



## Global Affinities: Reading O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra* as an Intertext

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**Abstract:** This article aims to show the relationship between the plays of O’Neill and his European counterpart, Aeschylus as a result of globalisation. O’Neill subscribes to Greek mythology but modifies or transforms it in the American scenario. Our study of *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *The Oresteia* have considered the way meanings are constructed by a network of cultural and social discourses which embody distinct codes, expectations and assumptions. Besides, the thematic and linguistic similarities and differences between the works of the European and that of the American author selected have enabled the researcher to have an insight into literary influences and affinities. This article has demonstrated that there is no end in the making of texts, as O’Neill has revisited classical literature to write his play, *Mourning Becomes Electra*. This shows aspects of multiculturalism as central issues experienced in Greek are equally experienced in the USA. This paper argues that there is a global undertone in the works of O’Neill and Aeschylus as they show aspects of intertextuality as a result of classical Greek influence. O’Neill alludes to Aeschylus’s Greek mythological form of play writing but transforms it into the American scenario, through American Realism. To analyse these plays, we are going to use postmodernism and structuralism. The paper concludes that, although O’Neill subscribes to Greek mythology, he deviates from European playwrights of this dramatic convention. His work has aspects of American Realism, and he is equally a social critic who writes about the ills that plague his society, in order to create awareness in his countrymen. The paper also shows that there is no end in the making of texts, irrespective of where we find ourselves.

**Keywords:** Global, affinities, intertext.

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According to Merriam Webster’s Dictionary, the term global means of relating to or involving the entire world. According to M.H Abrams, an affinity refers to likeness based on relationship or causal connection (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 35). Thus, global connection is linked with multiculturalism as it talks about sameness or similar experiences. This explains why Eugene O’Neill, an American author, alludes to Aeschylus, his European counterpart in the

writing of his play *Mourning Becomes Electra*. There are striking similarities between the plays *The Oresteia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. This article aims to show the relationship between the plays of O’Neill and his European counterpart, Aeschylus as a result of globalisation. O’Neill subscribes to Greek mythology but modifies or transforms it in the American scenario. Our study of *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *The Oresteia* have considered the way

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meanings are constructed by a network of cultural and social discourses which embody distinct codes, expectations and assumptions. Besides, the thematic and linguistic similarities and differences between the works of the European and that of the American author selected have enabled the researcher to have an insight into literary influences and affinities. This article has demonstrated that there is no end in the making of texts, as O'Neill has revisited classical literature to write his play, *Mourning Becomes Electra*. This shows aspects of multiculturalism as things experienced in Greek are equally experienced in the USA. This paper argues that there is a global undertone in the works of O'Neill and Aeschylus as they show aspects of intertextuality as a result of classical Greek influence. O'Neill alludes to Aeschylus's Greek mythological form of play writing but transforms it into the American scenario, through American Realism.

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the forms of intertextuality present?
2. Is *Mourning Becomes Electra* only a classical play?

### Framework

Postmodernism was chosen because it shows indeterminacy and plurality of meaning and equally shows that people interpret texts from different angles. Simon Malpas, in his *Introduction to Postmodern Debates*, defines postmodernism as a reaction to modernist meta-narratives. He defines a meta-narrative as a story, a discourse that conditions a philosophy, a cultural movement, or a historical event. In postmodern literature, the idea of originality and authenticity is undermined and parodied. The works do not pretend to be original and new, but rather the authors use old literary forms, genres, kitsch, allusion, and other means to recontextualise the works' meanings in different linguistic and cultural contexts to show a difference between the past and the present as well as between the past and present forms of representations. For example, Richard Gary Brautigan and Donald Barthelme exploited popular fiction genres in favour of their deconstruction through parody and pseudo-authenticity. John Barth points out an exhaustion of the old forms of art and suggests a creative potential of the use of the old forms, genres and styles. Moreover, postmodern authors not only reuse the forms and genres, they deliberately use plagiarism, false or pretended quotations from well-known literary texts. However, plagiarism in postmodern works does not necessarily mean stealing ideas; it is rather a device for evoking a parody effect and an ironic distance from these texts. German professor Ulrich Broich speaks about pla(y)gariasm which means a creative use and recontextualisation of

