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THE SCHEME OF POTIPHAR'S WIFE: FROM CLASSICAL TRADITION TO EUGENE O'NEILL

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ABSTRACT: The aim of the present paper is to introduce a literary *topos* called the scheme of Potiphar's wife, its development in literary history and its recreation in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924). Taking into consideration the three requirements established by Laguna Mariscal for a literary *topos* (content, literary form, and historical development), the evolution of this *topos* in The Egyptian Tale of Two Brothers, the biblical *Book of Genesis*, Homer's *Iliad*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Euripides's *Hippolytus*, Seneca's *Phaedra* and O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* is surveyed. It is argued that the story of Potiphar's wife is part of a long-standing *topos* that has been developed through the literary history. The recreation of this *topos* in O'Neill's play, as one permutation of this *topos*, while evoking several Classical sources, especially the *Hippolytus* by Euripides, is at the same time a creative adaptation, aimed to match the historical context of twentieth century America.

RESUMEN: El objetivo del presente trabajo es presentar el *topos* literario del esquema de la esposa de Potifar, rastrear su desarrollo en la historia de la literatura occidental y examinar su recontextualización en *Deseo bajo los olmos* (1924) de Eugene O'Neill. Teniendo en cuenta los criterios de contenido conceptual, forma literaria y desarrollo histórico, propuestos por Laguna Mariscal como requisitos de un tópico literario, esta investigación examina la evolución de este *topos* en el cuento egipcio de los dos hermanos, el libro bíblico del *Génesis*, la *Ilíada* de Homero, las

Metamorfosis de Ovidio, el *Hipólito* de Eurípides, la *Fedra* de Séneca y *Deseo bajo los olmos* de O'Neill. Se propone que la historia de la esposa de Potifar es parte de un *topos* de larga duración que se ha desarrollado a lo largo de la historia literaria. La recreación de este *topos* en la obra de O'Neill, a manera de permutación, aunque acusa la influencia de varias fuentes clásicas, especialmente del *Hipólito* de Eurípides, es al mismo tiempo innovadora, pues busca reflejar el contexto histórico de los Estados Unidos del siglo XX.

1. INTRODUCTION

A literary *topos* is understood as the artistic expression of a semantic content with an intermediate level of concretion, which is presented through a definable literary form, and has developed through the historical tradition (Laguna Mariscal, "En tierra, en humo, en polvo" 201; "Regalos para enamorar" 27-30). Many critics have so far tried to give their own definition of *topos* (see Curtius xii; Aguiar e Silva 390; Greene 50; Leeman 189; Azaustre and Casas 39; Escobar Chico 137-142; Abrams 205; and Most and Conte 1489).[1] Since *topoi* are "argumentative elements of the literary discourse" and not simply adornments, their function is to reflect "on human attitudes, concepts and structures" and thus, to enrich the text in terms of meaning ("Regalos para enamorar" 27). The following are the requirements of literary *topoi* proposed by Laguna Mariscal:

1. A *topos* must develop an intermediate semantic content, which means that it should neither be too general nor too particular.
2. The semantic content must be expressed through a particular literary form, with a particular structure and a given lexical register.
3. The topic must have developed through a historical tradition, normally rising in Classical literature and reaching modern literature ("En tierra, en humo, en polvo" 201; "Regalos para enamorar" 27-30).

In the present study, the aim is to introduce the *topos* of the scheme of Potiphar's wife in terms of content, form, and historical development, and to investigate its realization in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924). While critics have examined the many

[1] Gómez Luque also dedicates a full chapter of his dissertation to a review of the scholarship on literary topoi (33-58).

ways in which Eugene O'Neill's tragedies have been influenced by the Classical Greek tradition and investigated the similarities and differences in terms of form and content, the question of literary *topoi* has remained untouched. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the scheme of Potiphar's wife in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) as an example of how a biblical and Classical *topos* has weaved over time into modern American literature. The *topos* of the scheme of Potiphar's wife, whose development is discussed in religious texts and Greek mythology, has been revitalized in O'Neill's play under the influence of Classical sources in such a way that the result is an adaptation for a modern audience. Consequently, a study of this relationship is expected to pave the way for a deeper understanding of the reception of Greek tradition in O'Neill's modern American plays.[2]

