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An American Tragedy: Memory and History in Eugene O'Neill's *A Touch of the Poet* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*

Aurélié Sanchez

- 1 Eugene O'Neill's late plays usually deal with the revelation of grim, intimate secrets that unfold in the stifling atmosphere of isolated barrooms and family living rooms. Between *Mourning Becomes Electra*, written in 1931 and considered by the author as a turning point in his career, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, his final play, the characters become more and more isolated in cramped, deserted places.¹ In this respect, the last period of O'Neill's career illustrates the shift from the religious and social function of Greek tragedy to the emphasis on individual fate that characterizes modern drama, and that John Drakakis describes in the following terms:

Historically, tragedy is thought to have originated in a choral performance to celebrate the Greek god Dionysus but it has evolved as the dramatic form which stages the relationship between suffering and joy in a universe which is often perceived as at best inimical, or at worst radical on its hostility to human life. [...] It deals, above all, with the relationship between harmony and discord. (Drakakis and Liebler 2)

- 2 However, the emphasis on privacy and enclosure found in O'Neill's works is sometimes counterbalanced by the intrusion of the outside world within the intimate space of the characters. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *A Touch of the Poet*, the private and the public spheres coalesce and fall within the broader scope of American history. In spite of the introspective quality of his work, O'Neill expressed some interest in American culture, as is shown by a letter written to his son in the 1930s:

[T]his is the destined time for America to fall back upon itself in a cultural sense, to cease running to Mama and Papa Europe whenever it feels spiritually wounded [...], to realize appreciatively and with pride that the adolescent attitude has become a pose, that it is adult, if it will only examine itself. (Bogard and Bryer 411)²

- 3 Private and national history intermingle in the two plays, and this blending of memory and history sheds light on the playwright's concern about the cultural maturity of America.
- 4 Both works were part of two ambitious projects. *Mourning Becomes Electra* was completed after O'Neill's prolonged stay outside the United States. This trilogy is largely inspired by Aeschylus's *Oresteia* but it is set in a Puritan New England town at the end of the Civil War. The reference to Greek theatre illustrates the playwright's determination to bring a serious and adult mode to the American stage which was, according to him, plagued by superficial melodrama. The play is divided into three parts: "Homecoming", "The Hunted" and "The Haunted". "Homecoming" and "The Haunted" are made up of four acts each while "The Hunted" contains five acts. The plot of the trilogy hinges upon a series of murders and acts of revenge within the influential Mannon family. In the play, Ezra Mannon is poisoned by his wife Christine on the night of his return from the battlefield. Christine kills her husband in order to escape with her lover, Adam Brant. The identity of this mysterious sea captain is disclosed right from the start, when Lavinia Mannon, the daughter, discovers that he is her cousin, the son that Ezra Mannon's brother had with a colored servant, Marie Brantôme. In fact, he comes to avenge his parents, who died in misery and disgrace. In the second and third part of the trilogy, Lavinia convinces her brother Orin to take revenge on behalf of their father and to murder Brant. This is then followed by two suicides: Christine's and Orin's, who has been driven half-insane by guilt. With this play, Eugene O'Neill wanted to go back to the roots of the Greek theatre, "to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense of the word as one can grasp it [...], to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values" (Bogard and Bryer 195).³ *A Touch of the Poet* is the fifth play of a projected but unfinished eleven-play cycle on American history entitled *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*. The objective of these historical plays that would have spanned the period between the Napoleonic wars and the 1920s was to offer an insight into the American family and to stage the failure of the American Dream. *A Touch of the Poet* tackles the pipe dream of Cornelius Melody, the Irish keeper of a run-down tavern near Boston, who likes to pose as the grand gentleman he used to be in Europe, while tyrannizing his wife Nora. The play also deals with Melody's daughter, Sara, who has fallen in love with a wealthy but idealistic Yankee, Simon Harford. The young man is sick and has to stay at the tavern to be nursed by the Irish girl. These two plays borrow elements from Greek and Classical tragedy. Nevertheless, Eugene O'Neill also breaks away from the conventions of this genre in order to create a genuine American tragedy. Through the interplay between memory and history, the dramatist sheds light on a distinctive American sense of the tragic which is based on the idea of loss and on the celebration of this loss.
- 5 The structure and the plot of *Mourning Becomes Electra* are reminiscent of the pattern of Aeschylus's trilogy. Both plays open with the return of military heroes—the Greek Agamemnon in *The Oresteia*, and the Union general Ezra Mannon in O'Neill's play. Both national figures come home to realize that the horrors of the war have contaminated their families. The characters are all animated by a sense of punishment and justice. This notion is at the core of *The Oresteia* and is embodied by Mannon, who is also a judge, in *Mourning Becomes Electra*.⁴ Even if the gods who play an important role in Aeschylus's play disappear in the modern version, the characters still express a sense of unexplainable doom and fate, as does Seth, the family's faithful servant: "[T]here's such

