appearing "to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption" (O'Neill 1982: 3.202). This maternal force is represented in the play by the ghostly presence of Eben's "Maw" in the parlor, "*a grim, repressed room like a tomb in which the family has been interred alive*" (241). This blends with the allusion to Phaedra in Abbie when she first makes love to Eben in the parlor: "*In spite of her overwhelming desire for him, there is a sincere and maternal love in her manner and voice – a horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love*" (243). And finally, O'Neill alludes to Medea, as Abbie kills the baby that has resulted from her union with Eben in order to prove that she is not trying to get the farm away from him by producing another heir for Ephraim. As in *Lazarus Laughed*, O'Neill combines the Greek references with Christian ones – in this case Ephraim's version of the "hard" God of the Puritans that hovers over his rocky New England farm: "God's hard, not easy! God's in the stones! Build my church on a rock – out o' stones an' I'll be in them! That's what He meant t' Peter!" (237).

In *Desire Under the Elms*, the recuperation of these fragmented myths to tell a story of modern "primitives" serves a modernist function, the consrruction of a myth that might serve to explain the contemporary human predicament. O'Neill makes the link between his characters and elemental humanity by suggesting their closeness to the earth and the animals. The plot proceeds from elemental human drives and emotions. But Abbie and Eben are elevated by selfless feelings. After turning Abbie in to the sheriff for murdering their baby, Eben comes to her and asks her forgiveness. Abbie forgives him, and rather than run away as Eben proposes, is determined to stay and take her punishment, "t' pay fur my sin" (266). She makes it clear that the sin was killing the child, not their sexual union: "I don't repent that sin! I hain't askin' God t' fergive that!" (266). Eben insists that he must share her guilt and her punishment: "I got t' pay fur my part o' the sin! . . . I want t' share with ye, Abbie – prison 'r death 'r hell 'r anythin'!" (267).

At the end of the play, the two walk off hand in hand toward the sunrise, an image that has been identified with that of Adam and Eve as they leave the garden in *Paradise Lost*. In embracing justice and a selfless love as they go off to jail, they

transcend the greedy self-interest that dominates the rest of the play, leaving behind Ephraim, who has been unable to set himself free by turning the animals loose and setting fire to the farm as he had intended. Ephraim, alone on his farm with his God, sees that "it's a-goin' t' be lonesomer now than ever it war afore . . . Waal – what d'ye want? God's lonesome, hain't He? God's hard an' lonesome!" (268). The most important aspect of transcendence in the ending for O'Neill is the achievement of "belonging," as he would put it, the sense that one is not alone in the universe. Abbie and Eben achieve this through their love. As Eben says, "If I'm sharin' with ye, I won't feel lonesome leastways" (267). Through their connection to each other, proven by a surrendering of self-interest, Eben and Abbie achieve a momentary glimpse of Unity, which elevates them from the various forms of desire that have enslaved the Cabot family throughout the play.

In his trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill made a more overt use of Greek myth, joining the story of the *Oresteia* to the Nietzschean theme of Dionysian vitality through the symbolism of the "Blessed Isles." Frederick Carpenter has pointed out that O'Neill follows the Greek versions of the myth in the first two plays, translating "classical myth into modern psychological terms; in the third, he created his own myth" (1979: 127). In the first play, *The Homecoming*, General Ezra Mannon (Agamemnon) returns from the Civil War and is murdered by his wife Christine (Clytemnestra) at the urging of her lover, Adam Brant (Aegisthus). The play ends with a confrontation between Christine and her daughter Lavinia (Electra), who accuses her of the murder and vows to avenge her father. In the second play, *The Hunted*, Christine's son Orin (Orestes) returns from the war, and, urged on by Lavinia, shoots Adam Brant. In a departure from the myth, Orin does not kill Christine; instead he drives her to suicide. The third play, *The Haunted*, centers not on Orin, but on Lavinia, placing Electra at the center of the myth. Like his mother, Orin commits suicide, driven by his guilt and despair, but the central conflict of O'Neill's play, between the repressive Puritan heritage of the Mannons and the passion and vitality represented by Christine, plays itself out within Lavinia.

