The Use of Tragic Irony in Four Plays of Eugene O'Neill

Raymond John Schneider

Loyola University Chicago

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THE USE OF TRAGIC IRONY IN FOUR PLAYS

OF

EUGENE O'NEILL

BY

RAYMOND J. SCHNEIDER, S.J.

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Raymond John Schneider was born in Detroit, Michigan, June 7, 1923.

He attended Gesu Parochial School there. He spent the first two years of high school at University of Detroit High and then transferred to Campion High School, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, from which he graduated in June, 1941. In August of the same year he entered the Society of Jesus at Milford, Ohio.

He started his undergraduate studies at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio in September, 1943. In 1945 he transferred to West Baden College of Loyola University, and there received the Bachelor of Arts degree in English in June, 1946. He then entered the Graduate School of Loyola University.
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CHAPTER I

DRAMATIC IRONY IN TRAGEDY

As the purpose of this thesis is to define the nature, function and purpose of tragic irony as employed by Eugene O'Neill in four of his representative plays, it will not be out of order here in the beginning to spend some space on the concept of tragic irony itself. Once we have a firm grasp of what this irony is, how it is exhibited in tragedy and why it is made use of at all, we can proceed more naturally to the critical analysis of O'Neill's usage. Thus we shall first establish a definite norm and then decide whether O'Neill conforms to it. When this is done we can reach the conclusion as to whether his peculiar use of tragic irony makes for good drama.

Of the many meanings of the word, "irony", there is one which is most typical of drama in general and tragic drama in particular. In the Oxford English Dictionary under the second meaning of "irony" we find exactly what we want.

2. a condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might be, expected; a contradictory outcome of events, as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things.¹

Thus there seem to be two elements to this definition: one, a reversal of situation and, two, an element of mockery. The outcome is not merely a mis-
fortune, a sort of chance catastrophe which occurs suddenly and unexpectedly. It is more. There is an added element of the "mockery of the promise and fitness of things." There seems to be an intimate connection, even though of a contradictory nature, between the tragic outcome and the events which led up to it. This connection led the Greeks to suppose a Destiny, a Malignant Destiny, to be behind the actions of man guiding him as if by strings.

In ancient conception Destiny wavered between justice and malignity; a leading phase of malignant destiny was this irony or double-dealing; irony was the laughter of mockery of Fate. It is illustrated in the angry measures of Oedipus for penetrating the mystery that surrounds the murder of Laius in order to punish the crime, impunity for which has brought the plague upon his city: when at last it is made clear that Oedipus himself has been unknowingly the culprit, there arises an irresistible sensation that Destiny has been all the while playing with the king, and using his zeal as a means for working his destruction. 2

This apparent double-dealing in the fortunes of life made the Greeks postulate some Mind, some Guiding Mind, which could effect such a mocking reversal for Its own pleasure.

This definition we see confirmed by many other dramatic authorities. The first and foremost exponent of this usage of irony in drama, according to professor G.G. Sedgewick of the University of British Columbia, was Bishop Thirlwall of England. In Sedgewick's work on irony he refers to the original essay by Thirlwall in which the Bishop defines it as

...a wise and benevolent contradiction or reversal, 'bitter perhaps, but following of necessity upon man's temerity and shortsightedness' ... 'Thus aims fulfilled seem paltry;

hopes clash with result. . . 'When we review such instances of the mockery of fate (italics not in the original) we can scarcely refrain from a melancholy smile. . . .'

Again in S.H. Butcher's classic commentary on Aristotle's Poetics we have a like explanation of this irony in his interpretation of the peripeteia which Aristotle first expounded.

The tragic peripeteia in Ch. xi. 1 suggests, if I mistake not, a series of incidents or a train of action ... tending to bring about a certain end but resulting in something wholly different. The situation, as it were, turns upon the agent who is attempting to deal with it, - swings round and catches him on the recoil.4

Here we see the device in connection with the most moving element in tragedy, the Reversal of Fortune, around which the entire plot centers. Thus we see the importance of the device in tragedy. It is here in this "granted wish that boomerangs back on the petitioner"5 that we see the mocking humour of the gods.

There is one last consideration which must be clarified regarding the tragic irony of which we speak before we can go on to its function in drama. It is with regard to what I may call the "tragic irony of language." This latter is closely allied to the "mocking reversal of fortune." As a matter of fact it heightens the effect produced by the final calamity and thus becomes a part of the general irony of plot with which we are more specifically concerned in this thesis. This "irony of language" can be considered according

3 G.G. Sedgewick, Of Irony, Especially in Drama, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1935, 22.
to two types, the conscious and the unconscious. A.E. Haigh has a very clear analysis of both.

Conscious irony occurs in those cases where the speaker is not himself the victim of any illusion, but foresees the calamity that is about to fall on others, and exults in the prospect. His language, though equivocal, is easily intelligible to the audience, and to those actors who are acquainted with the facts; and its dark humour adds to the horror of the situation. ... 

The other kind of irony, the unconscious, is perhaps the more impressive of the two. Here the sufferer is himself the spokesman. Utterly blind as to the doom which overhangs him, he uses words which, to the mind of the audience, have an ominous suggestiveness, and without knowing it probes his own wounds to the bottom. 6

Here we have the use of language which is known as "tragic irony" and it is this which must be differentiated from the "tragic irony" of this thesis. Perhaps it would be best to elucidate the matter by giving an example of both usages in a single play. In the Oedipus Tyrannus Sophocles makes use of the "mocking reversal" as well as the "ironic language" so this play should make a good example.

Let us first examine the "mocking reversal" of Oedipus. The king, in the final outcome of the plot, is seen to have been pursuing his own ruin. As we consider the whole play from the moment when he finds out his real parentage as Jocasta's son, the mocking reversal of fortune is completed. Here at the climax of the play his life of self-assurance, self-respect and dignity is suddenly wrecked and his manifest misery and abjectness seem to turn and mock the former state. The whole outcome of his intentions and former activity

recoils upon him in a huge mockery. It is necessary to examine the "Irony of Fate" as it is called, from the viewpoint of Oedipus. It is because he sees the whole progression of the prior part of his life from this vantage point of unveiled reality that the impact of the irony takes hold of him. He sees that his present state of destruction mocks his former state of security. We of the audience realize that the downfall of this character is tragically ironic because we see his self-assured rise to power through a bloody curtain of ruin.

This is the use of "tragic irony" which is the subject of this thesis. Now let us turn to the more common meaning of the term and exemplify it. It must be noted in the case of the Oedipus Tyrannus that the audience was familiar with the whole story that made up the plot of the play. The legend of Oedipus killing his father and marrying his mother was taken for granted before the playwright sat down to compose. The one use of language, therefore, which would most fascinate his public was that of equivocation and subtle allusion. So in the writing of the actor's speeches Sophocles made Oedipus use words and expressions that had, beside the innocent surface meaning, a hidden ominous sense that pointed to the oncoming destruction.

From this first scene until the final catastrophe the speeches of Oedipus are all full of the same tragic allusiveness. He can scarcely open his lips without touching unconsiously on his own approaching fate. When he insists upon the fact that his search for the assassin is 'not on behalf of stranger, but in his own cause,' and when he cautiously warns Jocasta that, as his mother still lives, the guilt of incest is not yet an impossibility, every word that he utters has a concealed barb. Perhaps the most tragic passage of all is that in which, while cursing the murderer of Laius, he pronounces his own doom. 'As for the man
who did the deed of guilt, whether alone he lurks, or in league with others, I pray that he may waste his life away in suffering, perishing vilely for his vile actions. And if he should become a dweller in my house, I knowing it, may every curse I utter fall on my own head.  

This is, of course, the 'unconscious irony' of which we spoke. An example of conscious irony from the same play would be the angry prophecy of Tiresias regarding the oncoming calamity of Oedipus's parentage.

OEDIPUS. ...Speak thy prophecies.

TIRESIAS. This day shall give thee birth and blot thee out.

OEDIPUS. O, riddles everywhere and words of doubt.

TIRESIAS. Aye. Thou was their best leader long ago.

OEDIPUS. Laugh on. I swear thou still shall find me so.

TIRESIAS. That makes thy pride and thy calamity.  

It is thus clear how this irony depends on some foreknowledge on the part of the audience regarding the impending disaster. Hence this language or equivocation can only be used in the tragedies where the catastrophe is known. When the spectator is in doubt, as is the case with so many modern plays, this device has to be set aside for the more generic spectacle of "tragic irony" at the climax of the play, or, as we have called it, the "mocking reversal of fortune." This does not mean, however, that irony of language cannot be found in modern drama. On the contrary it is usually employed where the author feels the situation would be better presented through use of irony

7 Ibid., 178-9.
8 Ten Greek Plays, Gilbert Murray, transl., Oxford University Press, New York, 1929, 16.
than through use of suspense. He thus lets the audience in on some secret of the plot by means of a villain, for example, such as Iago in Othello, and then presents the spectacle of the main character's blind pursuit of destruction. In this way the tragic irony of language can be a real asset to the tragic irony of plot. It brings out more fully the contrast between the states of security and calamity which are combined in one moment of recognition to make up the essence of the mocking reversal.

Once we have determined the nature of tragic irony, the next analysis will be that of its function. Once the question, "what is it?" has been answered, new ones arise. How does this tragic irony which occurs at the climax of the play, which is summed up in that one moment, which flowers into a huge mockery, - how does this irony work itself out? How is such a peculiar catastrophe which seems to argue a premeditated humour on the part of the gods brought about? What elements of the play are made use of to work this triumph of Fate? What peculiar kind of action within the story is employed to result in this "mocking reversal"? The answers to all these questions we have combined under the title of the 'function' of tragic irony in drama.

For the perfect connection between the nature and the function of tragic irony as we have conceived it we shall turn to F.L. Lucas.

Now, once it is seen that by his peripeteia Aristotle means this tragic effect of human effort producing exactly the opposite result to its intention, this irony of human blindness, we see at last why he connects the peripeteia so closely with the anagnorisis or "discovery." The peripeteia, in short, is the working in blindness to one's own defeat; the anagnorisis is the realization of the truth, the opening of the eyes, the sudden lightning-flash in the
Here we see the two main elements of the action of the play which are employed to bring about the tragic reversal about which we spoke. They are, first, the blind pursuit of what turns out to be a catastrophe, the "working in blindness to one's own defeat," and, second, the recognition of the destructive force, or, as he calls it, "the discovery."

Let us consider these two elements of the function of tragic irony separately. The first is the blind pursuit of destruction in the action of the plot. This is a most necessary element in accomplishing the complete mocking reversal at the climax for, as Worcester says,

A climax must be the culmination of a series of actions; it cannot materialize out of thin air like a Cheshire Cat and still be a climax. The necessary preparation and suspense are created by dramatic irony.10

We see, then, that the action of the play up to the climax must really bring about the catastrophe, if the reversal is to have its complete mocking effect. The main character must be seen to be going forward, making choices, pursuing a course of action which, unknown to him, leads inevitably to his doom. Again we have a fine example in the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles. As the story is woven together, the author adds incident to incident in logical progression until the inevitable outcome takes place and the catastrophe is seen to be accomplished through Oedipus's own doing. Thus the king searches both for the murderer of Laius and for his mother's identity, and by accomplishing both

---

ends seals his own Fate. As the story progresses Oedipus follows a certain course of action. He beseeches the gods for the cause of the plague in his city. This known, he takes every course of action necessary to discover the assassin. He lets curses fall upon the head of his supposed enemy. He angers Tiresias with his relentless probing. He pursues the clue that Jocasta gives him regarding the scene of the murder even though it may point to himself. He presses further questions upon the Stranger who brings news of Polybus's death till he finds he is really ignorant of his parentage. He persists, despite the pleadings of his wife, in searching out the secret of his birth. Finally, he threatens the shepherd with torture and death until the last evidence proving the reality of incest and patricide is uncovered. Here is the function of tragic irony in the play Oedipus Tyrannus. It is the story of a human will working steadily and blindly to accomplish what it least expects. When the forces of Oedipus's passions are aroused, they lead him along a certain path of action which results, finally, in a complete reversal of fortune. Again Thirlwall, as quoted by Sedgewick, sums up this working out of the irony: "It may be exhibited, he says, in a malignant shape as 'a cherishing of passions and a pandering to wishes which are hurrying their unconscious slave to ruin.' This spectacle, as the Greeks saw two thousand years ago, was the one perfect introduction to tragic reversal.

