

From Hatred to Love: Development of a Literary Topos in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931)*

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ABSTRACT:

In the present article, the classical literary topos of 'love out of hatred' is introduced and its development in Eugene O'Neill's American tragedy Mourning Becomes Electra (1931) is studied. This topos comprises four stages: a declaration of hatred, quarrels between the parties, progressive emotional attachment and, finally, a confession of love.

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The topos is traced back to the story of Achilles and Briseis in book one of Homer's Iliad. While the storyline of O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra is expressly based on the classical Orestes-Electra narratives, the play creatively incorporates this classical topos. Moreover, the recontextualization of literary topoi is an unconscious literary process whereby a topos, as a living expression of human experience, continues to develop in modern literature. O'Neill's trilogy combines architextual and hypertextual relationships to classical texts through deliberately taking inspiration from Aeschylus's Oresteia and incorporating the syntax of 'love out of hatred' as a classical topos.

KEYWORDS: *Literary Topoi; Love and Hatred; Classical Reception; Mourning Becomes Electra; Eugene O'Neill.*

Del odio al amor: desarrollo de un tópico literario en *A Electra le sienta bien el luto* (1931) de Eugene O'Neill

RESUMEN:

*En el presente artículo se presenta el tópico literario clásico 'amor a partir del odio' y se estudia su desarrollo en la tragedia estadounidense *A Electra le sienta bien el luto* (1931) de Eugene O'Neill. Este tópico comprende cuatro fases, a saber, una declaración de odio, rencillas entre las partes, apego afectivo progresivo y, finalmente, una confesión de amor. La historia del 'amor a partir del odio' se remonta al episodio de Aquiles y Briseida en el libro 1 de la *Iliada* de Homero. Si bien la trama de *A Electra le sienta bien el luto* de O'Neill está deliberadamente basada en las narraciones clásicas de Orestes-Electra, la obra incorpora creativamente este tópico clásico. Además, la recontextualización de los tópicos literarios es un proceso literario inconsciente mediante el cual un tópico clásico, como elemento vivo de la experiencia humana, se actualiza en la cultura moderna. La trilogía de O'Neill establece simultáneamente relaciones hipertextuales y architextuales con los textos clásicos: reproduce expresamente el esquema narrativo de la *Orestíada* de Esquilo (nexo hipertextual) e incorpora la estructura del tópico clásico 'amor a partir del odio' (nexo architextual).*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Tópicos literarios; Amor y odio; Recepción clásica; *A Electra le sienta bien el luto*; Eugene O'Neill.*

1. Introduction

Eugene O'Neill is famous for revolutionizing American theater by transferring the subjects of Greek tragedies to "American settings" (Palmer, 2018, 9).¹ The trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) is considered by critics the most representative of this procedure, since it embraces many motifs and elements of classical Greek literature.² The play begins with Lavinia's realization of a possible affair between her mother, Christine, and Lavinia's own suitor, Adam Brant. The story continues with the crisis resulting from this relationship and the children's (Orin and Lavinia) revenge for the murder of their father by Christine and Adam. Since *Mourning Becomes Electra* is one of the most significant representations of O'Neill's interest in the classical tradition, it is adequate to assess how a classical literary topos has developed in this three-part play cycle.

Regarding the definition of topoi, we follow Laguna Mariscal's proposal.³ Accordingly, a topos is the expression of an idea of intermediate semantic concretion, framed in a particular structure and developed through literary history, normally arising from ancient literature (1999, 201; 2014, 27-30).

1 O'Neill is considered the first twentieth-century American dramatist to "embrace the tragic form as exemplified by the Greeks" and recreate "an American version of it for the twentieth century" (Kennedy, 2018, 15).

2 Many studies discuss the influence of classical sources on O'Neill's formation of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. See Moore (1934), Pratt (1956), Stafford (1962), Campnett (1973), Nugent (1988), Chirico (2000), Miller (2000), Dyson (2001), Bese (2001), Black (2004), Sanchez (2010), Weiner (2013), and Nazemi, Maleki and Laguna Mariscal (2022). Bigsby considers the play "a self-conscious effort to recreate a modern Greek tragedy" (2018, xviii).