In the first two plays, Lavinia is closely allied with the Mannons, who, as Ezra says, "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" (O'Neill 1982: 2.54). Denying as far as possible her strong physical resemblance to her sensual mother, who "*has a fine, voluptuous figure*" and "*moves with a flowing animal grace*," Lavinia exemplifies the puritanical, military look of the Mannons: "*Her movements are stiff and she carries herself with a wooden, square-shouldered, military bearing*" (10). The symbolism of the Mannons is built around their mansion, which dominates the play's setting. An imitation Greek temple, it appears to Christine like a "sepulchre": "the 'whited' one of the Bible – pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray ugliness. It was just like old Abe Mannon to build such a monstrosity – as a temple for his hatred" (17). The symbolism for the other side of Lavinia's nature, proceeding from her mother, is the Blessed Isles, which are referred to throughout the trilogy by various characters. Adam Brant says they are "as near the Garden of Paradise before sin was discovered as

you'll find on this earth" (24). For the guilty and doomed Christine and Adam they are the much desired but unattainable place of "peace and forgetfulness" (112). To Orin, the Islands "came to mean . . . everything that was peace and warmth and security" (90), a womblike place where he could be alone with his mother. Finally, in the third play, they become Lavinia's Islands, as only she and Orin actually go there. The Islands awaken Lavinia to the awareness that she is "only half Mannon" and she shares her mother's sensual nature (146). The Islands give her a momentary glimpse of the Unity behind the veil of Maya. She says 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" (147). Lavinia's experience in the Blessed Isles makes for *"an extraordinary change in her . . . She now bears a striking resemblance to her mother in every respect"* (137). The conflict in the final play is Lavinia's struggle to embrace the part of her that comes from her mother, and the values that are figured in the image of the Blessed Isles, in the face of the rigid Puritanism of the Mannons.

At the end of the second play, Lavinia accepts the pistol shot that ends her mother's life with the words, "It is justice! It is your justice, Father!" (123). At the beginning of the third play, she tells Orin that their business with their parents "is all past and finished. The dead have forgotten us! We've forgotten them!" (138), and she proclaims to the Mannon portraits that she's done her "duty" by them (146), but she is to learn that the claim of the Mannons is not so easily dismissed. As she struggles to evade the reality of her brother's imminent suicide, she tells her fiancé, "nothing matters but love, does it? That must come first! No price is too great, is it? Or for peace!" (167). After Orin shoots himself, she is determined to free herself from the Mannons: "I'm through with you forever now, do you hear? I'm Mother's daughter – not one of you! I'll live in spite of you!" (168). But she finds that she is more Mannon than not. After a last desperate attempt to get her fiancé to play Adam Brant to her Christine, she gives up, saying *"(in a dead voice)* I can't marry you, Peter . . . Love isn't permitted to me. The dead are too strong!" (177). She drives him away, accepting the fact that she is "bound here – to the Mannon dead." She will not commit suicide, but shuts herself up in the house that symbolizes the Puritanism of the Mannons: "Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison! . . . It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born!" (178). Lavinia's last act is to order the shutters closed up and nailed shut and the flowers, the last vestige of her mother's vitality, thrown out. Despite the momentary freedom provided by her glimpse of the Blessed Isles, she is unable to deny the past that has shaped her and her present reality. The Mannon heritage is the stronger force, and its Puritanical standard of justice demands expiation.