Scenes of this kind had a peculiar fascination for the ancients. The fear of a sudden reverse of fortune, and of some fatal Nemesis which waits upon pride and boastfulness, was of all ideas the one most deeply impressed upon the mind of antiquity. Hence the popularity upon the stage

11 Sedgewick, 22.
of those thrilling spectacles, in which confidence and presumption were seen advancing blindfold to destruction...12

This function is confirmed further by Jebb's analysis of the Oedipus's plot evolution:

A secondary contrast runs through the whole process of inquiry which leads up to the final discovery. The truth is gradually evolved from those very incidents which display or even exalt the confidence of Oedipus.13

The second element which is used to complete the tragic reversal and which follows immediately upon the blind pursuit of destruction is the "recognition" or "discovery" of the destructive force. This is the "realization of the truth, the opening of the eyes, the sudden lightning-flash in the darkness" of which we spoke before.14 The main character suddenly realizes in a moment that he is doomed and that he himself has been the author of his doom. Even this recognition must be a part of the whole function of tragic irony as it proceeds throughout the play; "...these surprises, however, being themselves woven into the tissue of the plot, and discovered in the light of the event to be the inevitable, though unexpected consequences of all that has preceded,"15 is Butcher's explanation. This awakening to the reality of the doom that engulfs the protagonist is really the center and climax of the play. The resultant mocking reversal is immediately consequent upon, if not simultaneous with this "recognition." Oedipus realizes that he has married his mother and murdered his father; he realizes that this discovery has been made

12 Haigh, 177.
14 Lucas, 96-7.
15 Butcher, 278-9.
through his own action; and immediately his misery begins.

There is one other element connected with this recognition which has been hinted at before. Recognition, it is plain, must come too late to do any good. The protagonist cannot undo what he has done. His pursuit of what turns out to be his own ruin has been accomplished by irrevocable actions. Oedipus can never hide from himself the incest and patricide which he has now discovered. His pursuit and recognition have been too complete. It is too late to be anything but the miserable outcast of the gods.

To Sum up then, we define the function of tragic irony: the protagonist's blind pursuit of his own destruction and (the inevitable outcome of that pursuit) the tardy recognition of the destructive force.

The third and last consideration regarding this tragic irony is its purpose. What is the end of this function? What does this ironic plot-action and climax effect? Why do we include such a mocking reversal in the play at all? What is the purpose of showing us such a spectacle? Does it have a larger end in view than the mere relating of this one particular story? We have defined what tragic irony is and how it is expressed. Now we must tell what it does to the spectator and why.

To answer these questions we must first define tragedy and its purpose. Aristotle calls it "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; ... in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."16

16 Ibid., 23.
We see then that tragedy effects the proper purgation of the emotions of pity and fear. It follows, therefore, that tragic irony also must aid in accomplishing this end if it is to be an asset rather than a defect of the play. If we unite the incidents that accumulate in the exhibition of tragic irony into a single emotional impact we find that the catharsis has been heightened.

The distinctive emotional effect which the incidents are designed to produce is inherent in the artistic structure of the whole. Above all, it is the plot that contains those Reversals of the Situation ... and other decisive moments, which most powerfully awaken tragic feeling and excite the pleasure appropriate to tragedy.\(^{17}\)

We must examine this "pleasure appropriate to tragedy" a little further in order to see just what is being furthered by means of our dramatic device of irony. What does it mean to purge the emotions of pity and fear? Pity and fear in themselves and as we experience them in real life are different from the artistic, refined emotions.

Pity is a 'sort of pain at an evident evil of a destructive or painful kind in the case of somebody who does not deserve it, the evil being one which we might expect to happen to ourselves or to some of our friends, and this at a time when it seems to be very near at hand.' ... Fear Aristotle defines to be a species of pain or disturbance arising from an impression of impending evil which is destructive or painful in its nature.\(^{18}\)

This is pity and fear in real life when the pain of the emotion is unmixed with pleasure; it is immediate and directed towards ourselves. It is thus self-regarding and unrefined. In tragedy, however, these emotions are purged of their lower elements and directed towards universal truths represented in

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 347.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 206.
Pity and fear awakened in connection with these larger aspects of human suffering, and keeping close alliance with one another, become universalized emotions. What is purely personal and self-regarding drops away. The spectator who is brought face to face with grander sufferings than his own experiences a sympathetic ecstasy, or lifting out of himself. It is precisely in this transport of feeling which carries a man beyond his individual self, that the distinctive tragic pleasure resides. Pity and fear are purged of the impure element which clings to them in life. In the glow of tragic excitement these feelings are so transformed that the net result is a noble emotional satisfaction.19

It is the "grander sufferings" which are viewed in tragedy that brings out the refinement of the emotions. The spectator sees the "lacrimae rerum" as never before and he sees them from a view point of superior knowledge and detached sympathy. It is here that tragic irony is foremost. It is because by the device of irony the spectator is let into the secret of the play that he can sympathize more completely with the protagonist. Yet since he cannot interfere, it is a detached sympathy born of this superior knowledge.

The peculiar pleasure of the theatre, then, is the spectacle of life in which, it is true, we do not interfere but over which we exercise the control of knowledge. And this spectacle when it pleases or holds us, we do not view with the 'swelling or Pride' of superiority but with a paradoxical sympathy; for though it is sympathy it is likewise detached. Such a fusion of knowledge and detachment and fellow feeling is the gift of the spectator to a play which he likes. ...And this somewhat vague shape I shall label, for just this occasion, with the name 'general dramatic irony.'20

Here we see how irony effects the tragic pleasure in the mind and emotions of the spectator. It is through that power of reminiscence that the onlooker

19 Ibid., 267.
20 Sedgewick, 29.
views the whole story of the mocking reversal. The impact of it works a sympathetic sense of the contradictoriness of human destiny in him. G. G. Sedgewick calls it "the sense of contradiction felt by the spectators of a drama who see a character acting in ignorance of his condition." And this sense of contradiction is used to accomplish the end of tragic irony: "it points the significance of the situation, it brings the conflict of dramatic forces into clearer view, it heightens the sense of pity and terror."22

The next question is how does this more universal emotion for the general sufferings of mankind come about in the play. We have said that tragic irony is a great contributing factor in the refinement of the aesthetic emotions of pity and fear. The question that arises immediately, then, is how can the playwright best attain this end? What are the guiding principles of good drama which he must take into account when he makes use of tragic irony to attain "the proper purgation of these emotions?" What is the proper catharsis which tragic irony helps to attain? What are the necessary elements that make a real catharsis?

There are three elements which are the sine qua non of good drama. The first has to do with the artistic emotion of pity. To arouse the emotion of pity the dramatist must portray a character caught by misfortunes that he really has not deserved. The ruin that overtakes the protagonist is out of proportion with the faults and errors of judgment of which he is guilty. This does not mean that he is wholly innocent and yet is caught like Job, with a

21 Ibid., 43.
22 Ibid., 54.
catastrophe. This would not be pitiful but revolting in drama. Rather, there is an unequal retribution even after we take his errors of judgment into consideration.

Pity in itself undergoes no essential change. It has still for its object the misfortunes of 'one who is undeserving' ...; which phrase, as interpreted by Aristotle (Poet. ch. xiii.), means not a wholly innocent sufferer, but rather a man who meets with sufferings beyond his deserts.23

The second element that must guide the playwright has to do with the proper "purging" of the emotion of fear. It is the character of the hero which is the determinant here.

The tragic sufferer is a man like ourselves (δυνατος); and on this inner likeness the effect of tragedy, as described in the Poetics, mainly hinges. Without it our complete sympathy would not be enlisted. The resemblance on which Aristotle insists is one of moral character. His hero (Poet. ch. xiii) is not a man of flawless perfection, nor yet one of consummate villainy; by which we must not understand that he has merely average or mediocre qualities. He rises, indeed, above the common level in moral elevation and dignity, but he is not free from frailties and imperfections. His must be a rich and full humanity, composed of elements which other men possess, but blended more harmoniously or of more potent quality. So much human nature must there be in him that we are able in some sense to identify ourselves with him, to make his misfortunes our own.24

For such a man we can feel real sympathy because his character resembles our own in its deep essentials. For such a character we can go out of ourselves and experience the "sympathetic ecstasy," for his greatness, combined with his similarity to us, draws us out of our own selfish considerations and fears.

23 Butcher, 258.
24 Ibid., 260-1.
and into the more universal truths of man's destiny.

The third element which must be a guiding principle in the attainment of the correct catharsis also has to do with the tragic fear and has a reference to the blending of the two emotions of pity and fear. Once we have merged our sympathies with the hero as we explained above there arises in us the realization that this particular story has repercussions throughout all the sufferings of humanity, that these particular calamities are true of all times and all men. Once we are brought emotionally into the story by means of the resemblance of the hero to ourselves, we feel the emotion of fear with real intensity. Yet always there is the detachment of art, in which we are purified of the self-centered emotion of fear as it would crush us in real life.

We are brought into a mood in which we feel that we too are liable to suffering. Yet the object of dread is not a definite evil threatening us at close quarters. In the spectacle of another's errors or misfortunes, in the shocks and blows of circumstance, we read the 'doubtful doom of human kind.' The vividness with which the imagination pictures unrealized calamity produces the same intensity of impression as if the danger were at hand. The true tragic fear becomes an almost impersonal emotion, attaching itself not so much to this or that particular incident, as to the general course of the action which is for us an image of human destiny. We are thrilled with awe at the greatness of the issues thus unfolded, and with the moral inevitableness of the result. In this sense of awe the emotions of fear and pity are blended.25

"Moral inevitableness," then, is the last norm for judging a true catharsis. If the plot is so woven that the tragic fear aroused makes the spectator identify himself with the "doubtful doom of human kind" then we can say that it is the proper catharsis.

25 Ibid., 262-3.
Let us now summarize our definitions. The nature of tragic irony in this thesis is a reversal of the fortunes of the hero that seems to mock the fitness of things. The function of this irony is the blind pursuit and tardy recognition of the destructive force inherent in the plot. The purpose, finally, of tragic irony is the proper purgation of the aesthetic emotions of pity and fear by the spectacle of undeserved ruin overtaking with a certain moral inevitableness, a hero fundamentally like ourselves. If these elements are lacking, tragic irony is lacking. If they are realized to an imperfect degree, so also is tragic irony.

With these notions we can proceed to a critical analysis of four representative plays by Eugene O'Neill.
CHAPTER II

O'NEILL'S USE OF TRAGIC IRONY IN ANNA CHRISTIE

The problem that now confronts us is the critical analysis of O'Neill's use of tragic irony. What is the tragic irony in these plays and how does it compare with the norm we have laid down in the first chapter? Once we have answered these questions we can say whether O'Neill's peculiar use makes for good tragic drama or not.

We come first to the play Anna Christie, produced in its present form in the fall of 1921 and awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the most original play of that year. It is a revision of the unsuccessful play, Chris Christopherson. The play was published in book form in 1922, and the popularity with which it was received made it an exceptional financial success despite O'Neill's personal dissatisfaction with the play.

The story of the play can be summed up at the outset. Anna, the daughter of the sea-faring Chris, has been sent to a farm to be brought up by her cousins, in order that she may escape what the old sailor considers the evil influence of the sea. Instead she becomes the victim of her cousin's passions and flees to the city, only to be debauched again, finally ending in a house of prostitution. These calamities engender a bitter hatred towards men in Anna. As the play opens she returns after an illness to her father only to find him a cowardly, embittered old man who blames all his troubles on "dat
ole davil sea." For her recovery Chris takes his daughter with him on his barge and they live at sea for some time. During this period Anna finds that the sea which Chris hates proves to be the cleansing force in her life. Then the barge picks up a boatload of shipwrecked sailors, one of whom is a burly Irishman, Mat Burke. Knowing nothing of Anna's past, he falls in love with her, supposing her to be the first and only "rare, dacent woman" he has met. However, when he proposes marriage, she is forced to uncover her past and he, as well as Chris, are completely disillusioned with her. They both go off, get drunk and, unknown to either, sign on a long voyage to South Africa on the same ship. Mat's love for Anna turns out to be stronger than his sense of shame and he returns after two days and agrees to the marriage. Although they are united at the end, the play ends on a note of doubt in which the fear that the sea will again drag them into ruin is predominant.

