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LOVE'S FATAL ECHO: REVISITING DIDO AND PHAEDRA IN *MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA*

El eco fatal del amor: revisitando Dido y Fedra en Mourning becomes Electra

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Abstract: The classical narrative motif of suicide for love follows a four-stage process: intense affection, loss, despair, and ultimately, death. This paper examines the treatment of this motif in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, offering a broader perspective on its literary lineage, from Euripides' *Hippolytus* to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as *The Aeneid* by Virgil, *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, and Seneca's *Phaedra*. While scholars frequently highlight O'Neill's indebtedness to Aeschylus's *Oresteia* in the development of his trilogy, this study contends that his portrayal of love-driven suicide aligns more closely with other classical narratives, particularly those of Phaedra and Dido.

Keywords: Suicide for Love; Narrative Motif; Classical Literature; Eugene O'Neill.

Resumen: El motivo narrativo clásico del suicidio por amor sigue un proceso de cuatro etapas: afecto intenso, pérdida, desesperación y, finalmente, muerte. Este artículo examina el tratamiento de este motivo en *Mourning Becomes Electra*, de Eugene O'Neill, y ofrece una perspectiva más amplia

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sobre su linaje literario, desde *Hipólito*, de Eurípides, hasta *Romeo y Julieta*, de Shakespeare, pasando por la *Eneida*, de Virgilio, las *Metamorfosis*, de Ovidio, y *Fedra*, de Séneca. Aunque los estudiosos suelen destacar la influencia de la *Orestíada* de Esquilo en el desarrollo de la trilogía de O'Neill, este estudio sostiene que su representación del suicidio por amor se alinea más estrechamente con otras narrativas clásicas, en particular las de Fedra y Dido.

Palabras clave: Suicidio por amor; motivo narrativo; Literatura clásica, Eugene O'Neill.

1. Introduction[2]

The classical narrative motif of suicide for love (*suicidium amoris*) encompasses the deliberate act of ending one's life out of affection, portraying it as the ultimate remedy (*remedium amoris*) for unrequited love (*amor ingratus*) or as the primary means of redeeming lost honor (Librán Moreno, 2011b, p. 406.). This conceptual framework strikes a balance between specificity and inclusivity, articulating elements such as declarations of love, demonstrations of devotion, rejection, loss of reputation, and the pursuit of vengeance.[3]

Suicide for love typically manifests itself in tragic narratives, both in prose and verse, featuring poignant depictions of passion, despair, shame, frustration, and ultimately, death. Furthermore, it often unfolds in four distinct stages:

1. The protagonist experiences intense and passionate love.
2. The love remains unfulfilled, or the beloved is lost.
3. The protagonist undergoes a period of shock, depression, anger and frustration.
4. He/she resolves to commit suicide.

This classical narrative motif boasts a substantial literary lineage, spanning from Euripides's *Hippolytus*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* and Seneca's *Phaedra* to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, albeit there are countless examples that address this motif. The present study aims to examine Eugene O'Neill's *Morning Becomes Electra* and explore how the classical motif of suicide for love has been developed within the American play.

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[3] For a history and different categorizations of suicide for love in literature, see González de Mendoza Mera (1990, pp. 215-218), Librán Moreno (2011b, pp. 406-408), Navarro Antolín (1997, p. 5) and Laguna Mariscal (2014, p. 13).

2. Orin and Christine: Suicides Born of Lost Love and Revenge

Mourning Becomes Electra, written by Eugene O'Neill in 1931, stands as an American trilogy delving into the tumultuous conflicts among the members of the Mannon family. O'Neill's masterful drama garnered acclaim from critics and contributed to his receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1936 (Diggins, 2007, p. 26). Scholars have extensively explored the impact of classical Greek tragedies on O'Neill's literary oeuvre, with *Mourning Becomes Electra* drawing particular attention for its incorporation of classical themes.[4] Notably, this play not only adopts the name of a classical figure in its title but also adheres to the structural framework of Greek tragedies such as Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and Sophocles's *Electra*.[5] As Berlin observes,

> In narrative line O'Neill's trilogy follows Aeschylus' *Oresteia* rather closely in the first part (*The Homecoming*), somewhat closely in the second part (*The Hunted*), rarely in the third part (*The Haunted*). In *The Homecoming* the Mannon family (House of Atreus) awaits the arrival of Ezra Mannon (Agamemnon) from the Civil War (Trojan War)[6] which has just concluded. His wife Christine (Clytemnestra) has been having an affair with Adam Brant (Aegisthus), which daughter Lavinia (Electra), who also loves Adam, has discovered (1982, p. 108).

In doing so, O'Neill endeavors to creatively reframe the actions of the characters from classical tragedies within an American context (Robinson, 1998, p. 78; Berlin, 1982, p. 111).