already existing texts through the use of techniques reminiscent of plagiarism and their further modification by the use of linguistic and textual play (*Intertextuality: Forms, Function, English Case Studies* 252). Postmodernism, as well as postmodern literature, draw on pluralism and relativism which is associated with a distrust of the possibility of understanding and explaining the world either objectively or subjectively. This radical plurality is manifested in the choice of outcasts and marginalised characters rather than positive ones. The plurality of characters is closely connected to multiple or overlapping narrative voices, which offer their versions of reality in the story. The relativism in postmodern literature is manifested in the rejection of a close ending, and in the collaboration with a reader who, through the open ending, has an opportunity for participation in the meaning of a text. These express aspects of multiculturalism.

Structuralism was chosen because it talks about signs, the signifier, the signified text and meaning. After writing a text, the author is not the one who accords meaning to the text, rather the readers, through various forms of interpretation. Structuralism is an intellectual movement to the human sciences with a profound effect on linguistics, sociology and other fields as well as philosophy, which tries to analyse a specific field as a sophisticated system of interrelated parts. Structuralism believes that all human activity and its products are constructed and not natural. It also holds that everything has meaning. Structuralism dwells on the concepts that every system possesses a structure that determines the position of every element of a whole; that structural rules deal more with coexistence than changes, and those structures are the "real things" underlying the surface of meaning. In language and linguistic studies, structuralism includes collecting a corpus of utterances and then attempting to classify all of the elements of the corpus at their different linguistic levels. It also tries to explain broad subjects by surveying their individual components and the way they interact to each other. The structural approach views the language as being divided into various components interacting with each other and then forming the rules of the language.

Just as structural anthropology applies structuralist insights to the comparative study of human cultures, semiotics applies structuralist insights to the study of what it calls sign systems. A sign system is a linguistic or nonlinguistic object or behaviour (or collection of objects or behaviours) that can be analysed as if it were a specialised language. In other words, semiotics examines the ways linguistic and nonlinguistic objects and behaviours operate symbolically to "tell" us

something. In terms of literary analysis, semiotics is interested in literary conventions: the rules, literary devices, and formal elements that constitute literary structures.

Our discussion of the structuralist approaches to literature will focus on the narrative dimension of literary texts because structuralist criticism deals mainly with narrative. This focus is not as narrow as it may seem at first glance, however, if we remember that narrative includes a long history and broad range of texts, from the simple myths and folk tales of the ancient oral tradition to the complex mélange of written forms found in the postmodern novel. In addition, most drama and a good deal of poetry, though not classified as narrative, nevertheless have a narrative dimension in that they tell a story of some sort. In any event, as we will see, narratives provide fertile ground for structuralist criticism because, despite their range of forms, narratives share certain structural features, such as plot, setting, and character (*Critical Theory Today* 220).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term intertextuality is derived from the Latin word “intertexto”, which means “to intermingle while weaving.” When Julia Kristeva coined this term, she associated it primarily with post-structuralist theorists. In one of her essays, “Word, Dialogue and Novel,” she broke with traditional notions of the author’s influences and the text’s sources positing that all signifying systems (texts) are constituted by the manner in which they transform earlier signifying systems. A literary work is not simply the product of a single author, but of its relationship to other texts and to the structures of language itself. In *The Kristeva Reader*, she any “outlines that text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (66). A text is a piece of writing made up of previous writings. Literary creation calls for intertextuality, as any piece of writing is the absorption and transformation of previous writings. Intertextuality is also seen as the interconnectedness of a text with another or the rewriting or transformation of a text by an author.