Now, the question is, what use does O'Neill make of the dramatic device of tragic irony? First, what is the nature of the mocking reversal in Anna Christie? What is the contradictory outcome of events which seems to mock the promise and fitness of things? Where can we perceive the reversal of fortune which manifests the mockery of Fate? The answers to these questions will be the central, climactic turning point of the play. It is when the three characters, Anna, Mat, and Chris realize that the sea has trapped them and they must succumb. For Anna, it is when she realizes that both Mat and Chris are going to leave her, sailing away on the same ship. For Mat it is when he sees that he cannot keep from marrying Anna no matter what ruin may come. For Chris it is when he sees that "dat ole davil sea" has probably foiled his last
intention of giving himself up to the sea in return for Anna's happiness. As Joseph W. Krutch sums it up, Anna Christie is the story of the old sailor, retired to a barge and resentful of the sea, who realizes that when his daughter is married to a sailor, the sea, to which he and his "belong," will have claimed its own.¹ This is the mocking reversal of Anna Christie. The sea enters in here at the close of the action to turn and catch each of its victims to itself. The sea which has appeared so attractive to Anna and Mat, which has been pursued as inspiring and cleansing, now reverses its promises and offers nothing but the prospect of a return to the life of misery that has characterized all their forbears. We can see that the fatal cycle of vain hopes and final despair will be the eventual outcome of the story. And all this seems to mock the promised happiness that each character sought in the bosom of the sea.

We come now to the function of tragic irony in Anna Christie. How does O'Neill work out the "blind pursuit of the destructive force" in the action of the plot? Is there a "tardy recognition of this destructive force" in Anna Christie? How do the two elements combine to bring about the mocking reversal which we have explained?

First we will analyse the manner in which the sea has dominated and undermined the past of both Anna and Chris. To begin at the beginning, the sea has bewitched all Anna's ancestors including her father. It is the sea which has brought all the men to their deaths and their wives to loneliness and

grief.

CHRIS. (Shortly) Yes. Damn fools! All men in our village on coast, Sveden, go to sea. Ain't nutting else for dem to do. My fa' der die on board ship in Indian Ocean. He's buried at sea. Ay don't never know him only little bit. Den my tree bro'der, older'n me, dey go on ships. Den Ay go, too. Den my mo' der she's left all ' lone. She die poopy quick after dat--all ' lone. Ve vas all away on voyage when she die. (He pauses sadly) Two my bro'der dey gat lost on fishing boat same like your bro'ders vas drowned. ...

ANNA. (With an excited laugh) Good sports, I'd call 'em. (Then hastily) But say--listen--did all the women of the family marry sailors?

CHRIS. (Eagerly--seeing a chance to drive home his point) Yes--and it's bad on dem like hell worst of all. Dey don't see deir men only once in long while. Dey set and wait all ' lone. And when deir boys grows up, go to sea, dey sit and wait some more.2

This is the ironically ill-fated past of Anna's forbears; each and all of them follow after the sea only to find that it overwhelms them at the last.

More than this remote past is tragically ironic in the play, however. Immediately preceding the events of the first scene there is a mocking catastrophe that has taken place. Old Chris, feeling the sea will bewitch and en- trap his daughter, too, has put Anna on a farm deep inland to be raised and to find her happiness there.

CHRIS. ...Den ven her mo' der die ven Ay vas on voyage, Ay tank it's better dem cousins keep Anna. Ay tank it's better Anna live on farm, den she don't know dat ole devil, she don't know fa' der like me.3

3 Ibid., 253.
Chris senses the evil there is connected with following the sea but he does not realize that by keeping Anna from it he has really been the cause of her fall into prostitution. Fate has mockingly worked a cunning reversal so that the desire of the old man to keep her from the sea actually makes her return to it to recover the health lost by her profligacy. This is the unconscious pursuit of the destructive force which turns and strikes down the hero. Alan D. Mickle sums up O'Neill's irony in this situation. Speaking of old Chris, he says:

He takes a position as captain of a barge that never goes out into the open sea, and keeps his greatly loved little girl away inland so that she will be safe from it. Then he shakes his fist at it, and dares it to do its worst. One almost seems to hear the sea laughing. Man trying to circumvent the inevitable is only trying to circumvent himself. That is man's tragedy. Seeking to accomplish one end he invariably accomplishes another. ... And ole Chris's love for his daughter, and his cunning planning to save her from the sea, are the direct causes of her coming back to it.  

Now as the play proceeds we see that the same story is told with an inevitability that seems to make the sea a malignant and omnipotent devil. No sooner does Anna arrive on the barge than she is at once fascinated by the sea. It seems to be the first thing in her life to which she belongs. It seems to hold her and regenerate her sodden soul with real hope of happiness. This is the working out of the irony of the plot for O'Neill plans to have her long for and seek after the sea with all that belongs to it. Then in the end she will be trapped herself by what she thought was a prized possession.

It (the sea) comes to her as something strangely familiar.

To her it is something new, clean, strong. It is all that all her life she has had to fight against is not. It is the beautiful that all her life all her instincts have craved. That is the grim irony of the play. She has found, at last, rest, peace, calm. But it is only the illusory calm that precedes the storm.5

Anna is, in short, blinded to the oncoming doom that awaits her in accepting the sea. For her the sea means new self-assurance and confidence that this is the way of life that was meant for her. Ironically, of course, this turns out to be only too true. At the present moment, however, her newly-found pride at belonging to the sea blinds her to any consequences that may occur. Her father Chris, suspicious of her new attachment, does not feel the same certainty as regards the future.

ANNA. (Persistently) But why d'you s'spoe I feel so--so--like I'd found something I'd missed and been looking for--'s if this was the right place for me to fit in? And I feel clean, somehow--like you feel yust after you've took a bath. And I feel happy for once--yes, honest!--happier than I ever been anywhere before! ... 

CHRIS. (A grim foreboding in his voice) Ay tank Ay'm damn fool for bring you on voyage, Anna.6

Hardly do they get these words out of their mouths when the next step in the ironic working out of the catastrophe comes a step closer. We feel certain premonitions of coming evil as Anna greets the "Ahoy!" of a boatload of shipwrecked sailors with the resentful murmur, "Why don't that guy stay where he belongs?"7 Of the four sailors one only is still able to stand up and talk. It is the burly, simple, yet boastful Irishman, Mat Burke. In him

5 Ibid., 29.
6 O'Neill, Treasury, 265-6.
7 Ibid., 266.
we find a real central character in the drama of the sea. He has travelled
the oceans since a lad and so far his strength and pride have pulled him
through. Consequently we see that he, too, is blinded by the attraction of
the sea and follows after it as the only thing worth while. In Anna he sees
what he believes to be the first "fine, decent girl" he has met. His own
pride in himself and all his past conquest of the sea has blinded him. He
proceeds without caution to make love to her after the flimsiest explanation
of her past life. He becomes the gullible victim of the sea. The opposition
of Chris to their being married only proves a goad to his determination that
he shall have Anna. It provides him a chance to express his views of self-
confidence in his struggle with the sea.

BURKE. (With grinning defiance) I'll see, surely! I'll see
myself and Anna married this day, I'm telling you. (Then
with contemptuous exasperation) It's quare fool's blather
you have about the sea done this and the sea done that.
You'd ought to be 'shamed to be saying the like, and you
an old sailor yourself...

And Again:

BURKE. You've swallowed the anchor. The sea give you a
clout once, knocked you down, and you're not man enough
to get up for another, but lied there for the rest of your
life howling bloods murder. (Proudly) Isn't it myself
the sea has nearly drowned, and me battered and bate till
I was that close to hell I could hear the flames roaring,
and never a groan out of me till the sea gave up and it
seeing the great strength and guts of a man was in me?

Now we have the stage set for the second element in the function of
tragic irony. The recognition that is to bring about the reversal of events

8 Ibid., 277.
9 Ibid., 278.
and the mockery of the sea. Mat Burke forces the issue of the marriage with both Anna and Chris, despite Chris's obvious objection that his daughter will never wed a sailor. Anna, for different reasons of course, does not want this to come to a head. But finally, by bullying her beyond endurance, Burke accomplishes the last act of ironic fate which now turns in the person of Anna and strikes him down. He impatiently commands her to get dressed for the wedding. His conviction that he is in complete command of her and the situation is the perfect ironic prelude to the terrible awakening. From Anna's viewpoint also, this last act of Burke is a terrible awakening. For she sees now that these men of the sea are really dominating and brutal, and if she ever gives in to them she will be beaten by the sea herself. It dawns on her what she would have to suffer if she were to become a part of the life of the sea. Goaded into an awakening herself, she decides to enlighten them also.

ANNA. (At the end of her patience—blazing out at them passionately) You can go to hell, both of you! ... You're just like all the rest of them—you two! Gawd, you'd think I was a piece of furniture! I'll show you! Sit down now! (As they hesitate—furiously) Sit down and let me talk for a minute. You're all wrong, see? Listen to me! I'm going to tell you something—then I'm going to beat it.10

It is all over for her now. She sees she cannot find the happiness for which she was just beginning to hope. She must tell them the truth and then go back to her past life.

The telling of the story which is to open their eyes to the truth takes

10 Ibid., 283.
little time. Anna relates how she was debauched as a girl and, after running away, became a nurse girl in St. Paul. Here also the loneliness was too much for her and she finally succumbed by entering a brothel. This information bursts upon them as a complete shock. Now in a single instant, Mat understands why Anna has refused him and what a fool he has been. He has been longing and seeking the love of a woman whose past is smirched beyond recovery. He sees in a flash, "So that's what's in it!", how the Fates have turned and struck him down. Then he says:

BURKE. ... Was there iver a woman in the world had the rottenness in her that you have, and was there iver a man the like of me was made the fool of the world, and me thinking thoughts about you, and having great love for you, and dreaming dreams of the fine life we'd have when we'd be wedded! ... 11

This is the culmination of the irony of fate in Mat's life. He never really surmounts this catastrophe in the events that follow. Although after a two-day drunken orgy he returns to find that his love for Anna is greater than the shame attached to her, still as the incidents fall out there is nothing that will sufficiently blot out the feeling that somehow they are doomed beyond all hope.

As the play continues, however, each of the persons concerned tries to make the most of his sad lot. In the attempt they are foiled by a mocking fate. Chris returns to the barge after two days of drinking, with the absurd idea of going off to the sea and of having his pay given over to Anna. Again we see how Fate turns on him in his dogged determination to thwart it and

11 Ibid., 286.
brings about the exact opposite of what he wants. By sacrificing himself to
the sea he feels he will give Anna happiness, but Anna sees that this is just
the same old cycle of misery that has trapped her in the past.

CHRIS. Yes, Ay tank if dat ole davil gat me back she leave
you alone den.

ANNA. (Bitterly) But, for Gawd's sake, don't you see
you're doing the same thing you've always done? Don't you
see--? (But she sees the look of obsessed stubbornness
of her father's face and gives it up helplessly) ... 12

As far as Burke is concerned a somewhat similar story is told. His love of
Anna forces him to return to the barge to make sure that she has not been
lying. He finds, instead, that she has really hated the men of her past life
and loves no one but him. This he feels may be sufficient to unite them.
Then he hits upon the solution of having her swear upon an old crucifix his
mother gave him. When this is done he finds that she is not a Catholic and
immediately his fears return. Nonetheless he determines to take her, no
matter what ruin may overtake them. He flings a defiant challenge.

BURKE. (Defiantly, as if challenging fate.) Oath or no
oath, 'tis no matter. We'll be wedded in the morning,
with the help of God. (Still more defiantly) We'll be
happy now, the two of us, in spite of the divil 13

And almost immediately Fate answers him with a last mocking laugh. Not three
sentences later Anna tells him of the fact that, unknown to both, the two men
have signed on the same ship that is to take them to South Africa. They both
must leave Anna alone for a voyage and only the Fates know what may become of
her. But besides this Burke finds out from old Chris that both he and Anna

12 Ibid., 289.
13 Ibid., 296.
were Lutherans in Sweden. This is too much for him. He sees now that he has been caught by Fate and he succumbs.

BURKE. (Horrified) Luthers, is it? (Then with a grim resignation, slowly, aloud to himself) Well, I'm damned then surely. Yerra, what's the difference? 'Tis the will of God, anyway.14

The last indications of the sea's ultimate triumph come from old Chris. Mat, too, is forced to agree with him on this one thing: that the sea has played the last trick on them.

