

Love enters through the eyes: Revival of a classical topos in *Desire Under the Elms* (1924)*

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Abstract:

The present article aims to introduce a literary topos that has originated from the classical tradition and weaved into modern American drama. Following Laguna Mariscal's approach to literary topos, the definition, structure, and literary development of «love at first sight» as a classical topos is outlined. Then, its representation in Eugene O'Neill's modern American play *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) is studied. While taking Euripides's retelling of Hippolytus-Phaedra narrative as the main reference, this tragedy is also creatively linked to other classical texts through the existence of a classical topos. This incorporation could be deliberate, testifying to O'Neill's meticulous adaptation of the elements of Greek tragedy, or unintentional and the result of a natural literary procedure.

Key words:

Desire Under the Elms, classical reception, literary topos, Eugene O'Neill, love.

El amor entra por los ojos: Renacimiento de un tópico clásico en *Deseo bajo los olmos* (1924)

Resumen:

Este artículo tiene como objetivo presentar un tópico literario que se originó en la tradición clásica y se entrelazó en el drama estadounidense moderno. Siguiendo la teoría de Laguna Mariscal sobre los tópicos literarios, se esboza la definición, estructura y desarrollo literario del «amor a primera vista» como un tópico clásico. Luego, se estudia su representación en la obra americana moderna *Deseo bajo los olmos* (1924) de Eugene O'Neill. Si bien toma como referencia principal el recuento de Eurípides de la narrativa de Hipólito-Fedra, esta tragedia también se vincula creativamente con otros textos clásicos a través de la representación de un tópico clásico. Esta incorporación podría ser deliberada atestiguando la meticulosa adaptación de O'Neill de los elementos de la tragedia griega, o no intencional, como resultado de un procedimiento literario independiente.

Palabras Clave:

Deseo bajo los olmos, recepción clásica, tópicos literarios, Eugene O'Neill, amor.

1. INTRODUCTION

Eugene O'Neill's interest in the classical tradition, especially Greek tragedy, has been the subject of many studies. *Mourning Becomes Electra*

(1931), for example, is often considered a modern revitalization of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* both in terms of content and structure¹. Similarly, *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) has been referred to in various studies as a modern retelling of Euripides's myth of Hippolytus and

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¹ Critics consider *Oresteia* as the main source of influence on the writing of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. See, for example, ASSELINEAU, R., «Mourning Becomes Electra as a Tragedy», *Modern Drama*, 1-3 (1958), pp. 143-150; BURIAN, P., «Tragedy Adapted for Stages and Screens: The Renaissance to the Present», in EASTERLING, P. E. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 254-256; KHARE, R. R., *Shakespeare, Eugene O'Neill, T.S. Eliot and the Greek Tragedy*, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 339-374; BLACK, S. A., «Mourning Becomes Electra as a Greek Tragedy», *The Eugene O'Neill Review*, 26 (2004), pp. 174-178; and ALEXANDER, D. M., «Psychological Fate in Mourning Becomes Electra», *PMLA*, 68-5 (1953), pp. 923-924.

Phaedra². O'Neill was a rigorous reader of the works by the Greek tragedians. He was interested in philosophy, mythology and, of course, literature. The creative assimilation of these three fields made his plays deserve several Pulitzer Prizes for drama and a Nobel Prize in literature. Consequently, it should be a simplistic view to consider his plays simple imitations of a classical myth or tragedy.

Previously, we have demonstrated the ways in which through the recreation of topoi, literary texts could incorporate various classical subtexts, which have an architextual relationship with each other.³ Why is the term «architextual» used here? Basically, because the recreation of a classical topos could be both intentional and unintentional. Taking Eugene O'Neill as an example, we could argue that on the one hand, he had an extensive knowledge of the classical literature, so it is not surprising to find many classical subjects incorporated in his plays. On the other hand, literary topoi are «living elements of human experience». They develop naturally towards modern literature and their existence is not limited to any specific genre or discourse. As a result, they can create links between any texts which incorporate the same syntax⁴. This is what

Gerard Genette calls architextuality and defines as «the relationship of inclusion linking each text to the various kinds of discourse of which it is a representative»⁵. This link could be deliberate or the result of a natural and «unconscious literary procedure»⁶.

To demonstrate this in practice, in the present article, I introduce «love at first sight», a literary topos that is rooted in the classical tradition and has weaved into the modern American plays of Eugene O'Neill. It is first necessary to define this topos and verify its topicality before entering the discussion of the ways in which it is represented in O'Neill's drama.