3 In the last few decades, especially after the publication of Ernst Robert Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1953), there has been a tendency among literary scholars to clarify the definition of topoi, but the scope of some of these studies has remained theoretical and lacks applicability in practice. See, for example, Aguiar e Silva (1972), Leeman (1982), and Escobar (2000).

Although the term 'motif' is sometimes used interchangeably with *topos*, in this study we distinguish between the two terms. *Topoi* necessarily develop from the classical tradition and are endowed with a characteristic literary structure, which is not required in the constitution of a motif (Nazemi, Maleki and Laguna Mariscal, 2022, 196-197).⁴

Like Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, O'Neill's play adopts the form of a trilogy.⁵ The plot of the first part mainly follows that of *Oresteia*'s first play, *Agamemnon*. Ezra Mannon is murdered by his wife, Christine, who sees him as an obstacle to her love for Adam Brant. In the second play, Lavinia and Orin (the children of Ezra and Christine) decide to exact revenge for their father's murder by killing Adam Brant. This clearly echoes Orestes and Electra's attempt in *Oresteia*'s second play, *The Libation Bearers*, to murder Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus. As Nugent contends:

O'Neill designates that his work is to be understood in the context of Greek tragic theater and, most especially, as a modernization of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* [...] Each major narrative element of the Greek drama finds its counterpart here. The war hero (Agamemnon/Ezra Mannon), returning home, is treacherously murdered by his unfaithful wife (Clytemnestra/Christine) with the aid of her lover, also a dispossessed heir of the household (Aegisthus/Adam Brant). Subsequently, the children (Electra/Lavinia, Orestes/Orin) take

4 Nazemi, Maleki and Laguna Mariscal (2022, 196-197) discuss the differences between the terms *topos*, *motif*, *theme* and *leitmotiv*. Accordingly, a *theme* is a more general concept which includes *motifs*, *leitmotifs* and *topoi*. The main difference between a classical *topos* and a *motif* is the fact that a *topos* should necessarily originate from the classical tradition and constitute a specific structure.

5 Critics consider *Oresteia* the main source of influence on O'Neill's writing of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. See Asselineau (1958), Rutledge (1982, 143-144), Burian (1997, 254-256), Khare (1998, 339-374), Black (2004, 174-178), and Alexander (2007, 33-37).

their vengeance upon both lover and mother and, in the final play, must come to terms with their own part in the family's history of crime and punishment. In other details as well, from providing a narrative background of lust and betrayal in the previous generation to experimenting with the formal use of a "chorus" of townspeople to introduce the plays, O'Neill attempts to transfer Greek tragedy to the American stage. (1988, 38)

Numerous elements of the American play reveal the influence of Greek tragedy: the enactment of "the curse of the House of Atreus" (Weiner, 2013, 45), the power of fate in the life of the characters (45)⁶, the repetitive use of "mask similes" (48)⁷ or even the names of the characters, which are derived "from their etymological meanings"⁸ (49).

Admittedly, the details of the second and third plays of *Mourning Becomes Electra* are less dependent on Aeschylus's trilogy,⁹ even if they incorporate other classical motifs or elements. For example, the murder of Adam Brant causes Christine's suicide in the second play (*The Hunted*) as well as Orin's feeling of guilt¹⁰

6 Alexander deems this tragedy "a modern equivalent for the Greek idea of fate" (1953, 923). Chirico, however, believes that O'Neill intended to change Aeschylus's concept of tragedy by modifying "the representation of fate" (2000, 91). See also Stafford (1962, 550) and Nugent (1988, 38).

7 Nugent argues that, for O'Neill, masks are a theatrical means to direct "the audience's attention inward, to the characters' interior states" (1988, 40).

8 Weiner shows us that O'Neill's characters have similar names to their classical counterparts: "Christine/Clytemnestra, Adam/Aegisthus, Orin/Orestes, Abe/Atreus, Hazel/Hermione, and Peter/Pylades" (2013, 49).