CHRIS. ... It's funny. It's queer, yes--you and me shipping on same boat dat way. It ain't right. Ay don't know--it's dat funny way ole davil sea do her worst dirty tricks, yes. It's so.

(He gets up and goes back and, opening the door, stares out into the darkness)

BURKE. (Nodding his head in gloomy acquiescence--with a great sigh) I'm fearing maybe you have the right of it for once divil take you.15

Anna with a feeble attempt at gayety tries to drive out the feeling in all of them that they are doomed by the sea. But the final ending of the play is a clear prophecy that the sea will ever mock them into final defeat.

CHRIS. ... Fog, fog, fog, all bloody time. You can't see where you was going, no. Only dat ole davil, sea--she knows.16

We must now consider O'Neill's purpose in his use of tragic irony. What is the universal truth which O'Neill is trying to expound through means of this tragedy? Does Anna Christie represent and call attention to the "grander

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14 Ibid., 297.
15 Ibid., 297.
16 Ibid., 298.
sufferings" of humanity? What are these sufferings, at least in the mind of O'Neill? Aside from the fact that we agree or disagree with O'Neill's view of life, what is the tragic truth which he intends to portray as the purpose here?

Alan D. Mickle has summed up the inner story of the play as O'Neill would see it.

All the time of the play we are aware of a presence in the background, a vast, mocking, demoniac presence, against which all the actions of the people in the play make instinctive, unconscious war. In the end this Beyond-power will be victorious. All these people will have to give in and go the way it wills. Fate must win.17

Yet though this is the despairing story of life, there is some consolation in the fact that man, though he will fail, becomes glorified in the hopeless struggle. Thomas H. Dickinson confirms this view when he explains that O'Neill "lays on man the burdens and responsibilities and joys that belong to him. Of these the chief responsibility is to live with all the life there is in one, to live extensively, even though so living means that you fail."18 And again he says, "To the extent that you aspire, reality will get you. Yet there is nothing else to do but aspire."19 And finally, Eugene O'Neill himself can be quoted as saying almost the same thing:

I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind—(Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it—Mystery, certainly)—and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an

17 Mickle, 21.
19 Ibid., 81.
animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression.\textsuperscript{20}

But if this is O'Neill's purpose, if he has in mind the "self-destructive struggle" of man against a finally victorious Fate, can we say that he does accomplish that purpose in Anna Christie? Let us take up the three criteria we laid down in the first chapter and see if he fulfills them. Then we can make a judgment concerning this end.

The first norm for attaining a proper catharsis of the emotions is the fact that the catastrophe should be beyond the deserts of the hero or heroine. As we analyze the characters of Anna, Mat and Chris we see that this requirement is fulfilled. Despite Anna's past weakness there is a simple, child-like nobility to her character and the ruin that is cast upon her we feel to be all out of proportion with any error or culpable act of hers. At least during the time of the play she is not guilty to the degree for which she is to be punished. It is the same story with Mat and Chris. Both of them, though rough and dominating when aroused, are presented in the play as guilty of nothing more than hastiness of judgment. Their blindness arises from their own good intentions. Both of them love Anna in their own way and their aroused acts of angry determination are really out of proportion to the mocking fate of the sea.

On the second point also, we can see that O'Neill observes a general conformity. The characters must be drawn in such a way that we are sympathetic

towards them because of their general similarity with ourselves. It is true that the characters in Anna Christie are not of high and noble stature, i.e. according to the Greek conception of the protagonist. They come from the lower classes and, hence, do not have the moral elevation that seems to be requisite. However the characters in this play are never vicious, and in their aspirations at least, they show flashes of nobility that give them a touch of real greatness. Burke accepts Anna despite her past; the old sailor Chris offers himself to the sea to win happiness for his daughter; Anna courageously faces the prospects of lifelong loneliness. Certainly we can say that in their self-revelations these people show themselves like to us in their weaknesses and their desires. Just to hear Anna tell the story of her loneliness when she was a nurse and her hatred of the men who seduced her is enough to wring the heart with real sympathy. When Burke cries out

BURKE. ...Yerra, God help me! I'm destroyed entirely and my heart is broken in bits! I'm asking God Himself, was it for this He'd have me roaming the earth since I was a lad only, to come to black shame in the end, where I'd be giving a power of love to a woman is the same as others you'd meet in any hooker-shanty in port, with red gowns on them and paint on their grinning mugs, would be sleeping with any man for a dollar or two?²¹

we in the audience are torn with the feeling of the desolation that is creeping over him. All this is because he is depicted as having rich elements deep in human nature.

The last criterion for accomplishing the proper catharsis is the moral inevitableness of the resulting catastrophe. It is really this element in

²¹ Eugene O'Neill, Treasure, 286.
tragic fear which opens up to us the greatness of the issues at stake. This characteristic note in a play images the "grander sufferings" of the whole human race because it universalizes this one story into the whole story of man's destiny. In Anna Christie we find that the structure of the plot hinders this effect. The story as it is told has an element of romantic comedy that robs the final tragedy of its full impact. The inevitability with which the sea is to gather its victims to itself is obscured by the reunion of Anna and Mat just before the final curtain. The play, if analyzed carefully, ends on a note of true tragedy—the sea will triumph in the end—but when our emotions are aroused regarding the separation of Anna and Mat, we cannot help feeling a wild sweep of joy at their reunion. It is this emotion of joy that clouds the emotion that should be predominant: pity and fear for the really disastrous outcome. This faulty element in the play has led many critics to consider it a comedy rather than a tragedy. Others have called the ending "conventional."

O'Neill himself realized this defect in the play when he said:

My ending seems to have a false definiteness about it that is misleading—a happy-ever-after which I did not intend. I relied on the father's last speech of superstitious uncertainty to let my theme flow through and on. It does not do this rightly. I now have the stoker not entirely convinced by the oath of a non-Catholic, although he is forced by his great want to accept her in spite of this. In short, that all of them at the end have a vague foreboding that although they have had their moment, the decision still rests with the sea which has achieved the conquest of Anna.22

Thus we must conclude with O'Neill that Anna Christie only imperfectly attains the tragic end he intended and therefore, his tragic irony of fate is likewise limited in its purpose.

CHAPTER III
O'NEILL'S USE OF TRAGIC IRONY IN
THE EMPEROR JONES

Probably the best known of Eugene O'Neill's works is The Emperor Jones, a short play of eight scenes, written in the fall of 1920 and published in 1922. Its popularity was increased by the operatic version by Louis Gruenberg in 1932.

The story of the play is expressionistic and highly imaginative. A giant negro, Brutus Jones, former Pullman porter and ex-convict, makes himself in two short years the despotic "emperor" of a West Indiana Island. Part of his success is due to the superstition of the negroes whom he exploits, telling them nothing but a silver bullet can kill him. He enriches himself at their expense, and, as he tells a cockney trader, he has planned his escape to France when the inevitable rebellion comes. There he will spend the wealth he has saved. At the opening of the play the rebellion has already commenced, with the natives stealing his horses and retiring to the hills to plan their revenge. At the edge of the forest Jones is unable to locate the supplies he had hidden there for just such an emergency. Then begins the incessant beat of the tom-toms, at first paced to the normal pulse and then gradually increasing in tempo, which unnerves him considerably and helps to make him lose his way in the forest. As he wanders about seeking the trail that will lead him to the other side where a French gunboat awaits
him, his courage is sapped by his mental encounters with people and scenes of his past life. These brief, symbolic pictures show his mind's return to his own and his race's history: his murder of a gambling companion, Jeff; the hold of a slave ship; and finally, the witch-doctor and crocodile-god of the Congo. In each scene he fires a bullet to rid himself of the "ha'nt"; the last silver bullet which he has had moulded for himself as a lucky charm and as a last suicidal resort, he fires at the crocodile. During this wild, psychological return to the savage state he makes a complete circle in the forest and return to the place where he entered. The savages, who have been chanting evil spells and moulding silver bullets throughout the night, now return and riddle him to death. The last scene ends with the cockney trader commenting, "Silver bullets! Gawd blimey, but yer died in the 'eighth o' style, any'ow!"

The tragic irony in The Emperor Jones is not hard to delineate. As a matter of fact the play is almost over-ridden with it. The ironic reversal of events is beaten into the consciousness of the spectator with six melodramatic scenes and a final catastrophe. The play is the tale of atavistic elements mockingly overcoming Brutus Jones and all his newly-acquired ways of civilization. The reversal of fortune is the mental defeat that is worked in the mind of Jones by the onslaughts of savagery. Within and without himself he finds that the native element is too much for him and he must succumb to the superstitious nature that is his. His cocksure role as "emperor" is reversed to that of frightened slave. The savages, whom he took to be "ign'rent bush niggers," turn out to be the ready ministers of a mocking Fate. All that Jones despised in these simple, native people arises within his own mind and
overwhelms his sanity. It is his own real nature that finally gets him. In the past he has taken on the false ways and character of civilization and now his true nature causes his downfall. As Dickinson puts it: "Brutus Jones has learned from civilization the laws of 'bluff' and 'double-cross.' He tries these on the children of nature and nature gets him." In the heart of the forest the mind of Jones, vain with the "accomplishments" of civilization, breaks down to a state of cringing helplessness. He sacrifices each assumed honor to the jungle, and is finally killed by the superstitious, silver bullets of the natives.

But if this is the nature of the mocking reversal as considered generically in the play, what is the function of this irony? How does the native element work out the blind pursuit of destruction in the action of the play?

First we must consider the character of Brutus Jones. Its vaunting self-reliance, independence, and contempt for weakness has been an unconscious development in reaction to the weakness and superstition that make him inherently and fundamentally a savage himself. He contemns the stupidity of the natives because he feels that the knowledge he has gained from civilization makes him essentially different and superior. It is very necessary to understand this characteristic in Jones, for it is from this contempt of the natives that his blindness to the oncoming destruction is wrought. He is positive that his "bluff" and "tricks" can easily fool the stupid negroes, and he takes a real pride in the fact.

1 Dickinson, 106.
SMITHERS. (with a sniff) Yankee bluff done it.

JONES. Ain't a man's talkin' big what makes him big—
long as he makes folks believe it? Sho', I talks large
when I ain't got nothin' to back it up, but I ain't
talkin' wild just de same. I knows I kin fool 'em—I
knows it—and dat's backin' enough fo' my game. ...2

His pride and self-confidence are thus pictured at the outset that they may
be seen to be advancing blindfold to destruction. This is the initial work-
ing-out of the irony. The last thing Jones would ever really suspect could
possibly overthrow him is the native element. Hence by this very fact the
native element becomes the perfect vehicle for tragic irony. The natives have
been the source of success for Jones in the past. He has no real reason to
fear them. He has always come out on top. His coin of civilization has
brought him power and spoils beyond measure. And so, just as in Anna Christie,
the apparent source of happiness will finally turn out to be the author of
doom. His blind ignorance of the forces that are inherent in the atavistic
race strains in himself and the natives makes him the perfect subject for an
ironic reversal.

Now the action of the play proper begins. From the first we see how the
natives cooperate with the fears that are an essential part of Jones's inner
self to work his ruin. They begin by rousing his anger at their departure.
This is their first victory. They undermine his pride just a trifle. He
loses control of himself for a moment and cries out "Low-flung, woods' nig-
gers!" He catches himself immediately and reassumes his former airs, but he
has felt within himself the first tingling sense of frustration. The second

small victory is with regard to their theft of the horses. Here, as O'Neill inserts parenthetically to describe his reaction, "(Alarmed for a second, scratches his head, then philosophically)," we see he is again thwarted. Still his courage and resourcefulness win out and he resumes his scorn for the natives. He tells Smithers that the huge forest through which he must travel holds no fears for him. He has travelled it many a time and knows its ins and outs. As the last resort, if cornered by the savages with no escape, he will use his lucky silver bullet to commit suicide. He will triumph in spite of them. But in all probability this will never come to pass as far as Jones can see.

JONES. (gloomily) You kin bet yo' whole roll on one thing, white man. Dis baby plays out his string to de end and when he quits, he quits wid a bang de way he ought. Silver bullet ain't none too good for him when he do, dat's a fac'! (Then shaking off his nervousness—with a confident laugh) Sho'! What is I talkin' about? Ain't come to dat yit and I never will—not wid trash niggers like dese yere. (Boastfully) Silver bullet bring me luck anyway. I kin out-guess, outrun, outfight, an' outplay de whole lot o' dem all ovah de board any time o' de day or night! You watch me!