2. «LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT»: A LITERARY TOPOS

Topoi are traditionally defined as recurrent or «commonplace» motifs in literature⁷. More precisely, Laguna Mariscal defines them as «semantic motifs» with three main qualities: they are neither too general nor too particular, are expressed through a «definable form», have a history from antiquity towards modern times⁸. «Love at first sight» is a long-standing motif in world literature, defined as one's instant excitement and passion over meeting someone,

² For studies that discuss the classical reception of Hippolytus triangle in *Desire Under the Elms*, see MARIÑO SÁNCHEZ-ELVIRA, R. M. «Los temas griegos en 'Deseo bajo los olmos'», *Actas del IX Congreso Español de Estudios Clásicos*, Madrid, 1999, pp. 207-210; STERNLICHT, S., *A Reader's Guide to Modern American Drama*, New York, 2002, pp. 61-62; MCDONALD, M., *The Living Art of Greek Tragedy*, Bloomington, 2003, pp. 160-163; WALTON, J. M., *Euripides Our Contemporary*, London, 2009, p. 58; DUBOST, T., *Eugene O'Neill and the Reinvention of Theatre Aesthetics*, Jefferson, 2019, p. 132; MALEKI, N., NAZEMI, Z., & LAGUNA MARISCAL, G., «The Scheme of Potiphar's Wife: From Classical Tradition to Eugene O'Neill», *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, 24 (2020), pp. 122-129; and LIAPIS, V., «Prelude: Adapting Greek Tragedy: A Historical Perspective», in LIAPIS, V. and SIDIROPOULOU, A. (eds.), *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, Cambridge, 2021, pp. 49-50. Some critics also compare O'Neill's play with the myth of Medea. See, for example, MARIÑO SÁNCHEZ-ELVIRA, «Los temas griegos ...», pp. 207-210; LEAL, J., «Fedra abraza a Medea: Abbie Putnam de Deseo bajo los olmos», in MARTINO, F. de and MORENILLA, C. (eds.), *Entre la creación y la recreación*, Bari, 2005; NAREY, W. «Eugene O'Neill's Attic Spirit: Desire Under the Elms», *The Eugene O'Neill Review*, 16-1, 1992, pp. 49-54.

³ After analyzing the appearance of «murder for love» as a topos, it was concluded that O'Neill's two famous tragedies, *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, demonstrate architextual relationships with Medea narratives. See NAZEMI, Z., «The Study of Literary Topoi as an Area of Comparative Literature: The Case of 'Murder for Love.'», *Philologia Hispalensis*, 36-2 (2022), p. 173. Similarly, the recontextualization of «hatred to love» in O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* has caused parallel structures with some Greco-Roman texts. See NAZEMI, Z. & LAGUNA MARISCAL, G., «From Hatred to Love: Development of a Literary Topos in Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra (1931)», *Archivum*, 72 (2022), pp. 399-416.

⁴ NAZEMI, Z., «The Study of Literary...», p. 177.

⁵ GENETTE, G., *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge, 1997, p. XIX.

⁶ NAZEMI, Z. & LAGUNA MARISCAL, G., «From Hatred to Love...», p. 400.

⁷ CURTIUS, E. R., *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, TRASK, W. R. (trans.), Princeton and Oxford, 1983, p. XII. There are many theoretical studies on literary topoi most of which follow Curtius's definition as «rhetorical commonplaces». (*Ibid.*, p. xii). For Aguiar e Silva and Leeman, content, structure and tradition are important elements. See AGUIAR E SILVA, V. M., *Teoría de la literatura*, Madrid, 1972, p. 390; LEEMAN, A. D., «The lonely vigil. A topos in ancient literature», in J. den BOEFT, J. den and KESSELS, A. H. M. (eds.), *Actus: Studies in honour of H. L. W. Nelson*, Utrecht: 1982, p. 189. Escobar presents an elaborated definition of topoi following Curtius's approach. According to this definition, six factors distinguish a topos: anonymity, universality, tradition, conceptual character, variable extension and rhetorical function. ESCOBAR, Á., «Hacia una definición lingüística del tópico literario», *Myrtia*, 15 (2000), pp. 123-160. López Martínez further examines the position of topoi in literary theory and comparative literature. LÓPEZ MARTÍNEZ, M. I., *El tópico literario: teoría y crítica*, Madrid, 2007. The choice of Laguna Mariscal's definition as a theoretical framework for the present study is due to its incorporation of all the previous definitions as well as its practicality in applying it to literary texts. In another study, after reviewing the definitions of topoi, we have discussed the differences between similar literary terms such as theme, topos, motif and leitmotiv. NAZEMI, Z., MALEKI, N., & LAGUNA MARISCAL, G., «New Insights into Literary Topoi: A Study of 'Madness for Guilt and Remorse'», *Anuario de Estudios Filológicos*, 45 (2022), pp. 196-197. According to this study, what distinguishes a topos is its formal structure as well as its evolution from the classical literature. For other studies on the differences between literary terms also see MÁRQUEZ GUERRERO, M. Á., «Tema, Motivo y Tópico. Una Propuesta Terminológica», *Exemplaria*, 6 (2002), pp. 251-256; LÓPEZ GREGORIS, R., «Tematología», in GARCÍA JURADO, F. (ed.), *Diccionario Hispánico de la Tradición y Recepción Clásica*, Madrid, 2021, pp. 707-715.