9 For an analysis of the differences in the characterization of the two tragedies see Black (2004, 176) as well as Frenz and Mueller (1966, 86). Weiner (2013) interprets *Mourning Becomes Electra* from a different perspective by examining the traces of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

10 'Madness for guilt and remorse' is another classical topos that is developed in O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*. See Nazemi, Maleki and Laguna Mariscal (2022).

and his consequent suicide¹¹ in the third play (*The Haunted*), which do not correspond to what happens in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. In this study, we examine the development of the classical topos of 'love out of hatred' in O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* to show that this trilogy incorporates other classical subtexts.

2. Love out of hatred

In the first part of the tragedy, after following Christine secretly, Lavinia finds out about a relationship between her mother and Adam Brant. However, as she discusses her speculations with Seth, an old gardener who has lived his entire life in Mannon's house and plays the role of the choral character in the play,¹² she also discovers that this relationship is not based on pure love but was motivated by revenge and hatred. The transformation of hatred into love is a literary topos that originated in the classical tradition and has developed into modern culture. This topos consists of four formal stages:

1. The parties express hatred, revenge, or anger over an act of the other person.
2. They struggle/argue for a period of time, as a result of which they interact more.
3. Gradually, they feel emotionally attached.
4. They finally declare their love to each other.

At the heart of this literary topos lies the amalgamation of different senses and "a dilemma of sensation, action or value" (Carson, 1986, 9). A broader term used to describe this coincidence

¹¹ Chirico argues that Orin's suicide is a means by which O'Neill tried to rewrite Aeschylus's trilogy. To achieve this, "he increased the number of deaths, and he transformed them from murders to suicides" (2000, 87-88).

¹² Seth plays the role of the choral character in O'Neill's trilogy by observing the story closely, commenting on the events and giving important news and information (Abrams and Harpham, 2015, 52).

of feeling of love and hatred is 'bittersweet love', which includes different categorizations and representations.¹³ Poem 85 by Catullus is considered a good example in ancient Roman poetry; the speaker talks about a paradoxical feeling of love and resentment:

Odi et amo. quare id faciam fortasse requiris:
nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior. (*Carmina*, poem 85)

I hate and I love. Why I do this, perhaps you ask. I know not, but I feel it happening and I am tortured. (Translated by E. T. Merrill)

One can also trace the history of 'love out of hatred' back to Homer's *Iliad*. According to this epic poem, Briseis, the daughter of the King of Pedasos, is only a war prize and a means for Agamemnon to threaten Achilles. Agamemnon, after being deprived of his war booty (Chryseis), seeks revenge on Achilles: "I will myself come to your tent and take the fair-cheeked Briseis, your prize, so that you will understand" (*Iliad*, 1.182-185). Achilles murdered Briseis's husband and brothers and is obviously an enemy to her family:

for me doth evil ever follow hard on evil. My husband, unto whom my father and queenly mother gave me, I beheld mangled with the sharp bronze before our city, and my three brethren whom mine own mother bare, brethren beloved, all these met their day of doom (19.291-295).

Nonetheless, their enmity turns into love and passion. Achilles, who is hard and cruel to Briseis's family, gives her his heart. He prefers her to all the other girls offered to him. As Ajax

13 For the definitions and categorizations of the motif of 'bittersweet love' see Librán Moreno (2011a, 59-60) and Carson (1986, 3-6). Librán Moreno cites a passage from Ovid's *Amores* II to demonstrate "the closeness of love and hate" (2011b, 314).

states, "But as for thee, the gods have put in thy breast a heart that is obdurate and evil by reason of one only girl; whereas we now offer thee seven, far the best that there be, and many other gifts besides" (9.636-640). In book 9, Achilles even calls her his "wife" and "the darling" of his "heart" (9.335-340) and sleeps with her in the last book of *Iliad*: "Achilles slept in the innermost part of the well-built hut, and by his side lay fair-cheeked Briseis" (24.675-676). Achilles's love for Briseis is a significant example of the transformation of hatred into love in classical literature.¹⁴

