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A Postmodern Reading of Versatile Writing in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*

Abstract

The present paper will offer a postmodern reading of interdisciplinarity by investigating the multifaceted writing and the coexistence between various disciplines in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). Versatility in the O'Neillian text is elaborated through the intersection between psychoanalysis and Greek mythology. In this respect, the Oedipus complex will be analyzed from a Lacanian perspective. The rationale behind choosing Lacan is his efforts "[to transform] psychoanalysis from a modernist to a postmodernist discipline" (Horrocks 2001: 19). The paper will also examine the Electra complex from Jung's perspective. What is specific about Jung is that "he was strictly a phenomenologist, to that extent a postmodern before postmodernism" (David 2003: 24). The inner psyche of the characters will be further interpreted through a postmodern reading of masks. Like the civil war which divided the States into a Northern and a Southern part, the inner self of some Mannons is composed of masks that are the outcome of the inner split between repression and free will. On the other hand, the postmodern reading of the play will focus on Barthes' announcement of *The Death of The Author*. Interdisciplinarity will ultimately be mapped out with relying on Linda Hutcheon's postmodern reading of intertextuality.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The present paper intends to dig deep into the poetics and aesthetics of interdisciplinarity in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*¹ (1931). There have been extensive critical readings about the play, but most critics have approached the play from one specific perspective by focusing on one discipline and dismissing the importance of the convergent interdisciplinary lines. To start with, in his *Eugene O'Neill's Creative Struggle: The Decisive Decade*, the critic Doris Alexander argues that "the Electra story would put [O'Neill] in direct rivalry with Greek dramatists" (Alexander 2008: 150). According to Alexander, O'Neill relies on one modern discipline and copes with the archaic style of the Greek tragedians. The critic focuses on the modern features of the text and gives less importance to the intertextuality between the modern and the Greek texts. In a similar vein, in his *Shakespeare, Eugene O'Neill, T.S. Eliot and the Greek Tragedy*, R.R. Khare draws a comparative study between the play and Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*. He justifies the modernization of Greek standards by claiming that "it is not possible to create tragedy out of a dead myth" (Khare 1998: 354). Khare explores the similarities and differences between the Greek and Modern without finding an area of intersection between both the classical and the contemporary dramatic disciplines. Apart from the comparative studies of the play, many critics read it from a psychoanalytic perspective. For instance, the feminist scholar Judith Barlow is concerned about the psychosexual complexes of O'Neill's female characters. In *O'Neill's Female Characters*, she notices, "O'Neill seems to have taken his cue from Freud" (Barlow 1998: 168) while forming the characterization of Lavinia. The female critic examines the psychological complexes of *Mourning's* female heroine and indulges in a psychoanalytic reading of the Electra complex. In a parallel fashion, Georgia Nugent embraces a psychoanalytic feminist approach and analyzes the female sexual desire. In her *Masking Becomes Electra: O'Neill, Freud, and the Feminine*, Nugent describes "the act of writing like a Freudian return of the repressed" (Nugent 2003: 135). In other words, the play is loaded with sexual relationships, which evoke the eroticized style of writing.

¹ Henceforth, it will be referred to as *Mourning*.

The play has a wide range of critical reviews, but to my knowledge, few critics have been interested in O'Neill's transgression of the disciplinary boundaries and his going beyond the categorized division of the Greek and the modern disciplines. This paper seeks out to examine the notion of interdisciplinarity from a postmodern perspective.

Research objectives

O'Neill's creation of a union between different disciplinary axes will be mapped out through the interdisciplinarity between architecture and psychoanalysis, the interplay between psychoanalysis and Greek mythology, the intertextual affinities between British romantic poetry, American fiction and modern drama. The use of postmodern notions like simulacrum, the death of the author and intertextuality aims at presenting interdisciplinarity as the new discipline which emerges after the mission of decentralization.

Research questions

The study will be an attempt to answer the following questions:

What are the differences between interdisciplinarity, monodisciplinarity and multidisciplinary?

What are the poetics and aesthetics of interdisciplinarity in the O'Neillian text?

