

“Force of Meaning” in Dialogical Speeches in Eugene O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*

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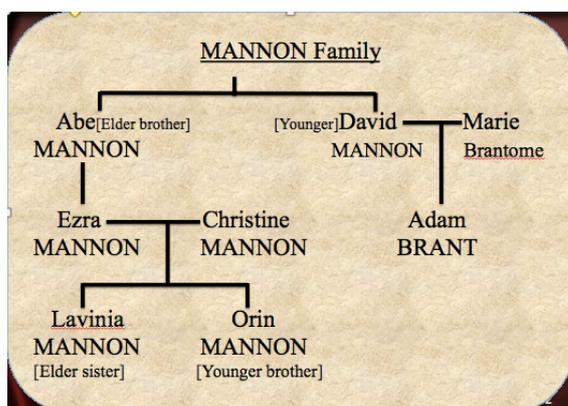
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○ Introduction ○

“Force of meaning” termed by Jonathan Culler is thought to mean the power to bring “narrative coherence” to the development of the events in a narrative structure. I think Culler’s idea, force of meaning, quite an interesting perspective from which to approach literary works. That’s why it is useful to consider the force of meaning of the events, or the coherence of the events in a play, in order to clarify the connections between the characters, especially in an intricately involved relationship. So, I would like to deal with *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), Eugene O’Neill’s dark trilogy using Greek tragedy as its narrative plot. This trilogy is regarded as one of the best examples among his dramatic works describing characters tossed about by the “force behind” (O’Neill 1925 [rpt., 1988: 195]) and their self-destructive struggles. As I have limited time, in this paper, I would like to consider the force of meaning of Ezra Mannon’s death in “Homecoming,” the first play of the trilogy. As Ezra’s death is the final and biggest event in “Homecoming,” it is worthwhile examining the dialogical speeches between Christine Mannon (the mother) and Lavinia Mannon (the daughter). Dialogues between these two Mannon women show the multiple layering of malicious plotting and vengefulness which advances the narrative development of the play, resulting in Ezra’s death. Therefore, through a corpus stylistic analysis, this paper attempts to consider how the dialogical speeches between the two Mannon women depict their confrontation and hatred leading to Ezra’s death, as essential to the narrative coherence of the play.

○ Relationship and the Background of the Mannon Family



Before discussing the dialogues between Christine and Lavinia, it is beneficial for us to obtain an overview of the relationships and the background of the members of the Mannon family. Christine Mannon has an affectionate and close relationship with her son, Orin, whereas Lavinia enjoys a harmonious and beneficial relationship with her father, Ezra

Mannon. However, the mother has a strained and frosty hostile relationship with her daughter, and the father too has a poor one with his son. In due course, Christine comes to commit adultery with Adam Brant. Because Ezra and Lavinia have made Orin join the Civil War army, Christine feels lonely, and is driven to the adultery with Adam Brant, the son of Ezra's uncle David and a Canadian nurse Marie Brantome. Adam's parents had been thrown out of the Mannon house and driven into severe poverty. His father committed suicide and his mother died in poverty without any help from the Mannon family. Adam decides to avenge her death on the family, and thus he approaches Christine. But he falls in love with her, and she with him. Lavinia is suspicious of Christine's behavior, and is enraged when she finds out her adultery.

○ Basic Pattern of the Events in *Mourning Becomes Electra*

Thinking of the basic pattern of the events in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, we can easily find the following sequence: when a Mannon comes back home, a Mannon dies. In "Homecoming," Ezra Mannon comes home, and he is killed with poison. In "The Hunted," the second play of the trilogy, Orin comes home, and Adam Brant is shot to death, and Christine commits suicide. In "The Haunted," the third play, Lavinia and Orin come home from their trip, Orin shoots himself, and Lavinia decides to sequester herself as if she is entombing herself in the Mannon house described as "a temple of Hate and Death." ("The Hunted," Act IV, p. 1046)⁽¹⁾

○ Background and Outline of "Homecoming"

In addition to the short explanation about the family members, it is helpful to give a rough outline and further background to "Homecoming." In the initial situation of the first play, Ezra and Orin have gone to the Civil War, and Christine and Lavinia have hated each other before the play's start. This is because Christine was completely against her son Orin's departure for the war, but her husband Ezra and Lavinia had forced Orin to join the army. This increases Christine's animosity against her daughter.