things as evil spirit. And I've felt it [...]—like something rotting in the walls!” (O'Neill 1931, 383). The Greek influence is also signaled by the scenery, and more specifically by the Mannons' house, whose architecture imitates the Attic style. Like *The Oresteia*, *Mourning Becomes Electra* fits the well-known Aristotelian definition of tragedy as the imitation of a serious action which has magnitude and which is complete in itself.⁵ O'Neill's play also borrows all the usual characteristics of revenge tragedy such as blackmail, verbal and physical violence, murder, suicide and adultery. The accusing ghostly presence of the murdered father is redolent of *Hamlet* for instance, and the name “Lavinia” is borrowed from Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*.

- 6 *A Touch of the Poet* does not deal with high and noble characters but it follows the classical rule of spatial and temporal unity. Its action is based on a plot involving an exposition scene, a *peripetia*, and a moment of recognition that is followed by a catastrophic ending. Indeed, Cornelius Melody is blinded by his Irish pride, which can be read as a modern version of the Greek *hubris*. His confrontation with the world of the disdainful Harford family shatters his dreams of past glory and leads him to a painful realization of his position as an outcast within American society. This uncompromising unveiling of the truth eventually provokes the cathartic sacrifice of the mare that symbolized his illusory grandeur. In fact, in *A Touch of the Poet*, noble tragedy is parodied by the characters, as is shown by the following stage directions:

At first, he poses to himself, striking an attitude—a Byronic hero, noble, embittered, disdainful, defying his tragic fate, brooding over past glories. But he has no audience and cannot keep it up. (O'Neill 1947, 57)

- 7 Con Melody only plays at being tragic here, and so does Mrs. Deborah Harford when she compares herself to the tragic figure of Cassandra in Act II. Tragedy thus appears as an unstable concept that can be interpreted according to an actor's or a playwright's fancy. This illustrates Raymond Williams's idea that “the varieties of tragic experience are to be interpreted by reference to the changing conventions and institutions” (Williams 120). As a matter of fact, Eugene O'Neill uses and subverts tragic codes in order to conjure up a new type of tragic drama that would apply to the specificity of the United States. The classical tragic standards do not fit in the American context. Like Simon's poetry, which is dismissed by his mother as a mere imitation of Lord Byron's, tragedy must be renewed or is bound to remain a copy of old European genres. However, rather than rejecting tragedy as too old-fashioned for his relatively young country, the dramatist insists on the utterly tragic dimension of America:

One critic [...] has said tragedy is not native to our soil, has no reason for being as American drama [...]. If it were true, it would be the most damning commentary on our spiritual barrenness. [...] Tragedy not native to our soil? Why, we are tragedy, the most appalling yet written or unwritten! (Bogard and Bryer 159)⁶

- 8 American tragedy remains thus to be defined.
- 9 According to Walt Whitman, borrowing from old forms and inventing new ones is what the American artist should tend to:
- [T]he expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new for America is the real race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with people. To him the other continents arrive as contributions... he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake. His spirit responds to his country's spirit. (Whitman 494)
- 10 The movement from the old European dramatic tradition towards a new form of theatre characterizes the two plays under study. Quite significantly, the Greek female figure that gives its title to *Mourning Becomes Electra* remains invisible throughout the

play, and is replaced by Lavinia, the Mannons' daughter. Consequently, this tragic character seems to symbolize a new, American tragic identity in the making.