Mourning Becomes Electra was the last full-blown tragedy that O'Neill would write. The great autobiographical plays that he wrote at the end of his career contain fragmented expressions of his tragic sense of life, but they lack the Dionysian element of the tragedies. In *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1940), for example, there is no recognizable protagonist. Each of the four members of the Tyrone family makes what could be a transformative discovery during the play, but it is too late for them to

realize it. James tells his son Edmund that he sold his gift for acting for the promise of easy money from a play that ruined him as an actor while it made him rich. His son Jamie warns Edmund against the part of himself that hates his brother and will destroy him if he can, but despairs of his own redemption. Edmund himself is a poet who has seen behind the veil of Maya to "the moment of ecstatic freedom . . . the peace, the end of the quest, the last harbor, the joy of belonging to a fulfillment beyond men's lousy, pitiful, greedy fears and hopes and dreams" (O'Neill 1955: 153), but he can only "stammer" when he tries to articulate his vision, and he finally feels that "it was a great mistake, my being born a man . . . who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death!" (153–4). Most pitiful is the mother Mary, whose addiction to morphine keeps her from remembering "something I need terribly. I remember when I had it I was never lonely nor afraid. I can't have lost it forever, I would die if I thought that. Because then there would be no hope" (173). What she has lost is her faith, a loss she cannot confront, because she despairs of forgiveness.

Arthur Miller

The most important statement about tragedy made by an American in the twentieth century was the brief newspaper article published by Arthur Miller a few days after the premiere of the country's defining tragedy, *Death of a Salesman* (1949). In "Tragedy and the Common Man," Miller set out to explain why, "in this age" when "few tragedies are written," he believed that "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were" (1996: 3). He dismissed rank "or nobility of character" as requisites for the tragic protagonist, proposing that "The tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity . . . tragedy, then is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly" (1996: 4). Miller wrote that what separated tragic heroes from the rest of us was their compulsion to "act against the scheme of things that degrades them" and that "from this total onslaught by an individual against the seemingly stable cosmos . . . comes the terror and the fear that is classically associated with tragedy" (1996: 4). More importantly, from "this total questioning of what has previously been unquestioned, we learn" (1996: 4). He found no reason why a common person like Willy Loman should be less capable of tragic action than a citizen who was more prosperous or had greater social stature than he. The most radical aspect of Miller's statement came in his definition of good and evil, however. In two concise paragraphs, he laid out his view of a tragic moral order for the twentieth century:

> Now if it is true that tragedy is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly, his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment. And this is precisely the morality of tragedy and its lesson . . . The tragic right is a

> condition of life, a condition in which the human personality is able to flower and realize itself. The wrong is the condition which suppresses man, perverts the flowing out of his love and creative instinct. Tragedy enlightens – and it must, in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man's freedom. The thrust for freedom is the quality in tragedy which exalts. The revolutionary questioning of the stable environment is what terrifies. (1996: 5)

Miller thus defined good and evil, not in terms of a transcendent moral order, but in terms of human beings themselves. The right is that which enables human self-actualization; the wrong is that which inhibits it. In this moral scheme, striking out against more powerful forces that inhibit the protagonist becomes a righteous act, not a guilty rebellion against a higher order. For Miller, modern tragedy cannot come about if its author "fears to question absolutely everything," when he regards any "institution, habit or custom" as "everlasting, immutable or inevitable" (1996: 6). He held that in modern tragedy, "the need of man to wholly realize himself is the only fixed star, and whatever it is that hedges his nature and lowers it is ripe for attack and examination" (1996: 6). In such a scheme, there is no place for resignation or submission, but Miller believed strongly in the capacity for enlightenment. In his view, it is to come not through the hero's suffering, but through the process of his "thrust for freedom," his rebellion against the forces that are repressing him. It is from this total questioning of what has previously been unquestioned that "we learn" (1996: 4).

Miller had *Death of a Salesman* immediately in mind when he wrote this statement, but it also describes the conception of tragedy that informs *The Crucible* (1953) and *A View from the Bridge* (1955). Each of his heroes, Willy Loman, John Proctor, and Eddie Carbone, is fighting to secure his "sense of personal dignity" against forces that threaten to destroy it. In Willy's case, it is the real conditions of the business world that threaten his dream of the way it should be: "Be liked and you will never want" (1949: 33). He fights the truth that his son Biff flings at him with a furious insistence on his worth: "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman" (132). John Proctor is on the verge of submitting to the superior forces of the Church and the State when he finally balks at signing a false confession that will be nailed up on the church door. When Judge Danforth demands an explanation, he explodes "*with a cry of his whole soul*: Because it is my name! . . . How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!" (Miller 1953: 143). Eddie Carbone echoes him when he demands that Marco take back the accusation of betrayal he has made against him: "I want my good name, Marco! You took my name!" (Miller 1955: 159).