This speech regains for him his cocky self-assurance and it is a triumph of irony when we consider how the events are to follow. Here we see a character who is heedless of danger and yet is walking into the jaws of it with a contemptuous jeer on his lips.

Almost immediately the Fates that await him strike up their reply to this defiant challenge. O'Neill describes it perfectly.

3 Ibid., 12.
4 Ibid., 14.
(From the distant hills comes the faint, steady thump of a
tom-tom, low and vibrating. It starts at a rate exactly
corresponding to normal pulse beat--72 to the minute--and
continues at a gradually accelerating rate from this point
uninterruptedly to the very end of the play).

(JONES starts at the sound. A strange look of appre­
hension creeps into his face for a moment as he listens.
Then he asks, with an attempt to regain his most casual manner)
What's dat drum beatin' fo'?

Here we see how the Fates mock his braggadocio with their simple ministers.
It is noteworthy how the elements that undermine the confidence of Jones are
always at a distance. They never confront him in the open daylight. These
enemies are the subtlest and the deadliest, for they make Jones himself his
own worst enemy by arousing within his own brain wild fears that plague and
shake him. These drums are such a weapon. They eat into the subconscious­
ness of the "emperor" and awake all the atavistic elements hidden there under
the coat of civilization. Dickinson comments on this use of the tom-tom.

The use of the reverberating drum to imply the deeper
rhythms of life from which the Emperor was seeking to
escape by his trickery of civilization, a rhythm that was
to swallow him as the tide laps the sand, is one of the
creative achievements of the modern theatre. 6

The tom-tom, although a somewhat melodramatic and artificial device, is a
good symbol for the representation of the ironic pursuit of Jones by agents
of savagery. No matter what he may do or say after this, no matter how he
may regain his confidence or pride, there is always that undertone of slow
music that cannot be silenced. It is a vivid picture of the steady, mocking
laughter of Fate.

5 Ibid., 14.
6 Dickinson, 106.
In the second scene it is the forest, the realm and figure of untouched nature, that further undermines the pride of Jones as it stands dark and ready to gather him into its shroud. The fact that he cannot find the tin of food he has hidden at the edge of the woods further unsettles him. Then as he looks up at the tops of the trees to find his location, the Little Formless Fears creep out of the forest to mock him.

JONES. ...Can't tell nothin' from dem trees! Gorry, nothin' 'round heah looks like I evah see it befo'. I'se done lost de place sho' 'nuff. (With mournful foreboding) It's mighty queer! It's mighty queer! (With sudden forced defiance—in an angry tone) Woods, is you tryin' to put somethin' ovah on me?

(From the formless creatures on the ground in front of him comes a tiny gale of low mocking laughter like a rustling of leaves. ...7

Already we see the downfall of Jones, for when nothing but the shot from the revolver can scare away these Formless Fears, we realize that his mind is captured even though he may still live.

The five scenes that follow are all according to a pattern and tell the story of his gradual return to the native. The imaginations that possess his mind in the darkness of the forest take him back to his true state of uncivilized fears. As he plunges farther and farther into the trees his Emperor trappings are ripped off his body. First his hat, then gradually his coat, spurs, shoes, and even most of his pants are torn from him in his flight. This is the perfect symbol of the interior uncovering that is taking place in his soul. Each wild imagination mocks his former self-assurance. Each one tells

7 O'Neill, Nine Plays, 20.
him what he really is: a bondsman playing at being free. It is the bondage of savagery, his native element, that claims him for its own as the trees close on him after each firing of his revolver. It is his atavistic fears which make him waste his ammunition futilely. First, Jeff, the victim of his razor in a crap game, comes back and mocks his borrowed security by showing Jones he has not really died. He lives still in the depths of Jones's soul. Then the Prison Guard returns to beat down again the proud aspirations that have been a part of Jones's newly-won character. The white man, in the person of the Auctioneer, next arises out of Jones's subconsciousness to impress upon him again that he is no more than a slave. There follows the slave-ship with its wailing, despairing negroes, telling him the same story. In the seventh scene, even his last silver bullet, the one perfect symbol of his assumed honors, must be sacrificed to the god of the jungle. In so doing he thinks he has overcome the last of the forces of evil in his path. He cries out, "De silver bullet! You don't git me yit!" and fires at the crocodile-god. This is the high point in the battle of Jones. It is the last resort. If his silver bullet fails, all fails. He has spent his last coin of civilization to prove that he is superior to his own native nature. The powers of darkness are, for the moment, checked. "Jones lies with his face to the ground, his arms outstretched, whimpering with fear as the throb of the tom-tom fills the silence about him with a somber pulsation, a baffled but revengeful power."8 Here we have the protagonist finally recognizing that he is incapable of doing any more in his own defense. Also, there is the agent of

8 Ibid., 33.
fate apparently baffled for the time being. But still the tom-tom beats on. The gods of the natives continue to work their further revenge and now that they have stripped Jones of every last shred of civilization, they move in for the kill.

The last scene at the edge of the forest ends the play like the crack of a whip. It is short, dramatic, and deadly. Now that the recognition of Jones's helplessness is understood the reversal follows immediately. And the reversal is charged with tragic irony. Out of their very stupidity and superstition the natives have hit upon the triumphing irony of moulding silver bullets to kill him. Their native simplicity is stronger than all the trickery of civilization. Jones has completed the circle in the forest and returned, just as they stupidly and superstitiously supposed, into their hands at the place where he had first entered the forest. Their leader is the perfect specimen of the native realm: "a heavy-set, ape-faced old savage of the extreme African type, dressed only in a loin cloth." It is from the mouth of this mask of savagery that we hear repeatedly the ironic sentence of doom, "We cotch him." Once the die is cast the catastrophe is wrought simply and suddenly. Jones alerts them by crashing through the underbrush; they creep into the forest and riddle him with their silver bullets. The utter desolation that hovers over the scene of destruction is relieved by the somewhat sympathetic irony of Smithers:

(***SMITHERS leans over his shoulder—in a tone of frightened awe) Well, they did for yer right enough, Jonesey, me lad! 

9 Ibid., 33.
Dead as a 'erring! (Mockingly) Where's yer 'igh an' mighty airs now, yer bloomin' Majesty? (Then with a grin) Silver bullets! Gawd Blimey, but yer died in the 'eighth o' style, any'ow.10

To paraphrase it, he seems to say, "Well, Fate got you and laughs at all your petty attempts to thwart it, but you put up a rather ennobling, though futile, fight against it."

This last remark of Smithers brings us very naturally to the purpose of the tragic irony in The Emperor Jones. For this sums up in a few words the larger truth that O'Neill is trying to teach in this play. This larger truth is that man cannot escape from what he is, and from that to which he belongs. He can put on the mask of higher living, he can strive manfully to raise yourself to a superior level, but in the end he will be crushed by Fate into realizing his smallness and helplessness. Joseph W. Krutch echoes this in his analysis of The Emperor Jones: "When he falls in the jungle cowering under fears which he had despised and terrorized by the atavistic force of superstition, he is another proof that one cannot escape from that to which one belongs."11 Again, Dickinson comments similarly: "O'Neill has no scorn for the savage except as he apes the ways of civilization, but for the hypocrisies of civilization his scorn is bitter."12

The question that follows this statement of his purpose is, of course, "Does he accomplish it?" To answer this let us first analyze the moral inevitability of the plot. On this one count we can say that The Emperor Jones is

10 Ibid., 35.
11 Krutch, 85.
12 Dickinson, 106.
successful, almost too successful. The hero is pursued with a relentlessness that is unswerving. As the plot is constructed, the approach of doom is beaten into our consciousness with the steady insistence of the tom-tom. Through seven overpowering scenes the Fates are represented as irresistible in their deadly approach. We may say, however, that O'Neill uses too much emphasis to get his point across. He not only shows us what he means; he continues to beat it into our physical make-up by using dramatic devices.

The beat of the drum throughout the length of this play, except for the opening dialogue, is not the only appeal this play makes to the physical anxiety of the audience. The terror of a concentrated fear is also played for more than it is worth, by varying its torture in painful monologue. ...the play... repeats through seven more scenes what was adequately conveyed in the first scene.13

Regarding the proper purgation of the emotion of fear, we find the play is also deficient. The central character is not, as he should be, someone who like ourselves at least in the elemental things. Jones is a vicious person, pure and simple, who would kill his fellow man at the least chance of gain. He is a vain, puffed-up figure who arouses no sympathy within us. Dickinson describes him as a "futile, half-contemptible figure, gaining glory only from his own vaunting."14 Looking at such a character in misfortune does not arouse fear in us, because we see no similarity of soul. Aside from the fact that he has no dignity of soul, there is no common bond between ourselves and him. Thus, his sufferings are completely foreign to us.

Lastly, regarding the pity which should be aroused at the sight of unde-

14 Dickinson, 106.
served ruin, we find the play again lacking. Really the Emperor is not punished beyond his deserts. His guilt has been equal to the disaster that overwhels him. Thus the spectacle is one in which perfect equanimity reigns. We may sympathize with him to a degree, but there is no aesthetic wringing of the soul upon realizing the pity of the situation. As Aristotle said:

Nor, again, may an excessively wicked man be represented as falling from prosperity into misfortune. Such a course of events may arouse in us some measure of human sympathy, but not the emotions of pity and fear. 15

And so we must conclude that the purpose O'Neill had in telling the story of The Emperor Jones and the tragic irony he used to attain that purpose, is hindered by the defect of melodrama: the use of sensational, unrelieved incidents and a petty, vaunting main character.

CHAPTER IV

O'NEILL'S USE OF TRAGIC IRONY IN THE HAIRY APE

A second experiment in expressionism resulted, in 1922, in the short but overpowering play, The Hairy Ape. Again there are but eight scenes as the only division. Again the story is told from the subjective viewpoint of the protagonist. And again the play has social implications. Indeed, the parallel between The Hairy Ape and The Emperor Jones is often commented on by critics, and O'Neill himself has called "The Hairy Ape ... a direct descendent of Jones." 1

The story of the play is a violent description of the enfeebled luxury of the rich and the brute-like existence of the poor. In the cramped forecastle of an ocean liner, Yank, a brutal, stupid and profane stoker, is the recognized champion of the offscouring of society represented there in the hold of the ship. The men are all slaves to the machines that society has created and on which it lives. The first scene shows Yank as the king of the stokehole, glorying in the abnormal strength which makes him so. However, when Mildred Douglas, daughter of the ship's owner, makes a slumming visit to the furnace room, she is shocked at Yank's unashamed brutality and faints away after a disgusted, scornful exclamation. Yank is no less aghast at finding in her a whole

1 Mantle, American Playwrights of Today, Dodd, Mead and Company, New York, 1929, 72.
world which he never knew before, and he realizes that he can have no place in it. He becomes sullen and morose at the insult offered him by this representative of a "higher" society and upon reaching New York he swaggers up Fifth Avenue, trying in vain to insult and battle the aristocratic strollers who are completely oblivious of him. Arrested, he is sent to jail, where his fellow mates direct him to the I.W.W. to seek his revenge. He is rejected by the labor organization, however, and he finally goes to the zoo to take a look at the ape, the one creature with whom he can find kinship. When he lets the gorilla free to help him wreak destruction on society, the beast crushes him to death.

The mocking reversal in *The Hairy Ape* can be summed up in a few sentences. It is the story of the ministers of society not only rejecting their own abnormal offspring but forcing that offspring in the person of Yank to realize that it does not "belong" to anything. Notice that this picture of the tragic reversal takes on a more universal character. We are concerned not merely with the fortunes of an individual. Yank, as he is presented in the play, is deliberately drawn along generic lines because O'Neill wants to bring out the idea of a whole class of people who are represented in him. He is an abstraction as well as a certain, definite individual undergoing these particular sufferings. And so, in like manner, the reversal which is represented is a generic thing. The forces of society overpower Yank's sense of "belonging" and along with him the whole laboring class. The whole culmination of the irony comes in the sudden answer to his searching question, "Where do I fit in?" The answer to that question is, "Nowhere!"
Let us now examine how the main character blindly pursues this terrible revelation in the action of the plot. In the first two scenes the setting for the conflict is painted. In one we see Yank, the abnormal offspring of society, glorying in his slave-like existence. He has been forced to grow abnormally strong and brutal to meet the abnormal circumstances of his upbringing and livelihood. Hence he is the natural champion of the stokers since he is the strongest and most violent. He is as high as any of them can hope to be and hence he "belongs." Feeling perfectly at home in his surroundings, he is completely blind to his real degradation. The dreamy ideals of the old Irish sailor, though they capture one for a moment, are swept aside by the dramatic picture Yank paints of the driving, brutal forces that keep the modern machines running. The second scene is the picture of the sickeningly artificial side of the upper class of society. The enfeebled product of the machine age is Mildred, the granddaughter of a famous steel magnate. O'Neill describes her as "looking as if the vitality of her stock had been sapped before she was conceived, so that she is the expression not of its life energy but merely of the artificialities that energy had won for itself in the spending." Mildred represents the opposing force in the play. It is through her that Yank meets his match.

