The recurrent theme of inter-human family relationships in a state of loss and decay in plays authored by Eugene O’Neill arises in part from the author’s own traumatic relationship with his parents and with his brother James. Trying to deal with his torturous memories, O’Neill seeks answers through his cursed characters, who partly derive from the writer himself, yet also offer a universal portrayal of humankind as a victim of his own mental being and system.

Given O’Neill’s profound interest in psychoanalysis, the plays mostly take place in the life process of the individual minds of the protagonists and of the animating effect they have on others who populate the play-texts; therefore it is essential for the understanding of the play-works under critical consideration to look at the inner lives and worlds of these enigmatic characters, and to evaluate to what extent they act on their own will and where, conversely, unconscious forms of desire from other characters, memories, wishes, objects and so forth are instead determinant.

The canonical plays Desire Under the Elms and Mourning Becomes Electra offer an intriguing blend of the forms and of the contents of the classical-traditional and of the modern stage play, as they extend the heritage and the lineage of ancient Greek tragedy, although situated in the internal time periods they formalize and present, as artworks, one imaginary version of the nineteenth century; furthermore, these plays undergo a transformation by the reader, the viewer, the interpreter and O’Neill himself via the critical agent of the psychoanalytic approach to the human mind and to its mental processes.

The present thesis will thus focus on these two foregoing plays and in so doing analyze their respective delineation of human relationships, of the desires that propel the characters as active agents into action, and spotlight a map of the mind’s procedures; this overall interpretive strategy will enable us to elucidate seemingly inexplicable choices and kinds of conduct by a select line of characters in two classical O’Neill texts. Critical resources will include a mobilization of O’Neill’s own use of different psychoanalytic theories, such as the archetypes and the Electra complex of Carl Gustav Jung and of the Oedipus complex developed by Sigmund Freud, as well as the present candidate’s own forays into the field in certain speculative forms of psychoanalytically-informed literary criticism.