The aim of this article is to show the extent to which the plays selected interrelate with one another, through forms of intertextuality such as allusion, convention and transformation. It also shows that intertextuality is not only limited to influences but equally playwrights can rewrite the works of others irrespective of the places they come from and the differences in their epochs, as the case with Aeschylus and O’Neill. This interrelatedness will be analysed through the elements of literature like setting, characterisation, plot, themes, style and structure. This study examines intertextuality to

demonstrate the relationship between Eugene O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra* and Aeschylus’s *The Oresteia*. This comparison gives an insight into literary influences and cultural studies by showing the connection between culture and intertextuality. Intertextuality shows the link between literary texts and their connections to other cultural productions.

## 2. Allusion

An allusion, according to *Merriam Webster’s Dictionary*, is an implied or indirect reference especially in literature; a work that makes allusions to classical literature, also the use of such references. Allusions can be seen in various domains such as historical, geographical, biological, and classical domains, just to name a few. O’Neill’s work, *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a direct allusion to Aeschylus’s classical play, *The Oresteia*. Eugene O’Neill’s accommodation of the ancient dramatic tradition and the classical intertext within *Mourning Becomes Electra* has mainly focused on the works of his predecessors. These dramatic models include Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*, from which O’Neill draws Orin’s Oedipus Complex, and above all, *The Oresteia* (and the *Electras* of Sophocles and Euripides), on which the plot of *Mourning Becomes Electra* is based. Though *Mourning Becomes Electra* undoubtedly is foremost a psychological adaptation of Aeschylean, Sophoclean, and Euripidean tragedy, O’Neill’s trilogy contains several more subtle classical allusions drawn from conventions and other non-tragic forms of classical drama (*International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 1). We therefore argue that Eugene O’Neill maps Aeschylus’s *The Oresteia* onto his modern tragedy.

O’Neill’s engagement with Aeschylean tragedy, *The Oresteia*, holds specific thematic significance to its context in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, linking forces of causality with the motifs of death and family destiny. O’Neill alludes to Aeschylus’s trilogy, *The Oresteia*, not only through characterisation, but stage directions, structure, the use of chorus and through the Chanty man and Lavinia, who symbolises Electra in *The Oresteia*. Before delving into this intertextual reading of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, it should be noted in brief that few authors have left so many clues to their literary ideal as has O’Neill. We will begin the analysis of allusion in this article with the setting of both plays.

*Merriam Webster’s Dictionary* defines setting as, “the time, place and circumstances in which something occurs or develops, or the time and place of the action of a literary, dramatic or cinematic work”. It should be noted that when we talk of setting, it is not limited to historical, (time), and geographical, (place), but there is also the psychological setting which brings in the stream of consciousness

technique. Sarah Anyang Agbor in her book, *An Introduction to Commonwealth Literature*, defines setting as, “The time and place in which the events of literary work take place” (76). A setting can also be symbolic in the manner in which it makes ideas larger and more significant. Setting will be analysed in *The Oresteia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, through the angles listed above.

Aeschylus wrote *The Oresteia* in the fifth-century B.C. His play is strongly based on the philosophical and political consciousness of his time. It was a time of transition when Greek civilisation was moving towards a cultural cohesion after passing through a long period of wars and bloodshed. Athens was about to play a critical role in coming years as on the one hand, it had emerged successful in its struggle against tyrannical regimes of the past, and on the other hand, it had to consolidate the Greek city states against the possible invasion of the Persian Empire. This explains the war theme in Aeschylus’s plays, particularly *The Oresteia*.

O’Neill wrote his play in the 1930s when most of the writers were struggling with the social and economic realities of the times. The New York Stock Market crashed in October 1929 destroying the hopes and aspirations of the American people, founded on the American Dream. Consequently, much of the literature produced in the context of 30s aims at finding out the social and economic causes which led to the Great Depression and its implications on the lives of the common Americans. Hence, a spirit of pessimism prevailed both at the individual and societal levels. However, O’Neill rejected the economic study of man’s conditions and diverted his attention to explore the deep hollows of the human soul.

