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NEW INSIGHTS INTO LITERARY *TOPOI:* A STUDY OF 'MADNESS FOR GUILT AND REMORSE'

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Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to offer a new perspective towards the literary *topoi*, both in theory and practice, by elaborating on the definition of *topos*, as well as its similarities and differences from other literary concepts, such as motif, leitmotiv, or theme. By focusing on the *topos* of 'madness for guilt and remorse', we intend to apply our theoretical proposal to a close reading of literary texts. The evolution of this *topos* from classical tradition to modern American drama will also be traced. The following texts will be examined: Euripides's *Orestes* (408 BC), Vergil's *Aeneid* (29-19 BC), Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), Nathaniel Hawthorne's «Roger Malvin's Burial» (1832) and Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). It is argued that the presence of this *topos* in the aforementioned works follows in the footsteps of Euripides's retelling of the myth of Orestes. The results of the study testify to the creative recurrence of this *topos* in Western literature.

Keywords: literary *topoi*, madness for guilt, classical reception, classical literature.

NUEVA APROXIMACIÓN AL CONCEPTO DE TÓPICO LITERARIO: LA TRAYECTORIA DEL TÓPICO 'LOCURA POR CULPA Y REMORDIMIENTO'

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Resumen

El objetivo del presente artículo es ofrecer una nueva visión sobre los tópicos literarios tanto en la teoría como en la práctica, contribuyendo a la definición misma de tópico, así como estudiando las similitudes y diferencias de este concepto literario con otros, como motivo, *leitmotiv* o tema. Centrándonos en la evolución literaria del tópico de la 'locura por culpa y remordimiento' desde la tradición clásica hasta el drama estadounidense moderno, pretendemos aplicar nuestra propuesta teórica al análisis de textos literarios. Se rastreará el desarrollo del citado tópico en *Orestes* de Eurípides (408 a.C.), *Eneida* de Virgilio (29-19 a.C.), *Macbeth* de Shakespeare (1606), «Roger Malvin's Burial» de Nathaniel Hawthorne (1832) y *Mourning Becomes Electra* de Eugene O'Neill (1931). Se argumenta que la presencia de este tópico en las obras mencionadas sigue la tradición de la versión de Eurípides del mito de Orestes. Los resultados del estudio atestiguan la recurrencia creativa de este tópico en la literatura occidental.

Palabras clave.: *topoi* literarios, locura por culpa, recepción clásica, literatura clásica.

1. Introduction

The origin of the literary *topoi* is shrouding in mystery. However, most scholars agree that they have a long history in modern critical theory from Ernest Robert Curtius, who defined them as «rhetorical commonplaces» in 1948[1]. After him, critics contributed their own definitions, some bringing examples[2], but nobody ever solved this

[1] According to Curtius (1983: xii), *topoi* were comprised of «notions that could be digested into a single phrase» or ones «which could be treated variously and at length».

[2] Aguiar e Silva (1972: 390), for example, followed the same approach as Curtius and defined the *topoi* as patterns of argumentation which pass from one generation to another and are solidified into «a stereotype or cliché». Leeman (1982: 189) describes *topos* as «a literary treatment of a certain idea» in a way that the audience can recognize «a certain tradition pattern». Escobar (2000: 137-142) also delineates some of the characteristics of *topoi*. According to him, a *topos* must be anonymous, universal, traditional, with a variable extension, with a conceptual content, and a rhetorical function. In a similar way, Most and Conte (2012: 1489, s. v. «Topos») consider it «a standard form of rhetorical argumentation or a variably expressible literary commonplace». Gómez Luque (2018: 33-58) dedicates a complete chapter of his dissertation to the history of topicology and further introduces the *topos* of «love seafare». Following the traditional definition of a literary topic as «a common place that is repeated with an almost identical structure and lexicon», López Gregoris (2021: 707-715) surveys the history of Thematology as well as its different functions and categorizations.

question in practice: what is the difference between a theme, a motif, a leitmotiv and a *topos*?[3].

This question motivated the present study mainly because, as scholars interested in doing research on literary *topoi*, we faced the difficulty of distinguishing between the three terms. It is true that finding an answer to this question is challenging, since literary criticism and literature in general always involve a certain level of subjectivity. However, delineating some of the characteristics of *topoi,* as well as their similarities or differences from other concepts such as theme or motif, could help us differentiate them more appropriately.