In *Heroides*, Ovid creatively changes the point of view of the story and composes an epistolary love poem, addressed to Achilles by Briseis. She begins by complaining about the loss of her family members and the cruelties of the war, but continues to express her deep emotional attachment to Achilles, despite all the reasons she has to despise him:

I who was part of my father's land
 have seen my dearest relative lying dead:
 the sons of my mother, three brothers,
 comrades in life, are today comrades in death;
 my husband writhed in the bloody dirt,
 his body heaving as he lay on the ground.
 Though I lost so many dear to me
 my loss was eased by loving you as brother,
 as my husband, and as my master. ("Briseis to Achilles", 59-67)

This change of feeling became a recurring topos in the development of literary history. To give a few examples, we could refer to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), where Elizabeth's hatred towards Mr. Darcy for the lack of true judgment about his character and intentions turns into passionate love at the end of the story (see Wilson, 1985, 56). A

¹⁴ For an analysis of the story of Achilles and Briseis, see March (2001, 23-25; 169-170).

similar evolution features in *Becoming Jane* (2007), a movie based on Austen's personal life, in which Jane initially hates Thomas Lefroy for his criticism of her writings; however, as they develop the connections and interactions with each other, her resentment transforms into love. Among other significant literary examples, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Lucy Maud Montgomery's famous novel *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) come to mind, since all of them deal with this topos extensively, although a detailed analysis of these works falls beyond the scope of this study.

3. Hatred to love in O'Neill's plays

Mourning Becomes Electra was not the first of O'Neill's plays in which the literary topos of 'love out of hatred' appeared. In *Anna Christie* (1921), a play awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama, Anna's hatred towards men in general and Mat in particular turns into passionate love and ends with marriage. Anna's experience of child abuse and prostitution makes her reject Mat's advances, but, as they struggle, she grows more interested in him and realizes that he is the man of her life. The play ends happily with Anna and Matt's decision to marry.

A variant of the same topos appears in *Desire Under the Elms* (1924). Eben meets Abbie, his father's new wife. He shows resentment ("Yew kin go t' the devil!" (1988a, I.iv.338)) because he believes that his father's farm belonged to his mother and that he (Eben) is the only person who deserves to inherit it. When Abbie tries to build a peaceful relationship with him, he refuses and insults her: "ye durned old witch! I hate ye!" (I.iv.339). Abbie makes a lot of efforts to seduce Eben but fails every time. Abbie then tries to exact revenge on him for his rejection by accusing him in front of Ephraim (her husband and Eben's father) of having shown lust to her (II.i.345).¹⁵ However,

¹⁵ The story of the love of Abbie for her son-in-law, his negligence and her revenge could be considered a permutation of a topos labelled 'the scheme of

finally, after a period of struggles, Eben develops passion and declares his love, and they consummate it (II.ii.351): “An’ I love yew, Abbie! (II.iv.355). This triggers the fatal ending of their story when both are arrested by the sheriff (III.iv.377-378).

Interestingly, in all these examples, the characters have more objective reasons to hate than to love. Arguably in most stories dealing with this topos, the characters’ final love and reunion does not make sense in terms of reason and morality. For example, as mentioned earlier, Achilles falls in love with his enemy and Briseis loves the murderer of her relatives¹⁶. Betraying his father’s trust, Eben also consummates his relationship with Abbie, who is his mother-in-law and a rival for the possession of the farm. As a matter of fact, madness and lack of reason have traditionally been considered inherent in love (Thornton, 1997, 17-23; Moreno Soldevila, 2011).

The same cycle happens in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. O’Neill shows that Christine and Adam’s love originated in anger and resentment. Adam even confesses to Christine that his love was initiated by a feeling of revenge towards her husband:

I remember that night we were introduced and I heard the name Mrs. Ezra Mannon! By God, how I hated you then for being this! I thought, by God, I’ll take her from him and that’ll be part of my revenge! And out of that hatred my love came! It’s damned queer, isn’t it? (O’Neill, 1988b, 1.II.922).