The first setting of the first part in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is the exterior of the Mannon house, built in imitation of Greek style with the white pillars in front, which creates a functional irony for the New England setting with its Puritanical view. C.W.E Bigsby in *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*, states that “The self-destructive fatalism of Greek theatre, symbolised by the furies, is transmuted into a Calvinist conscious which makes the self its own enemy” (80). In *The Oresteia*, the setting of the first play *The Agamemnon* is “Before the royal palace of Argos” (*The Oresteia* 17). Argos in *The Oresteia* becomes the New England of 1865 in the play and New England, with notions of sin, guilt and punishment, is a perfect setting for such a trilogy. Through the external walls of the ‘tomb-like Mannon house’ (*Mourning Becomes Electra* 15), we move to the interior and symbolically from the social to the psychological, from the public to the private. O’Neill’s purpose of changing the situation and the setting

from Athens to New England is also his search for expressing the human condition related to his own culture. Aeschylus and O’Neill mostly make use of the outside setting, though O’Neill frequents the internal part of the house. In the second play of Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*, the setting is “The grave of Agamemnon” (*The Oresteia* 77), which is still the out space. The second play of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Hunted*, takes place still in the exterior of the Mannon house (*Mourning Becomes Electra* 113). In the last play of *The Oresteia*, *The Eumenides* takes place still in the outer setting but this time a little metaphysical because it was in the shrine (*The Oresteia* 121). Likewise, the setting of the last play of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Haunted* takes place still in the exterior of the Mannon house (*Mourning Becomes Electra* 209). The next element to analyse is the characters of both plays.

*Merriam Webster’s Dictionary* defines characterisation as “One of the attributes or features that make up and distinguish an individual”. According to Sarah Anyang Agbor, characterisation refers to the way that a person looks, talks, acts or thinks (79). Since O’Neill alludes to Aeschylus’s play, *The Oresteia*, his characters are an emulation of those of the Greek dramatist.

Plot and structure are the subsequent elements of the plays that are related to allusion.

Plot, in Aristotle’s terms, is the arrangement of the incidents. It is also the structural principle, which defines the limits of the action within the limits of the cultural pattern, and provides a form, which the dramatist can use to present his ideology. According to Sarah Anyang Agbor, “plot provides the structure of the story. The plot of a story can be chronological or begin in mediocres’ as well as from the end of the story” (*An Introduction to Commonwealth Literature* 72). Structure is defined as “the design or form of the completed action” (74). It is structure that gives a story balance and coherence. Aeschylus’s play *The Oresteia*, follows the structure of a traditional plot, which O’Neill later adopts. A traditional plot begins from the beginning or exposition, and later proceeds to conflict which will lead to a complication that moves to the climax and lastly, the denouement or the falling point where the protagonists pass away as a result of hubris or weakness of character.

O’Neill borrows the three divisions of *The Oresteia* (changes them as *Homecoming*, *The Hunted* and *The Haunted*), and fits them into his plot structure. Before the action of the first play, Abe Mannon (Atreus) dispossesses his brother David Mannon (Thyestes) because of David’s seduction of, and subsequent marriage to, Marie Brantome whom Abe himself desired. Abe avenges his brother by

ruining the family house, in which the seduction took place, and building a new one for himself. Abe Mannon's hatred of his brother is the start of the fated family life of the Mannons. In *Homecoming*, the first play, David Mannon's son Adam Brant (Aeghistus) seeks vengeance for his father's death and seduces Christine Mannon (Clytemnestra) away from her husband, Ezra Mannon, Agamemnon of the play.