The themes of death and suicide hold significant relevance in O'Neill's plays as they often mirror his own life experiences. O'Neill himself made a suicide attempt in 1912 and grappled with the tragic loss of friends and family members, including his son who took his own life in 1950.[7] Within his play cycle, there are two instances of suicide: those of Christine Mannon and her son, Orin. Chirico suggests that one of O'Neill's deviations from Aeschylus's plays was boosting the

[4] For discussions about the influence of classical Greek literature on O'Neill's literary trajectory, consult Berlin (1982, pp. 108-117), Tornqvist (1998, pp. 19-23), Black (2004, pp. 170-172; 1998, p. 12), and Alexander (2007, p. 32). For a review of the available scientific literature, see Nazemi (2024).

[5] Khare illustrates how O'Neill endeavors to "explicate his own vision by re-creating his form" based on Aeschylus's play (1998, p. 347). For a comprehensive comparison between the two works, consult Pratt (1956, pp. 165-167), Nugent (1988, p. 38), Burian (1997, pp. 254-256), Khare (1998, pp. 339-374), Fischer-Lichte (2004, pp. 300-306), and Alexander (2007, pp. 31-58). Additionally, refer to Diggins (2007, pp. 211-221), Raleigh (1989, p. 67), Chirico (2000, pp. 84-89) and Liapis (2023, pp. 479-485). For studies highlighting the influence of Sophocles's *Electra*, see Miller (2000, p. 105), Claybourne (2005, p. 472), and Weiner (2013, p. 42).

[6] Wikander acknowledges that the play draws parallels between the post-American Civil War era and "the aftermath of Troy" (1998, p. 228).

[7] For example, Jimmy, a friend of O'Neill's, supported him during his suicide attempt but tragically succumbed to suicide himself: Black (1998, p. 14 and p. 9). See also Dowling (2009, p. 7).

death toll and transforming some deaths into suicides (Chirico, 2000, pp. 87-88). While the general influence of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and *Electra* on *Mourning becomes Electra*, in matters of plot, is obvious, the theme of suicide cannot be directly traced back to those Greek dramas.

In the first play, *Homecoming*, the crisis between Christine, the middle-aged wife of Ezra Mannon, and Lavinia, her daughter, erupts as they return separately from a trip to New York. Lavinia's suspicion of an affair between her mother and Adam Brant, her own suitor, prompts her to spy on Christine secretly. Initially denying Lavinia's accusations, Christine eventually confesses the truth with defiant resignation, stating, "Very well! I love Adam Brant. What are you going to do?". This revelation exposes Christine's complex motivations, rooted in her resentment towards her husband ("You would understand if you were the wife of a man you hated") (O'Neill, 1988, 1.2.916.), and her profound loneliness exacerbated by her son's departure to serve as a soldier in the civil war: "I never would have fallen in love with Adam if I'd had Orin with me. When he had gone there was nothing left-but hate and a desire to be revenged- and a longing for love! And it was then that I met Adam. I saw he loved me" (1.2.917). Therefore, the intertwining themes of familial conflict, desire, and betrayal set the stage for the ensuing tragedy.

The playwright provides vivid descriptions of Christine and Adam's passionate affair and their solemn vow to remain bound together eternally (1.2.922-926).[8] Yet, amidst the fervor of their love, there lurks a darker truth: Adam's initial feelings for Christine were steeped in hatred and a desire for vengeance upon the Mannon family: "I swore on my mother's body I'd revenge her death on him [Ezra]" (1.1.912).[9] He adds:

> BRANT – 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? (1.2.922)

This revelation adds a layer of complexity to their relationship, casting shadows on the sincerity of Adam's affection and the depth of their connection. Christine's love for Brant, however, was subconsciously kindled as she began to notice striking resemblances between him and her son, Orin, whom she cherished deeply (1.2.921).

[8] When Brant is about to come, Christine adorns the house with flowers, feeling a surge of energy (O'Neill, 1988, 1.1.904).

[9] For an analysis of the transformation of hatred to love in *Mourning Becomes Electra* see Nazemi and Laguna Mariscal (2022, pp. 407-412).

This uncanny likeness excited dormant emotions within her, further complicating the intricate web of emotions surrounding her relationship with Brant.

In the unfolding narrative, Christine, aided by Adam Brant, perpetrates the murder of her husband, mirroring the actions of Clytemnestra (who killed her husband Agamemnon with the help of her paramour Aegisthus), all in a bid to eliminate the barriers to her love for Adam and facilitate their escape together. However, Orin's return from the war prompts Lavinia to reveal the details of the affair, igniting his intense rage (2.4.990), and ultimately driving him to seek vengeance by murdering Brant (2.4.994-995).[10] In the immediate aftermath of the murder, Orin initially takes pride in his actions. However, his perception shifts as he sees his own reflection in Brant's features, foreshadowing the tragic fate that awaits him.