Potiphar’s wife’, which originates in the Egyptian Tale of Two Brothers and the *Book of Genesis*, and develops in Homer’s *Iliad*, Euripides’s *Hippolytus*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Book XV), and Seneca’s *Phaedra*. See Maleki, Nazemi, and Laguna Mariscal (2020, 118-129). For an analysis of the influence of classical literature on the formation of *Desire Under the Elms*, see Nazemi and Laguna Mariscal (2022).

¹⁶ Homer highlights the love of Achilles in the *Iliad*, whereas Ovid focuses on Briseis’s feeling for Achilles in *Heroides*. Nevertheless, in both narratives, the topos of ‘love out of hatred’ appears, since the two stories present the transformation of hatred into love in a situation where resentment would make more sense.

The reason lying behind this hatred is the fact that Adam turns out to be the son of David, Ezra Mannon's uncle.¹⁷ Years earlier, David fell in love with "a nurse girl" called Marie Brantome and had to marry her to protect his honor when she got pregnant. When this happened, Ezra's father (Abel Mannon) expelled the couple from the house and rebuilt it (1.I.906).

In O'Neill's trilogy two explanations for this dismissal are adduced: Lavinia believes that Abe Mannon expelled them from the house to preserve the family's honor ("because he wouldn't live where his brother had disgraced the family", 1.I.906); Adam, however, states that Abe Mannon was also in love with Marie, so their dismissal was a revenge and an expression of rage and jealousy (1.I.911). Indeed, O'Neill's story is set in a Puritan context where the condemnation of those who transgress the codes of morality is inevitable. As Alexander maintains,

O'Neill's house of Atreus is a Puritan house with a Puritan heritage; much of the family doom proceeds directly from this fact. The original curse on the family starts with the love of the two Puritan brothers for the Canuck nurse girl, Marie Brantome. The destructive effects of this love are generated largely from the family Puritanism. The Puritan Atreus, Abe Mannon, clothes his jealousy in a moral condemnation and expels his brother David from the family. Although David is loved by Marie, he cannot live happily with her, but, under his Puritan sense of shame, becomes alcoholic and finally kills himself. In the next generation, Abe Mannon's Puritan son Ezra ignores Marie Brantome's dying plea for help, despite his childhood love for her, because he assumes that her wickedness excludes her from charity. Thus O'Neill's Aegisthus, Adam Brant, is made ready for his part in the murder of Agamemnon by his hatred for the Puritan Mannons, who have destroyed his mother. (1953, 925)

17 This is another reference to Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, since, according to the tragedy, Aegisthus, Clytemnestra's lover, is also Agamemnon's cousin and bears "strong facial resemblance to Agamemnon and Orestes." (Alexander, 1953, 923).

All in all, Adam Brant was brought up in poverty, and after the death of his mother he decided to take revenge on Ezra, Abbe Mannon's son, who had neglected him and his mother.

I found out that when she'd been laid up, not able to work, not knowing where to reach me, she'd sunk her last shred of pride and written to your father asking for a loan. He never answered her. And I came too late. She died in my arms. (*with vindictive passion*) He could have saved her--and he deliberately let her die! He's as guilty of murder as anyone he ever sent to the rope when he was a judge! (1.I.912).

Adam meets Christine, Ezra's wife. He decides to retaliate against Ezra by possessing his wife, but finally falls in love with her: "I thought, by God, I'll take her from him and that'll be part of my revenge! And out of that hatred my love came!" (1.II.922). To accomplish his love and marry Christine, he decides to help her murder Ezra, but finally, before they can elope¹⁸, he is shot by Orin, Christine's son, "holding in a savage, revengeful rage" (2.IV.990). Similarly, Orestes kills his mother's lover in Aeschylus's *The Libation Bearers*, with the difference that Orestes murders both his mother and her lover, while Orin, the modern counterpart, takes revenge on Adam Brant by murdering him and means to only punish his mother by killing the lover. In other words, Orin never wishes to murder his mother, and it is the death of the beloved that causes Christine's suicide. Consequently, while Orestes is involved in a direct act of matricide, Orin indirectly contributes to Christine's death.

