Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)
A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
Impact Factor 6.8992 (ICI) http://www.rjelal.com;
Email:editorrjelal@gmail.com; ISSN:2395-2636 (P); 2321-3108(O)

Vol.10.Issue 2. 2022
(April-June)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

The Descendant from the *Nobility* to *Commonality*: The Representation of Everyday, Common Themes in the Modernist Drama in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* and Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* in Relation to the Classical Dramas

Sepehr Daneshara[1], Gilliam M. E. Alban[2]
[1]Ph.D. Candidate in English Language and Literature, Istanbul Aydin University, Istanbul, Turkey
[2]Docent Professor of English Language and Literature, Istanbul Kultur University, Istanbul, Turkey



Article Received: 30/03/2022
Article Accepted: 29/04/2022
Published online:03/05/2022
DOI: 10.33329/rjelal.10.2.70

Abstract
For the readers of classical dramas, it would not be very surprising to come across with very supernatural elements which, in fact, built the core skeleton of such works. The focal attention of the classical dramas was mainly upon the violation of sacred codes of behavior in which there was no room for the appearance of impersonal relations or social significations. However, in the course of time, modern dramas, specifically American tragedies, shifted the focus of plays to everyday issues through which readers could sense the very similar experiences in their lives as depicted in these works. No longer these works deal with the farfetched themes which overwhelmed the classical works of art. The present article is a short comparative analysis of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* and Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* in terms of their thematic levels in order to delineate the way they treat a few of the widespread issues of the twenty-first century America. By analyzing the thematic aspects of these works, the important role of *expressionistic* elements in showing the *worldly* issues of American individuals as well as nuclear families is made bare. Consequently, this study sheds light on the systematic movement in the grip of drama from the sacred Gods-individual relations and themes to the social and family problems. In conclusion, it is also shown that the modern American drama has very unique characteristics the parallels of which are very rare to be found in other literary traditions.

Keywords: Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill, Classical Drama, Modern Drama, Expressionism

By analyzing and comparing some examples of classical tragedy with modern drama, it would become clear that this genre of literature has undergone dramatic changes both in content and form in the grip of its development. Classical tragedy, in terms of its form, identified itself with exalted language. Tragedy, as reckoned by Aristotle as a high form of expression, used to have grand

dictions for the reason that their protagonists are from noble origins. Appearance of supernatural elements in classical tragedy was another style which was very prevalent in most of the works. Therefore, the settings of the dramas were less *realistic* in that they had to bring the opportunity for the appearance of these supernatural beings. Other formal aspect of classical tragedy is its *unrealistic* style and elements of narration. For many classical dramatist, chorus was of a high importance

> "It is often noted that there is no violence enacted in Greek tragedy, and in general violent actions did take place out of sight. As a result, in order to inform the audience of what has happened, we have the ubiquitous messenger speech. The disaster that has struck the Greek army returning from Troy is reported by a messenger in Aeschylus' Agamemnon, and similarly, in Sophocles' Women of Trachis, a messenger tells the heroine, Deianeira, what is happening elsewhere" (Rabinowitz 28).

Looking from *thematic* aspects, classical tragedy dealt with tragic flaws which did not result because of the *inferiority* of protagonists, but for the reason of false decisions of the *noble* protagonists. Therefore, heroic values were of high importance for playwrights. Additionally, as the presence of *supernatural* elements in the classical tragedies, the main themes encapsulated theses from myth and (semi-)religious bases and rituals;

> "Ritual practices more than any one coherent set of beliefs dominated ancient Greek religion. Rituals can be defined as actions that individuals or groups perform repeatedly in order to organize reality for themselves; the ancient Greeks used ritual to define relations between mortals and immortals, but also among humans, and between humans and animals" (Rabinowitz 67).