2. THE SCHEME OF POTIPHAR'S WIFE AS A *TOPOS*

The story of Joseph and his resistance to the wife of Potiphar is an interesting narrative mentioned in Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious texts. Despite the fact that the stories recounted in *Midrash*, *Genesis* and *Quran* are different in details, the three texts confirm that Potiphar's wife desired Joseph, was rejected by him and accused him of having intended to rape or seduce her (see Milner 160 and Hollis 31-33). Thompson includes Potiphar's wife as a motif in his motif-index referring to "a woman who makes vain overtures to a man and then accuses him of attempting to force her" (See Motif K2111). Laguna Mariscal also considers this a *topos*, called the scheme of Potiphar's wife, that exists both in religious and literary texts[3] (Laguna Mariscal, "La capa de José"). In a similar way, Lefteratou describes this narrative as the "Phaedra mythological megatext" (See Lefteratou 124). The story of Joseph was not the first example of the presence of this *topos* in history. However, since it is the most famous example, the *topos* is known as the scheme of Potiphar's wife. In the present study, we discuss this *topos* and its

[2] For a discussion of the reception of Greek tragedy in modern literature and culture, see works by Zyl Smith, Hardwick and Stray, Martindale and Thomas, and Burian. Also, for a statistical study about scholarship on O'Neill's plays, see Carpenter.
[3] For a broad discussion of the representation of Phaedra's story in literature and visual arts, see Lefteratou 110-117 and Jeffrey 626.

development in Classical literature towards modern American drama. Following Laguna Mariscal's theoretical approach, three factors will be taken into consideration: content, form, and historical development.

2.1. CONCEPTUAL CONTENT

Despite the fact that this *topos* apparently addresses a particular story (the specific story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife), it covers a wide range of narratives that circle around the same idea: "the temptation of a young man by the wife of a man to whom he owes loyalty, his refusal, the calumny of the wife against him which is believed" (Lattimore 5). Besides, the inclusion of this scheme in Thompson's motif-index testifies to its "widespread presence in traditional narratives" (Hollis 28). In other words, the story of Potiphar's wife is part of a long-standing *topos* that has weaved into history. Hollis explains this *topos* with further details:

> A young, virile male is approached by an older female, human or deity, who is in a position of power or authority with relation to him and who attempts to seduce him. The male refuses her overturns. At this point the female exercises her power and falsely accuses him, generally bringing severe punishment upon him. This punishment is carried out by an authoritative male, usually a type of father figure, and effectively removes the supposed male seducer from action, sometimes even killing him. In many, though not all, examples, the hero ultimately returns in a kind of resurrection. (29; See also Lefteratou 124-125; Hollis 30-31; Yohannan 1)

Here, we need to distinguish the term *topos* from theme. Theme is defined as "a general concept or doctrine" (Abrams and Harpham 205) or the "controlling idea" of a literary work (Perrine 90). In O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), 'incest' could be considered the general theme, while the scheme of Potiphar's wife could be a subcategory of this theme, or a *topos*.

2.2. LITERARY FORM

In terms of structure, this *topos* is expressed in four parts: 1. A married woman requires a young man, 2. she is rejected by him, 3.

she falsely accuses him before her husband of having tried to seduce or rape her, and 4. the boy is punished. In the biblical story of Joseph, the same order of events occurs:

1. Potiphar's wife[4] expresses her desire to Joseph by asking him "Come to bed with me!" ("Genesis", NIV.39.7).

2. She is rejected by Joseph, who is faithful to God's orders and to Potiphar: "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (see NIV.39.8-10).

3. One day, Potiphar's wife traps Joseph when nobody is at home and catches him by his cloak, asking him to sleep with her. When Joseph rejects her advances, she screams and uses the cloak as false evidence to accuse him of having tried to make love with her: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house" (NIV.39.14-18).

4. Angry with Joseph, Potiphar sends him to prison (NIV.39.20).

2.3. DEVELOPMENT IN LITERARY HISTORY

As Laguna Mariscal observes, a *topos* must have a literary history, normally rising from the Classical tradition and reaching modern literature. The *topos* of the scheme of Potiphar's wife has a history beginning with the "Tale of Two Brothers" in Egyptian folklore and the biblical story of Joseph in the biblical *Book of Genesis*. It appears in Homer's *Iliad* as well as in plays written by Sophocles, Euripides, and Seneca. It is also addressed by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, and by Jean Racine in *Phèdre*. It is recreated in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* and its film adaptations. Here we will review shortly the literary history of this *topos*.