In the third scene the two forces are brought into conflict and the tragic irony takes on an active form. In the first scene the static picture of the blindness of Yank glorying in his degradation was ironic but the real action of the play had not yet begin. Now that we know what a huge mockery
he is in himself, O'Neill passes on to the real story of the play: the revelation of this to Yank himself. The first recognition of what he is comes from the sudden shock of being brought face to face with Mildred. He reads in her scornful remark and fainting disgust the first lines of the indictment that he is a "Hairy Ape." She lets him see himself mirrored for a moment in her revulsion. She undermines all his self-confidence and pride by the simple device of letting him see what he really looks like to the rest of society.

(...) As she looks at his gorilla face, as his eyes bore into hers, she utters a low, choking cry and shrinks away from him, putting both hands up before her eyes to shut out the sight of his face, to protect her own. This startles Yank to a reaction. His mouth falls open, his eyes grow bewildered.

MILDRED: (about to faint—to the engineers, who now have her one by each arm—whimperingly) Take me away! Oh, the filthy beast! (She faints....Rage and bewildered fury rush back on Yank. He feels himself insulted in some unknown fashion in the very heart of his pride...3

This is the first stinging blow to his pride. From now on the impact of this single incident eats into his whole being and is the ultimate source of his downfall. His secure and dominating position has been undermined.

When he learns that her fear of him is born, not of any recognition of superiority in him, but of repulsion and disgust; when he learns that he is to her only a dangerous animal, a 'hairy ape,' then his life-philosophy bursts like a bubble. The bottom he once felt so secure on slips from under his feet. He sees in an instant the hitherto unseen cage he and his kind are in, and its bars. He has glimpsed liberty and found thereby the prisoner he is.4

The rest of the play is the blind pursuit of this enemy, society, till it

3 Ibid., 58.
4 Mickle, 47.
forces him to admit his "unfitness." His blindness to the nature of his opponent is brought out well by O'Neill as he has Yank describe his bewilderment at this first attack.

YANK: ...(Again bewilderedly) Say, who is dat skoit, huh? What is she? What's she come from? Who made her? Who give her de noive to look at me like dat? Dis ting's got my goat right. I don't get her. She's new to me. What does a skoit like her mean, huh? She don't belong, get me! I can't see her.5

The last sentence sums up his struggle. He "can't see her." He is fighting something he knows not. This is the irony with which he is pursued throughout the rest of the play. He is searching in the dark for something which he really does not want to admit. In the end his quest will be rewarded with the ironic revelation that he is no more than a "hairy ape" who has no real place in the world.

The external action of the play which works out this story is shown from the psychological outlook of Yank. Having failed at thinking the thing out he decides to erase by revenge the stain she has put upon him. He first tries to attack her in person as she steps off the boat but the "plainclothes bulls," the protectors of her class, give him the "bum's rush." Next he turns to her whole class as represented in the Fifth Avenue church-goers. Here he is even more confused. The whole scene is charged with unreality for Yank. As he sees it and as we see it through his eyes, it is a picture of grotesque artificiality with marionettes for people. They don't "belong," surely, and yet they overwhelm him. The platoon of policemen summoned by an irritated gentle-

5 O'Neill, Nine Plays, 64.
man has missed his bus fall upon him and throw him in jail. All his strength is powerless against this disinterested enemy.

In jail Yank further pursues his supposed revenge. He hears about the I.W.W. and plans to join it to wreck Mildred and all her class. But in reading the paper telling of the organization the thought suddenly strikes him that her father has made the steel that is caging him in. The jail is nothing but a cage for an ape and he has come a step closer to realizing it. Steel itself, his one-time ideal, has turned upon him and become her ally. Steel also now tells him that he doesn't "belong." Well, in that case, steel, too, must be wrong.

YANK: ... Sure--her old man--president of de Steel Trust--makes half de steel in de world--steel--where I tought I belonged--drivin' trou--movin'--in dat--to make her--and cage me in for her to spit on! Christ! ... He made dis--dis cage! Steel! It don't belong, dat's what! ...

The next scene is Yank's futile attempt to join the I.W.W. He believes that they will give him a chance to blow up the steel works of the millionaire Douglas. By so doing he feels that he will even the wrong done him. Again the irony comes in the rejection of Yank and the renewed charge that he is no more than an ape. The secretary has him thrown out with the words, "Oh hell, what's the use of talking? You're a brainless ape." This rouses Yank but again he maintains, "Dey're in de wrong pew." Still, though he sees that they do not have the answer he is seeking, he realizes that he himself does not yet have it either. As he puts it, "I don't tick, see?--I'm a busted Ingersoll,

6 Ibid., 77.
dat's what. Steel was me, and I owned de woiuld. Now I ain't steel, and de woiuld owns me. Aw, hell! I can't see--it's all dark, get me? It's all wrong!"7 Society, however, is ironically uninterested. The policeman tells him at the end of the scene to "Go to hell."

In the last scene the irony and the catastrophe are climaxed. In it we see Yank completely disillusioned as to his "belonging" anywhere. He has to admit his "ape-hood." He has seen the lofty world that Paddy and the rest spoke of but he realizes that he cannot get in it.

YANK: Sure. I seen de sun come up. Dat was pretty, too—all red and pink and green. I was lookin' at de sky-scrapers—steel—all de ships comin' in, sailin' out, all over de oith—and dey was steel, too. De sun was warm, dey wasn't no clouds, and dere was a breeze blowin'. Sure, it was great stuff. I got it aw right—what Paddy said about dat bein' de right dope—on'y I couldn't get in it, see? I couldn't belong in dat. It was over my head.8

This is the recognition that he cannot belong to the nobler things of life. Next comes the realization that he cannot go back to being an unthinking ape. He must stand in the middle "takin' all de woist punches from bot' of 'em."

Now the triumphant irony of the play occurs. Unable to think his way out, Yank decides that a little action will settle the question. This action will be a losing fight against an omnipotent opponent, but at least it will be action. For such a move, however, he needs a comrade. The gorilla is just such a person. He, at least, is of lower rank than Yank and thus should be glad to cooperate with him in the battle against society. Yank opens the cage

7 Ibid., 83.
8 Ibid., 85.
and frees the gorilla with a gesture of condescension. He feels that he has found himself for this one moment at least. He is going to lower himself to the level of a real ape that he may find some joy in life. He calls the gorilla, "brother" and offers his hand in the clasp of comradeship. But this is not to be. Even the animal kingdom will not receive him. The ape knows Yank and he cannot be buddies. The animal is enraged at the mocking good-fellowship offered by the stoker, leaps on him, and crushes him to death.

(The gorilla scrambles gingerly out of his cage. Goes to Yank and stands looking at him. Yank keeps his mocking tone--holds out his hand) Shake--de secret grip of our order. (Something, the tone of mockery, perhaps, suddenly enrages the animal. With a spring he wraps his huge arms around Yank in a murderous hug.⁹

Here is the final irony. Even the ape rejects him. There is no place for this special type of "hairy ape" and Yank is forced to admit it. Up to now he has been searching for his place in the scheme of things. Now he knows there is no place for the likes of him. In this last crushing embrace of the gorilla Yank's last hope for "belonging" dies.

As he advances toward the cage the ape stretches out his arms. But it is not, as he supposes, to welcome him as a brother. It is to crush him to death and furnish the final proof that one variety of hairy ape does not "belong" even in a zoo.¹⁰

In his death agony Yank mockingly admits that he is a complete misfit. In the harangue of a circus Barker a culminating line of irony ends the play. In it is summed up his unique indictment: he is a tragically ironic, new species of animal the world has never seen before and for which it has no room.

⁹ Ibid., 87.
¹⁰ Krutch, 88.
YANK: ...In de cage, huh? (in the strident tones of a circus barker) Ladies and gents, step forward and take a slant at de one and only—(His voice weakening)—and and original—Hairy Ape from de wilds of—(He slips in a heap on the floor and dies....

What then was O'Neill's purpose in presenting such a brutally ironic story? For the answer to this question we can go to O'Neill himself as quoted by Burns Mantle:

The Hairy Ape, he once said, "was propaganda in the sense that it was a symbol of man, who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way. Thus, not being able to find it on earth nor in heaven, he's in the middle, trying to make peace, taking the 'woist punches from bot' of 'em.' This idea was expressed in Yank's speech. ... This is what his shaking hands with the gorilla meant. But he can't go back to 'belonging' either. The gorilla kills him. The subject here is the same ancient one that always was and always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate.12

This is the universal truth to be represented in an idealized hero. It is by this spectacle of the struggle of man with his own fate that the author intends to accomplish the generic purpose of all tragedy: to purge the emotions of pity and fear. We are supposed to pass from a consideration of Yank and his individual, mocking catastrophe to the larger story of all men and their tragically futile attempt to "belong" to the spiritual sphere which is their birthright.

Does O'Neill accomplish this purpose by means of good dramatic construction? Is the purpose of the play as well as of the device of tragic irony

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11 O'Neill, Nine Plays, 86.
12 Mantle, American Playwrights, 73.
attained? The first norm for judging this is the moral inevitability of the plot. In *The Hairy Ape* we find this only too true. Each advance of Fate upon Yank has all the resoluteness of doom itself. He is bound to find out his miserable state. From the moment that Mildred cries out at his brutal beastliness to the moment he is crushed by the ape there is a "beyond-force" that will not be checked by anything he does. Fate pursues him with unswerving stride right down to the last lap.

And in *The Hairy Ape* she (Fate), in that single dramatic instant in the stokehole, leaps at Yank and, as an ever-present, tormenting, invisible, never-get-at-able force, follows him until he dies.13

The first norm fulfilled, what about the second? Is there room for real pity in the story of Yank? Again we must judge in the affirmative, if we follow the requirement laid down in the first chapter that the catastrophe be out of proportion to the real deserts of the sufferer. Yank, as he is presented to us throughout eight scenes, is not personally guilty for what happens. It is not completely just, we tell ourselves, that such an underprivileged character should be beaten down by circumstance. This man has not merited utter frustration of character by any act of his own. He is certainly "more sinned against than sinning."

The last requirement is sadly lacking, however. Again O'Neill has chosen a character in whom we can find no real humanity. His abnormality, though not his own doing, is repulsive to the audience. We cannot attach him to our-

13 Mickle, 54.
selves by any personal similarity. We cannot fear for the fortunes of one who is not human like ourselves. What is more, there is an abstract quality about him that blurs the reality of his individual character. We cannot feel moved by a sudden shudder of apprehension for a symbol. Burns Mantle takes issue with O'Neill on this very point. "I think," he says, "O'Neill is mistaken in believing that Yank 'remains a man.' He has human attributes, but 'he is a symbol.'"14

We must conclude, thus, that O'Neill again only imperfectly attains his purpose because of the diminished stature of his character. The emotion of pity that is aroused by the spectacle of undeserved ruin becomes sentimental when not blended with fear for a person like ourselves.

14 Mantle, American Playwrights, 74.
CHAPTER V

O'NEILL'S USE OF TRAGIC IRONY IN

MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA

Probably the greatest attempt of O'Neill to build a drama along classical
Greek lines was his much-lauded trilogy, *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Produced
and published in 1931, the play is a modern rendition of the Greek legend of
Electra and is portrayed in three parts: *The Homecoming*, *The Hunted*, and *The
Haunted*.