What is the area of convergence between architecture and psychology?

How can poetic verses and narrative texts be inserted within a play? What is the aim behind the fusion of three literary genres?

Is the act of writing based on the denial of the past? How does the author die? How does he unearth the ghosts of the past? And what is the relationship between the past and the present?

Interdisciplinarity, monodisciplinarity and multidisciplinary

Before tackling the manifestations of interdisciplinarity in *Mourning*, it is pertinent to decipher the semantic differences between monodisciplinarity, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity. To start with, "discipline is defined as a branch of knowledge or instruction or learning-Mono means one; a monodiscipline therefore is a single [discipline]" (Songca 1961: 141). In other words, a monodiscipline is composed of one field of research. In her approach to acquiring knowledge, Professor Rushiella Songca writes, "Multi-disciplinary entails studying a research topic using more than one discipline" (Songca 1961: 144). More significantly, multidisciplinary implies the presence of different academic disciplines that exist without any possibility of coexistence. On the other hand, Songca offers a lexical definition of interdisciplinarity by writing: "interdisciplinary: Inter concerns that which is between the disciplines. Interdisciplinary concerns the integration of several disciplines to create a unified outcome that is sustainable enough to enable a new discipline to develop over time" (Songca 1961: 141). Interdisciplinarity is thus different from monodisciplinarity and multidisciplinary in the sense that it necessitates the cohesion of different disciplines.

THE INTERDISCIPLINARY INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN GREEK MYTHOLOGY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

The revival of Greek architectural Design

The first form of inderdisciplinarity is traced through the amalgamation between the world of Greek Mythology and the Lacanian Postmodern Psychoanalysis. In fact, there are affinities between the Greek architectural design of the house and the psychological complexes of some characters. In fact, the house of Mannons is introduced as a modern Greek temple inhabited by New Englanders who have developed some psychological complexes. The events of the play take place in “the temple portico [which is placed] like an incongruous white mask fixed on the house to hide its somber grey ugliness” (Act 1, 15). The architecture of the house, the idea of masking and the juxtaposition between light and darkness evoke the fluctuation of the Mannons between forces of life and forces of death. The two contradictory forces show the disharmony between the Greek ideology of life celebration and the Puritan perception of life-renunciation. This Puritan rejection of earthly life is presented at the inception of the play and the temporal axis. Indeed, the events of the play start “on a late afternoon in April, 1865” (Act 1, 15). The season is used in an ironic way because spring which is supposed to be associated with serenity and regeneration, loses its luminosity in the somber den of the Mannons. The solemn mood inside the house of the Mannons originates in the father’s unresolved psychological complexes dating back to the phase of childhood. The rigidity of the puritan mother has caused the Oedipus complex of Ezra. From a Lacanian perspective, “the Oedipus complex can be seen as the transition from a dual relationship to a triangular structure. Lacan argues that it is more accurately represented as the transition from a preoedipal triangle (mother\child\phallus) to an oedipal quaternary (mother\child\father\phallus)” (“the Oedipus Complex and Sexuality”). The quaternary relationship is traced through Ezra’s concealment of the sexual side and his deep attachment to the Puritan mother. What is specific about the adult Ezra is his inability to get rid of the maternal influences. He cannot help being influenced by his Puritan mother who inculcates in him the maxims of austerity and denying any form of pleasure. He transmits this ideology to his nuclear family and informs his wife: “being born was starting to die. Death was being born” (Act 3, 92). The Oedipus complex or the deep attachment to the Puritan mother crystallizes when Ezra omits the existence of sensuality and defines life as the stage of slow death. The Puritan education and the maternal inheritance have an influence on Ezra’s architectural design of his house. In reality, the decoration of the garden indicates that the Mannons’ life is tainted by their belief in the Puritan philosophy of death. The exterior design of the temple is marked by the presence of “a big pine tree is on the lawn at the edge of the drive before the right corner of the house” (Act 1,15). The image of the pine tree suggests the presence of the forces of death which confer a melancholic atmosphere. Indeed, “pines were planted on graves” (“Pine 1998”) and planting pine trees in the house of Mannons shows that some characters are living dead.