[4] She is not given a name in the biblical *Book of Genesis*, but in *Quran* she is known as Zuleikha.

2.3.1. THE EGYPTIAN "TALE OF TWO BROTHERS"

Redford considers the "Tale of Two Brothers" as "the earliest known example" of this *topos* (93; see also Bromiley 1126-1128 and Yohannan 14), which is said to date from the reign of Seti II (1200-1194 BC). It recounts the story of Anubis's (in some versions Anpu's) wife, who tries to seduce Bata, her husband's younger brother (Lefteratou 108; See also Hollis 33-34; Goldman 33; Thorburn 267 and Bierlein 173-174). According to Simpson's retelling of the story, Anubis, the elder brother, has always treated Bata as a son (Simpson 81), making it similar to the story of Joseph.

Just like the handsome Joseph in the *Book of Genesis* (NIV.39.6), the younger brother in this tale is described as being "a perfect man: there was none like him in the entire land, for a god's virility was in him" (Simpson 81). The wife of the older brother, attracted to the youth and strength of Bata, finally confesses her desire for him: "Come, let's spend an hour lying together" (Simpson 82). However, like the chaste Joseph, the younger brother in this tale gets angry and states his reasons for rejection: "you are just like a mother to me, and your husband is just like a father to me, for he who is older than I it is who has brought me up" (82-83).

The wife of the elder brother, angry with the rejection and fearful of her reputation, decides to take revenge on Bata. As a result, she wears some bandages to appear like an assaulted woman and accuses Bata (83). Having heard the story, the indignant Anubis decides to kill his younger brother. Bata, however, is informed by a cow about the scheme and runs away, praying to Pre-Harakhti to help him. Finally, Bata finds a chance to tell Anubis the whole truth and proves his honesty by "cut[ting] off his phallus" and throwing it "into the water" (84). At the end, the wife of the elder brother commits suicide and Bata begins his journey to "the Valley of the Pine" (Hollis 34).

2.3.2. THE GREEK MYTH OF BELLEROPHON AND ANTEIA

In the Greek myth of Bellerophon and Anteia (in some versions Stheneboea), mentioned in Book VI of *Iliad*, the same scheme is repeated (see Thorburn 267; Goldman 33; Bierlein 175-176 and Lattimore 5). According to this myth, the pretty Anteia, the wife of king Proetus, was madly drowned in love and lust for

Bellerophon, "to lie with him in secret love". However, she could not conquer "upon wise-hearted Bellerophon, for that his heart was upright", so she decided to take revenge by making "a tale of lies" (Homer 6.160-165). Consequently, she asked her husband either to kill himself or to "slay Bellerophon" (6.165), accusing Bellerophon of having had sexual intentions against her will (6.165-170). To punish Bellerophon, the king decided to send him to a deadly mission to Lycia (6.170). In some versions of the story, it is believed that Bellerophon returned to kill Stheneboea (see Lattimore 6).

2.3.3. EURIPIDES'S *HIPPOLYTUS*

Critics have suggested that Hippolytus' triangle is the most similar narrative to the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (see Smith 189, Thorburn 267; Feldman 369; Berlin 33 and Lattimore 5). As Thorburn explains,

> The story of Phaedra's sexual advances toward her stepson has often been *compared* to the story in *Genesis 39* of the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife to Joseph. In both stories, the married woman's attempt to seduce the young man fails and the rejected woman claims the young man has tried to rape her. In both stories, the husband drives the young man from his household. Hippolytus is exiled from Troezen, and Joseph is imprisoned. (267)

Like the original myth, Euripides's tragedy represents Phaedra's excessive desire against Hippolytus's excessive chastity (Lefteratou 114).

The story follows the same plot as that of the Greek myth. Phaedra has for long suffered loneliness and is given a degree of sympathy by the author (Watson 109). However, she feels embarrassed to express herself and it is the nurse who informs Hippolytus about Phaedra's love, despite the disagreement of the queen. He not only rejects her but promises to keep all this a secret forever (Euripides 659-664). Before Theseus arrives to Athens, Phaedra commits suicide, leaving a note accusing Hippolytus of rape, by which she hopes to achieve her revenge (Berlin 40). Theseus returns home, believes Phaedra's letter and curses his son, who enters the stage and insists on his innocence. However, since

Hippolytus has promised to keep the secret, he cannot reveal the truth (Euripides 1060-1063).