- 11 In the two plays under study, the characters' personal history is blended with two major political events—the end of the Civil War and the 1828 election that was to mark the beginning of the Jacksonian era. This is underlined by Sara Melody's speech in the first act of *A Touch of the Poet*, in which she enunciates the basic principle of the American mythology:

[T]his is the country where you can rise as high as you like, and no one but the fools who envy you care what you rose from, once you've got the money and the power goes with it [sic]. (O'Neill 1947, 27)

- 12 In spite of the negative undertone that appears in the reference to envy, America is seen as a virgin territory where the immigrants' former identity can be erased. For instance, Melody came to America to forget the duel that brought him disgrace, and even language can be cleansed of the asperities of the Melody's Irish brogue. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the song “Shenandoah”, which is the anthem of the state of Virginia, can be heard regularly off stage. This hints at the purity of the newly unified country, thanks to the name and history of this state, for Virginia was the first colony and is often nicknamed the “Mother of Presidents”. Moreover, the chanting of “John Brown's Body,” a war song that glorifies the famous abolitionist, underlines the potential of America for freedom after the Civil War. Ezra Mannon embodies the military, political and industrial power of the United States, as he is a general in Grant's army, a judge, the mayor of his town and a successful businessman. Christine Mannon's lover, Adam Brant, stands for conquering America, since he has been west to search for gold and has also traveled all around the world. Finally, the portraits of American presidents which are hung in the Mannons' living room, together with the portraits of family members, pinpoint the dedication of the characters to their nation. In *A Touch of the Poet*, the idealism that characterizes American Transcendentalism is represented by Simon Harford, an avatar of Henry David Thoreau, who has decided to live by an isolated pond in order to write a book about the evils of greed and the necessity to live a simple life. Yet, this mythical image of America is undermined by ominous elements that foreshadow the characters' and the nation's failures. All the elements that highlight the Americanness of the characters and the setting seem to be part of an ironical *mise-en-scène* that verges on a stereotypical representation of the United States. This series of *clichés* finally crumbles, as does the theatrical Con Melody at the end of *A Touch of the Poet*. As the character's first name suggests, everything happens to be fake. *Mourning Becomes Electra* opens with the celebration of the Unionists' victory over the Confederates that is compromised by the death of Abraham Lincoln. This tragic national event is soon echoed by the murder of Ezra Mannon by his wife. Little by little, the horrors of the war start repeating themselves within the walls of the family mansion, illustrating the contiguity of private and public spheres and the relation between microcosm and macrocosm. The pure whiteness of the mansion is to be stained by tragedy, as is ironically revealed by Mannon's speech when he comes back home:

[I]n 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 rid of. (O'Neill 1931, 308)

- 13 The intrusion of the national tragedy within the private space of the family is highlighted by the alternation of indoor and outdoor scenes. Furthermore, the

spectator has a deeper and deeper view of the inside of the house, through the description of the study, the living room and then the bedroom where Mannon is murdered. Here, O'Neill distorts the Greek tragic rule, offering a blunt and brutal representation of death, while in *The Oresteia*, Agamemnon's murder does not happen on stage and is rendered by the horrified cries of the hero who remains out of sight behind a door. This gradual disclosure of privacy allows the audience to realize that nobility and heroism are but a façade which gives way to somber images of both the family and the nation. Indeed, the second part of the trilogy begins with a description of the sitting room, whose walls are covered by portraits that bring to mind the dark past of New England and its Calvinistic heritage:

Portraits of ancestors hang on the walls. At the rear of the fireplace, on the right, is one of a grim-visaged minister of the witch-burning era. [...] The third portrait has the appearance of a prosperous ship owner of Colonial days. (O'Neill 1931, 332)

- 14 Here the reference to the witch-hunt reveals that the history and development of America might have been founded on injustice, a fate that also awaits the Mannons. Moreover, the house described by O'Neill is reminiscent of Governor Bellingham's home in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. In Hawthorne's novel, the house represents old traditions and embodies English oppression:

Hester Prynne gave a summons, which was answered by one of the Governor's bond-servants; a free-born Englishman, but now a seven years' slave.

[...]

Governor Bellingham had planned his new habitation after the residences of gentlemen of fair estate in his native land.

[...]