> ORIN – Do you remember me telling you how the faces of the men I killed came back and changed to Father's face and finally became my own? (He smiles grimly.) He looks like me, too! Maybe I've committed suicide! (2.4.996)

This moment serves as a foreshadowing of the inexorable chain of events finally leading to Orin's own demise.

The following day, Lavinia and Orin arrive back home, breaking the news to Christine (2.5.1000). Overwhelmed by the sudden revelation, Christine's world shatters as she steps into the confines of her home. A tense silence hangs in the air, fraught with anticipation, until the abrupt sound of a gunshot pierces through the stillness (2.5.1001-1002). Here, the American playwright "replaces the murder of Clytemnestra with the suicide of Christine" (Frenz and Mueller, 1966, p. 97). This suicide mirrors the tragic endings of literary figures like Dido or Romeo and Juliet, where love's absence becomes unbearable, rendering life devoid of meaning. Christine's poignant last utterance, "live" (O'Neill, 1988, 2.5.1001), underscores her inability to fathom existence without her beloved. As articulated by Librán Moreno, the absence of hope in love instigates a repulsion towards the present and a despondency towards the future (Librán Moreno, 2011b, p. 406). Thus, the cessation of suffering necessitates the elimination of its root cause – existence itself.

Similarly, in the fourth book of *Aeneid*, Virgil masterfully unfolds the poignant love affair between Aeneas and Dido. Initially, Dido finds herself consumed by the flames of passion:[11] *At regina gravi iamdudum saucia cura / volnus alit venis,*

[10] For the motif of murder for love in this trilogy see Nazemi (2022, pp. 187-188).

[11] Interestingly, both Dido and Phaedra fell in love with men for their beauty, gallantry, and dedication to the hunt, as they were individuals committed to a pursuit that consumed their entire lives (Harto Trujillo, 1995, p. 222).

et caeco carpitur igni (Verg., *A*. 4.1-2).[12] Despite this fervor, she restrains herself, bound by the solemn oath she made after the death of her beloved husband, Sychaeus, swearing off love and marriage forever. However, fate, orchestrated by the cunning machinations of Juno and Venus, intervenes, bringing Aeneas and Dido together into a union of love that defies societal norms, though lacking in official sanction. Yet, Aeneas is abruptly reminded of his destiny by the messenger of the gods, Mercury, compelling him to depart for Italy. Faced with the harsh reality of Aeneas's departure, Dido experiences a tumult of emotions — shock, frustration, and seething anger.

Following Aeneas's obligation to heed the call of duty and abandon Dido, the Queen is left shattered and betrayed. In a moment of deep sadness, she comes up with a plan to ease her pain. Feigning indifference to her attendants, she announces her intention to cremate the possessions of Aeneas, a symbolic act intended to purge herself of his memory and the agony of his departure. This scene encapsulates the complex interplay of love, duty, and destiny in the *Aeneid*, illustrating how passion can become both a potent elixir and a bitter remedy for the wounds of abandonment:

> Testor, cara, deos et te, germana, tuumque
> dulce caput, magicas invitam accingier artes.
> Tu secreta pyram tecto interiore sub auras
> erige, et arma viri, thalamo quae fixa reliquit
> impius, exuviasque omnis, lectumque iugalem,
> quo perii, superimponas: abolere nefandi
> cuncta viri monumenta iuvat, monstratque sacerdos." (Verg., *A*. 4. 492-498)

Believing her to be sincere, the servants unwittingly assist her, unaware of her true intention to prepare her own deathbed. As the story reaches its conclusion, overwhelmed by her unrequited love and unable to envision a life without her beloved, she envisages suicide as the sole remedy (Navarro Antolín, 1997, p. 44; Librán Moreno, 2011b, p. 406), as well as a form of retribution for his abandonment (Navarro Antolín, 1997, p. 43)[13]. Having climbed onto the pyre, she attempts to end

[12] Pyy argues that the narrative of Dido's love extends beyond mere romance, encompassing overlooked political dimensions. She highlights a pivotal moment in Book 4, where Dido expresses regret over not bearing a child with Aeneas (2021, pp. 47-48). As such, in the event that Dido bore a potential child with Aeneas, her authority could potentially be preserved following his departure. Hill also believes that Dido's suicide was a strategy to induce shame in Aeneas and to reaffirm her position "as a moral witness within her community" (2004, p. 159).

[13] Librán Moreno characterizes this act as a form of suicide intertwined with the desire for the departed beloved to experience remorse (2011b, p. 408). In Ovid's *Heroides*, literary figures such as Phillies, Briseida, and Deyanira have similarly taken their own lives for this purpose (Navarro Antolín, 1997, p. 44). See also Fabre-Serris (2023,

her life with Aeneas's sword, casting herself into the flames intended for burning his possessions, thus bringing her life to an end: *Sic ait, et dextra crinem secat: omnis et una / dilapsus calor, atque in ventos vita recessit* (Verg., *A*. 4. 704-705).[14] Dido's decision to end her life is a consequence of her untamed passion and a rebellious response to the destiny that has shattered her.