We are indebted to two studies previously published by Laguna Mariscal (1999; 2014), who distinguishes a literary *topos* in terms of semantic content, literary form, and development in the history of literature. According to him, a literary *topos* should be understood as the expression of a semantic content with an intermediate level of concretion. This semantic content is expressed through a particular literary form with a particular structure. Moreover, it should have been developed within the historical tradition, springing in classical literature, and reaching modern literature (Laguna Mariscal, 1999: 201; 2014: 27-30).

Based on this definition, parts of the doubts are solved, although not all. Before getting into this analysis, it is adequate to take a quick review of the definition of the other similar terms so that a comparison will be easier. A theme is «a general concept or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to involve and make persuasive to the reader» (Abrams and Harpham, 2015: 230)[4].

[3] Márquez (2002: 254-255) distinguishes between the terms topic, *topos* and motif. Following Curtius, he suggests that a topic is a concept derived from rhetoric and refers to an abstract or general literary matter that is recognized as common. More precisely, a rhetorical *topos* is a means of exploring the subject and finding the formal arguments. Moreover, a motif has a temporary function like a theme, but is repeated in a single literary work. López Gregoris (2021: 708) also addresses the same terms and tries to clarify their differences. According to her, a topic is «an optional literary instrument». Whether a topic becomes a motif depends on its use and repetition in an author's work.

[4] In a similar way, critics define it as a «central idea» (Cuddon, 1999: 913), «a salient abstract idea» (Baldick, 2001: 258) or «a branch of the subject» (Childs and Fowler, 2006: 239). See also López Gregoris (2021: 707). Some suggest that a theme can be used

Considering this definition, murder, love, death, marriage, or jealousy could all be considered a theme. A motif, defined as «a conspicuous element … which occurs frequently in works of literature» (Abrams and Harpham, 2015: 229), would be a sub-level of theme[5]. In other words, a motif is a repeated element, device or image in literary works. *Carpe diem* could be considered the best example which has been represented in many classical and modern literary works (Abrams and Harpham, 2015: 46). A leitmotiv, on the other hand, having a more limited scope than a motif, requires the recurrent element to be repeated within one literary or artistic work (Cuddon, 1999: 453; Quinn, 2006: 238)[6]. For example, in O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), many images of death appear.

These words are essential in literary criticism. Now it is appropriate to establish the comparison between these concepts. According to Laguna Mariscal's discussion, firstly, a *topos* is neither as general as a theme nor as particular as a leitmotif. Rather, it has an intermediate level of semantic concretion like a motif. Secondly, while literary form is not a requirement for a theme nor a motif, a *topos* requires a particular structure, a lexical register or a literary imagery. Thirdly, a *topos* requires not only recurrence but also development from classical tradition towards modern literature (beginning with the Renaissance period). Thus, its appearance in several examples of classical works is a necessity.

This third criterion makes it easier to distinguish between a *topos* and a motif because, once we realize a motif has not appeared in classical works, it cannot be considered a *topos*. Finally, *topoi* as «argumentative elements of the literary discourse» have a function, that is, to reflect on human attitudes (Laguna Mariscal, 2014: 27). Consequently, a *topos*,

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interchangeably with motif (Quinn, 2006: 417). Baldick (2001: 258) also defines it in a similar way to a motif: «a topic recurring in a number of literary works».

[5] Cuddon (1999: 522) suggests that a motif is «a part of the main theme» while according to Quinn (2006: 269) a motif is «a concrete example of a theme». Márquez (2002: 255) argues that a theme «must be repeated in a given *corpus* and naturally fulfill an integrating function in that corpus» in order to be considered a motif. See also Baldick (2001: 162).

[6] Baldick (2001: 138) argues that the purpose of the recurrence of motif is to support or indicate the general theme.

regardless of the theme of the story, enriches the text in terms of meaning[7]. The table below summarizes all the points:

	Theme	Motif	Leitmotiv	Topos
Conceptual Content	General	Intermediate	Specific	Intermediate
Literary Form	Not necessary	Not necessary	Not necessary	Specific structure
Historical Development	Not necessary	Recurrence in literature in general	Recurrence in one single work	Recurrence in different texts, from classical tradition to modern literature

TABLE 1: Comparison of the similar terms based on Laguna Mariscal's definition of *topos*.