*Mourning Becomes Electra* follows the general outlines of the Aeschylean trilogy very closely. The playwright borrows the three play division, the sequence of events and the climactic order. Although O'Neill follows the three play divisions of *The Oresteia*, he further expatiates them by dividing the plays into acts. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Home Coming*, which is the first play has four acts (14), *The Hunted*, has five acts (112) and the last play, *The Haunted*, has four (208). This can somehow show the slight difference between the structural patterns of Aeschylus and O'Neill. *The Oresteia* of Aeschylus has 154 pages while O'Neill's, *Mourning Becomes Electra* has 288 pages. This little distinction shows that despite the fact that O'Neill emulates Aeschylus's structural pattern in the writing of his play, he writes with a lot of details and descriptions.

#### 4. Transformation

*Merriam Webster's Dictionary*, defines transformation as an act, process, or instance of transforming or being transformed. One of O'Neill's most interesting and most important experiments is his adjustment of *The Oresteia* of Aeschylus to an American situation. This adjustment is O'Neill's attempt to construct the Athenian idea and define its variable realisations particularly in America.

Eugene O'Neill transfigures Aeschylus's play, *The Oresteia* to suit the context of his American society. Aeschylus's dramatic form was classical history of loft drama and it was a form which could be imitated to suit O'Neill's search for aesthetic dramatic form and the reinterpretation of myth, psychology and culture in relation to social criticism. Aeschylus, who lived from 525 to 456 B.C., is the first important Greek dramatist, and is often regarded as the founder of Western drama. "He wrote largely about traditional themes, based on myths and Olympian law" (Cassady Marshal and Pat Cassady *Theater and Drama* 3). Aeschylus's most cited work today is considered to be *The Oresteian Trilogy* (458 B.C.), which is based on Greek mythology, and "is the only present-day trilogy by any Greek dramatist" (Cook Albert and Edwin Dolin, *Greek Tragedy* xxv). The plays (*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides*), which make up the trilogy deal with the concept of revenge, the record of crimes and their

inevitable punishment (judgment) in the house of Atreus.

In American drama, it is O'Neill, as one of the first modern dramatists, who experimented with theatrical devices by using the works of major predecessors of the Greek theatre such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The adjustment of *The Oresteia* to an American situation was, in a way, a result of his experiment with the Greek dramatic form. According to Porter Thomas, O'Neill was attracted to Greek tragedy because "it dealt with the 'Mystery within a conventional structure; it came out of a relatively homogenous culture and was well supplied with legendary themes" (*Myth and Modern American Drama* 28). On the other hand, O'Neill tried to convert the Greek myth into modern psychology in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. O'Neill adopted both form and the content based on Greek myth in order to create modern psychological drama. His purpose of adjusting the Greek text into his own style stems from his interest in metaphysics and human psychology in relation to social paradoxes. The social dimension of O'Neill's action in *Mourning Becomes Electra* extends into Puritanism, in particular. In broader sense, however, it extends into the spiritual evils of human relations and experiences. O'Neill models his work, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, on *Oresteian Trilogy* by adapting the plot structure into a modern context to convey his own messages to his audience. As Patrick Roberts notes, "the circumstances of blood-feud are remote enough from the modern audience's experience, especially in the context of a totally different age and culture" (*The Psychology of Tragic Drama* 179). It is obvious that the complex of Hellenic and Christian values is in sharp contrast. O'Neill changes the personalities and the motivations of the characters in the action, and thus replaces the traditional Greek cultural pattern of blood revenge and Olympian theology with modern psychology and Puritanism. As the cultural situation changes, the significance of the traditional pattern is modified.

O'Neill revamps the myth in *The Oresteia* and provides a key to the meaning of the action in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. So, the tragic patterns in Aeschylus and O'Neill relate very differently to the overall meaning of the plays in question. As earlier mentioned, the first setting of the first part in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is the exterior of the Mannon house, built in imitation of Greek style with the white pillars in front, which creates a functional irony for the New England setting with its Puritanical view. According to C.W.E Bigsby, "The self-destructive fatalism of Greek theatre, symbolised by the furies, is transmuted into a Calvinist conscious which makes the self its own enemy" (*A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama* 80). Argos in *The Oresteia* becomes the New England

of 1865 in the play and New England with notions of sin, guilt and punishment is a perfect setting for such a trilogy. Through the external walls of the 'tomb-like Mannon house', we move to the interior and symbolically from the social to the psychological, from the public to the private. O'Neill's purpose of changing the situation and the setting from Athens to New England is also his search for expressing the human condition related to his own culture. The main incident of the plot in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is, then, given a name, Puritanism, as O'Neill visualises it.