On the wall hung a row of portraits, representing the forefathers of the Bellingham lineage, some with armor on their breasts, and others with stately ruffs and robes of peace. All were characterized by the sternness and severity which old portraits invariably put on; as if they were the ghosts, rather than the pictures, of departed worthies [...]. (Hawthorne 70-71)

- 15 The parallel between both houses suggests a shift from English to American oppression. The witch hunter in the Mannon family seems to have replaced the English slave owner, turning New England into a brutal land and distorting the ideals of the Pilgrim Fathers. Sounds also participate in this movement from harmony to discord and in this blending of national and private tragedy, as the booms of canons that celebrate victory in the first part are replaced by the sound of guns when Christine and then Orin commit suicide. In *A Touch of the Poet*, the failure of the American Dream is embodied by Melody, who is defined by his daughter as "the easiest fool [that] ever came to America" (O'Neill 1947, 7). Swindled by the Yankees as soon as he arrived in his new country, the old Major became a solitary figure who cannot find his place in society. He is geographically isolated, on the margins of a then developing transportation system:

The dining room of Melody's Tavern, in a village a few miles from Boston. The tavern is over a hundred years old. It had once been prosperous, a breakfast shop for the stagecoach, but the stage line had been discontinued and for some years now the tavern has fallen upon neglected decay. (O'Neill 1947, 7)

- 16 His isolation is also social, as he finds himself belonging to neither the Irish nor the wealthy Yankee community. Moreover, the land he occupies has nothing to do with a pure and fertile territory where he could fulfill his dreams:

SARA—The land our great gentleman was swindled into buying when he came here with grand ideas of owning an American estate!—a bit of farm land no one would

work any more, and the rest all wilderness! You couldn't give it away! (O'Neill 1947, 30)

- 17 Through the personal tragedy of the characters, America appears as a land that contrasts with the mythical image of the “Land of Milk and Honey”.
- 18 A journey through the past of the Mannons and the Melodys sheds light on their original sins. These past mistakes bring forth the image of America as a stillborn country where “guilt breeds more guilt” (O'Neill 1931, 407), as Lavinia says at the end of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. The idea of corrupted reproduction and heredity that is conveyed by the verb “breed” could be an echo of the image that leads the Atridae to destruction in *The Oresteia*. Indeed, the oracle sees two birds devouring the wombs of a doe which still contains her young ones. The destruction of the yearlings before their birth could be read as a symbol of hopelessness as to the future of youth—both in the Melody and Mannon families and in America. Adam Brant, whose first name points at the idea of an original fall, embodies the curse that fell on the Mannon family, and physically brings back the past onto the stage and within the house. The family mansion had been built by the grandfather in order to erase what he thought was a disgrace. As a matter of fact, in *Mourning Becomes Electra* and in *The Oresteia*, tragedy is triggered off by the unfortunate union of a man and a woman. In Aeschylus's play, the chorus wonders if the curse of the Atridae did not originate in Priam and Helen's elopement, since it is this event that started the war between Troy and Greece. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, it is miscegenation and the Mannons' attempt at erasing its traces that led to private conflict. Yet, the house still contains the family's dark secrets. It is described as “a sepulcher”, “a tomb,” “a temple for hatred” or a “mask on Puritan ugliness” (O'Neill 1931, 273), which reveals that shameful memories can never be smothered. Past errors cannot be erased, and the curse is bound to repeat itself over and over again, contaminating the young generation: “You and I, who are innocent, would suffer a worse punishment than the guilty” (O'Neill 1931, 348), Lavinia says to her brother Orin. The repetition of the curse is conveyed by numerous repetitions in the dialogues. The argument between Orin and Lavinia in the third part is similar to the one between Christine and Ezra in the first part for instance. The mask-like faces of the characters and their physical metamorphosis also signal that doom is ineluctable. The uncanny similarities between all the characters' faces annihilate any individual characteristic and show that fate can strike any member of the family, no matter how innocent they are. Here, the definition of the original curse which is passed on from one generation to another is redolent of the Judeo-Christian myth. However, the possibility of redemption that is considered in the Christian tradition seems to disappear and leave way to ineluctable fate. According to George Steiner, this feeling of inevitability is what defines real tragedy:

[A]ny realistic notion of tragic drama must start from the fact of catastrophe. Tragedies end badly. The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence. This again is crucial. Where the causes of disaster are temporal, where the conflict can be resolved through technical or social means, we may have serious drama, but not tragedy. [...] Tragedy is irreparable. It cannot lead to just and material compensation for past suffering. (Steiner 146)

- 19 The curse of the Mannons can even spread to other families: at the end of the play, Lavinia refuses to marry her fiancé Peter because her secrets weigh on his relation with his own mother. As a matter of fact, the song “John Brown's Body” that illustrated the

merry atmosphere at the beginning of the play takes on gloomy undertones, as the lyrics read: “John Brown's body lies a-molderin' in his grave/His soul goes marching on”. This can be read as an ironic echo of the Mannons' struggle with their own ghosts. In the same manner, Lavinia offers a sarcastic rewriting of “Shenandoah” as Seth sings it at the end of the play:

SETH—“Oh, Shenandoah, I can't get near you way-ay, I'm bound away...”