The house of Mannons becomes a claustrophobic space for some liberated women like Christine because it stifles their female freedom and longing for sensuality. The Apollonian² side of the Mannons is reflected through the specific sculpture of windows and the little natural radiation. In fact, “the windows of the lower story reflect the sun’s rays in a resentful glare” (Act 1, 15). The pale glow is in keeping with Ezra Mannon’s renunciation of any natural element associated with the earthy life. His Puritan views about eschatology and the implacable power of death have encouraged him to teach his daughter some ways of freezing emotions. In this respect, when he comes back from war, he blames Lavinia for being emotional, showing her tears of joy and advises her to control her emotions. He teases Lavinia in an embarrassing tone “patting her head gruffly: Come! I thought I’d taught you never to cry” (Act 3, 81). The father is taming the instincts of his daughter and repressing the erotic side. Concealing emotions implies that the father abides by the Puritan social norms and disgusts the natural freedom of the natives. The role of the Puritan education of the mother in shaping Ezra’s rigid strategies of bringing up his daughter show Ezra’s Oedipal tendencies. The common point between the Greek Oedipus and the postmodern Ezra is their inability to get rid of the umbilical chords. The interplay between Greek mythology and postmodern Lacanian psychoanalysis show the role of the mother in shaping the preferences and the ideological orientations of both male characters. This relationship is reminder of the playwright’s deep torment because of losing motherly tenderness. His wife Carlotta reveals: “he had had no real home, no mother in the real sense, or father, no one to treat him a child should be treated” (qtd. in Sheaffer 233). Her statement reflects O’Neill’s need for recapturing the motherly love and shows the way his personal life affects the psychological construction of his characters.

The Electra Complex

Another form of interdisciplinarity or interconnection between Greek mythology and psychoanalysis can be traced through the Electra complex. This fusion emerges when the heroine of Greek mythology and the postmodern Electra display similar psychosexual complexes. In fact, both of them develop an Electra complex which is based on an unconscious attachment to the father and taking the mother as a rival. According to the swiss psychiatrist, Carl Gustav Jung, “[a] daughter develops a specific liking for the father, with a correspondingly jealous attitude towards her mother, we would call this the Electra Complex. Electra took vengeance on her mother Clytemnestra for murdering her husband Agamemnon and robbing her_ Electra_ of her beloved father” (Jung 1961: 69). Put differently, the Electra complex is produced when the girl turns away from the mother as a love object and moves towards the father. This female psychological complex is noticed when the heroine of Sophocles’ Greek tragedy *Electra* contributes to the murderous act of killing the mother. When the mother asks her son for some exoneration, Electra reacts in a tone loaded with rancor: “[shouting through the closed doors] You had none for him, nor for his father before him!. . .Strike her again, strike” (Sophocles 2007: 123). Her merciless behavior emanates from her desire to take revenge against the adulterous

² Apollonian: the Apollonian side consists in being indulged in a rational world and seeking for bodily mortification. “The Apollonian elements reflect ideals of solemn and ordered perfection attributed to the sun, God, Apollo” (Lee 2002: 2). On the other hand, the Dionysian side is based on enjoying emotional and carnal pleasure.

mother. Like the Greek Electra who has an antagonistic relationship with her mother, the modern Lavinia envies her female parent and tries to cut any maternal link. Her Electra complex appears when she is closely and securely attached to her father. Lavinia imitates her father and shares his view about love as a sin. The influence of the father is further reinforced when she seeks to preserve the Puritan way of life and mortify the flesh. In her attempts at bodily mortification, "she wears her hair pulled tightly back, as if to conceal its natural curliness" (O'Neill 2003: Act 1, 23). The concealment of natural beauty suggests that Lavinia follows the father as an ideal model and heeds his advice of controlling emotions. She screams: "I don't know anything about love! I don't want to know anything! (intensely) I hate love!" (O'Neill 2003: Act 1, 29). She is repressing the sensual side and trying to show her Apollonian nature. In short, interdisciplinarity between Greek mythology and psychoanalysis contributes to the formation of Lavinia's complex female persona.