While each of these men is ultimately destroyed by the powerful forces he is up against, Miller notes that "the flaw, or crack in the character" of the modern tragic hero "need be nothing but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status" (1996: 4). Each of his heroes destroys himself through his compulsion to act. Willy Loman commits suicide in order to get the insurance money that he thinks will enable

his son Biff to fulfill the destiny he imagines fot him: "Can you imagine that magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket? . . . I always knew one way or another we were gonna make it, Biff and I!" (Miller 1949: 135). John Proctor goes to his death, unwilling, finally, to bargain his life for a false confession. Eddie Carbone is killed fighting Marco for his sense of his own righteousness against the truth that he is guilty.

The enlightenment that comes from these tragedies is not, except perhaps in John Proctor's case, a greater degree of wisdom for the character. It is enlightenment for the audience. As we have already noted, Miller says: "from this total questioning of what has previously been unquestioned, we learn" (1996: 4). It is through the hero's "thrust for freedom" against institutions, customs, and economic forces that are commonly viewed as inevitable, permanent, and unassailable that the audience is led to see them in relation to Miller's conception of good and evil, to weigh their economic, social, religious, and familial institutions and values against the standard of human freedom and self-actualization. In Miller's plays, they are often found wanting.

Reprinted many times, Miller's brief essay proved to be a seminal document in the discussion of twentieth-century tragedy, as *Death of a Salesman* has come to be seen as the United States' defining play. A salesman who was born to be a carpenter, Willy Loman embodies a fundamental condition that Miller saw as endemic to twentieth-century life in the United States. Willy's tragedy is that he is born to a kind of bad faith. His talent is working with his hands – as Biff says, "there's more of him in that front stoop [that he constructed] than in all the sales he ever made" (Miller 1949: 138). But he can't be a carpenter, because, as he tells Biff, even his father was better than a carpenter. In America, everyone has to be better than his father. Willy has to pursue the goal of "Success." This concept of success is what Miller calls "Willy's law – the belief, in other words, which administers guilt to him . . . a deeply believed and deeply suspect 'good' " (1996: 149), which severely limits his self-conception and his freedom. As his son Hap says, Willy had "the only dream you can have – to come out number-one man" (Miller 1949: 139).

Miller, who was aware of the suicides of many broken businessmen during the Great Depression, wrote that Willy's tragic death proceeds from the fact that he "has broken a law without whose protection life is insupportable if not incomprehensible to him and to many others; it is the law which says that a failure in society and in business has no right to live" (1996: 149). And, what's more, his death is

> the wage of his sin, which was to have committed himself so completely to the counterfeits of dignity and the false coinage embodied in his idea of success that he can prove his existence only by bestowing "power" on his posterity, a power deriving from the sale of his last asset, himself, for the price of his insurance policy. (Miller 1996: 147)

There is learning in the play, on the part of Biff, who comes to realize that Willy had "the wrong dreams" (1949: 138) and rejects them for himself. The tragic irony is that

Willy sees the revelation of Biff's love for him not as an alternative to the "law of success," as Miller says it is (1996: 149), but as an incentive to trade his life for a $20,000 insurance policy. It is too late for Willy to be enlightened, but not, Miller suggests, for the audience. Miller sees the United States as a nation that has the wrong dreams, that is in thrall to the law of success. His hope is to provide a vision of the opportunity for "a thrust for freedom" by the audience, for "in the tragic view the need of man to wholly realize himself is the only fixed star" and "the final result" of a tragedy "ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker's brightest opinions of the human animal" (1996: 6).