To outline the story, in Act I, Lavinia suspects Christine is conducting an affair with Adam Brant. Whereat, in her dialogue with Adam, Lavinia tactfully drives him into a confession of his real identity and background. In Act II, Lavinia makes Christine admit her adultery with Adam, and then orders her mother to break up with Adam and to be a faithful wife. At this point, Christine obeys Lavinia's command on a superficial level, but in her mind, she decides to kill her husband, and then tells Adam to buy poison. It is to these circumstances, Ezra Mannon returns in Act III. Even though Ezra tells his wife how much he loves her, Christine rebuffs him. In Act IV, when Ezra has a heart attack after a serious quarrel with his wife, Christine gives him poison instead of medicine and kills her husband.

○ First Question about “Homecoming”

Thinking of the events in the story of “Homecoming,” Ezra’s death must be the biggest and the most crucial event of the play. However, a very simple question arises: What causes Ezra to be driven to his death. In other words, what makes Ezra’s death a significant consequence in the fictional dramatic world of “Homecoming.” In addition, Ezra’s death is not only the final event of the first play of the trilogy, but is the cause of the revenge taken by Lavinia in the second play, “The Hunted.” In this sense, Ezra’s death is of great significance. Therefore, it is worthwhile examining the dialogical speeches between Christine and Lavinia which show the multiple layering of malicious plotting and vengefulness which advance the narrative development of the play, eventually resulting in Ezra’s death. When considering the main element which pushes the narrative development toward his death, it is the hatred existing within the Mannon family that thirsts for it in the sequence of the events in the play. In other words, the hatred in Mannon family is the main factor that sets Ezra’s death as the inevitable significant consequence in the final event of “Homecoming.”

○ Second Question about “Homecoming”:

Looking at the sequence leading to the murder of Ezra, it is Christine who schemes and carries out the murder, and her lover Adam who supports her plot. Now another question is why must Christine put Ezra to death? It’s because Lavinia, the daughter, who cannot tolerate the adulterous relationship between Christine and Adam, compels her mother to end the illicit relationship with Adam and to be a faithful wife to her husband.

○ Third Question about “Homecoming”:

Now then, a third question arises: why can’t Lavinia forgive Christine? It’s because Lavinia has had a hostile relationship with her mother for a long time, and feels disappointed with the fact that Christine has an affair with Adam with whom Lavinia has become emotionally involved. That’s why Lavinia cannot tolerate her mother’s treachery of her beloved father.

○ Considering Malevolent Relationship between Christine and Lavinia via the Linguistic Information from the Corpus Data

The reason why Christine and Lavinia have such a frosty malevolent relationship is that these two Mannon women actually hate each other fiercely. What background circumstances drive them into this relationship of complete hate? In order to understand how the play depicts the fabric of human relationships of hate and to grasp the main factor in the murder of Ezra, it is necessary to analyze the speeches exchanged between Christine and Lavinia which reveal the interweaving of

their mutual hatred.

Now let us turn to an account of the lexical properties showing the characters' hatred and hostile relationships. To begin with, I would like to look at the use of the word "hate" which explicitly shows the characters' hatred. In "Homecoming," the word "hate" is used 21 times by seven different characters in various contexts.⁽²⁾

KWC	ファイル
1 Orin with me. When he had gone there was nothing left--but hate and a desire to be revenged--and a	Christine--Speech--Homecom...
2 ct. She's worried already about his heart. Besides, she may hate me, but she would never think--	Christine--Speech--Homecom...
3 life would be ruined and I would ruin yours! You'd grow to hate me!	Christine--Speech--Homecom...
4 hat! How can you be so--! You've loved Orin! Why didn't you hate him, too?	Lavinia--Speech--Homecomin...
5 know anything about love! I don't want to know anything! I hate love!	Lavinia--Speech--Homecomin...
6 I hate the sight of him!	Lavinia--Speech--Homecomin...
7 you're an old woman with all your looks gone! He'd grow to hate the sight of you!	Lavinia--Speech--Homecomin...
8 I've felt it ever since I can remember--your disgust! Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate	Lavinia--Speech--Homecomin...
9 I hate you! You steal even Father's love f	Lavinia--Speech--Homecomin...
10 ber--your disgust! Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate you!	Lavinia--Speech--Homecomin...
11 uld see you wanted me to go. I had a feeling you'd grown to hate me. Did you? That was why I went. I	Mannon--Speech--Homecomi...
12 s hardly alive for you any more. I saw that. I tried not to hate Orin. I turned to Vinnie, but a dau	Mannon--Speech--Homecomi...
KWC	ファイル
1 Wal, don't matter much. He's allus hated her.	Ames--Speech--Homecoming.txt
2 we were alone he asked me to forgive him hitting her. But I hated him and I wouldn't forgive him. Th	Brant--Speech--Homecoming.txt
3 oduced and I heard the name Mrs. Ezra Mannon! By God, how I hated you then for being his! I thought,	Brant--Speech--Homecoming.txt
4 You would understand if you were the wife of a man you hated!	Christine--Speech--Homecom...
5 I--I knew you hated me, Vinnie--but not as bitterly as	Christine--Speech--Homecom...
6 telling me such things! Let me go! You--then you've always hated Father?	Lavinia--Speech--Homecomin...
7 iar he was! I just led him on--to find out things! I always hated him! Wait! I don't trust you! I kn	Lavinia--Speech--Homecomin...
8 Aveh--but he hated her worse than anyone when it aot	Seth--Speech--Homecoming.txt
KWC	ファイル
1 Which is more'n you kin say fur his wife. Folks all hates her! She ain't the Mannon ki	Louisa--Speech--Hom...