⁸ LAGUNA MARISCAL, G., «En tierra, en humo, en polvo, en sombra, en nada»: historia de un tópico literario (I)», *Anuario de Estudios Filológicos*, 22 (1999), p. 201; Laguna Mariscal, «Regalos para enamorar (munera amoris): un tópico literario de ayer y de hoy», in MORENO SOLDEVILA, R. and MARTOS, J. (eds.), *Amor y sexo en Roma: su reflejo en la literature*, Huelva, 2014, pp. 27-30.

usually awakened by «a visual stimulus»⁹. Following Laguna Mariscal’s definition, we intend to show how «love at first sight» could be considered a topos.

First, «Love at first sight» has an intermediate level of conceptual content since it is not as general as the theme of love, nor is as specific as a sub-motif like love’s various causes, the symptoms of love and the lover’s efforts to approach and seduce the beloved. Its scope is not as limited as a leitmotiv either since it can develop in literary texts of any genres. Moreover, it is not an abstract idea and can be defined and understood in concrete terms. Laguna Mariscal believes that literary topoi are not decorative elements in literary texts (belonging to the field of *elocutio*), but they are reflections of attitudes, ideas, and anxieties¹⁰. The underlying ideology of this topos is the belief that love has an irrational, unexpected and maddening nature¹¹.

As W. B. Yeats states, love occurs in a visual moment «Wine comes in at the mouth / And love comes in at the eye; / That’s all we shall know for truth / Before we grow old and die»¹². In her entry entitled «enamoramiento» (infatuation) in the *Diccionario de motivos amorios en la Literatura Latina*, Librán Moreno distinguishes between a type of love which is instantaneous and one which is gradual¹³. In this study, however, by love at first sight we refer to an instantaneous feeling which is aroused by surface beauty and not by examination or progressive discovery of the beloved’s qualities. Thus, falling in love is a sudden and

automatic reaction aroused by something that beauty exudes, an external force that, suddenly, permeates feelings of the human being¹⁴. The table below illustrates the ways in which «love at first sight» fulfills the requirement of conceptual content.

The second important factor for distinguishing a literary topos is its possession of a definable literary form. «Love at first sight» encompasses four formal stages: 1. The lover meets someone for the first time. 2. He/she is instantly attracted. 3. The lover tries to follow, seduce and win the beloved. 4. He/she is finally accepted or refused. These steps happen chronologically. Furthermore, the episode where this topos appears always incorporates descriptions of the physical attraction or beauty of the beloved. This moment usually occurs in bucolic contexts.

Finally, a topos should possess a literary history from the classical tradition. «Love at first sight» has been frequently addressed in the classical Greco-Roman works of any genres including poetry, drama or novel. In classical Greek tradition, this topos is a recurrent element¹⁵. As Calame explains and exemplifies,

«For the author of the *Iliad*, the ensnaring gifts of the goddess of love are constituted by luxuriant locks and beauty such as those of the young shepherd Paris. In Bacchylides, too, it is those that inflame the heart of Minos when he sets eyes on one of the girls who, along with

Table 1. The semantic content of «love at first sight»

Level	Literary Terms	Example
General	Theme	Love, desire, passion, etc.
Medium	Motif / Topos	«Love at first sight»
Specific	Sub-motif	-The reasons behind infatuation -Symptoms of love -Seductions of the lover

⁹ LIBRÁN MORENO, M., «Enamoramiento», in MORENO SOLDEVILA, R. (ed.), *Diccionario de motivos amorios en la Literatura Latina: Siglos III a. C.-II d. C.*, Huelva, 2011, p. 157.

¹⁰ LAGUNA MARISCAL, «Regalos para enamorar ...», p. 25.

