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Eugene O'Neill

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These three plays exemplify Eugene O'Neil's ability to explore the limits of the human predicament, even as he sounds the depths of his audiences' hearts.

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From Reader Review Three Plays: Desire Under The Elms; Strange Interlude; Mourning Becomes Electra for online ebook

Allison says

I read Desire Under the Elms and Mourning Becomes Elektra. I was so disturbed by the latter that I can't get myself to read Strange Interlude. I probably won't ever read it without the pressure of academic supervision. O'Neill is a richly skilled writer, but he is dark and humorless. Martin McDonagh, another dark playwright, writes about similarly tragic people and families, but adds a comic undertone that makes them entertaining. Mourning Becomes Elektra I read over the course of two days, and even then I found it exhausting. I can't imagine what it would be like to see it performed, or to perform it. Eugene O'Neill just isn't my cup of tea.

Sebadiaz says

So much darker than I imagined. Passions, greed, murder, jealousy are ripe throughout the plays. The amazing aspect is that though they are period pieces, they seem wholly capable of being presented today and speaking to modern audiences. The strongest of the plays in my opinion was Strange Interlude, with Mourning Becomes Electra the weakest of the three. The version I read went above and beyond the classical stage directions, almost as if the play was purposefully novelized, which made it much richer and easier to imagine.

Seth Kupchick says

I read "Strange Interlude" kind of by surprise at 23 years old, when I was taking myself seriously as a creative writing major, because it beat working at a bookstore. I bought a great old O'Neill compendium called "Nine Plays" I'm pretty sure, and I didn't buy it for "Strange Interlude," but "Desire Under The Elms," which I loved for its raw sensuality, and very brutal view of sex, death, and life. But "Strange Interlude" really took me for a ride and showed me what theater could be though I never saw an actual performance of it, but maybe parts of one once in the U.C.S.C. library watching videos in an age before computers. I never read a play before where the characters said one thing to each other, and then turned to the audience and said what they were really thinking, and to make it worse, the play pits a beautiful woman with many suitors longing for her dead heroic husband in the war, and all of her suitors are inferior, and she reviles men, and they revile themselves as they pursue her. I'm not sure if it sounds cliched or not by today's theater standards, but I don't remember ever feeling a play that much, nor is that to say I liked it more than, say, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" but it easily had the same devastating impact emotionally for me, and I couldn't believe O'Neill had the audacity to do it, and I'd say pull it off in spades. It makes all of his other plays look almost quaint by comparison, and yet he could do it only once, so he got all he could from the idea to expose sexually inadequate mousy men courting a ferocious woman laughingly upset by the weakness of her suitors longing for a man willing to die for a cause, a real man, and so many in between people, but what makes it really devastating is that it's not a series of soliloquies on loneliness or valor, but rather the soliloquies come in direct reference to the dialogue, so that you see everyone's mask then their real person inside and what they are thinking, however brutal, beautiful, kind, forgiving, or sad, to the person they are talking to, though their thoughts belie the conversation, and the way the two weave is incredible, not to mention the play goes on forever. I thought it was one of the most real experimental plays I'd ever read because it really scared me in

an intimate way, so it wasn't removed from the understandable like many experimental works are, and yet there was nothing normal about it. O'Neill clearly had a very brutal and what many would call depressive view of life and it comes out in full splendor in a "Strange Interlude" as no one lives up to anyone's expectations, least of all their own. I should reread the play to remember the specific reactions each character invokes in the other, but everyone's internal thoughts are exactly as you'd imagine them, and I think the most pathetic character in the play is an academic poet who half heartedly tries to woo the elegant widow that is the Dean's daughter, but his attempt is so half assed he mostly wonders if he's fooling anyone but himself, and has clearly been so emasculated that he wonders if he has ever even loved a woman, leaving the reader to wonder if this is code for gay. Rather than going through all of the characters internal struggles, reflecting off their actual conversation, it's safe to say that O'Neill felt all of his character's pain and there is actually a lot of love for everyone in spite of their weaknesses and flaws.

Karschtl says

So far I have only read one of the three plays - Mourning becomes Electra. I read it for a university course about "American Drama".

With a lot of references and similarities to Greek Mythology O'Neill wrote a family-drama taking place at the end of the Civil War in New England.

Right at the beginning is the heroic husband poisoned by his not-so-loving-anymore wife. His daughter, who always hated her mother and doted on her father, persuades her brother to take revenge and kill the lover of their mother. After this is accomplished the mother kills herself out of grief over her loss...

But the brother cannot cope with what he has done and that he drove his own very much beloved mother to death. So he kills himself as well at the end of the story. Only surviving member of the family is now the daughter, representing Elektra from Greek Mythology, who is now unhappy and lonely.