The slip of the tongue

The complexity of Lavinia's personality is introduced through the inward struggle and the presence of an intricate inner self that is composed of inner masks. From a postmodern angle, "a mask [is] deceptively standing in for a void. To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has... to simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't" (Weinstein 21). In this respect, the Greek tradition of putting on masks is echoed by the presence of inner masks that are based on dissimulation since they show that Lavinia is pretending not to be jealous, but the slip of her tongue evokes her consideration of the mother as a rival. According to O'Neill: "one's inner self passes in a solitude hounded by the masks of one-self" (qtd. in S. Bloom 2007: 29). The masks of the inner self can be noticed through the heroine's lips of the tongue which show that Lavinia lies to herself and to Peter her fiancé. One of the masks is uncloaked when the heroine mentions the name of Adam instead of calling her fiancé. She screams: "take me Adam... She is brought back to herself. Why did I call you Adam" (O'Neill 2003: Act 3, 285). In his psychoanalytic explanation about these slips, Freud writes, "I have pointed out that these phenomena are not accidental, that they require more than physiological explanations, that they have a meaning and can be interpreted, and that one is justified in inferring from them the presence of restrained or repressed impulses and intentions" (Freud 2008: 47). We infer through Lavinia's slip of the tongue that she used to repress her emotions regarding Adam. "The return of the repressed" brings the sensual side to the surface and shows that Lavinia is resurrecting the ghosts of the past. She is not able to forget Adam even after contributing to the act of killing him. At the final scene, the Greek poetics of divine justice are replaced by self-punishment and Lavinia decides to punish herself for being the instigator of Adam's death and Christine's suicide. This substitution underlines the influence by "Greeks borrowing their myths, but without resort to Gods and with only a modern psychology of fate" (Brietzke 2001: 20). The postmodern revival of the Greek Electra or the replacement of public justice by personal justice demonstrates that interdisciplinarity does not cope with the Greek tradition of the past. Interdisciplinarity is based on the reexamination of the past.

THE POETICS OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

The Death of the Author

The interdisciplinary meeting between Greek mythology and psychoanalysis is mediated through an interdisciplinary junction between different literary genres. From a post-structural standpoint, the meeting between different disciplines is an instance of “The Death of the Author”. The post-structural critic Roland Barthes perceives the literary text as, “a multidimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original; the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture” (Barthes 1986: 53). Put differently, the figurative death of the author occurs when he mixes different disciplines and is held captive of cultural heritage. Harold Bloom argues that being attached to the literary heritage downplays the creative skills of the author who is in a constant state of dependence on his precursors. In *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom announces that the mission of “[the author is to] misinterpret the father, by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father” (Bloom 2003: 19). The process of rewriting unveils the desire of perpetuating the father and shows the interconnection between the past and the present.

Interdisciplinarity or the fusion between different disciplines results in the anxiety of the author. The influence by the father forms a kind of anxiety which originates in the vacillation between unearthing literary heritage and seeking for novelty. In this context, Bloom ponders: “how can they [authors] give pleasure, if no way they have received it! But how can they receive the deepest pleasure, the ecstasy of priority, of self-begetting, of an assured autonomy, if the way to the true subject and their own true self lies through the precursor ‘subject and his self ‘ (Bloom 1997: 116). Anxiety resides in finding a flexible correlation between authenticity and inheritance. This amalgamation bestows the author with an “ibidinal” identity which incorporates “Ego and the Ibid”. In his postmodern and psychoanalytic visions of authorship, the American scholar Eric Santner asserts that the identity of the author is essentially “ibidinal”. He writes, “[s]ymbolic identity must be thought as being ibidinal: a symbolic investiture not only endows the subject with new predicates ; it also calls forth a largely unconscious citation of the authority guaranteeing, legitimating one’s rightful enjoyment of those predicates” (Santner 1998: 50). In other words, the act of writing is based on the modernization of the old literary canon and the lack of originality. The absence of originality recalls the postmodern revision of Julia Kristeva’s semiotic analysis of intertextuality. The examined notion has been coined by Kristeva who developed a more strictly formalist theory of the irreducible plurality of texts within and behind any given text, thereby deflecting the critical focus away from the notion of the subject (the author) to the idea of textual productivity” (Hutcheon 2013: 26). Under the postmodern rubric of intertextuality, the task of the author lies in harmonizing multiple texts. In her *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon further expounds: “postmodern intertextuality [is] a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context” (Hutcheon 2000: 118). The dialogue between the past and the present evinces that intertextuality chimes with interdisciplinarity. The prefix “inter” entails the presence of a yoke linking between texts belonging to different disciplines.