Another compelling literary portrayal of suicide driven by love is the profound connection between partners, wherein one voluntarily follows the other in death, often motivated by the expectation of reunion in the afterlife (Librán Moreno, 2011b, p. 407). Shakespeare's tale of Romeo and Juliet exemplifies this narrative motif, believed by critics to have been inspired by Ovid's narrative of Pyramus and Thisbe in *Metamorphoses* (See Rudd, 1979, p. 185; Stack and Bowman, 2011, p. 124; Fabre-Serris, 2023, pp. 98-102).[15] According to the legend, Pyramus and Thisbe are deeply in love, but their families oppose their union. They arrange a secret meeting close to Ninus's tomb. Initially, Thisbe arrives after deceiving her parents. However, while waiting, she encounters a lioness that threatens her. Fleeing in fear, she leaves behind her blood-stained veil. Pyramus, upon discovering the veil, mistakenly believes Thisbe to have been murdered by the beast and resolves to take his own life in despair:

> persequar exstinctum letique miserrima dicar
> causa comesque tui; quique a me morte revelli
> heu sola poteras, poteris nec morte revelli.
> Hoc tamen amborum verbis estote rogati,
> o multum miseri meus illiusque parentes,

pp. 90-107). Garrison, in his analysis, includes Phaedra's suicide within this thematic category (1995, pp. 65-67). Matos (2020, p. 194) explores a form of suicide depicted in literature, often perceived by lovers as heroic, in which individuals find solace in the prospect of dying contentedly if their beloved responds with compassion upon their demise—whether through acknowledgment, inducing guilt or remorse for not reciprocating, or prompting a last-minute reciprocation that, if timely, could lead to a blissful death. See also Navarro Antolín (1997, p. 10).

[14] Moorton highlights studies suggesting that Virgil employs a "destructive imagery", such as depictions of fire and sword, to symbolize Dido's tragic love and demise. He posits a reciprocal relationship between love and death, where "the imagery of death is predicated of Dido's love, and then, conversely, the imagery of love is predicated of Dido's death" (1990, p. 153). For additional interpretations of Dido's love and death narrative, consult the works of Newton (1957), Anderson (1973), Monti (1981), Cairns (1989, pp. 129-150), Farron (1993, p. 22), Otis (1995), Hill (2004, pp. 105-120), Gransden and Harrison (2004, pp. 41-44), Fratantuono (2007), Bruce (2013, pp. 61-82), and Pyy (2021).

[15] Laguna Mariscal examines two additional examples of this type of love-induced suicide: 1. The first part of Virgil's *Eclogue 8*, where Pastor Damon, overwhelmed by his unrequited love for Nisa, chooses suicide. 2. The myth of Alcestis and Admetus, wherein the lover cannot continue living without the deceased beloved (2014, p. 13). In general terms, the act of love-induced suicide is something that shepherds in bucolic literature resort to when they feel overwhelmed by the rejection or indifference of their beloved (see Benavente Barreda, 1991, pp. 20-21 and Cristóbal López, 1996, p. 201 and p. 217). Virgil belongs to this genre.

ut quos certus amor, quos hora novissima iunxit,
conponi tumulo non invideatis eodem; (Ov., *Met*. 4.151-157)

Thisbe returns, eager to reunite with her beloved, only to discover his wounded body. Overwhelmed by shock and grief, she resolves to end her own life in order to be reunited with her beloved:

at tu quae ramis arbor miserabile corpus
nunc tegis unius, mox es tectura duorum,
signa tene caedis pullosque et luctibus aptos
semper habe fetus, gemini monimenta cruoris."
Dixit, et aptato pectus mucrone sub imum
incubuit ferro, quod adhuc a caede tepebat.
Vota tamen tetigere deos, tetigere parentes:
nam color in pomo est, ubi permaturuit, ater,
quodque rogis superest, una requiescit in urna." (Ov., *Met*. 4.158-166)

In the culmination of the tale, Thisbe, with determination, positions the blade beneath her breast, then falls upon it. The sword, still warm with his crimson blood, seals her fate as she succumbs to death.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* follows a parallel storyline. In general terms, Shakespeare's works are renowned for their exploration of themes surrounding mortality and self-inflicted death (Hanford, 1912; Kitkland, 1999; Bennett, 2017, p. 6). Within his plays, characters grapple with the profound complexities of mortality, contemplating the significance of life and the inevitability of death. Through richly layered narratives, Shakespeare delves into the psychological depths of characters facing existential dilemmas, often culminating in profound moments of self-destruction or contemplation of suicide.