Paul Frandano says

Re. Strange Interlude: this was the first O'Neill I'd read in more than 30 years - I'd read most of the major plays back in the day - and this was in fact a rereading. Given all the O'Neill tics and smothering stage direction, surprisingly contemporary, although wordier than even the wordy playwright needed it to be - did he really need to spell out, in explicitly abecedarian detail, every single thing? Controversial at the time, and O'Neill's most successful Broadway production, we have to wonder now whether that was all titillation at the overt sexuality of the drama, the frankness of which still startles. The colloquial language of smart Northeasterners holds up extremely well, Nina remains powerfully drawn and realized as a character and - having aged 25 years in the course of the play, has, depending on your point of view, either changed or not. And even in the conclusion seems a bit prankish, this is a satisfying stage experiment that is still staged to impressive theatrical effect (as in the recent production by the Shakespeare Theater Company of Washington DC).

Phillip says

I read *Desire Under the Elms* for my dissertation. It's definitely a unique Hippolytus adaptation, but for me it didn't live up to the complexity of a play like *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Maybe it was tough to really get into this play because it is written in dialect--what sounds to me like a southern drawl, rather than a Connecticut dialect, but we can put that issue aside. And there are a lot of complex issues going on in this play, issues about rights, the nature of God, sons usurping fathers, and so on. So I think I may be too hard on this play as a dialect piece, and it may in fact have the same kind of psychological complexity as *Long Day's Journey*. But I just didn't enjoy *Desire* as much as I did *Long Day's Journey*.

Laura Little says

O'Neill channels Greek Oedipal tragedies strongly in this collection. Characters feel quite two dimensional - but that's precisely the point; the tragedies and deaths that unfold in each work are set in motion at the beginning, and each player must play their role to bring about ordained retribution. I've read *Desire Under the Elms* several times, but I find *Mourning Becomes Electra* a better exposition of a dysfunctional, vindictive, and jealous family.

Jennifer says

O'Neill was actively channeling Greek Drama when he churned out these plays, which explains why they're so monumental and deliberate (the unkind would say occasionally stilted), and laced with sins and expiations greater than most mortal lives can contain.

This much I remember from my high school English classes, but it would have been nice had this edition included a little critical introduction discussing the playwright's influences - or explaining just how in holy hell anyone ever managed to stage *Strange Interlude* when it's nine bloody acts long. That's *185 pages*, boys and girls. Unless showrunners trimmed the thing by removing all the dialogue asides, sitting through that must have felt like sitting through *Les Miserables*...twice.

Still, you have to give O'Neill credit for having the stones to tackle a complete re-working of Aeschylus's *Orestia* and create the intermittently fabulous *Mourning Becomes Electra*, which was easily the highlight of the three plays collected here. It's fascinating to read *MBE* immediately after its source material, if only because it makes you speculate what the *Orestia* will look like two thousand years from now when the next talented guy decides to retell it to reflect the hang-ups of his day.

Melanie says

Two stars for *Desire Under the Elms*

This probably wasn't the best O'Neill drama to start off with. For me it was coarse and dark, and none of the characters were really likable (although perhaps that was the point?).

The action was fast-moving and even a bit crazed. There also didn't seem to be a whole lot of true, believable character development.

Overall, just not my taste, but I still might try to read the others in the volume.

Update on April 30, 2011:

Four stars for *Strange Interlude*

In contrast to *DUtE*, *Strange Interlude* was more engaging and believable (albeit disturbingly so).

The strength of this work is O'Neill's use of stream of consciousness, or, I suppose in drama terminology, the asides. I'm not quite sure how successfully such a feature could be effectively staged; nevertheless, I found it a wonderful representation of how the human mind works: Within seconds one's thoughts move from hatred to shame, from jealousy to regret, from resolve to acquiescence.

Four stars for *Mourning Becomes Electra*

My favorite O'Neill play so far.

Enik? says

Very interesting plays, well written, although I found myself put off by some of the characters. Eugene O'Neill certainly gets to the core of human beings, but I do find myself thinking that, although his depiction is probably very accurate, I do not care for human beings as he depicts them.

Three different plays, three very different kinds of love, all three... shudderworthy. Lots of food for thought.

Cymru Roberts says

This review concerns *Desire Under the Elms*.

Just as I see the list of characters in a play as an interesting preview of where the author's head is at, so too I see a later authors' choice of play when seeking to adapt any of the many myths of yore. Choosing *Hippolytus* is significant. It's one of my favorites by Euripides, so the fact that O'Neill, someone who I've felt a kinship with ever since *Long Day's Journey into Night* first mortally wounded me in high school, shares a similar taste in the Greeks as I, well... that's precisely why I read books, to feel that kinship that transcends space and time, forming a brotherhood of the cursed which in mutual understanding of one another's hexes thereby defeat existential loneliness, comforted as we marked Orestes are by the tragic and deathly force so present and beautiful, so all-pervasive, it can only be considered God.

Do ye bear that mark of Cain? Have ye donned the unholy cloak of literature? If not, then I don't expect this play to be anything special. The New England dialect kept bringing to mind the Ying Yang Twins ("Ah-yup!") and the actions of the characters are regrettable. O'Neill's genius is adapting Greek Tragedy in such a way that his own plays are different -- he doesn't hold strict adherence to plot points, sometimes strays from

themes or combines them -- but the powerful, indeed *holy* essence crafted centuries ago by those master playwrights is preserved and if not expanded upon, at least done worthy justice. At their best, O'Neill's adaptations have clarified their Greek predecessors in ways countless re-readings of the originals hardly could. Furthermore, given the subject matter of such tragedies -- filial duty, fate, love, sex, death -- O'Neill via the Greeks have helped me to better understand myself.