A messenger informs the death of Hippolytus, resulting from Theseus' curse: "Hippolytus is no more!–so may one say,/ Though yet still a little space he seeth light" (1162-1163). Later, Artemis appears to Theseus and tells him the whole truth (1296-1312). At the end of the play, Theseus meets his son, hardly clinging to life. Hippolytus forgives his father and then dies:

> Farewell to thy departing, Maiden blest.
> Light falls on thee long fellowship's severance!
> Lo, I forgive my father at thy suit,
> As heretofore have I obeyed thy word
> Ah, o'er mine eyes even now the darkness draws!
> Take, father, take my body and upraise. (1440-1445)

2.3.4. OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES*

Ovid included an epistolary poem from Phaedra to Hippolytus in the *Heroides*, in which Phaedra expresses her desire for her son-in-law: "I am burning with love within; I am burning, and my breast has an unseen wound" (see *Heroides* IV.15-20). However, it is in Book XV of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that the story is narrated in detail. Speaking from the point of view of Hippolytus, Ovid explains what happened to him as the result of his "stepmother's wicked art" (XV.479-551). According to this myth, Phaedra, the wife of Theseus, fell in love with Hippolytus, Theseus's son and therefore, her son-in-law. Like the previous narratives, this relationship is incestuous in nature and "constitute[s] a betrayal of both human trust and divine law" (Goldman 33-34).

Being devoted to the goddess Artemis and faithful to his father, Hippolytus rejected her advances (XV.479-551). In order to take revenge, Phaedra accused him of having raped her in a letter written to her husband, Theseus, and committed suicide. Enraged, Theseus cursed his son before Neptune. As a result, the god called for a monster from the sea who frightened Hippolytus' chariot horses and he was doomed to death ("Theseus and the Heroes of Attica"'; See also "Hippolytus" 165 and Grimal 204).

> Though I was guiltless of all wrong,
> my father banished me and, while I was

> departing, laid on me a mortal curse.
> Towards Pittheus and Troezen I fled aghast,
> guiding the swift chariot near the shore
> of the Corinthian Gulf, when all at once
> the sea rose up and seemed to arch itself
> and lift high as a white topped mountain height,
> make bellowings, and open at the crest. (*Metamorphoses* XV.479-551)

The last part of this myth is interesting because, unlike Joseph, Bata and Bellerophon, who could prove their innocence and save their lives, Hippolytus dies unfairly (see Lattimore 6).

2.3.5. SENECA'S *PHAEDRA*

In his play, Seneca tells the story of the frustrated Phaedra, who has been left alone for many years since her husband, King Theseus, has gone on a journey to the underworld in search of Persephone (Seneca 89-98). At the beginning of the play, Phaedra states that she feels a strong love for Hippolytus: "madness has conquered and ruled me" (184-185). Hearing her confessions, the nurse tries to bring her back to her senses (129-132). Later, Phaedra expresses her will to commit suicide (263) as she finds this the only treatment to her suffering. To prevent this, the nurse promises to help her by negotiating with Hippolytus.

In the second part of the play, the nurse approaches Hippolytus and reproaches him for rejecting pleasures of life such as the company of women. Hippolytus, however, defends his innocent way of life, free from evil, which he associates with women and city (559; see also 483-489).[5] Phaedra finally finds an occasion to confess her love directly to Hippolytus (665-671). Shocked and frightened with his stepmother's incestuous request, Hippolytus flees to the forests (718) and the nurse screams, accusing him of rape (719-735).

Later, Theseus returns home from the underworld. Being acquainted with Phaedra's accusations, he gets enraged and curses him, using the third of the three wishes granted to him by his father:

[5] Cristóbal López argues that this utterance implies three themes: 1. Life in contact with nature as a source of happiness, which has cynical-stoic origins, 2. The *locus amoenus* (pleasant location), with poetic roots, and 3. The Golden age, suppressed by the arrival of evil, which has a mythological origin. The three themes concern the happy life and develop in Classical poetry (155).