¹¹ In classical literature, the words love and madness are so highly associated that they are sometimes used interchangeably. Laguna Mariscal, G. «Riñas», in MORENO SOLDEVILA, R. (ed.), *Diccionario de motivos amorios en la Literatura Latina: Siglos III a. C.-II d. C.*, Huelva, 2011, p. 367; THORNTON, B. C., *Eros: The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*, Boulder, 1997, pp. 19-23.

¹² YEATS, W. B. «A Drinking Song», *Poetry Foundation*, 1916. This is a universal amatory topic. See for example, *Phaedrus* in PLATO, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9, FOWLER, H. N. (trans.), Cambridge and London, 1925, 251 b and 255c. and PROPERTIUS, *Elegies*. MUELLER, L. (ed.), Leipzig, 1898, 2.15.2.

¹³ LIBRÁN MORENO, M., «Enamoramiento», pp. 157-160.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹⁵ «Love at first sight» even appears in the Greek proverb «ἐκ τοῦ ἑσποῦν γίνεται ἀνθρώποις ἔρᾶν». See ZENOBIOS, *Proverbia*, BUHLER, W. (ed.), Gottingen, 1999, pp. 169-180.

Theseus and others, belongs to the group of adolescents sent as tribute for the Minotaur.»¹⁶

In Homer's Hymn 5, Aphrodite falls instantly in love with Anchises while tending the cattle¹⁷. To attract the beloved, she takes a bath, uses fragrance, and wears elegant clothes¹⁸. She, then, goes on a journey to finally meet the beloved, who is amazed to see her in her outstanding style¹⁹. In Greek mythology, the love of Perseus for Andromeda is another important representation of this topos²⁰. The topos also appears in Apollonius Rhodius's epic poem *Argonautica*, where Eros' arrow causes Medea's immediate passion for Aeson's son²¹. Similarly, Euripides emphasizes the power of Eros incensing love in *Hippolytus*: «O Eros, O Eros, how melts love's yearning / From thine eyes, when thy sweet spell witcheth the heart»²². In this tragedy, Phaedra's love for her stepson happens after a moment of visual encounter.²³

The topos is a recurrent element of classical Roman literature as well. Propertius and Publilius Syrus associate love with eyes: «Oculi sunt in amore duces» (The eyes are the guides in love)²⁴ and «Oculi occulte amorem incipiunt, consuetudo perficit» (the eyes secretly initiate love,

the custom completes it)²⁵. In Virgil's *Eclogue* 8, Damon remembers his first infatuation in life, when he was only 12 years old. He states that once he met the beloved, he felt lost²⁶. In classical mythology, Cupid (Eros in Greek) can force the partners to fall in love with his amorous arrow. An interesting example occurs in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where the Greek myths are retold. As an example, the love of Phoebus for Daphne results from «Cupid's vengeful spite»²⁷. To escape from the god's constant pleads and harsh persecution, Daphne asks her father for help, and he turns her into a laurel tree. In book III, Echo falls in love with Narcissus's charm and starts following him²⁸. However, having been cursed by Juno, she is not capable of declaring her love and loses the opportunity to win the love of Narcissus. Similarly, Perseus experiences love at first sight when he meets Andromeda²⁹.

There are many more examples that prove that this topos has been an inseparable part of the classical stories. However, the exhaustive examination of all would exceed the scope of the present study. The reference to some classical stories here was to validate the recurrence of «love at first sight» in the history of Western literature as a key element of its topicality. The table 2 below summarizes the

Table 2. «Love at first sight» as a literary topos

Characteristics of a topos	«Love at first sight»
Conceptual content	-More specific than a theme -Incorporates sub-motives -Possesses an underlying ideology
Literary form	-Incorporates four chronological phases -Is usually developed in bucolic contexts
Historical tradition	-Shows recurrence in the classical tradition (Homer, Euripides, Virgil, Ovid, etc.) -Develops towards modern times (O'Neill's plays as an example)

¹⁶ CALAME, C., *The Poetics of Eros in Ancient Greece*, Princeton, 1999, pp. 23-24.

¹⁷ «Hymn 5», in *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, EVELYN-WHITE, H. G. (trans.), Cambridge and London, 1914, 5.54-55.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.60-67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.80.