On the other hand, the traits of *modern* drama have dramatic deviations from its predecessors. Influenced by Chekhov's style, modern playwrights focused more on everyday-life issues, and odd and nostalgic lamentations for the ideal values sustained in the classical plays were not present anymore. Eugene O'Neill and more eminently Arthur Miller were the first followers of this *realistic* mode of playwriting. The settings and themes they used for their works were more tangible for the readers and audiences of their er. In order to achieve this goal, they had no other opportunity except applying everyday language which entailed the language of *common* people. Beginning from this movement, the language of modern dramas was not of complex structures. Taking advantages from modern technologies, contemporary drama intended to leave ultimate impressions over the consciousness of audience. Bringing sound and lighting effects to the works were only some of these techniques introduced to modern drama. More outstandingly, the main aim of modern drama was to educate the audiences and make them more cautious about the facts around themselves. Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* and Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* can be taken as good examples of modern movements.

O'Neill in his work *Mourning Becomes Electra* exposes the issues of a family after the Civil War in America. These issues, if looked from the eyes of an 19th century inhabitant of New England, are of more familiar images for the contemporary readers. According to Dorris Alexander, although this work is reckoned as a modern drama by many critics because of its thematic and formal elements, the analysis of the work shows its great influences from classical tragedy:

> "The first idea had come to him in the spring of 1926, when he thought of "a modern psychological drama using one of the old legend plots of Greek tragedy"—the Electra, or the Medea. The Electra story would set him in direct rivalry with the great Greek dramatists, for Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides had all treated it. He would make it a real trilogy, like theirs, with three plays treating the same characters. Through it he could achieve—what he had always striven to arrive at—a sense, like the Greek sense, "of the Force behind" life, whatever one called it, "Fate, God, our biological past creating our present." It was to be "primarily drama of hidden life forces" (Bloom 31-32).

The "hidden life forces" quoted by Alexander can be spotted as the *eternal* issues present in every person's life regardless of their *time* and *place*. The most important theme of the work encircles around the family issues which were very prevalent not only in classical times, but also in the 19th and 20th centuries America. But the main emphasis of this work is over the modern Freudian family issues"

> "Moreover, the play's major relationships pattern themselves according to the Freudian family romance that Macgowan had helped popularize in a 1929 book he CO-authored, What is wrong with Marriage. Each Mannon child is enamored of the opposite-sex parent in a drama which features frequent fleeting glimpses of unconscious suppressed desires (as in Vinny's attraction to Brant, who resembles her father), and which exposes the repetition compulsion of characters whose later words and gestures re-enact moments from earlier scenes, from the recent past" (Manheim 77).

The Mannon's family is not only problematic from the point of view of oedipal complexities. It is also troublesome in having an unfaithful relationship between Ezra and Christine. While Ezra has been in the Civil War for the achievement of angelical ideals, his wife commits adultery. In fact adultery was something of a more common problem throughout the history of human lives, but its connection to the children of the family- such as the rivalry between the mother and daughter over a man- and also *puritan* ideas were new spheres of analysis. *Symbolism*- later considered in this study as a subcategory of the *Expressionistic* movement- is another experimental technique used in *Mourning Becomes Electra*:

> "… in Mourning Becomes Electra O'Neill is decidedly concerned with the use of the Atreus legend In Greek literature as the basis for constructing the plot of his own modern day myth or legend of the House of Mammon (11).
>
> Mourning Becomes Electra deals experimentally with Greek legend and myth, especially In terms of the Greek conventions of plot and character, in creating a modern Oresteia. The major symbols used in this play are Seth Beckwith as the Greek Chorus, the chanty "Shenandoah" as a dramatic refrain paralleling the action of the play, and the blessed isles as a symbol of the freedom that they are all seeking" (Butler 13).

Similar to O'Neil's drama, Arthur Miller's work *All My Sons* has some parallel structures with classical dramas, but he stands to reshape the classical tragedy in a novel way. In obeying the rules of traditional dramas, Miller tries to sustain the main Aristotelian ideas of unities of *time*, *space* and *action.* The entire play, like many other classical peers, happens within a twenty-four-hour common setting. The setting is also limited to few locations, and therefore, the attention of audience is not disturbed. The final unity of action is also maintained strictly, and there happens almost no disturbance of the narration of chronological events. On the other hand, this work, instead of emphasizing long-lasting moral values of classical tragedies, focuses on the issues of its age. These issues objectively show the problems of both a *nuclear family* and *society* when all the ideal dreams have been vanished, and the left is only an atmosphere where irresponsibility, human greed, treachery and selfish love have the strongest voices. In other words, Miller voices the problems of his own age by modernizing the old philosophy of drama, and *expressionism* brought by Miller is one of the modern features of his works.