"Come, fulfil this grim gift, ruler of the sea! Let Hippolytus not look on the bright daylight any longer; in youth let him meet the spirits his father angered" (942-948).

As the result, Hippolytus's death is informed by the messenger. It is told that his horses were horrified by a monstrous bull rising from the sea, so his chariot was thrown and he was torn apart (1000-1114). In the final part, Phaedra laments over the death of Hippolytus, feels guilty, confesses the truth and commits suicide (For a detailed narration of the myth, see Hamilton 220-223).

3. O'NEILL'S *DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS*

3.1. SUMMARY

O'Neill's play tells the story of Ephraim Cabot, who returns home after a long trip accompanied by Abbie Putnam, his new wife who is much younger than him. Unsatisfied with her marriage, Abbie gets infatuated with Eben, Ephraim's youngest son, who is obsessed with taking revenge on his father for the death of his mother. After a series of struggles, Eben and Abbie finally unite and Abbie gets pregnant; however, to receive the inheritance (the farm) from Ephraim, she makes him believe that the child is his. Later, Eben becomes suspicious that Abbie's love was a lie, purposely made to have a child with him for possessing the farm. To prove that this is not true, Abbie kills the baby and tells Ephraim the whole truth. Enraged with Abbie for killing the child, Eben reports the murder to the sheriff. However, after a while he regrets and returns to Abbie with sympathy. At the end of the play, the sheriff comes, both Abbie and Eben confess their guilt and are arrested. As we can see, the *topos* of the scheme of Potiphar's wife (the story of a married woman in love with her son-in-law) plays an important role in the development of the story, but only as a secondary subject-matter.

3.2. THE SCHEME OF POTIPHAR'S WIFE IN THE PLAY

As for the main question of this study, that is the *topos* of the scheme of Potiphar's wife, one can find similar stages of this narrative in the relationship between Eben and Abbie:

1. Since Abbie is not satisfied with her marriage with Ephraim, she gets infatuated with her son-in-law, Eben, who is young and physically attractive. As O'Neill describes:

> *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* (I.4.338).

From the first moments of their encounter, Abbie tries to seduce Eben. O'Neill states that Abbie uses her "seductive tones … all through" the scene (I.4.338) and at the end, she confesses her desire:

> ABBIE. (*walks up to him -a queer coarse expression of desire in her face and body-slowly*) An' upstairs-that be my bedroom-an' my bed! (*He stares into her eyes, terribly confused and torn. She adds softly*) I hain't bad nor mean-'ceptin' fur an enemy-but I got t' fight fur what's due me out o' life, if I ever 'spect t' git it. *(then putting her hand on his arm-seductively*) Let's yew 'n' me be frens, Eben. (I.4.339)

2. However, Eben rejects Abbie's advances with resentment and tries to escape the situation:

> EBEN. (*stupidly-as if hypnotized*) Ay-eh. (*then furiously flinging off her arm*) No, ye durned old witch! I hate ye! (*He rushes out the door.*) (I.4.339).

3. Feeling furious about Eben's rejection, Abbie decides to take revenge by reporting him to his husband, accusing him of having tried to seduce her:

> ABBIE. (*vengefully*) Just let me tell ye a thing or two 'bout Eben! Whar's he gone? T' see that harlot, Min! I tried fur t' stop him. Disgracin' yew an' me-on the Sabbath, too!
>
> CABOT. (*rather guiltily*) He's a sinner-nateral-born. It's lust eatin' his heart.
>
> ABBIE. (*enraged beyond endurance-wildly vindictive*) An' his lust fur me! Kin ye find excuses fur that?
>
> CABOT. (*stares at her-after a dead pause*) Lust-fur yew?

> ABBIE. (*defiantly*) He was tryin' t' make love t' me-when ye heerd us quarrelin'. (II.1.345)

4. Finally, Ephraim gets enraged and decides to punish Eben: "By the A'mighty God – I'll end him!" (II.1.345). Here, Ephraim's calling on God evokes Theseus's invocation of Poseidon, the god of sea: "Father Poseidon, thou didst promise me/ Three curses once. Do thou with one of these / Destroy my son: may he not 'scape this day, / If soothfast curses thou hast granted me" (Euripides 888-890).