The story opens after the Civil War with the return of Brigadier-General
Ezra Mannon, descendant of a Puritan family, to his New England home where he
is awaited by his wife, Christine, and his daughter, Lavinia. However, during
his absence and that of her adored son, Orin, Christine has fallen in love
with the clipper captain, Adam Brant, son of Ezra's uncle and a family nurse
maid. Brant had intended to revenge his mother's death and disgrace, due in
part to the indifference of Ezra when she was starving. He planned to do this
by stealing Christine's love from him. Instead he falls in love with the
sensual Christine. Mother and daughter hate each other because Lavinia has
too much of the Mannon Puritanism about her. Yet there is an inner conflict
within Lavinia's soul, since the strong, passionate elements inherited from
Christine wage constant war with the harsh severity that is the Mannon herit-
age. When she finds that Brant, who was just awakening a passionate love
within her, is really in love with Christine and has had frequent secret

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meetings with her, she is disillusioned and determines never to marry. When Ezra returns, we see how he hates Orin because of his having gained the love which Ezra himself could never win. According to an agreement with Brant, Christine poisons Ezra, pretending to give him medicine to relieve an attack brought on by her confession of her guilty love. Lavinia, however, discovers the poison when Christine faints, and realizes that her mother is guilty of murder. In the second part of the trilogy, Orin returns to find his father dead and his mother distracted and changed. Despite his mother's immediate attempts to regain his affection and confidence, Lavinia persuades him to join her revenge plot. The two of them follow Christine to a rendezvous on Brant's ship, and, after she leaves, Orin kills Brant. Upon learning of this, Christine commits suicide. In The Haunted, the last part of the trilogy, Lavinia and Orin are returning from a long voyage that has taken them to the South Sea Islands. Orin is still harried by guilt and remorse and has grown to resemble his father, Ezra. Lavinia, however, has been freed from her Puritanical repressions by contact with the Island natives, and has taken on the beauty and amorality of her mother. Now at last she wants to marry, and so she throws herself at Peter, who has courted her in vain since childhood. Moreover, she encourages Orin's affair with Hazel, Peter's sister. Orin is enraged at Lavinia's plans for happiness and writes a confession of all the Mannon crimes and breaks with his fiancee, Hazel. After unsuccessfully trying to slip the written confession to Hazel in secret, he makes an incestuous proposal to Lavinia and, goaded by her, shoots himself. Lavinia then makes love to Peter but is thwarted by the suspicions aroused by Orin's confession-letter and her own passionate eagerness. Peter leaves her and she shuts her-
self up in the Mannon house to live out the curse to the finish.

There is one species of tragic irony in all three parts of the trilogy. In each there is a mocking reversal of hatred and death in return for passionate desire. The Fate which overcomes each of the tragic characters is essentially the same. Ezra, Christine, Orin, Lavinia, and even Brant are overcome by hatred and death which has been brought on by passionate longing for love. The reversal of fortune is not merely the sad story of their violent soul-frustrations and deaths. The reversal partakes of the real nature of tragic irony in that each is the unknown author of his own doom. The blindness which their passionate love engenders keeps them from seeing that they are really seeking out hatred and death. The Fates, as represented in the Mannon dead, mockingly overthrow the hopes of each character in turn. The Mannon heritage of harsh, unrelenting, puritanical justice is stamped upon the soul of each of the protagonists. Do what they will, they cannot free themselves of this terrible influence. The mask-like character of the face of each of the Mannons is the external symbol of the stamp that is upon their souls. They cannot escape from their inheritance of hatred and death and when they try the Mannon dead rise and mockingly switch their seeming prosperity to miser.

The function of this tragic irony in *Mourning Becomes Electra* follows a pattern throughout the three plays. In *The Homecoming* we can easily trace the two elements in the working out of tragic irony, i.e. the blind pursuit of the destructive force and the tardy recognition of the same by the protagonist. Ezra Mannon becomes a perfect subject for the ironic reversal in the first part. His own character, stamped with the Mannon coldness and severity,
is really the ultimate reason for his doom. From his Puritanical reticence and inhibitions is born the hatred of his wife, Christine. The mystery of his strange, silent character, which has intrigued Christine before their marriage, turns into an ugly revelation on their wedding night. His cold and rigid possession of her instils a hatred in her which years of married life only increase. Now as the play opens we find that Ezra has taken definite steps to win the love of his wife. He sends Orin, on whom she has showered her affection, to the army to rid her of her attachment for him. Ironically, this is one of the contributing reasons why she falls into the affair with Brant. She no longer has Orin to love and so she seeks elsewhere. Thus by seeking to gain the love of Christine, Ezra has really put her farther away from him. But not only does he fail to win her love, he also brings about his own death. Christine, in falling in love with Brant, plans to poison her husband when he returns. Ezra is, of course, ignorant of all this when he arrives at the Mannon estate after the Civil War. Then he takes the next blind step which is a pursuit of his dream of love and at the same time the immediate occasion of his destruction. Now that the war is over he feels that he and Christine have a new life ahead of them. He wants to start over again, giving and receiving the love they have not shared till now. He bares his whole soul to Christine, telling her he wishes to forget the past and his own coldness and start a new love between them that will be warm and real. The irony of the situation is that, now, when it is too late, he offers the love that Christine had wanted all her previous life. Now her growing hatred is too strong to make her forget that past and, as she maintains, "what must be, must be!"

EZRA. ...All right, then. 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.

CHRISTINE. (distractedly) EzrA! Please!

EZRA. I want that said! Maybe you have forgotten it. I wouldn't blame you. I guess I haven't said it or showed it much--ever. Something queer in me keeps me mum about the things I'd like most to say--keeps me hiding the things I'd like to show. Something keeps me sitting numb in my own heart--like a statue of a dead man in a town square. (Suddenly he reaches over the takes her hand) I want to find out what that wall is marriage put between us! You've got to help me smash it down! We have twenty good years still before us! I've been thinking of what we could do to get back to each other.... I'm sick of death! I want life! Maybe you could love me now! (In a note of final desperate pleading) I've got to make you love me!

CHRISTINE. (pulls her hand away from him and springs to her feet wildly) For God's sake, stop talking. I don't know what you're saying. Leave me alone! What must be, must be! ...1

In the next scene in the bedroom we get a perfect picture of the recognition and final catastrophe. Now at last Ezra is convinced that Christine cannot, will not, love him, no matter what he has said. In his bitterness at the disappointment, he guesses at the truth: that she has given herself to him on this night in order that his weakened heart may give way. It takes but a few bitter sentences to confirm his suspicion, for he goads her with this truth until she is forced to tell him the whole story about her affair with Brant. This latter she does deliberately with the intention of exciting him into a heartattack. The attack takes place, and she gives him the poison in place of his medicine. He dies with the horrible realization of the supreme extent of her hatred. The irony is completed. The very moment when he

1 O'Neill, Nine Plays, 740.
holds her in his arms, when he hopes that their new love will begin; he finds that she really still hates him. The recognition of the evil force in his life comes at the exact moment of his highest hopes. This tragic discovery is the immediate herald of the catastrophe. The disillusionment brings forth such bitter reproaches from his mouth that Christine is impelled to take the final step of murder. This completes the mocking reversal, for he realizes fully, as he gasps out his last breath, that Christine is now the horrible evil which he has loved:

EZRA. ... You were lying to me tonight as you've always lied! You were only pretending love! ... You made me appear a lustful beast in my own eyes!--as you've always done since our first marriage night! ...

CHRISTINE. (in a stifled voice) Look out, Ezra! I won't stand--

EZRA. (with a harsh laugh) And I had hoped my home-coming would mark a new beginning--new love between us! I told you my secret feelings. I tore my insides out for you--thinking you'd understand! By God, I'm an old fool!

CHRISTINE. ... Did you think you could make me weak--make me forget all the years? Oh, no, Ezra! It's too late! (Then her voice changes, as if she had suddenly resolved on a course of action, and becomes deliberately taunting) You want the truth? You've guessed it! You've used me, you've given me children, but I've never once been yours!

And then:

CHRISTINE. Yes, I dared! All my trips to New York weren't to visit Father but to be with Adam! He's gentle and tender, he's everything you've never been. He's what I've longed for all these years with you--a lover! I love him! So now you know the truth!?

And then when Ezra has a heart attack in his mad frenzy at learning this and

2 Ibid., 746.
asks for his medicine:

CHRISTINE. Wait. I have it now. (She pretends to take something from the stand by the head of the bed--then holds out the pellet and a glass of water which is on the stand) Here. (He turns to her, groaning, and opens his mouth. She puts the pellet on his tongue and presses the glass of water to his lips) Now drink.

EZRA. (Takes a swallow of water--then suddenly a wild look of terror comes over his face. He gasps) That's not--my medicine! (She looks back to the table, the hand with the box held out behind her, as if seeking a hiding place. Her fingers release the box on the table top and she brings her hand out in front of her as if instinctively impelled to prove to him she has nothing. His eyes are fixed on her in a terrible accusing glare.3

Thus the irony is culminated in the first part of the trilogy. Ezra pursues Christine's love only to find her the source of hatred and death.

In the second division of Mourning Becomes Electra, the ironic construction of the plot follows a somewhat similar pattern. Christine is now the protagonist. She is madly in love with Adam Brant, the clipper captain, and does everything in her power to see the culmination of that love. The first horrible step is, of course, the scene we have just described. She murders her own husband. However, by doing so she arouses the jealous hatred of Lavinia.

This hatred will be one of the ultimate causes of Christine's own destruction. When Lavinia rushes into the bedroom of her dying father, Ezra points an accusing finger at Christine and says, "She's guilty--not medicine!" This aroused Lavinia and throughout the second play she is the figure of the harsh severity of the Mannons' exacting, terrible justice. Christine battles her

3 Ibid., 747.
in vain. In fact, everything the mother does turns ironically into a weapon in the hands of her daughter.

Her first false step is with regard to her son, Orin. He returns from the war and notices immediately that Christine has changed. This is, of course, due to her love of Adam Brant and murder of Ezra. Orin himself is more or less the same. He still is strongly attached to his mother, and herein lies the heart of the matter. Christine wants Orin to marry Hazel so that Lavinia will not have a chance to influence him regarding the murder or the love affair. She immediately warns him that Lavinia is out of her mind with grief and falsely accuses her of both these crimes. Here she makes her first blunder. Orin is not too concerned with the accusation of murder. He could even forgive her if it were true. But his jealousy for Christine’s love is challenged directly by the mention of another man, and he is difficult to convince despite his deep attachment. She takes her next blind step in the direction of her own doom when she loses control of herself with Lavinia and actually puts the plan of revenge into Lavinia’s own mind. After her talk with Orin to prepare him for the coming accusations of her daughter, Christine cannot refrain from boasting to Lavinia that she has offset anything Lavinia may say to Orin. But her intense longing for Brant’s love undermines her reckless confidence and she cannot help but speak out her fears to her daughter regarding her lover’s safety if Orin is aroused.

CHRISTINE. ... Go on! Try and convince Orin of my wickedness! He loves me! He hated his father! He’s glad he’s dead! Even if he knew I had killed him, he’d protect me! (Then all her defiant attitude collapses and she pleads, seized by an hysterical terror, by some fear she has kept hidden) For God’s sake, keep Orin out of this! He’s still
sick! He's changed! He's grown hard and cruel! All he thinks of is death! Don't tell him about Adam! He would kill him! I couldn't live then! I would kill myself! (Lavinia starts and her eyes light up with a cruel hatred. Again her pale lips part as if she were about to say something but she controls the impulse and about-faces abruptly and walks with jerky steps from the room like some tragic mechanical doll. ...)\(^4\)

This is the perfect picture of the laughing gods who turn from their victims with a smirk. Lavinia is here deliberately pictured as a mechanical minister of Fate as she smiles and goes to finish the plan of destruction.

After Lavinia has completely aroused Orin's jealousy by revealing Christine's love for Brant, she offers to make proof of the affair by giving her mother the opportunity to betray herself. This is the next blind step toward destruction. Christine really believes she is warning her lover against Orin when she is really leading Brant into his hands. Given the opportunity to go to Boston unnoticed, Christine is followed by Lavinia and Orin who listen in on the tryst and kill Brant when she has left. Thus she feels she is protecting her lover and insuring her own happiness with him when she is really bringing about the ruin of both. When Orin and Lavinia return, they tell Christine the truth and with this final recognition of the destructive force she is overwhelmed and kills herself. Again the story is the same. The person whom the protagonist has loved turns out to be the source of doom. Orin was formerly the only person for whom Christine had any affection. Now it is Orin who turns and kills the happiness in her life by murdering Brant. The mockery of the Mannon heritage in her life is completed.