Romeo and Juliet unfolds in Italy, commencing with Count Paris's courtship of Juliet and Romeo's despondency over his unrequited affection for Rosaline. Their paths converge at a ball held by the Capulets, where their romance begins (1.5). The iconic balcony scene solidifies their love, leading to a secret marriage arranged by Friar Laurence for the following day (2.6). The crisis erupts when Juliet's father insists that she marry Count Paris. Overwhelmed and uncertain of escape, Juliet seeks Friar Laurence's aid. He proposes a potion that induces a temporary coma, deceiving everyone into believing she is deceased (4.1). Promising to notify Romeo of the plan, the Friar assures Juliet she can reunite with him the next day. However, the messenger fails to reach Romeo in time, leading him to assume Juliet is truly dead. In anguish, Romeo slays Paris, who has come to

mourn Juliet (5.3). Consumed by grief, Romeo then ingests poison, choosing to accompany his beloved in death's journey.

> That unsubstantial Death is amorous,
> And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
> Thee here in dark to be his paramour?
> For fear of that, I still will stay with thee,
> And never from this palace of dim night
> Depart again. Here, here will I remain
> With worms that are thy chambermaids; O here
> Will I set up my everlasting rest,
> And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
> From this world-wearied flesh. (Shakespeare, 2003, 5.3.103-112)

Upon awakening, Juliet is confronted with the devastating sight of her lifeless beloved beside her. Unable to bear the anguish of existence without Romeo, she takes hold of his dagger and plunges it into her own heart, embracing death to be reunited with him in eternity (5.3.160-171). Their tragic demise serves as the poignant conclusion to their ill-fated love story, eternally intertwined in both life and death.[16]

The suicides of Romeo and Juliet provide a nuanced exploration of love, interwoven with themes of destiny, familial conflict, and societal expectations. Their decision to end their lives represents the culmination of intense emotions and circumstances beyond their control, showcasing the influence of a fate which is proper of Greek Tragedy. Throughout the story, their love is portrayed as predetermined, doomed from the start by forces beyond their control. Their tragic ending reflects the unpredictable nature of destiny. Initially, their love is depicted as passionate and consuming, defying the feud between their families. Furthermore, their joint suicide can be seen as a desperate attempt to escape their circumstances. Faced with the impossibility of being together due to their families' hostility, Romeo and Juliet view death as the only means to achieve unity beyond the mortal realm. Their tragic demise can be interpreted as a sorrowful consequence of societal pressures and familial expectations.

In parallel with the impulsive actions of Romeo and Juliet, Christine's demise in *Mourning Becomes Electra* unfolds passionately and hastily. Romeo hastily weds Juliet and hastily drinks poison upon hearing of her supposed demise:

[16] Fisher posits a distinction between Romeo's and Juliet's suicides. Rome's suicide suggests that all passions stem from "commonly false beliefs", whereas Juliet's is grounded in "accurate, full knowledge" (2002, p. 98).

> In passionate love with Juliet, Romeo marries her in a day. But in despair over the news of her supposed death, he drinks poison, also in a day. The passion of despair, with its rash consequences, leads to the impetuous suicide that blocks the few hours of necessary delay that would have permitted the real situation to become clear. (Fisher, 2002, p. 98)

Similarly, in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Christine's passion-fueled despair leads to impulsive self-annihilation, prematurely cutting short the opportunity for clarity. Though Brant and Christine exhibit more patience in consummating their union compared to Shakespeare's protagonists, the impulsive nature of their ultimate act remains evident. Moreover, Christine's premeditation of her suicide is evident in earlier parts of the play, where she forewarns of her inevitable self-inflicted demise should tragedy befall her beloved (O'Neill, 1988, 1.2.923 and 2.2.974). Christine's death also bears resemblance to the suicides of Phaedra and Dido, functioning as a form of retribution against Orin, her initial love interest and Brant's assailant. Orin, haunted by guilt upon realizing his role in Christine's demise, acknowledges his complicity and terms it as murder rather than suicide (2.5.1002-1003).[17]

In the upcoming third part of the trilogy, Orin's sense of guilt will intensify steadily, eventually becoming the driving force behind his decision to take his own life. As Alexander confirms,

> The final horror of this second play comes with Christine's realization that her son has killed her lover, and with her last look of mingled fear and hatred at the daughter who has brought him to do it. Inside the temple of Hate and Death, she shoots herself with a "pistol," like the pistol of Agnes's suicidal letter, sending Orin into an agony of remorse: "I drove her to it!" His cry releases all O'Neill's guilt over Agnes joined to all his guilt at bringing on his mother's trouble (2007, p. 43).

It is pertinent to acknowledge that, within the classical tradition, a variety of methods for suicide existed. As elucidated by Librán Moreno, the prevalent techniques included "the rope, the sword, and jumping into the void" (2011b, p. 408). Notably, death by hanging incurred disdain due to its implications of corpse disfigurement, while death by incised wound was deemed honorable and even heroic. Contrary to these classical depictions of suicide, O'Neill's play departs from tradition by employing a modern method. Christine's choice to end her life is by a gunshot, a stark deviation from the traditional means. Additionally, unlike

[17] Critics, including Pratt (1956, p. 166), Diggins (2007, p. 217), and Chirico (2000, p. 89), posit that Orin and his sister motivated Christine's decision to take her own life.

the customary practice of delivering a final soliloquy, she departs without any melancholic speeches. Her silence leaves her suicide open to one clear interpretation: her love for Brant. Through this decisive action, she not only punishes Lavinia and Orin but also seeks vengeance against them, not through words but through her resolute deed.