²⁰ ROSE, H. J., *A Handbook of Greek Mythology*, London and New York, 2004, p. 224; MARSHALL, C. W., *The Structure and Performance of Euripides' Helen*, Cambridge, 2014, p. 168; WESTMORELAND, P. L., *Ancient Greek Beliefs*, San Ysidro, 2006, p. 170. This myth is also narrated by Euripides in *Andromeda*. Only a few fragments of this play have remained. PODLECKI, A. J., «Echoes of the Prometheia in Euripides's *Andromeda*?», in COUSLAND, J. C. R., & HUMEPP, J. (eds.), *The Play of Texts and Fragments: Essays in Honour of Martin Cropp*, Leiden and Boston, 2009, p. 79.

²¹ APOLLONIUS RHODIUS, *Argonautica*, MOONEY, G. W. (trans.), London, 1912, 3.285-290.

²² EURIPIDES, *Hippolytus*, WAY, A. S. (trans.), London and New York, 1912, 525-526.

²³ More examples could be found in Greek novel and the new comedy. See, for instance, REARDON, B. P., «Achilles Tattius and Ego-Narrative», in MORGAN, J. R. and STONEMAN, R. (eds.), *Greek Fiction*, Oxon and New York, pp. 86-87; HADAS, M., «Xenophon of Epheus, An Ephesian Tale», in HANSEN, W. F., (ed.), *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998, pp. 6-7; MALTBY, R. «The Happiness of Love in Roman Comedy and Elegy», in Michalopoulos, A. N., Papaioannou, S. and Zissos, A. (eds.), *Dicite, Pierides: Classical Studies in Honour of Stratis Kyriakidis*, Newcastle upon Tyne, pp. 173-174. An analysis of all these examples is beyond the scope of the present study.

²⁴ In TOSI, R., *Dizionario delle sentenze latine e greche*, Milán, 2017, n° 1837.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ VIRGIL, «Eclogue 8», *Bucolics, Aeneid, and Georgics of Vergil*, GREENOUGH, J. B. (trans.), Boston, 1900, 8.37-42.

²⁷ OVID, *Metamorphoses*, MORE, B. (trans.), Boston, 1922, 1.455.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.368-372.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.672-703.

ways in which «love at first sight» could be considered a literary topos following Laguna Mariscal's definition.

«Love at first sight» fulfills the final requirement of a topos by its development in modern literature. Here, we examine its revitalization in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924).

3. «LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT» IN *DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS*

Desire Under the Elms begins with the description of Ephraim's three sons, among whom Eben's role is more significant. From the first moments of the play, Eben expresses deep resentment towards his father, considering him the murderer of his mother: «he killed her!»³⁰. Ephraim has been absent for a long time and the children suspect he is dead, but soon the news of his return with a young bride is heard³¹. Finally, the seventy-five-year-old Ephraim returns home with Abbie, a lady of thirty-five who is «full of vitality»³². It is in scene four that Abbie first meets Eben, her stepson. Although they do not exchange a friendly conversation, Abbie gets infatuated with Eben's physical appearance.

In this play, the topos of «love at first sight» follows the four structural stages mentioned earlier: 1. Abbie meets Eben in person and 2. is instantly attracted to his guise. 3. She tries to seduce him into having a relationship with her and 4. is finally capable of winning his love. Like the other examples of this topos, Abbie's love is also aroused by the physical allure of Eben. The playwright describes it as follows: «For a moment she stands looking at Eben. He does not notice her at first. Her eyes take him in penetratingly with a calculating appraisal of his strength as against hers. But under this her desire is dimly awakened by his youth and good looks»³³. That is, Abbie is not in love with Eben's personality. In fact, she never even shows interest in that. What attracts her is his strength and youth. Thus, in this story, love is initiated by physical admiration³⁴. The same process takes place in the narratives mentioned in the previous section such as the love of Echo for Narcissus, Medea for Jason or Aphrodite for Anchises. In none of the above examples we find the lover attracted to one's

personality or intelligence. If this would be the case, then the infatuation could not be considered instant, but gradual and progressive because the lover would need time to learn about the other's attitudes or mindset.

Critics believe that Abbie and Eben's relationship is influenced by Euripides's *Hippolytus*³⁵. Clearly, «its theme of incestuous and illicit passion» has been used by O'Neill³⁶. The incorporation of the topos of «love at first sight» also links this play to Euripides's tragedy, where Phaedra falls instantly in love with her stepson after seeing him, when the victim (Hippolytus) was not even aware of the tear of love on his soul³⁷.

Πανδίωνος γῆν, πατρὸς εὐγενῆς δάμαρ
ἰδοῦσα Φαίδρα καρδίαν κατείχετο
ἔρωτι δεινῷ τοῖς ἔμοις βουλεύμασι.

the Great Mysteries, Phaedra, high-born wife
Of his own father, saw him; and her heart
In fierce love was enthralled by my device³⁸.