As we can see, all the stages of the scheme of Potiphar's wife have clearly been incorporated in O'Neill's play. As a result, it can be concluded that the *topos* has weaved itself over time into the play. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the story does not end in this stage and continues in a different way from the previous narratives mentioned. This is what makes O'Neill's play a creative adaptation. After Abbie finds Ephraim enraged with Eben, she gets frightened of harming Eben so she tries to convince Ephraim that it was not at all serious:

> ABBIE. (*in a quieting tone*) Listen, Ephraim, 'Twa'n't nothin' bad-on'y a boy's fooling'-'twa'n't meant serious-jest jokin' an' teasin' (II.1.346)

As the play progresses, Abbie continues her seductions and Eben gets closer to her. Finally, unlike Bata, Joseph and Hippolytus, Eben yields to his desire and unites with Abbie:

> 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.*) (II.III.355)

As the result of this affair, they bear a child and at the end of the play, when the truth is revealed by their own confessions, both are punished (II.IV.377-378).

Obviously, O'Neill is writing for an audience who live in the twentieth century, a time in which many young people experience affairs before marriage, so they are not chaste in the sense of the cases with Hippolytus or Joseph. The mode of punishment is also different. Ephraim is not as powerful as Potiphar or Anpu, neither is Abbie as weak as Potiphar's wife to commit suicide in the face of difficulties. At the end, when both confess their guilt, they continue to be in love and accept to go with the sheriff together. This is the art

of O'Neill to take the original story and to adapt it for the new context. However, the main idea of the *topos* (a married woman's love for her son-in-law and his rejection) has been faithfully kept at the beginning of the story.

3.3. SOURCES OF INFLUENCE

3.3.1. THE BIBLICAL STORY

Critics have remarked that echoes of the Joseph story can be found in *Desire under the Elms*. Abbie's lustful advances towards her stepson and her efforts to take revenge by accusing him when he rejects her advances reverberate Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Alexander, *Eugene O'Neill's Creative Struggle* 33). Eisen also considers Abbie a "wife-of-Potiphar figure" and argues that the play implies "a biblical … sense of fate" (348-349). Besides, as in the biblical story of Joseph, in this play, the younger brother figure is the focus of attention. However, unlike Joseph, he is not the father's favorite child. Rather, the relationship is based on strong mutual resentment as he struggles to possess the farm from his father, brothers, and stepmother. Other elements in the play also recall the biblical story, such as the fact that Ephraim was Joseph's ancestor and Simeon was Joseph's second older brother (348).[6]

Like the description of Joseph in *The Book of Genesis* as "well-built and handsome" (NIV.39.6), O'Neill characterizes Eben as "well-formed" and "good-looking" (I.1.319). As Goldman contends,

> the hero figure of all of these tales is endowed with great beauty and strength. Of Bata we are told that "there was no one like him in the entire land," that Joseph was "well built and handsome," and that "to Bellerophon the gods granted beauty and desirable manhood." The hero proves irresistibly attractive to the female protagonists of the tales: the wives of Anubis, Proitos, and Potiphar, respectively. (Goldman 33)

This is perhaps another reason why Abbie gets infatuated by him immediately after their first encounter. Furthermore, when Ephraim

[6] For a study of the significance of names in O'Neill's play see the work by Ou.

prays to have a child with Abbie, he quotes some verses from the bible that "precede the Joseph saga" (Eisen 349): "Pray t' the Lord agen, Abbie. It's the Sabbath! I'll jine ye! Two prayers air better nor one. 'An' God hearkened unto Rachel'![7] An' God hearkened unto Abbie! Pray, Abbie! Pray fur him to hearken!" (O'Neill II.2.347).[8] Finally, as punishment, both Joseph and Eben are sent to prison, although Joseph is released afterwards while Eben's fate is not mentioned in the play. All these instances testify the influence of the biblical story of Joseph on O'Neill's writing of the play.

Nevertheless, there are also deviations from the biblical narrative. While Joseph and Potiphar's wife have a great gap in age, Abbie and Eben are closer in age and they fit better as a couple. Potiphar and his wife have for many years taken care of Joseph, while Abbie is a newcomer and Eben owes nothing to her except the respect as his father's new wife. Besides, the story of their relationship is not only based on lust, but also includes other elements like their interest in possessing Ephraim's farm: in fact, the audience is always suspicious of their love, until the moment Abbie kills the child and Eben confesses his guilt to the sheriff. It is also clear that both Eben and Abbie hate Ephraim and long for taking revenge on him, which is not the case in the biblical narrative.