LAVINIA—I'm not bound away [...] I'm bound here—to the Mannon dead! (O'Neill 1931, 423)

- 20 We thus notice a shift from the promises brought about by the end of the Civil War, such as the abolition of slavery, to the final enslavement of the characters in their own memories.
- 21 The old values have collapsed and are now trivialized. The battle of Talavera, that Melody celebrates every year, is enacted again with some cutlery on a dirty table-cloth in Act III of *A Touch of the Poet* and the customers of the tavern mistake its name for “the name of a new brand of whiskey” (O'Neill 1947, 57). The death of old values is represented on stage through the presence of Mannon's corpse in his coffin. The glory of the Mannons is mocked by the son Orin, as he shouts to his father: “You were always like the statue of an eminent dead man!” (O'Neill 1931, 345). The idea of petrification that is conveyed by the statue image also applies to the young generation as, at the end of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Lavinia decides to bury herself alive in the family mansion.
- 22 If Aeschylus's tragedy begins with the memory of Iphigenia's sacrifice, O'Neill's play ends with the sacrifice of youth, thus hinting at America's potential for failure as a young nation. The younger generation already seems to be decayed, since it is represented by a wounded soldier in *Mourning Becomes Electra* and by a sick idealist in *A Touch of the Poet*. America no longer appears as a promising nation in the making, but as a country plagued by loss from the beginning. This feeling of loss is echoed by Christine Mannon's complaint in the second part of the trilogy as she exclaims: “Why can't all of us remain innocent and loving and trusting?” (O'Neill 1931, 326). America offers no shelter against tragedy and the only places to find peace, such as the exotic South Sea islands mentioned in *Mourning Becomes Electra* and Simon's pond in *A Touch of the Poet*, happen to be off stage. This play also hints at the frailty of Simon's idealism in the face of America's obsession with success and moneymaking. First of all, the only poet of the play never appears on stage. He is sick and his daydreaming is presented as a weakness by his mother. In fact, she finds it hard to conceal her scorn for the idealists of her family:

DEBORAH—Simon is an inveterate dreamer—a weakness he inherited from me [...]. Simon's grandfather [...] had the quality too. A fanatic in the cause of pure freedom, he became scornful of our Revolution. It made too many compromises with the ideal to free him. [...] [After the French Revolution], he came home and lived in a little temple of liberty he had built in a corner of what is now my garden. (O'Neill 1947, 82-83)

- 23 The ridiculous aspect of this temple of liberty, trapped within the tamed enclosure of a garden, contrasts with the wilderness that surrounds Simon's little shack by the pond. The discrepancy between the two places illustrates the tension between the old Romantic ideal and American Transcendentalism. Nevertheless, the Thoreauvian principles which are hinted at through the character of Harford are undermined by the union of the young Yankee with Sara Melody, the ambitious and down-to-earth daughter who embodies the spirit of enterprise. Defined as a “sordid tragedy” by

Melody (O'Neill 1947, 113), the marriage of the two young characters symbolizes the conflict between the two contradictory aspects of American life. Moreover, it foreshadows the loss of Simon's ideals, as Sara spoils his innocence by slipping in his bed at night to make sure he will feel constrained to marry her. For the Irish immigrant, conquering America is akin to conquering the vulnerable poet's body in order to claim his property.⁷

- 24 Thus, the failure of O'Neill's characters echoes the failure of America as a country of opportunity and as a land of ideals. The chantyman's melancholy wail in *Mourning Becomes Electra*—"Everything is dying" (O'Neill 1931, 357)—sounds like a threnody for his country. The playwright also deals with the death of old Romantic principles, thus shedding light on the need for a new poetical style. The sense of loss that animates his two plays becomes the material for the expression of a highly poetical despair. According to O'Neill, beauty lies in the hopelessness of tragedy, "the only success is in failure" (Estrin 71), and drama constitutes the best medium to represent Man's desperate struggle:

