

Mark MASTERSON

“It’s Queer, It’s Like Fate”: Imaging Queer in
O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*

Set in New England just after the Civil War, *Mourning Becomes Electra* rewrites the *Oresteia* with notable influence from *Oedipus Rex*. In 1930 and one year before the premiere, Eugene O’Neill called the trilogy “a psychological drama of lust” and wondered whether it would be possible to achieve “a psychological approximation of [the] Greek sense of fate” when writing for an audience that had little belief in divine punishment of wrong-doers (Boggard: 335). Ultimately, O’Neill delivered his trilogy with desire arguably embodying the workings of fate because it is desire that leads inexorably to two murders, two suicides, and permanent self-imposed exile for a fifth character. Indeed, one might say that the trilogy evokes and concretizes in its plot the sexualized stages of “normal” heterosexual maturation that Freud identifies precisely through the spectacularized failures O’Neill puts on stage. It is worth noting that, within this oppressively heterosexualized milieu, the word *queer* occurs nearly thirty times. In this paper, I discuss the function I see *queer* performing in the trilogy.

Queer is a word the townspeople use to describe the Mannon women (especially when they have married into the house) (O’Neill 265, 266, 268). The Mannon house (looking like a Greek temple according to the stage directions) also appears *queer* (O’Neill 384). Ezra says to Christine, “Something queer in me keeps me mum about the things I’d like most to say—keeps me hiding the things I’d like most to show” (O’Neill 309). Looking upon his dead father (O’Neill 345-346) or upon a soldier he has killed on the battlefield (O’Neill 347), Orin has *queer* feelings; Brant thinks it *queer* that he grew to love Christine in the context of his extreme enmity against Ezra (O’Neill 292; an estimation with which Sedgwick could agree). *Queer* indicates, then, class jealousy, masculine secrecy, masculine anxiety over attaining proper manhood, and the sublimation of masculine homosocial competition.

While *queer* still possessed in 1931 its nineteenth-century meanings of “out of place,” “peculiar,” *et al.*, it had by this time also come to designate masculine men who had sexual desire for other men (Chauncey 101, Jagose 74). And it is not so odd to think of this word as operative in this way when the trilogy was being composed or when it was first being seen (to say nothing of now). In the first place, the audience at the premiere in New York City was a sophisticated one. We can also discover that O’Neill is on record with endeavoring to keep the diction of the trilogy up to date (Boggard 337) and indeed with finding the Civil War context all but expendable: he regarded the 1860’s northern setting as but a mask for a play of ideas inflected by notions of modern psychology. And if we consider a) the ultimate failure of heterosexual sex to create the next generation, b) the desires of the male characters for what is impossible and unthinkable, and, finally, c) the centrality of sexual sin within this “psychological drama of lust,” we can imagine that an audience will plausibly gravitate to thinking of homosexual “deviance” when it hears the word *queer*.

And so, in this trilogy, where incest between siblings and parents/children is speakable, *queer* denotes a place of unconsciousness for characters who know all too well just what it is that they want. It may too be the secret engine that drives Orin to kill himself. But most importantly, its occurrence both as designation for the elite Mannons themselves and at crucial points in the Mannon men’s lives makes it a symbol of the intractability and fallen nature of human institutions—and of the unknowability of the divine.