Eben, unlike Joseph, hates his father because he finds him responsible for the death of his mother. From the beginning of the play, he expresses his eagerness to take revenge and to grasp the farm. Unlike the brothers of Joseph in the biblical story, who try to kill him in order to gain the attention of their parents, in the play it is Eben who gives money to the two brothers to acquire the property of the farm entirely. The ghost of the dead mother also plays an important role in the story: Eben yields to Abbie's lust only when she enters the room of the mother, closed since her death; and when Abbie is able to play the role of a mother for Eben.

In short, despite the deviations from the biblical story, its influence can still be perceived in the play's basic representation of the scheme of Potiphar's wife.

[7] "Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive" ("Genesis", NIV.30.22).

[8] Hays argues that in the play it is Ephraim more than other characters who "makes religious statements apply to irreligious acts" (424).

3.3.2. THE CLASSICAL GREEK TRADITION

The influence of Greek tradition on Eugene O'Neill is undeniable. He had most probably known Greek tragedy before becoming a playwright. He read plays by Sophocles and Euripides at the age of 13 at school. At the time, these plays were taught in Catholic schools to teach moral lessons to students (Black, "'Mourning Becomes Electra' as a Greek Tragedy" 168). Some of his plays have been studied by the critics in comparison with Greek tragedies and mythology.[9] This relationship is more evident in those plays that include the name of Greek characters in their title, like *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Besides, in Betts Academy he studied Classical subjects and read Classical works. He must have, for sure, read Greek tragedies there (Black, "'Mourning Becomes Electra' as a Greek Tragedy" 168-169). Referring to the influence of Greek tragedy on O'Neill's plays, Nugent states that he tries to "wed psychoanalytic theory to the Greek mythic material" to finally modernize Greek tragedy for the American stage (38-39).

Narey examines how the tragedies of Euripides have influenced the writing of *Desire Under the Elms*. Similarly, Robinson shows that this play "enacts ancient Greek myths in nineteenth-century New England" (70). Considering the assessments proposed by these critics, it seems that O'Neill's play is as Greek as it is biblical. There are similarities between O'Neill's characters and those of the Greek myth, as presented by Euripides. As an example, Eben's interest in the farm, rather than modern life in the city, echoes Hippolytus's worship of Artemis, goddess of hunt and wild nature, in Euripides's tragedy. There also similarities between Abbie and Phaedra. Like Phaedra, Abbie hides her feelings before she expresses them directly to Eben. Both make advances and, when rejected, calumniate the boy. In both stories, the fathers (Theseus and Ephraim) curse the son and eventually are left alone with the kingdom (the farm in the case of Ephraim) (Racey 44 and Berlin 53-

[9] Stephen A. Black, for example, discusses the influence of O'Neill's readings of Greek tragedy on the formation of his plays ("'Celebrant of loss'" 12; "'Mourning Becomes Electra' as a Greek Tragedy" 168-169; *Eugene O'Neill: Beyond Mourning and Tragedy* 340; see also works by Apaibandikul, Uzunefe Yazgan, Chirico, Alexander, Sederberg, Peterson, and Parks, among many others). Egil Tornqvist goes further to show the influence of Greek tragedy on O'Neill's literary as well as philosophical paragons (Tornqvist 19; see also Shafer 139, Sinha 51 and Bloom 26 who point to O'Neill's personal readings of Greek tragedy).

54). The play also echoes Euripides's *Medea*: the mother (Abbie) kills her own child, as Medea killed the sons born to Jason. Thus, by embracing "the spirit of Greek tragedy" in his works (Hermann-Miller 71), O'Neill follows the literary "tradition"[10], recreating the myth of Hippolytus and the tragedy by Euripides.

Nonetheless, he does not limit himself to a strict act of imitation or a literal translation of Classical sources. Instead, he adapts them to a new historical and cultural context, that is twentieth century America, in such a way that echoes of the American dream permeate the play, the ghost of the mother replaces the power of Aphrodite and "the important animal in O'Neill's play is not a bull but a cow" (see Berlin 53). Thus, although O'Neill's writing of the play is in various ways under the influence of the classical tradition, the use of the *topos* is inserted in a modern rural American setting. The middle-class characters are not heroes, in its Greek sense, but normal people with their points of strength and flaws.