In the third play, titled *The Haunted*, O'Neill delves deeper into the complexities of familial guilt and psychological turmoil. Returning from their journey a year after Christine's tragic suicide, Lavinia and Orin find themselves entangled in a web of haunting emotions and unresolved conflicts. Lavinia's transformation is striking; she now bears both physical and behavioral resemblances to her late mother (O'Neill, 1988, 3.1.2.1017), unsettling Orin, whose guilt-ridden psyche continues to unravel. He, consumed by an overwhelming sense of culpability for his mother's demise, laments, "The only love I can know now is the love of guilt for guilt which breeds more guilt" (3.3.1037). His desperation for absolution leads him to a dark proposition: he urges Lavinia to confess their mother's murder, so that she seeks solace in the purifying flames of justice (3.3.1041). Yet, his twisted path to redemption takes a sinister turn as he endeavors to document the family's sins, intending to expose their darkest secrets to Hazel, his only confidante (3.2.1029). Lavinia, however, intercepts Orin's machinations and thwarts his plans (3.3.1038). The parallels with Phaedra's vengeful missive are unmistakable, as Orin seeks retribution against Lavinia, whom he perceives as the catalyst for their mother's demise.

Lavinia's burgeoning relationship with Peter, Hazel's brother and a former suitor, stokes Orin's "veiled sexual jealousy" (Liapis, 2023, p. 482), exacerbating his already fractured psyche. Orin's opposition to Lavinia's impending marriage stems from his transference of his unrequited love for his mother onto Lavinia (O'Neill, 1988, 1.2.1019). Bereft of the ability to possess Lavinia for himself, he descends further into malevolence, contemplating sinister deeds in the shadows of his tormented mind. The stage is set for a harrowing confrontation, as O'Neill skillfully navigates the treacherous terrain of familial love, betrayal, and retribution:

> ORIN – There are times now when you don't seem to be my sister, nor Mother, but some stranger with the same beautiful hair – (*He touches her hair caressingly. She pulls violently away. He laughs wildly.*) Perhaps you're Marie Brantôme, eh? And you say there are no ghosts in this house? (3.3.1042)

When Lavinia becomes aware of Orin's newfound desire for her, coupled with malevolent intentions, she finds herself unable to restrain her emotions and voices her genuine indignation: "(*her control snapping—turning on him now in a*

burst of frantic hatred and rage) I hate you! I wish you were dead! You're too vile to live! You'd kill yourself if you weren't a coward!" (3.3.1042). In this pivotal moment, Orin confronts the devastating wreckage of his shattered hopes. His actions, unwittingly driving his beloved mother to her tragic end, have left him drowning in a sea of guilt and revulsion, compounded by Lavinia's rejection. With nothing left to lose, Orin reaches a fateful decision, mirroring the tragic path trodden by his mother.

For Orin, much like the legendary figures like Phaedra, death emerges as the sole harbinger of peace, offering the prospect of absolution from the burdensome weight of guilt and shame. In this moment of profound reckoning, Orin's trajectory converges with the narratives of tragic figures ensnared in the inexorable grip of fate and folly:

> ORIN – (*in a pitiful pleading whisper*) Vinnie! (*He stares at her with the lost stricken expression for a moment more – then the obsessed wild look returns to his eyes – with harsh mockery*) Another act of justice, eh? You want to drive me to suicide as I drove Mother! An eye for an eye, is that it? But – (*He stops abruptly and stares before him, as if this idea were suddenly taking hold of his tortured imagination and speaks fascinatedly to himself.*) Yes! That would be justice – now you are Mother! She is speaking now through you! (*more and more hypnotized by this train of thought*) (3.3.1042)

Orin's conviction that only death can reunite him with his mother emerges in his poignant declaration, "Mother will be waiting for me there" (3.3.1042). This motif finds resonance in classical literature, where lovers yearn for death as a recourse to reunite with their beloved in the afterlife (Librán Moreno, 2011b, p. 407). Such narratives serve to validate the notion of suicide as a means of reunion and offer solace to the bereaved lover left behind (Librán Moreno, 2011a, p. 288). A striking parallel can be drawn with Seneca's *Phaedra*, where the female protagonist, in the throes of despair, articulates her fervent desire to join Hippolytus in the afterlife before succumbing to suicide: *non licuit animos iungere, at certe licet / iunxisse fata* (Sen., *Phaed*. 1183-1184).