O'Neill was familiar with the works of Greek tragedians³⁹, so the incorporation of «love at first sight» could testify to his meticulous appropriation of the elements of *Hippolytus*.

There are also differences between the recreation of this topos in O'Neill's and Euripides's tragedies. For example, Phaedra tried to hide her passion from Hippolytus or the others including her nurse. It was her symptoms of love that finally revealed her lovesickness and led to her final confession.

ἐνταῦθα δὴ στένουσα κάκπεπληγμένη
κέντροις ἔρωτος ἢ τάλαιν' ἀπόλλυται
σιγῇ' σύνοιδε δ' οὔτις οἰκετῶν νόσον.

Thenceforward, sighing and by stings of love
Distraught, the hapless one wastes down to death
Silent : her malady no handmaid knows⁴⁰.

Even to declare her love, she did not try to appear seductive; rather, she was shy and ashamed of herself⁴¹. Phaedra was reluctant to declare her love to Hippolytus⁴²,

³⁰ O'NEILL, E., *Desire Under the Elms*, in *Complete Plays 1920-1931*, New York, 1988, I.ii.322.

³¹ *Ibid.*, I.iv.332.

³² *Ibid.*, I.iv.335.

³³ *Ibid.*, I.iv.338.

³⁴ Librán Moreno refers to Horace's *Carmina* III where «falling in love is not sudden, its first phase is admiration, followed by liking». See LIBRÁN MORENO, M., «Enamoramiento», p. 157.

³⁵ See note 4.

³⁶ HARTIGAN, K., *Greek Tragedy on the American Stage: Ancient Drama in the Commercial Theater, 1882-1994*, Westport and London, 1995, p. 61.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³⁸ EURIPIDES, *Hippolytus*, pp. 26-28.

³⁹ BLACK, S. A., «Mourning Becomes Electra ...», pp. 168-172.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-28.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 682-688. See also SENECA, «Hippolytus or Phaedra», in MILLER, F. J. (trans.), *Seneca's Tragedies I*, London, 1917, 1.636-645.

⁴² EURIPIDES, *Hippolytus*, pp. 503-506.

so the nurse informed Hippolytus directly⁴³. Quite contrary, Abbie tried her best to appear seductive and did not get disappointed even when Eben rejected her.

Furthermore, Euripides presents a dichotomy between Phaedra's passion and Hippolytus's chastity⁴⁴ which is missing in O'Neill's narrative. Eben is not chaste. In fact, before meeting Abbie, he used to visit Minnie, a prostitute⁴⁵, so it should not have been a difficult task for Abbie to finally persuade him to initiate an affair with her. Euripides's Phaedra, however, feels so embarrassed about the situation that she commits suicide to protect her and her children's honor: «to bequeath my sons a life of honour»⁴⁶, while Abbie persists on her seductions to finally achieve her goal, without ever worrying about honor.

Although the plots share similarities⁴⁷, Abbie's infatuation, the symptoms of love and some of the consequent actions do not follow the tradition or are strictly based on «genetic dependency»⁴⁸, that is on the myth of Hippolytus and Phaedra. Quite the opposite, once Abbie gets attracted to Eben, she sets off for the mission of seducing him. In the first part of *Desire Under the Elms*, all the conversations exchanged between Abbie and Eben are accompanied by notes by the playwright on the ways in which Abbie tries to attract Eben. Abbie, who usually behaves with resentment to Ephraim, her husband, now starts talking to Eben «in her most seductive tones» and Eben gradually gets entrapped into her passion: «They stare again, Eben obscurely moved, physically attracted to her»⁴⁹.

Of course, Eben is aware of the immoral nature of this love, so he tries to resist his desire «fighting against his growing attraction and sympathy»⁵⁰ and reject Abbie

like Hippolytus's reaction when he knew about Phaedra's love⁵¹. Abbie also recognizes that this relationship is not appropriate. However, the physical attraction of the loved one disrupts the lover's reasoning and his perception of reality⁵².