The interplay between British romantic poetry and modern drama

The poetics of interdisciplinarity in *Mourning* dwell in the intertextual traces within the play. Intertextuality is achieved through straddling the borderlines between different literary genres and the incorporation of British romantic poetry within a modern American text. The fusion between poetry and drama is reinforced by the pictorial portrayal of Brant Adams as a Byronic hero: “[he] is dressed with an almost foppish extravagance, with touches of studied carelessness, as if a romantic Byronic appearance were the ideal in mind” (O’Neill 2003: Act 1, 40). Adams’ sartorial depiction shows that he shares the same romantic disposition of Lord Byron. What is specific about a Byronic hero is that “[he] is a boldly defiant but bitterly self-tormenting outcast, who spurns the social norms. He seems to suffer for some unnamed sin” (“Byronic 1998”). It is the case of Adam who is marginalized by the Mannons because of the unconventional marriage and the revolutionary love of his parents. Accordingly, he decides to go beyond all the social conventions by constructing his vital universe in the island. The experience of rehabilitation is inspired by Lord Byron’s quest for ethereal freedom. According to Lord Byron, the soul is supposed “to recreate itself under the influence of fresh experience” (qtd. in Michael O’Neill 2008: 37). Both the romantic poet and the free sailor hold the same Bohemian flair. The main objective behind the intertextual weaving of romantic poetry and modern drama is to present the Byronic features of Adam and maintain the blissful effect of the island. The relapse into the heritage of romantic poetry endows the sentimental characters with an outlet from the gigantic grip of materialism. In this context, Adam exclaims with appreciation: “The Blessed Isles, I’d call them! You can there forget all men’s dirty dreams of greed and power!” (O’Neill 2003: Act 1, 44). “The dirty dreams” allude to the deceptive nature of the American dream. Adam criticizes the prevailing sense of materialism and incriminates the ideology of individualism. His renunciation of urban life reflects O’Neill’s pessimistic outlook about modern life as a death-like life. Interdisciplinarity between romantic poetry and the dramatic text has a parodist function because the immersion into romanticism aims at unveiling the brutal socio-economic power. The island as a romantic place is an escape from a meaningless modern world which has lost its values.

American fiction and modern drama

Another instance of intertextuality is formed through the presence of Herman Melville’s *Typee*³. Orin is impressed by *Typee*’s sedative islands and captivated by the natural spontaneity of the natives. He divulges to his mother: “I read it and re-read it until finally those Islands come to mean everything that wasn’t war, everything that was peace and warmth and serenity” (O’Neill 2003: Act 1, 148). The union between fiction and drama as two different literary disciplines is meant to outline the adventure in the island and show that the longing for the isle connotes the return to the serenity in the womb. The association of the female body with the island is made conspicuous when Orin declares that the maternal corpus reminds him of the shape of the island. He addresses Christine: “the breaking of the waves was your voice. The sky was the same color as your eyes. The warm sand was like your skin. The whole island was you... You needn’t be provoked at being an

³ *Typee*: Melville Herman (2009), *Typee, A Peep at Polynesian Life*, The Floating Press Ltd, Auckland. There are similarities between *Typee*’s hero, Tommo and Orin Mannon. Both of them share the same experience of enjoying a pacific life in the Island.