Much like Phaedra, Orin delivers a poignant soliloquy in the moments preceding his demise. Speaking directly to his beloved mother, he articulates his fervent desire for swift reunion and seeks redemption for the sins of the past. In his impassioned plea, Orin yearns to bridge the divide between the living and the departed, longing for the opportunity to atone for his transgressions and find solace in her embrace. His words resonate with an earnest longing for reconciliation and closure, echoing the themes of love, loss, and the quest for redemption that permeate tragic narratives throughout literature.

> Yes! It's the way to peace—to find her again—my lost island—Death is an Island of Peace, too—Mother will be waiting for me there—(*with excited eagerness now, speaking to the dead*) Mother! Do you know what I'll do then? I'll get on my knees and ask your forgiveness—and say—(*His mouth grows convulsed, as if he were retching up poison*.) I'll say, I'm glad you found love, Mother! I'll wish you happiness—you and Adam! (*He laughs exultantly*.) You've heard me! You're here in the house now! You're calling me! You're waiting to take me home! (O'Neill, 1988, 3.3.1042)

Peter intervenes in the midst of the heated exchange between Lavinia and Orin. At this critical juncture, Orin casually mentions his intention to clean his pistol, subtly hinting at his suicidal thoughts in front of Lavinia. Despite this revelation, Lavinia does not intervene or attempt to dissuade him.

> ORIN – (*with unnatural casualness*) Gone home. (*then with a quick, meaning, mocking glance at Lavinia*) I'm just going in the study to clean my pistol. Darn thing's gotten so rusty. Glad you came now, Peter. You can keep Vinnie company. (*He turns and goes out the door. Peter stares after him puzzledly*.) (3.3.1043)

With determination, he strides into the room, sealing his fate with the decisive click of the door shutting behind him, the echo of a gunshot piercing the air once more. This final act, reminiscent of the tragic denouements of Phaedra and Dido, represents a calculated strike of vengeance and retribution against Lavinia, who dared to spurn his affections by choosing Peter as her partner, thus betraying him. As such, Orin perceives his own death as the ultimate and sole means of enacting revenge on Lavinia. This parallels the character of Phaedra, who likewise employs death as a vehicle for vengeance and retribution. In different renditions of the myth of Hippolytus, Phaedra's suicide marks a pivotal moment of turmoil. Unable to overcome her shame and seeking retribution against Hippolytus for spurning her affections, she falsely accuses him of sexual misconduct. As such,

> Phaedra furnishes the clearest example of a suicide brought about because of fear of disgrace but simultaneously carried out to ensure that vengeance will be wrought. She does not leave vengeance up to the gods by uttering a curse, but instead leaves a devastatingly accusatory written suicide note. (Garrison, 1995, p. 66)

In Euripides's rendition of the myth, Phaedra's nurse reveals her enduring, passionate love for Hippolytus, only to be rebuffed by him. Hippolytus remains steadfastly loyal to Theseus, Phaedra's husband and his own father and king. Anticipating the imminent return of Theseus and seeking to "escape shame and reclaim honor" (Garrison, 1995, p. 45), Phaedra resolves to take her own life:

καλῶς ἔλεξας: ἓν δὲ †προτρέπουσ'† ἐγὼ
εὕρημα δῆτα τῆσδε συμφορᾶς ἔχω,
ὥστ' εὐκλεᾶ μὲν παισὶ προσθεῖναι βίον
αὐτή τ' ὀνάσθαι πρὸς τὰ νῦν πεπτωκότα.
οὐ γάρ ποτ' αἰσχυνῶ γε Κρησίους δόμους
οὐδ' ἐς πρόσωπον Θησέως ἀφίξομαι
αἰσχροῖς ἐπ' ἔργοις οὕνεκα ψυχῆς μιᾶς. (E. *Hipp*. 715-721)

Phaedra's legacy includes a letter accusing Hippolytus of lusting after her (Berlin 1981, p. 40). When Theseus returns, he stumbles upon Phaedra's lifeless body and is confronted with her accusatory words. Convinced by her claims, the anguished king curses his own son, invoking Poseidon's wrath[18].

Seneca offers a fresh perspective on the tale, injecting new dynamics into the narrative. In his version, upon learning of Phaedra's intense affection, Hippolytus flees to the safety of the forest, seeking solace from the tumultuous situation. It is Phaedra's nurse who falsely accuses him of inappropriate advances. Upon Theseus's return, fuelled by the nurse's accusations and Phaedra's own words, he is consumed by rage, cursing his son (Sen., *Phaed*. 945-948). Following Hippolytus's demise, Phaedra is wracked with guilt, leading her to confess the truth before taking her own life.