For a short period, the relationship experiences ups and downs. On the one hand, Eben is «sexually accosted by Abbie» and on the other hand, he «rebuffs her»⁵³. He curses Abbie: «damn ye!», «Yew kin go t' the devil!»⁵⁴, «ye durned old witch! I hate ye!»⁵⁵, «An' I hate the sight o' yew!»⁵⁶. He even threatens her to tell everything to Ephraim as in the tradition of Hippolytus⁵⁷:

E BEN—(trying to break from her spell—
confusedly) If Paw'd hear ye goin' on... (resentfully) But
ye've made such a damned idjit out o' the old devil...!⁵⁸

Hippolytus rejected Phaedra because he did not want to commit an immoral action against his father, Theseus:

Σ καὶ σὺ γ' ἡμῖν πατρός, ὃ κακὸν κάρα,
λέκτρων ἀθίκτων ἦλθεσ εἰς συναλλαγάς"
ἀγῶ ῥυτοῖς νασμοῖσιν ἐξομόρξομαι,
εἰς ὅτα κλύζων. πῶς ἂν οὖν εἶην κακός,
ds οὐδ' ἀκοῦσας τοιάδ' ἀγνεύειν δοκῶ;

As thou hast come, foul quean, to tender me
Commerce in mine own father's sacred couch!—
Words that with fountain-streams wash away,
Sluicing mine ears. How should be so vile,
Who even with hearing count myself defiled?⁵⁹

Unlike Hippolytus, Eben actually hates his father and even curses him to death⁶⁰. The logic behind his rejection is the fact that he does not want to yield Ephraim's farm to

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 601.

⁴⁴ LEFTERATOU, A., *Mythological Narratives: The Bold and Faithful Heroines of the Greek Novel*, Berlin, 2018, p. 114. For an interpretation of Euripides's retelling of the myth of Hippolytus, see MALEKI, N., NAZEMI, Z., & LAGUNA MARISCAL, G., «The Scheme of...», pp. 119-120.

⁴⁵ BERLIN, N., *The Secret Cause: A Discussion of Tragedy*, Amherst, 1981, p. 54. MARIÑO SÁNCHEZ-ELVIRA, «Los temas griegos...», p. 209.

⁴⁶ EURIPIDES, *Hippolytus*, 717.

⁴⁷ Maleki, Nazemi, and Laguna Mariscal examine the similarities and differences between *Desire Under the Elms* and different versions of Hippolytus narrative. MALEKI, N., NAZEMI, Z., & LAGUNA MARISCAL, G., «The Scheme of...», pp. 127-129. See also NAZEMI, Z. & LAGUNA MARISCAL, G., «Eugene O'Neill: la tragedia clásica en versión moderna», *The Conversation*, 2022; MARIÑO SÁNCHEZ-ELVIRA., «Los temas griegos...», pp. 207-210.

⁴⁸ LAGUNA MARISCAL, G., «Eres mi padre y mi madre: tradición literaria de un tópico amoroso atribuido a Jesús en el Evangelio», in ROIG LANZILLOTA, L. and MUÑOZ GALLARTE, I. (eds.), *Liber amicorum en honor del profesor Jesús Peláez del Rosal*, Córdoba, 2013, p. 208.

⁴⁹ O'NEILL, E., *Desire Under the Elms*, I.iv.338

⁵⁰ O'NEILL, E., *Desire Under the Elms*, I.iv.339.

⁵¹ EURIPIDES, *The Hippolytus of Euripides*, 32-36 and SENECA, «Hippolytus or Phaedra», II.704-709.

⁵² LIBRÁN MORENO, M., «Enamoramiento», p. 159.

⁵³ LIAPIS, V., «Prelude: Adapting Greek Tragedy: A Historical Perspective», in LIAPIS, V. and SIDIROPOULOU, A. (eds.), *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, Cambridge, 2021, p. 49.

⁵⁴ O'NEILL, E., *Desire Under the Elms*, I.iv.338.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, I.iv.339.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, II.i.343.

⁵⁷ For a detailed interpretation, see MALEKI, N., NAZEMI, Z., & LAGUNA MARISCAL, G., «The Scheme of...», p. 127.

⁵⁸ O'NEILL, E., *Desire Under the Elms*, II.i.342.

⁵⁹ EURIPIDES, *Hippolytus*, 651-655.

⁶⁰ O'NEILL, E., *Desire Under the Elms*, I.ii.322.

anyone including Abbie, because he believes that it belonged to his mother. So, he wants to keep the enmity with Abbie and not get involved in any emotional relationships.