island because this was the most beautiful island in the world-as beautiful as you, mother” (O’Neill 2003: Act 1, 48). Like the island which stands for a peaceful refuge against the greed of the Mannons and their desire to expand wealth, the maternal body represents a longing for a serene return to the womb to reach security far from modern corruption. The sea island has affinities with the life of the foetus inside the womb. Indeed, “the delicate and easily injured embryo swims and executes movements like a fish in water” (qtd. in Bishop 1986: 485). The free movements remind Orin of the pre-natal phase when he was blessed with peace and union with the mother. The idyllic image of the Southern island presents an area of convergence between Melville’s text and *Mourning*. In reality, “O’Neill has left aside the novelist’s suggestion that the South Sea paradise was already corrupted” (Maufort 1989: 92). Despite the divergence between the two texts, both Tom and Orin go back to the land with a new understanding about life. Tom becomes aware about the dichotomy between good and evil and Orin returns to the land with a new perception about guilt. Orin goes back to the land and kills himself after being haunted by the pangs of conscience. After the death of Christine, Orin punished himself by joining her. He believed that he will be able to return to the protective womb only by shutting himself in a tomb.

The Return of the Author

The return to the womb is coupled with a return of the author. Barthes vouches that “the subject apprehends himself elsewhere, and subjectivity can return at another space on the spiral: deconstructed, taken apart, shifted without on change” (Barthes 1975a: 168). In this respect, subjectivity occurs when O’Neill returns with a new perception of fate as a sardonic element as it necessitates struggle and leads to an entrapment in an absurd circle of defeat. All the Mannons could not help being manipulated by the upper hand of destiny and escape the doomed failure of their dynasty. What is specific about “O’Neill’s determinism [is that it] was in large part itself determined by the Greek tragedians, Freud, and early twentieth century American culture, all of which figured the family as a form of fate” (Robinson 1998: 78). For example, like Greek heroes Orin is doomed to death, but instead of being penalized by Apollo, the son could not cut the umbilical cords with the mother and his oedipal affiliation pushed him to be sepulchered next to her. Interdisciplinarity between the Greek perception of fate as determined by Gods and the postmodern assumptions about the role of biological forces in shaping the destiny of the postmodern Adam has raised an existential question about the dialectics of life and death and the struggle between free-will and predestination. In the closing scene, Lavinia attempts to solve this existential dilemma by confirming her mature vision of the psychology of predestination. She undertakes the responsibility of struggling against the inevitability of fate and decides to inhumate herself inside the temple of her predecessors: “I’m not going the way Mother and Orin went. That’s escaping punishment. And there’s no one left to punish me. I’m the last Mannon. I’ve got to punish myself! Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison!” (O’Neill 2003: Act 3, 287). At the end of her journey of interdisciplinarity, Lavinia discerns the inextricable fate of being a Mannon and the impossibility of eradicating her biological roots.

CONCLUSION: "A TODAY EMERGES FROM YESTERDAY"⁴

In conclusion, interdisciplinarity is based on the renunciation of fixity and the overlap between different disciplines. The O'Neillian text occurs in the third space of intersection between psychoanalysis, Greek mythology. The poetics of interdisciplinarity are achieved when the dramatist is trying to go beyond the divide through the act of writing. Intertextuality or the close-knit nexus between the Byronic adventure, Melville's *Typee* and *Mourning* has demonstrated that authorship is based on a re-structuring of the literary heritage. At the end of the interdisciplinary journey, "the author returns from the world of the text to life, the life returned to it is not the author's but our life. The author returns to us" (Gallop 2011: 39). The author returns after a deep introspection over the ontological experience of the postmodern man and his swinging between the socio-economic, psychological and biological forces. Through the postmodern rereading of the Greek *Electra* and *Oedipus*, O'Neill has proved that interdisciplinarity is necessary in a universe based on the constant shift of cultural identities. The machine of interdisciplinarity is put into motion to rescue the human being from temporal dislocation. It is based on a revision of the past and respecting the fluidity of time.

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⁴ Barthes 1975b: 10.

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