Critics have also admitted that *Desire Under the Elms* is an American tragedy with elements borrowed from Greek stories. O'Neill has made many deviations from the Classical sources to modernize his work. As an example, while the chorus plays an important role in Greek tragedy, O'Neill has transferred this role to the townspeople, whose suspicious gossiping conversations foreshadow the future of the story (Bloom 28). Besides, while Gods direct the action of the characters in Greek drama,[11] they have no roles in O'Neill's play. Instead, the power of the ghost of the dead mother as represented through the elms embracing the house dominates the life of the characters. Thus, although O'Neill and Euripides focus on one single story, each tries to write a tragedy that matches the demands of his time (see Bloom 28; Berlin 33; Berlin 55; Jing and Feng-chun 1046).

There are more examples justifying this claim. While Phaedra is unsuccessful in fulfilling her love, Abbie finally wins Eben. In his

[10] Laguna Mariscal distinguishes between tradition (genetic dependency) and phenomena of polygenesis or independent creation ("Eres mi padre y mi madre" 208).

[11] In Euripides's *Hippolytus*, gods play a key role in determining the life of individuals. As Berlin explains, Euripides has placed his story "in a divine framework" in such a way that it begins and ends with the presence of gods (Aphrodite in the beginning and Artemis at the end) and their statues are present to the audience throughout the play, signifying their influence on the actions of the protagonists (Berlin 34; see also Lattimore 7 and Knox 312). More importantly, Hippolytus is the victim of Aphrodite's anger with him for worshiping Artemis, goddess of hunt: "But his defiance of me I avenge / Upon Hippolytus this day" (Euripides 22-23).

turn, Eben is not as chaste as Joseph or Hippolytus: it is mentioned that he goes from time to time to the house of a prostitute. Therefore, he is rather like Hippolytus' womanizer father, Theseus. The father, Ephraim, reminds also of Theseus in being the possessor of many women (three wives in a row, plus Min) (see Berlin 54).

Furthermore, Abbie's desire for Eben is not only based on lust and love (as in the case of the original myth), but has a material motivation; greed for the farm motivates her to marry Ephraim and to seduce his son (Berlin 55; See Flath 90). Finally, while in Greek sources, Hippolytus is doomed to death alone, O'Neill ends his play with Abbie and Eben delivered together to the arms of justice. In sum, O'Neill's work, while imitating a mixture of Greek sources, has deconstructed many of the Classical elements for the purpose of creating an adaptation which matches the expectations of an American audience.[12]

4. CONCLUSION

In the present study, the literary scheme of Potiphar's Wife has been introduced and its development in the history of literature investigated. First, this *topos* was presented in terms of conceptual content and literary form. It is argued that this *topos* consists of four stages and is neither as particular as a *leitmotiv*, nor as general as a theme. Then, the presence of the *topos* has been traced in the biblical *Book of Genesis*, the Egyptian "Tale of Two Brothers", Homer's story of Bellerophon and Anteia, and the myth of Hippolytus as recounted by Homer, Euripides, Ovid, and Seneca. Finally, the recreation of the *topos* in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* was examined and the similarities and differences with the sources were pointed out.

The results of the study suggest that O'Neill follows the tradition, that is the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, as told in the Bible, as well as the story of Hippolytus, as presented by Euripides. On the other hand, the similarities between the biblical and the mythical traditions are due to coincidence and polygenesis

[12] Critics have also referred to the possible influence of Jean Racine's *Phèdre* on O'Neill's writing of the play. See, for instance, the essay by Meyers. See also Morford and Lenardon 162; Grene and Lattimore 241. However, since the focus of this study is on classical sources, Racine's play has not been discussed.

(Laguna Mariscal, "Eres mi padre y mi madre" 217). Finally, O'Neill's tragedy is a fusion of different sources and, at the same time, a deconstruction of many elements of the Classical tradition. It is concluded that the scheme of Potiphar's wife as a literary *topos* is part of a longstanding tradition which has appeared over time in literary works and reached O'Neill's play. O'Neill's reception of the *topos* is original and creative. By following the same stages of the scheme of Potiphar's wife, he echoes the cultural tradition, while, by deviating from them, he creates an adaptation that reflects the historical context of twentieth century America.

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