EBEN—(*fighting against his growing attraction and sympathy—harshly*) An' bought yew—like a harlot! (*She is stung and flushes angrily. She has been sincerely moved by the recital of her troubles. He adds furiously*) An' the price he's payin' ye—this farm—was my Maw's, damn ye!—an' mine now!⁶¹

Abbie, unlike Phaedra, does not get disappointed and is attentive with «*passionate eagerness*» to every opportunity to get close to Eben⁶². In a similar way, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* once Echo finds Narcissus attractive, she also starts following him «with soft and stealthy tread». Abbie even further takes physical actions to arise Eben's desire by, for example, «*putting her hand on his arm - seductively*»⁶³. In one moment when they are alone, she finally kisses him. At first, it seems that Eben loses control, but once again, he steps back and repents:

*Abbie stands for a second staring at him, her eyes burning with desire. Then with a little cry she runs over and throws her arms about his neck, she pulls his head back and covers his mouth with kisses. At first, he submits dumbly; then he puts his arms about her neck and returns her kisses, but finally, suddenly aware of his hatred, he hurls her away from him, springing to his feet.*⁶⁴

Abbie then realizes that, for Eben, desire cannot be the only motivation to initiate an affair with her. The only way to convince Eben is to enter his mother's room, which acts as his comfort zone.

ABBIE—(*both her arms around him—with wild passion*) I'll sing fur ye! I'll die fur ye! (*In spite of her overwhelming desire for him, there is a sincere maternal love in her manner and voice—a horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love.*) Don't cry, Eben! I'll take yer Maw's place! I'll be everythin' she was t' ye! Let me kiss ye, Eben! (*She pulls his head around. He makes a bewildered pretense of resistance. She is tender.*) Don't be afeered! I'll kiss ye pure, Eben—same 's if I was a Maw t' ye—an' ye kin kiss me back 's if yew was my son—my boy—sayin' good-night t' me! Kiss me, Eben⁶⁵.

Once she crosses this red line and pretends to be as caring as his mother, Eben submits to Abbie's pleas and confesses love to her.

EBEN—(*throws himself on his knees beside the sofa and grabs her in his arms—releasing all his pent-up passion*) An' I love yew, Abbie!—now I kin say it! I been

dyin' fur want o' ye—every hour since ye come! I love ye!
(*Their lips meet in a fierce, bruising kiss*)⁶⁶.

Although the plot of the play continues and ends with the possible death of the lovers, the topos of «love at first sight» has been preserved with all its structural stages.

As we can see, O'Neill's tragedy follows Euripides's tradition and diverts from it in order to offer a unique representation of the topos. However, as we mentioned earlier, a literary topos is also capable of linking one text to all the other texts which include the same syntax. That is to say, although O'Neill's tragedy is deliberately influenced by the works of the Greek tragedians, whom he was familiar with, we could also compare the incorporation of «love at first sight» with the other permutations of this topos. This would mean comparing narratives and finding parallel structures, rather than looking for factual points of influence. In all the classical examples mentioned, love occurs in a bucolic context. The lovers are attracted to one's physical guise and the loved ones are always described as handsome, strong or pretty. All try to approach the loved one and seduce them. Of course, they utilize different approaches to attract the beloved. Eros and Cupid's power of creating love is also replaced by a sense of determinism in O'Neill's plays. Abbie, unlike Phaedra and more similar to Echo, follows the beloved in order to attract him. The ending is different in various narratives. Phoebus never achieved Daphne; Echo could never declare her love to Narcissus; and Phaedra committed suicide after being rejected by Hippolytus. But Abbie did not lose hope and finally achieved Eben's declaration of love.

4. FINAL WORDS

Literary topoi do not simply decorate texts, but are vehicles to convey mindsets like, in this case, the belief in the sudden and irrational nature of love. After elaborating on the conceptual content, structure and tradition of «love at first sight» as a classical topos, its creative use in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* was examined. It was concluded that O'Neill's play takes as a point of departure the myth of Hippolytus and Phaedra, but demonstrates clear differences in the development of the topos. Furthermore, the incorporation of «love at first sight» links O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* to all the classical texts that incorporate this topos. In other words, all the representations of a topos share a similar structure and are only different in details. The parallelism between these texts is more due to polygenesis than direct influence. In the case of O'Neill, his imitation of *Hippolytus* is deliberate. However, the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, I.iv.339.

⁶² *Ibid.*, II.i.341.

⁶³ O'NEILL, E., *Desire Under the Elms*, I.iv.339.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, II.ii.351.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, II.iv.354.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, II.iv.355.

development of this topos is not limited to *Desire Under the Elms* or to *Hippolytus*. As a result, even if there was no proof of O'Neill's interest in the Greek tragedy, his play could be compared to Euripides's *Hippolytus* as one of the permutations of «love at first sight». The topos continues to be an inseparable part of modern literature and culture as reflections of human experience.

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