Puritans were the strict guardians of public morality, and sexual indulgence was one of the most degrading sins among them. O'Neill's observation, however, is that they were associated with a repressive attitude towards sexual impulses. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, a dominant symbol of love is degenerated by Puritan values into lust. Lavinia, who has a sort of romance with Captain Brant tries her best not to reveal her feelings and declares that she 'hates love'. Physical love is dirty and degrading in Puritan ethics. In this sense, it is impossible to deny the Freudian psychology on the play, especially on the sex drive, life adjustment, and the dangers of repression and more importantly on the Oedipus complex. So, apart from implied oedipal fantasies (Orin's love for his mother, further transmuted to his sister, Lavinia) and Electra complex (Lavinia's love for her father), Christine's sense of love for Brant and Lavinia's secret love for him all end up with self-destruction and death. Love, as the only life force, turns out to be the agent of death rather than a cure for the Mannons. The values in the Mannon family are so distorted that there is a sexual and psychological deformity, which is the mark of their Puritan heritage and O'Neill's interpretation of Puritanism.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill deals with the traditions, ideals, attitudes and values of a part of his own community and he uses Greek myth in order to shape the plot and character types. O'Neill sees a rich source of material in ancient myth for his study of human nature. He also attempts to create a mythicising procedure by elevating the status of the Mannon family to a classical model in regard to universally shared human feelings and emotions such as ambition, hatred, revenge, love, etc. Yet, the play holds references, marking the American Puritanism in 1865, which, unlike the ancient Greek idea of communally shared guilt and redemption, charges the individual with sin and punishment.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As far as themes and style are concerned, Aeschylus and O'Neill can be considered as social critics as they satirise the evil of their societies, one way or the other. Concerning style, they use devices

and techniques like symbolism, satire, humour, metaphors, similes, tragedy, chorus, mask, and stage directions, but O'Neill make use of detailed writing as he expands his work with a lot of analysis. This explains why *The Oresteia* has 154 pages and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, has 288. They satirise man's greedy nature and the wickedness of man to another. After performing a careful analysis of this intertextual study, we discovered that O'Neill modified the myth in *The Oresteia* and provides a key to the meaning of the action in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. So, the tragic patterns in Aeschylus's and O'Neill's relate very differently to the overall meaning of the plays in question. The plot of *Mourning Becomes Electra* is remarkably faithful to *The Oresteia*. Its characterisation and symbolism, however, are determined by O'Neill's interpretation of the puritan heritage, by Freudian psychology, and by the aftermath motif of salvation by spatial remove. *The Oresteia* proclaims a constant relationship between the individual and society. Orestes's crime does not isolate him from the community, as he flees to the communal shrine and is judged by a jury of citizens and his personal fate changes the structure of society from clan-centred to city-centred. It should be noted that O'Neill borrows from Greek tragedy but varies a bit from the Athenian society. Athenians believe in the presence of gods who can always purify them, whenever they sin or commit a terrible act. Thus, there is still hope left for Aeschylus's character but O'Neill's characters bear the consequences of their actions all by themselves as there is no god to back them up. Thus, intertextuality can be deliberate as well as not deliberate, like Aeschylus and O'Neill. This paper also came to the compromise that although O'Neill rewrites Aeschylus's play, *The Oresteia*, he avoids plagiarism by transforming it in to the American scenario, through American realism. O'Neill focuses his realistic work more precisely on Puritanism. We therefore conclude that there is global undertone in the works of O'Neill and Aeschylus as their plays under study show aspects of sameness, thus, bringing the society as one and express multiculturalism.

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