While Miller insisted on his modern understanding of the nature of tragedy, he did not by any means reject classical tragedy wholesale. In fact, he said in an interview that when he began to write plays, "one assumed inevitably that one was in the mainstream that began with Aeschylus and went through about twenty-five hundred years of playwriting" (1996: 265). Asked what playwrights he had admired when he was young, he replied, "first, the Greeks, for their magnificent form, the symmetry... that form has never left me; I suppose it just got burned in" (1996: 265–6). Writing *The Crucible* led him to a larger view of the Greek tragedies. He thought that they must have had a "therapeutic effect" on the community by "raising to conscious awareness the clan's capacity of brutal and unredeemed violence so that it could be sublimated and contained by new institutions, like the law" (1987: 342).

This is most evident in *A View from the Bridge*, which is consciously constructed according to Miller's understanding of a classical Greek tragedy. It is a "vendetta story," about people who have "a blood debt" to pay (Roudané 1987: 262). The story of an uncle who has an illicit passion for his niece, and is driven to kill the man who accuses him of it in order to avoid facing his guilt, had a "myth-like resonance" for Miller, who did not feel he was "making anything up, but rather recording something old and marvelous" (Roudané 1987: 192). The play was deliberately written in one act, and made use of the convention of the chorus in the lawyer Alfieri, who is able to see the course of Eddie's inevitable self-destruction, but is unable to stop it. Eddie, the hero, is "as good a man as he had to be, / In a life that was hard and even" (Miller 1955: 96). Miller sets civilization, in the person of the lawyer Alfieri, in opposition to the primal demands of nature and blood. These are dramatized in Eddie, who violates the taboos of his culture while acting on a passion he neither wants nor understands, and Marco, who is driven to kill Eddie because he has harmed his family. By making Alfieri the chorus, Miller allies the audience with his point of view, placing them on the side of civilization while at the same time being awestruck by the power of nature and blood.

Although no other modern American playwrights have taken on the question of modern tragedy as directly as Anderson, O'Neill, and Miller did, significant tragedies such as Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Archibald MacLeish's *J. B.* (1958), Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), and Marsha Norman's *'night Mother* (1983) have been written, mostly modeled along Aristotelian lines. During the late twentieth century, several playwrights experimented with the

conception and conventions of tragedy. A. R. Gurney wrote his *Another Antigone* (1988), which has the form of classical tragedy, and which Gurney has said "is about, and should constantly remind us that it is about, both its similarity to and difference from its Greek counterpart" (1989: viii). David Mamet wrote *Oleanna* (1992), which he called a "tragedy about power" (Kane 2001: 125). Several of August Wilson's plays, including *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) and *Fences* (1987), integrate traditional tragic structure with what Wilson sees as a uniquely African-American worldview, juxtaposing supernatural experience with everyday reality.

It is one of the ironies of American theater history that, while the tragic vision is not generally considered to characterize the American view of life, the most significant plays in the classic American repertoire are tragic in vision even if they do not exemplify all of the conventions associated with the genre. *Death of a Salesman*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *The Crucible*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* – for contemporary playwrights, there is no escaping the influence of these great works and the tragic vision they embody. David Mamet may call his *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1988) a "gang comedy," but its vision of the American businessman's dark predicament echoes that of *Death of a Salesman*, as does the tragic mutual misunderstanding of the generations in August Wilson's *Fences* (1986). While the family and the business world provided the focus for mid-twentieth-century American tragedy, the playwrights at the end of the century were forced to face the failure of the American dream of the "Great Society." The pervasive issues of identity politics, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, pointed to the failure of the democratic ideal to produce a society that embodied the values of equality, justice, and human dignity. Tony Kushner's two-part *Angels in America* (1993) is perhaps the defining play of this period. It exemplifies the conjunction that characterizes American tragic vision at the beginning of the twenty-first century: a realization of the United States' failed social and political policies with a mythically transcendent hope inspired by a vision of its ideal possibilities.

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