Expressionism is a modern literary movement which can be considered as an umbrella term for many techniques. As J. A. Styan claims, modern drama is highly dependent on three important movements:

> "A final explanation. In order to follow a clearer path through a jungle of detail, Modern Drama is presented as three extended essays on realism, symbolism and expressionism, with developments in the last two into surrealism, absurdism and epic theatre" (Styan XI).

In the case of *All My Sons*, Expressionistic elements are also available in the work, and lighting

effects are only one example of such elements in the works:

> "When Ibsen discussed the first production of The Wild Duck (plainly a primary influence on All My Sons) with the director of the Christiana Theatre, he stressed both the 'naturalness and realism' of the play, at the heart of which, nonetheless, was an affecting symbol, and the need for lighting that would reflect 'the basic mood' of each act" (Bigsby 81).

In addition to *Expressionism*, the different symbols used in the mentioned book are considered as one behavior of the experimental movement, *symbolism*. From the beginning of the play, several symbols grasp the attention of audience in many ways. For instance, the fall of apple tree cannot be reckoned as a meaningless event in the play; this, in fact, symbolizes the foreshadowing of a disaster which would be disclosed later in the work. Moreover, the setting of home cornered by tall trees *symbolizes* an isolated atmosphere where Keller family has distanced itself from the outer world:

> "Undeniably, a tree fallen in its prime stands as a correlative for a son apparently cut down in the war, and is identified as such by the characters, while a storm occurring on the eve of a crisis in family affairs might seem an unnecessary underscoring of a drama which has its own logic, its own emotional tone, its own internal dynamic. That it does not seem unduly theatrical is precisely because the symbolism is read into it by characters neurotically alert to threat and vigilant for evidence of change" (Bigsby 82).

Miller puts one step further and portrays the lives of a successful family whose roots go back to middle-class people of the contemporary America. Joe Keller, who is now a successful trader, is indebted to the treachery he has committed to his job partner. In fact, the greed for money and great life have made him blind enough to disregard the lives of brave pilots under risk. For Miller, it was not the classical idea that protagonists used to have tragic flaws but the inherent greedy and inferior nature of individuals in modern age-or drama:

> "The Greeks believed in a world controlled by fates that were directed by the gods, but Miller prefers to believe that people's characters have the biggest influence in determining their fate. Failure, in Miller's eyes, should not be blamed on an indefinable hostile fate or social system but on individuals who refuse to accept their responsibilities and connection to fellow human beings. It is the flaws that exist in Keller's character that ensure his defeat rather than any divine authority. Keller knowingly shipped out faulty aircraft parts that may have caused numerous deaths. To try to save his business, he has knowingly put others at risk. Because he refuses to accept responsibility for his actions, his guilt drives him toward the destruction of his relationship with both the sons whom he so wanted to have follow in his footsteps, and finally, of himself" (Abbotson 45).

In conclusion, it is obvious that modern drama, though it had some parallel structures with its predecessors, is molded into a different style of narration both in thematic and formal levels. The use of simple language, abundance of symbols, common settings, and introduction of new techniques by the means of technology are only some aspects of this literary formation. The other remarkable change occurs in the portrayals of lives of ordinary people with the issues related to their own age. In other words, most of the elements of classical tragedies have got into thin air and a new form of literary incarnation has come to the genre *modern drama* specifically in American literary tradition.

References

Abboston, Susan. *Critical Companion to Arthur Miller.* New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007. Print.

Bigsby, C. W. E. *MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA, 1945-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.

Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Eugene O'Neill.* New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007. Print.

Butler, F. Jay. *Eugene O'Neill's Use of Symbolism in Eight Major Experimental Plays*. Diss. Loyola University Chicago, 1972. Print.

Manheim, Michael. *THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO EUGENE O'NEILL*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Print.

Rabinowitz, Mancy Sorkin. *Greek Tragedy.* Hong Kong: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. Print.

Styan, J. L. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Expressionism and Epic Theatre*. Vol. 3. Cambridge University Press. Print.