\(^4\) Ibid., 778.
The third part of the play deals directly with the tragedy of Lavinia, but it also includes the downfall of Orin. In Orin we see the return to the fate of Ezra. He has blindly pursued the love of Christine, his mother, but by doing so he reaps just the opposite reward. By killing Brant he hopes to remove the one obstacle to his love for his mother. But by doing so he goads her into committing suicide and removing herself from him entirely. The whole of the last play, as far as he is concerned, is the story of his recognition of this ironic fate and the final catastrophe that results from it. He remains just long enough to bring about the downfall of Christine. Really it is only after his death that he has a destructive influence upon his sister. But now as far as his own story is concerned, his recognition of the destructive force in the lives of all of them is embodied in a confession which he writes. Once this is completed, it takes but a goading word from Lavinia, after he has made a feeble grasp at what would be incestuous happiness with her, to make him commit suicide.

Lavinia is now the only Mannon left to search out her happiness against impossible odds. She returns from the long voyage a changed woman. She has shaken off her Puritanical repressions, so she thinks, and is now the amoral woman her mother was. It follows that she will fall into a like pit. In her eagerness to grasp the passionate love which she has learned on the South Sea Islands, she becomes blinded by her own desires. Her first false step in the direction of what she thinks is happy married love with Peter is to have Orin married off to Hazel. Once she is rid of this burden, she tells herself, she can enjoy her love to the full. But it is in this ridding herself of Orin
that she fails. Orin now becomes the symbol of all the Mannon dead demanding the rigid justice of hatred and death for the crimes of passionate love. In thus seeking to have Orin removed, she betrays to him her determination to find the happiness all the Mannons have sought. This arouses Orin to write his confession of the Mannon crimes and to try to give it to Hazel secretly. Even though Lavinia prevents this, the suspicions that it arouses in Hazel's mind are enough to work Lavinia's downfall even after his death. This is because Orin has hinted to Hazel that the contents will keep Lavinia from ever marrying Peter.

But this state of affairs is not enough to work the final disaster for Lavinia. The next blind step she takes is to goad Orin into suicide. He has just promised not to show the letter to Hazel if she promises to give up Peter. Beyond this he makes an incestuous proposal to Lavinia to insure her being bound to him by unbreakable ties of shame. She could never marry Peter, no matter how she plotted, if Orin could reveal such a sin. This, however, is too much for Lavinia. After refusing to confess their common guilt regarding the murder of Brant, she drives him to suicide. This she feels will free her and be a final step towards the achievement of her own ends. But by so doing she arouses the jealous hatred and anger of Orin's sweetheart, Hazel. Hazel, embittered by the thought that Lavinia has had something to do with Orin's suicide, starts a family quarrel with her brother, Peter, and arouses some suspicions within his mind regarding Lavinia. It now takes but the final climaxing irony to complete the mocking reversal. Lavinia has removed Orin but has brought her disaster a step closer by arousing Hazel. Now she takes
the final step that works the destruction itself. In her very eagerness to have her happiness, she makes the proposal to Peter that they be married immediately, that very day. She fears that if she remains one day longer in that mansion, the Mannons will work her doom just as irrevocably as they have wrought the destruction of the rest. And here is the last irony of the play. By throwing herself at Peter, she arouses his suspicions. He thinks that she wishes to marry him to cover up something that Orin would have revealed in his confession. The idea that they be married on the day of Orin's burial is shocking to Peter. This would not be right. Besides, he fears that her eagerness to have him is an indication of her possible guilt with the natives of the South Sea Islands. Symbolically and ironically this is true. Ever since that time, she has wanted passionate love with all her heart, and now that she is within a hair's breadth of attaining it in Peter, she loses him by her eagerness.

Then comes the recognition on her part. As she puts it, "The dead are too strong." Orin, even after his suicide, has worked her ruin. Her own desire has led her blindly into mocking defeat. There is nothing for her to do but pay the penalty of hatred and death. She will live out the curse of the Mannons in herself by shutting herself up in the house till she dies. And as she resumes the Mannon stiffness and rigidity and walks into the sombre mansion, we realize by the external symbol how the Fates have mockingly won out in the end.

So much for the function of tragic irony in *Mourning Becomes Electra.* What conclusion can we draw now as to the end O'Neill wished to accomplish in
writing such a play? What tragic truth did he put into the story of these fated Mannons? It is the growing modern conviction that man is doomed to frustration by the very complexity of his psychological make-up. The forces within man that make up his character, his inherited tendencies and his environmental or acquired qualities, have become too complex to allow of any real solution. Each of the characters is caught between the conflicting emotions of love and hate, expression and repression, desire and despair. This spiritual frustration is treated by Elizabeth R. Hunt in The Play of Today. She calls it "the new drama of catastrophe." The innermost souls of the characters are shown struggling against impending doom but unable to avert it because of the very framework of their characters. Man's tragic destiny is due to the force of the psychological complexity of characters in their social and economic environment or is due to hereditary influences. This is the purpose of Mourning Becomes Electra: to tell the sad tale of man trapped by his own nature. Joseph Wood Krutch thus interprets the element of Fate in this play. "It is true," he says, "that the characters are no longer the victims of fate so much as the victims of psychological processes presented in a manner which reveals unmistakably the influence of Freud." Cleanth Brooks and Robert Heilman echo this view in their discussion of O'Neill's purpose in Mourning Becomes Electra: "O'Neill, on the other hand, clearly seems interested in the 'psychological how'—the tangled web of complexes that accounts for the actions of his characters." This tragic tale of spiritual frustration

5 Elizabeth R. Hunt, The Play of Today, John Lane Co., New York, 1913, 76.
6 Krutch, 108.
within man’s character is, then, the general truth which the Mannon trilogy aims to portray. Even in the ironic title we can read the same. His Electra, by reason of the conflicting elements within her own character, is, surely, most in accord with her true self when she suffers. Mourning is the only proper action of her life when she sees her real self. Since she is frustrated by passionate desires and rigid repressions, in all truth, "mourning becomes Electra!"

The last question that presents itself is, of course, does he achieve this purpose? Does he open up the larger aspects of human suffering as he conceives them by means of this play? Is the catharsis which will effect this properly attained? How well is the purpose of the play, as well as that of the tragic irony, accomplished?

The first criterion of inevitability seems fulfilled in Mourning Becomes Electra. Since the main conflict arises from within the characters themselves, there is a predetermination about the whole play that overwhelms us. The hatred and death that is the Mannon heritage arises naturally from the passionate desires of the individuals. Given the inordinate love, the consequences follow irrevocably. The jealous, possessive love of each of the characters forces him or her into actions which must lead directly to destruction. Ezra is jealous of Christine’s love of Orin and this leads him to remove Orin from her sight only to find that the loss is too much for his wife and she must seek other love, even by killing him. Christine’s passion for Brant blinds her to Lavinia’s determination to revenge, and the mother becomes the victim of the daughter. Orin’s jealous love of his mother leads him to
Kill Brant, her one reason for living on, and, by doing so, he is the indirect cause of her suicide, thus removing his own source of happiness. Lavinia's blind and passionate love of Peter leads her to antagonize Orin and repel her lover so that she, too, becomes the unconscious author of her own doom. In each and every one of these tragic stories we get the feeling that it could not be otherwise. Granted their characters and these circumstances, the tragic result was inevitable.

To continue the critical analysis a step further, is our pity aroused by the spectacle of the characters receiving a punishment beyond their deserts? This is a difficult question to answer from the viewpoint of O'Neill. Each of the characters is guilty of one crime or another, but along with this there seem to be character-determinants within the soul of each which diminish their guilt somewhat. Thus if we take their crime alone, they do not receive more than their due. With the exception of Ezra, all are guilty of murder in one form or another. Even Ezra is guilty of a coldness and severity toward his wife over a long period of years which amounts to something of a crime. But along with this guilt, each of the character has within himself a seemingly uncontrollable urge toward passion for which he is not completely responsible. As O'Neill pictures them, they are stamped with an abnormal perversion of love from the start, and hence their actions cannot be judged from their objective nature alone. In general, therefore, I believe it is O'Neill's intention to portray them as receiving misfortune beyond their deserts. In other words, since they are not completely responsible for their jealous actions because of an inherited characteristic, they can be said to excite the tragic emotion
of pity. And this is true because, all things considered, their punishment is beyond the guilt of their actions.

The final criterion, however, finds O'Neill seriously lacking. Again in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, as in *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones*, O'Neill keeps us from experiencing the tragic emotion of fear by reason of the abnormality of his characters. We find it hard to identify ourselves with those perverted by incestuous desires or complete amorality of character. As each one makes his appearance, he is stamped with a mask-like character that keeps him from being sufficiently human to arouse our sympathy. We cannot really fear for characters who are so different from ourselves. All nobility seems to be sapped out of them by their inherited perversion. As H. S. Canby has put it:

> The Greeks who wrote the Electra tragedies would have drawn back, I think, from such a dependence upon special circumstances. They would have known as well as we, although without our psychological terms to describe them, the permutations of love in every strong family, but they would not have rested a tragic development upon an abnormal instance. They were sounder dramatists than Eugene O'Neill.  

W. P. Eaton confirms this opinion.

*Mourning Becomes Electra* has been freely called a masterpiece. In one sense it unquestionably is... In it, O'Neill's method is as nearly classic as we can well ask of the modern drama, but he deals with small, spiritually insignificant, almost contemptible characters. It is a gripping and emotional play but it is not a Greek tragedy.

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Thus Mourning Becomes Electra is limited in its tragic effect by the diminished stature of its tragic heroes. Before this story can take on the emotional impact of the Oresteia, it must deal with people who have more of rich humanity in them. We cannot identify ourselves with the sudden misfortunes of those whose souls are twisted and abnormal from the start.

We conclude, then, that the full purpose of Mourning Becomes Electra was not achieved by O'Neill. The tragedy of the ignoble and the perverse failed to arouse the emotion of fear in the hearts of his audience.

In conclusion we can sum up the answer to the problem of this thesis. We have seen that Eugene O'Neill's use of tragic irony in four representative plays conforms to our general norm as to nature and function. In Anna Christie we have the mocking reversal of the sea claiming its victims to itself. The working out of this reversal in the action of the plot is achieved by means of the blind pursuit of the sea's attractiveness and through the final recognition in the three characters that they have been duped. In The Emperor Jones, too, there is a mocking reversal. This time it is the atavistic, savage elements within and without Jones which turn his apparent success into defeat. It fulfills its functions by telling the story of blind self-assurance advancing heedlessly to doom, and by leaving Jones at the last whimpering with the fearful discovery of his destruction. In The Hairy Ape, the ironic twist of fortunes is the tragic realization that Yank "belongs" to nothing. This reversal is wrought through his blind and brutal determination to find his own place,
and, accomplishing this better than he ever suspected, he discovers his misery. 

_Mourning Becomes Electra_ has three different parts but the same reversal of fortune. It is the return of hatred and death for passionate desire. In _The Homecoming_, Ezra is portrayed as seeking the love of Christine, yet blindly accomplishing what he realizes only too late: that he loves what destroys him. In _The Hunted_, Christine pursues her love for Adam Brant, but each unknowing step she takes only brings on her lover's death. Her own suicide climaxes the shock of recognition. In _The Haunted_, Orin realizes that he has been striving for the love of Christine and ironically loses her in the attempt. Lavinia, the most determined of the Mannons, becomes by that very fact too eager in the attainment of Peter's love and loses it all the more surely. The removal of Orin, she realizes at the end, was only the ironic means of preventing her own happiness.

So much for the nature and function in O'Neill's usage. It is in the purpose of tragic irony that we find O'Neill lacking. Although he has, as a rule, what he considers a universal tragic truth to convey, he is hindered from conveying it by his misuse of the catharsis of pity and fear. In _Anna Christie_ the aesthetic purgation is interfered with because of the lack of moral inevitability in the completion of the plot. In _The Hairy Ape_ the same is true for different reasons. The tragic emotion of fear is checked because of the brutal abnormality and the purely symbolic nature of the main character. The _Emperor Jones_ seems to be deficient on all three counts; the story is told with an inevitability that is sensational and unrelieved, the ruin of the hero is certainly not beyond his deserts, and the hero himself is an ignoble, half-
contemptible figure. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, an otherwise excellent play is robbed of its effect by characters who are stamped from the start with abnormal perversions.

Thus we can draw our final conclusion: that O'Neill's use of tragic irony as represented in these four plays only imperfectly attains the goal of fine drama.
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