As we can see, the play clearly follows the formal stages of the topos of 'love out of hatred'. Adam Brant initially despises Ezra and his family. He decides to begin an affair with Christine in order to retaliate against Ezra, but, as he interacts with her, a

¹⁸ Adam Brant is killed the night he plans an elopement with Christine (O'Neill, 1988b, 2.IV.990-995).

feeling of mutual love is born. He confesses his love and tries to find a way to elope with her but fails to do so. One could compare this story to that of Achilles and Briseis because both narratives involve married women whose love is immoral in nature. Both stories also emphasize the appealing physical appearance of the female characters who are the objects of love¹⁹: the “fair-cheeked Briseis” (*The Iliad*, 24.676) and “striking-looking” Christine (O’Neill, 1988b, I.I.896). Both Achilles and Adam have initial reasons to despise their beloved: Achilles in a war context and Adam in a family setting. For Adam, Christine is a means to revenge, and, likewise, Briseis is Achilles’s tool against Agamemnon. Both Achilles and Adam contribute to the death of their beloved’s relatives: Achilles kills Briseis’s husband and Brant cooperates with Christine to commit mariticide. There is a clear difference, since Christine, the modern character, plays the key role in the murder.²⁰ This could be interpreted as an example of female empowerment, as the female character plays a more active role in determining her fate. Nevertheless, fatalism always pervades O’Neill’s tragedies: “the characters strive to achieve what they want, but always fail” (Nazemi and Laguna Mariscal, 2022).

Finally, a question arises: does O’Neill’s recontextualization of the *Oresteia* work at the same level as his incorporation of the classical topos ‘love out of hatred’? Certainly not. The difference between these two modalities of reception corresponds to two of the intertextual relationships distinguished by Gerard Genette (1997): ‘hypertextuality’ in the first case, and ‘architextuality’ in the second. O’Neill had *Oresteia* in mind when writing *Mourning Becomes Electra*; he himself admits this and his

19 Dué argues that in the *Iliad*, “Briseis, Helen, Andromache, and Hecuba” are represented “as both objects of love and singers of lament” (2002, 5). Ovid offers a similar representation of Briseis in *Heroides*.

20 Christine asks Brant to provide her with poison for murdering Ezra (O’Neill, 1988b, 1.II.925).

biographers confirm it by tracing his readings before and during the process of writing the play (see Black, 2004, 168-172). Thus, he intended to create an explicit connection between his work and that of Aeschylus. This procedure, called hypertextuality by Genette, is defined as “the literature in the second degree” or “the superimposition of a later text on an earlier one” (1997, xix). On the other hand, the development of the ‘love out of hatred’ topos links O’Neill’s text to a broader kind of discourse (genre). This is what Genette calls ‘architextuality’, defined as “the relationship of inclusion linking each text to the various kinds of discourse of which it is a representative” (xix; see also Nazemi, 2022, 177). O’Neill’s play, as one permutation of the literary topos of ‘love out of hatred’, fits into this category, since it establishes an architextual relationship with other textual representations of this topos, such as the story of Achilles and Briseis.

4. Conclusions

The main objective of the present study was to introduce the literary topos of ‘love out of hatred’ and explore its treatment in Eugene O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). This topos encompasses four structural stages, including an expression of hatred or resentment, struggles between the parties, progressive emotional attachment and, finally, a declaration of love. ‘Love out of hatred’ is a recurrent literary motif; however, its origin can be traced back to the classical literature such as the story of Achilles and Briseis in Homer’s *Iliad* or Ovid’s *Heroides*. Finally, it was concluded that O’Neill’s trilogy establishes a hypertextual relationship with Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* for its deliberate imitation and an architextual connection to the other representations of the topos of ‘love out of hatred’. The presence of these topoi does not end with O’Neill’s tragedies, nor is it limited to literature. Literary topoi, as living elements of human experience, continue to develop through the history of literature and culture as artistic representations of life.

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