Looking at the concordance lines, we may easily notice that Christine and Lavinia use this word much more frequently than the rest of the characters. Christine utters the word "hate" (including "hated") 5 times (1.29 ‰). And Lavinia utters the word 9 times (3.15‰). Lavinia's relative frequency 3.15‰ is by far larger than 0.72‰, the relative frequency of the word "hate" in the whole trilogy. In addition, to sum up the number of the word "hate" used by these two characters, Christine and Lavinia utter the word "hate" 14 times which accounts for two-thirds of the total use of this word in "Homecoming." That's why it is useful for our argument to examine in what context the word "hate" is used.

13 out of 14 uses of the word "hate" are used as verb. Moreover, 7 out of 13 uses of the verb "hate" takes Christine as its object, and the subject of the verb is Lavinia. The most explicit example to describe Lavinia's hatred of her mother is "Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate you!"("Homecoming", Act II, p. 917). Lavinia's harsh expressions revealing her hate for her mother increases our curiosity: by what process does Lavinia develop her hate, and how is it described in her speeches? Quotation (1) offers a good example describing the cause of Lavinia's aversion:

- (1) CHRISTINE--You will listen! I'm talking to you as a woman now, not as mother to daughter! That relationship has no meaning between us! You've called me vile and shameless! Well, I want you to know that's what I've felt about myself for over twenty years, giving my body to a man I--
- LAVINIA--Stop telling me such things! Let me go! You--then you've always hated Father?
- CHRISTINE--No. I loved him once--before I married him--incredible as that seems now! He was handsome in his lieutenant's uniform! He was silent and mysterious and romantic! But marriage soon turned his romance into--disgust!
- LAVINIA--So I was born of your disgust! I've always guessed that, Mother--ever since I was little--when I used to come to you--with love--but you would always push me away! I've felt it ever since I can remember--your disgust! Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate you!
 ("Homecoming", Act II, pp.916-7)

Lavinia is expressing her aversion in an obvious manner by using "disgust" and "hate." Looking at quotation (1), after Christine's speech, "marriage soon turned his romance into--disgust!", Lavinia notices that her hatred was fixed on her fate at her birth, saying "So I was born of your disgust!" Discovering that she was a child of her mother's disgust, Lavinia utters hate-filled words to her mother, "Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate you!" Whereas the remote cause of their reciprocal loathing is disclosed in the dialogue between the mother and the daughter in quotation (1), these two Mannon women verbalize their increased hatred.

Thinking of the increase in her hatred, Christine explains in her speech that her hate for the daughter is enlarged because Lavinia nagged her beloved son Orin into the Civil War in spite of her begging. However, from the Lavinia's view point, the unfaithful act committed by her mother is far beyond her tolerance, so Lavinia intensifies her feelings of abhorrence. As a result, through their dialogical speeches, the endless enmity between these two Mannon women is projected onto the stage. When the chain of their hatred results in the addition of the germination of Christine's murderous intention, the development of the events in "Homecoming" converges on the murder of Ezra. This increases the need for further investigation of the speeches which depict Christine's aversion and murderous intent.