Critics speculate on the motives behind Phaedra's suicide, suggesting that she may have sought to accompany her beloved into the afterlife (Librán Moreno, 2011a, p. 288), or perhaps to demonstrate the depths of her love as her final testament (Librán Moreno, 2011b, p. 406). These interpretations enrich our understanding of Phaedra's tragic demise, revealing layers of complexity within the character's motivations.[19] As Fitch also contends,

> Seneca presents dramatically a woman of intense emotions, but weak willed, a woman who veers wildly between one impulse and another, even in the face of a few lines. Her mental and emotional confusion continues right into her suicide speech, which continues varied and even contradictory elements: anguish and guilt over Hippolytus' death, desire to share his death and even pursue him in the underworld, desire to salvage some honour, hatred of Theseus and honor at the prospect of living on as his wife. (2002, p. 442)

[18] For more interpretations of Phaedra's suicide in Euripides's rendition, see Calame (1999, pp. 3-6). This tragic sequence of events finds a parallel in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where Hippolytus's perspective is shortly explored. See Goldman (1995, pp. 33-34), Grimal (1990, p. 204), Lattimore (1962).

[19] For different interpretations of the myth, refer to Hamilton (1942, pp. 220-223). Additionally, consult Maleki, Nazemi and Laguna Mariscal (2020, pp. 119-122) for a comparison of different Hippolytus-Phaedra narratives.

Hill agrees with Fitch on the fact that Seneca's Phaedra commits suicide as "an attempt to salvage what remains of a formerly pristine public reputation" (Hill, 2004, p. 160). Considering the societal norms of ancient Rome, where honor held significant sway and suicide was sometimes seen as a solution to disgrace (Garrison, 1995, pp. 28-32),[20] we might infer that Phaedra's decision to take her own life was also shaped by these cultural factors.

Phaedra's decision to end her own life, apart from being seen as an attempt to safeguard her honor and avoid the potential wrath of her husband, offers insight into the complexities of human emotion and the tragic consequences of unbridled passion. Despite her fervent efforts to suppress her burgeoning feelings for Hippolytus, her stepson, Phaedra finds herself carried away by their overwhelming intensity. Her tragic flaw lies in her inability to reconcile her profound desires with her societal obligations and familial duties. In a desperate bid to gain control over her tumultuous emotions and escape the torment of unrequited love, Phaedra tragically resorts to manipulation, falsely accusing Hippolytus of harassment. However, the repercussions of her actions prove catastrophic, leading not only to her own demise but also to the destruction of her family and the tragic death of Hippolytus himself. Phaedra's suicide serves as a poignant symbol of the destructive power of unfulfilled desires and the devastating consequences of defying societal norms in the realm of classical tragedy.

Furthermore, drawing parallels to Euripides's *Orestes*, Alexander attributes Orin's descent into madness to the weight of his guilt over "matricide" (2007, pp. 42-43), while Bogard counters, asserting that Orin's actions are not those of a madman but rather a "deliberate" manifestation of "desire energized by ruthless purpose" (1988, p. 353). Moreover, Orin harbored a belief, ever since Christine's demise, that Lavinia deserved punishment for her perceived jealousy towards her mother and her role in Christine's tragic end: "She can't have happiness! She's got to be punished!" (O'Neill, 1988, 3.3.1037). However, unlike Phaedra's death by poison, Orin chooses a more modern instrument of self-destruction, a pistol, symbolizing the evolution of ancient tragedies into modern woes. In sum, Orin's suicide can be seen as a culmination of various complex emotions, including love, betrayal, vengeance, and a profound sense of guilt and despair.

As the play ends, Lavinia parts ways with Peter. Left abandoned by all, she elects to administer her own form of punishment by retreating into the desolate confines of the family home. This could be viewed as a subtle form of self-annihilation, though not in the physical sense but rather through the slow erosion of social

[20] For the history of suicide for love in classical Roman literature, see Grisé (1982) and Hill (2004, pp. 87-104).

and emotional ties with the outside world (Asselineau, 1958, p. 144). Instructing Seth, the gardener, to shutter the windows and discard the blossoms, she crosses the threshold and closes the door behind her, yet this time, no gunshot shatters the stillness of the air.

3. Conclusions

In this study, we examined how suicide for love as a narrative motif is recontextualized in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, set in modern American society. Despite critics' assertions that O'Neill's play draws heavily from the myth of *Oresteia* and *Electra*, our study demonstrated its reliance on a broader array of classical sources. For instance, Christine's suicide shares motivations of revenge featuring in Seneca's *Phaedra*, yet her inability to endure life without love aligns her with characters like Dido and Romeo. Similarly, Orin's suicide mirrors aspects of Euripides's *Phaedra*, driven by a desire for vengeance against a scornful beloved. This narrative parallel is further underscored by Phaedra's guilt in Seneca's version. This analysis also enabled us to examine the aforementioned classical sources and their portrayal of suicide for love. It was concluded that O'Neill skillfully integrates a range of classical texts into his work. While remaining faithful to the thematic and structural essence of the "suicide for love" trope, he effectively adapts it to capture the complexities of modern society.

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