I have an innate feeling of exultance about tragedy. The tragedy of Man is perhaps the only significant thing about. What I am after is to get an audience to leave the theatre with an exultant feeling from seeing somebody on the stage facing life, fighting against the eternal odds, not conquering, but perhaps inevitably being conquered. The individual life is made significant just by the struggle. (Gelb 336)

- 25 Here O'Neill echoes Arthur Schopenhauer's definition of tragic pleasure:

[T]he effect of tragedy is analogous to that of the dynamical sublime, for like this it lifts us above the will and its interests, and puts us in such a good mood that we find pleasure in the sight of what tends directly against it. (Schopenhauer 5)

- 26 In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Orin refuses to go out and face daylight. His speech on the electrical light could be read as a metatheatrical comment about the role of the theatre in the unraveling of a tragic truth:

And I find artificial light more appropriate for my work—man's light, not God's—man's feeble striving to understand himself, to exist for himself in the darkness! It's a symbol of his life—a lamp burning out in a room full of shadows! (O'Neill 1931, 397)

- 27 This quote can be interpreted as the definition of a modern tragedy in which Man stands alone, no longer in the hands of some whimsical god, but trying to come to grips with his pathetic condition and with a feeling of loss that is genuinely American. From James Fenimore Cooper, for whom this country [...] probably presents as barren a field to the writer of fiction and to the dramatist as any other on earth (Cooper 5), to Herman Melville's white whale that "shadows forth the heartless void and immensities of the universe [and] stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation [...]" (Melville 196), facing loss is at the core of American fiction and drama. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *A Touch of the Poet*, this feeling of emptiness is both personal and national. Memory and history intermingle to reveal an image of America as a land in the making but already in mourning, trying to come to terms with loss and death. In this respect, mourning also becomes America.

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NOTES

1. "I think my new work is going to show more poise, more patience with itself to reach at perfection, more critical analysis of itself and contemplation, more given time for gestation and genuine birth, more pains. [...] It's time I achieved a more mature outlook as an artist — and now I know I have" Letter to Eleanor Fitzgerald, 13 May 1929 (Bogard and Bryer 339).
2. Letter to Eugene O'Neill Junior, 13 May 1933.
3. Letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn, 3 April 1925.
4. CHORUS—But righteousness shines out from grimy dwellings, honoring the man who lives in virtue. She turns her eyes away from gold-encrusted mansions where men's hands are black, and moves towards integrity, rejecting power and wealth (Aeschylus).

5. Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions (Aristotle).

6. Letter to Malcolm Mollan, December 1921.

7. Simon Harford eventually turns into a greedy businessman in the next play of the historical cycle, *More Stately Mansions*.

ABSTRACTS

No matter how personal Eugene O'Neill's writing usually is, his plays also tend to express a general tragic feeling. *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *A Touch of the Poet* encapsulate this tension between the private and the public spheres. As he borrows from Greek tragedy and abides by some widespread generic rules, the playwright also tries to create a distinctively American form of tragedy. The tragic mode no longer relies on a heroic fall, *hubris* and godly revenge, but rather on a cathartic celebration of loss. By blending personal and national history, O'Neill stages the failure of the American Dream and presents America as a stillborn nation of lost ideals. However, this feeling of loss becomes the material for the expression of genuine poetic despair on stage.

Malgré l'intimisme qui caractérise son œuvre, les pièces de Eugene O'Neill tendent à exprimer un sentiment tragique universel, à l'instar de *Mourning Becomes Electra* et de *A Touch of the Poet*, qui mêlent sphère publique et privée. Empruntant à la tragédie grecque et suivant certaines règles du genre, le dramaturge tente également de créer une forme de tragédie distinctivement américaine. Le tragique ne repose plus alors sur la chute du héros, l'*hubris* et la vengeance divine, mais sur une célébration cathartique de la perte. Associant histoire personnelle et histoire nationale, O'Neill met en scène l'échec du rêve américain et présente l'Amérique comme un territoire mort-né aux idéaux perdus. Néanmoins, ce sentiment de la perte devient le matériau d'une poésie inédite qui s'exprime sur scène.

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