That, my friends, is the magic of literature come to life.

Gregorio says

This one took me a while. A long while. A long long long while.

Desire Under The Elms is good, but I can barely remember what it is about.

Strange Interlude took me 3 months to read. Maybe more. However, when I finally finished it, I was amazed by the play. It has a great pay off... Though I do think it is too long, even though the length is necessary for the ending.

Mourning Becomes Electra is the quickest read, mostly because (in contrast to Interlude) there is so much action going on. It's not as good as Strange Interlude though.

Steven Mcguire says

Desire Under the Elms is a play about very simple people tossed into a very complex situation. But in there ignorance you get a very emotional look into such great problems as opposed to a logical approach. So in essence these people seem much more human and relatable. The language is very hard to get past because the author really nails the southern slang but makes it difficult to read quickly and burn through it.

Julia Curtis says

I only read one play from this collection, Desire Under The Elms. However, it was fantastic. It is a wonderful play about the culture of New England, and the time frame that it was in. It showed how dark New England can be, and the effects of marrying down. There were many twists in the play, and then some that were predictable. It's a show that makes you want to jump off a cliff, so keep yourself away from sharp objects once you get to the last act.

Gary says

These are crazy plays, with Greek tragedy underpinnings--Oedipus Rex, anyone? Interesting, but a little too much for me. Strange Interlude was, well, strange. I kept thinking, "How would this really work on a stage?" More than half of the dialogue was the character's thoughts. Mourning Becomes Electra was probably the best of the three, but still a lot of weirdness to it.

Esdaile says

This is intense melodramatic stuff. What is striking about Eugene O'Neill's dramas is the awareness and portrayal of what protagonists are thinking juxtaposed to what they are actually saying. I imagine that the plays are therefore only producible for the radio. A large part of the action takes place at two simultaneous levels (the spoken and the unspoken). This stresses the duality of the human persona and is therefore intensely psychological in the modern, post-Freudian sense of the word. The characters are driven by bitterness, the need for revenge, love of a long reaching but somehow not joyous kind and ambition. They seem to be unable to act independently but are driven by the psychological-genetic compulsions which compel them to behave as they do. I found the plays extremely dark but pretty compelling reading. There is an all-pervasive gloom to the plays which I read. I can easily imagine that these plays would flourish in "totalitarian" societies whether NS Germany or Soviet Russia, because the characters are not so much unpredictable individuals acting on quirks or sudden impulses good or bad, they are rather expressions of the consequences of genetical inheritance or past experience. The characters seem to live in the future and the past rather than the present. There are similarities with Ibsen. Not "enjoyable" really but certainly well worth reading. I have never had the chance to hear, still less to see, a play by Eugene O'Neill, so I write with the reservations anyone should keep who is writing critically of a text which is supposed to be performed and which they have themselves never seen performed.

Cameron Gordon says

These are three prominent O'Neill plays, famous and celebrated in their time, and written before his acknowledged masterpieces that were more frankly autobiographical came out, such as *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Of the three plays, *Mourning Becomes Electra* is, in my view, the weakest and most contrived. It is not a bad play, to be clear -- O'Neill writes flawed not bad plays, such is his talent -- but it is the one most forced in its construction to drive to a tragic conclusion. The other two are more interesting and effective. *Desire Under the Elms* reads like a Tennessee Williams drama, and is creepily dark, except it is set in New England rather than the South. *Strange Interlude* is very Freudian with the characters' thoughts being 'spoken' as well as their actual words to each other. It too is very twisted and very effective in the way the flaws of the male and female characters drive them to a bizarre interdependence. All of these plays are worth reading because O'Neill is a great writer, but they are not the apotheosis of his works, though one can definitely see the themes that emerge throughout his work.

Lance says

Strange Interlude is very good, but *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* are both masterpieces. O'Neill's just a genius when it comes to displaying his characters' souls, and whether what we see is revolting or noble, there is an underlying sympathy for just about every character that he pens in the two plays.

Sketchbook says

Out of largesse, 3-stars. Life is a "pipe dream," eh, and "dere's dat ol debbil sea." O, shut the fuk up, Gene. He yanked American drama away fr mawkish mellerdramer, and introduced sex & neurosis (on an adult level), bolstered by his knowledge of Freud, Jung and himself. Today he's unreadable and almost unplayable. I'm glad bio-writers keep his name flickering, I guess, but the only work that holds up is "Long Day's etc." Despite an interesting Life, his "theatre" of the psychic and subconscious is : dated.

"I kin talk t'the cows. They know. They'll give me peace." Fr "Desire Under the Elms." Moo. He did come up with wonderful titles. Looking back over 100 years of American drama, there's - frankly - not much. Ten Williams is the one to remember and he gets into purple prose too.

Elizabeth says

These plays could be good if they were edited down or rewritten to make them more palatable to a contemporary audience, but as they're published here they're terrible. After reading these plays I can't help but think of O'Neill as a misogynist and that's a bit of a bummer.