○ Christine's Hate for Ezra

When Lavinia asks her mother why she has an affair, Christine replies, "You would understand if you were the wife of a man you hated!" ("Homecoming," Act II, p. 916) As is shown in this reply, Christine exhibit her hate for her husband in an obvious manner. Looking at quotation (2), although she admits that she once loved Ezra, Christine says to her husband, "You filled me with disgust!", thereby disclosing her hate-filled feelings to him:

- (2) CHRISTINE: . . . You've used me, you've given me children, but I've never once been yours! I never could be! And whose fault is it? I loved you when I married you! I wanted to give myself! But you made me so I couldn't give! You filled me with disgust! ["Homecoming," Act IV, p. 944]

At this juncture, I would like to mention something about the use of the word “disgust.” As the following concordance lines show, in “Homecoming,” the word “disgust” is used four times, twice by Christine and twice by Lavinia, but in the four uses of “disgust,” the two characters both mention Christine’s dislike for Ezra:

The screenshot shows a concordance search interface. At the top, there are tabs for 'ファイル', 'Concord', 'Cluster', 'Collocation', 'Word Count', and 'コーパスファイル情報'. Below the tabs, there is a search box containing the word 'disgust', a search button, and a range selector set to '60'. A checkbox for '文脈語' is checked, and a 'R1-R2-R3' dropdown is visible. The main area displays a table of concordance lines:

KWIC	4 in	2 ファイル	ファイル
1	us and romantic! But marriage soon turned his romance into--disgust!		Christine--Speech--Ho...
2	elf! But you made me so I couldn't give! You filled me with disgust!		Christine--Speech--Ho...
3	So I was born of your disgust! I've always guessed that, Mother--ever since I w		Lavinia--Speech--Home...
4	push me away! I've felt it ever since I can remember--your disgust! Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate yo		Lavinia--Speech--Home...

Thinking of Christine’s relation with her daughter and her husband, Christine is in a relationship of detestation with Ezra as well as in a frosty hostile one with Lavinia. Consequently, during her husband’s absence due to leaving for the war, Christine enjoys a honeymoon period with her lover Adam. That’s why, as is shown in quotation [3], Christine couldn’t believe that her husband would come home, and she prayed that he should be killed in the war so intensely that she finally believed it would surely happen.”

(3) CHRISTINE-- . . . And I simply couldn’t believe that he ever would come home.

I prayed that he should be killed in the war so intensely that I finally believed it would surely happen! Oh, if he were only dead!

[“Homecoming,” Act II, pp. 922-3]

Therefore, Christine has a burning desire “if only he were only dead!” But in reality in the drama, it is only a matter of time before Ezra comes home. In addition, Lavinia forces her to end the adulterous relationship with Adam and to be a faithful wife to her disgusting husband. Facing such difficult situation, Christine has no choice but to kill her husband so that she can have a meaningful life.

In Act III, Ezra returns to his house to this situation. As the hatred and vengefulness of Christine and Lavinia has formed the course of the story of the play before his homecoming, there is no option but to let Christine kill Ezra at the end of the play so that the development of the events in the play can maintain the demand of narrative coherence from which the audience extracts a sort of plausible signification in the play.

○ Summary

In this paper, I have considered how the narrative development of the play gives significance to events in the fictional dramatic world of “Homecoming,” the first play of Eugene O’Neill’s trilogy, *Mourning Becomes Electra*. While the murder of Ezra occurs at the end of the play, it is worthwhile considering the force behind this crucial event in the play, so that we can clarify something that may remain hidden and at the same time establish the significance of the relationship between this event and other events, or between one act and another act.

Through our examination, we can find that there are two main factors that give significance to the murder of Ezra as the final event of the play. First, as Lavinia was born out of her mother’s disgust, Christine and Lavinia are preordained to be engaged in limitless hatred and endless conflict with each other. This is how the play prepares the basis for the ensuing tragic event. Secondly, driven by her hostile aversion, Lavinia vindictively forces her mother to break up her adulterous relationship and to be a faithful wife, thereby triggering Christine’s murderous impulse. These two factors determine the direction of the narrative advancement in the play. Thus, Ezra’s death is the inevitable consequence that not only harmonizes with the vindictive situation formed by the two Mannon women’s hatred, but gives significance to the narrative coherence in the development of the play’s events.

NOTES

⁽¹⁾ All quotations here from *Mourning Becomes Electra* are cited from *Eugene O’Neill: Complete Plays 1920-1931*, ed., Travis Bogard (New York: The Library of America, 1988), pp. 887-1054. Henceforth, name of the play in the trilogy and the page are indicated in the brackets.

⁽²⁾ In this paper, I use CasualConc (created by Yasuhiro Imao) in order to conduct lexical analysis: <https://sites.google.com/site/casualconc/>.

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