It is important to remember that on some occasions the use of these terms could overlap[8]. For example, *carpe diem* could be considered both a motif and a *topos*; however, in most occasions, based on the mentioned criteria, we are able to differentiate these terms (Gómez Luque, 2018: 35-36):

	Theme	Motif	Topos	Leitmotiv
Level of semantics	X	√	√	X
Structure	X	X	√	X
Appearance in classical tradition	X	X	√	X
Universality	X	√	√	X
Recurrence in literature in general	X	√	√	X
Rhetorical function	X	√	√	X
Development from classical to modern literature	X	X	√	X

TABLE 2: Common points according to Laguna Mariscal's definition

[7] Escobar (2000: 139) also believes that the use of the topic is conscious, not spontaneous.

[8] Abrams and Harpham (2015: 230) argue that the terms *topos* and motif can sometimes be used interchangeably.

It is appropriate to bring an example and demonstrate the theory we have discussed earlier in practical terms.

2. 'MADNESS FOR GUILT' AS A *TOPOS*

According to the definition offered, 'madness for guilt', could be considered a literary *topos*. It can be defined as the mental experience of a literary character, associated with self-guilt resulting from a wrong action/incident happened in the past, in which she/he un/deliberately had a contribution. This *topos* often appears in the context of tragic works of any genre and comprises five stages:

1. The character commits a wrong action against the law or the established values out of anger. This action affects the life of another person in a tragic way.

2. The character reaches the moment of recognition (*anagnorisis*), when it is too late to compensate for the past action.

3. He/she feels guilty and begins to anguish and blame him/herself.

4. As the consequence of this feeling of guilt or as a godly punishment for the wrong deed, he/she experiences mental disorder[9].

5. Finally, this madness causes the character to take action un/consciously in order to relieve him/herself from the feeling of remorse.

It must be noted that, almost always during this process, a murder is involved, either as the main action of the character or as the consequence of his/her madness. Here we will review shortly the historical development of this *topos* in literature, as represented in Euripides's *Orestes* (408 BC), Vergil's *Aeneid* (29-19 BC), Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), Nathaniel Hawthorne's «Roger Malvin's Burial» (1832), and Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931).

[9] Here, by madness we simply follow Theodorou's (1993: 33) general definition as «disorder of human mind». Padel (1992: 176) specifically defines tragic madness as «inner wandering, wounding, twisting, dislocation» which is «associated with the outward violence of murder».

2.1. Euripides's Orestes

The best example of madness for guilt and remorse in classical Greek tragedy could be traced back to the story of Orestes's murder of Clytemnestra, his own mother, and his consequent madness recounted by Euripides[10]. The play starts on the sixth day after Clytemnestra's death. Orestes feels agitated as a result of the matricide (*Orestes* 395-400):

Μενέλαος: τί χρῆμα πάσχεις; τίς σ᾽ ἀπόλλυσιν νόσος; 395
Ὀρέστης: ἡ σύνεσις, ὅτι σύνοιδα δείν᾽ εἰργασμένος.
Μενέλαος: πῶς φῄς; σοφόν τοι τὸ σαφές, οὐ τὸ μὴ σαφές.
Ὀρέστης: λύπη μάλιστά γ᾽ ἡ διαφθείρουσά με–
Μενέλαος: δεινὴ γὰρ ἡ θεός, ἀλλ᾽ ὅμως ἰάσιμος.
Ὀρέστης: μανίαι τε, μητρὸς αἵματος τιμωρίαι. 400

[Menelaus: What ails you? What is your deadly sickness?
Orestes: My conscience; I know that I am guilty of a dreadful crime.
Menelaus: What do you mean? Wisdom is shown in clarity, not in obscurity.
Orestes: Grief especially has ruined me–
Menelaus: Yes, she is a dreadful goddess, yet are there cures for her.
Orestes: And fits of madness, the vengeance of a mother's blood].

As we can notice, Orestes himself admits that he is suffering from a mental illness («fits of madness»), due to excessive remorse for his mother's death. In different parts of the play, his illness is described with the following symptoms: he does not eat, nor washes himself. He is all the time lying down on his bed, weeping in some moments (40-46). He does not brush his hair (224), has «flakes of foam» (ἀφρώδη πέλανον) over his mouth and eyes (219-220) and feels weak and unable to move (223-233). It is explicitly stated that Orestes is suffering «a cruel disease» (ἀγρίᾳ… νόσῳ), which has driven him «round and round in frenzied fits»

[10] Similarly, in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the murder of Clytemnestra causes Orestes anguish and remorse. See March (2001: 567) and Feder (1980: 76-84). Padel (1995: 37) discusses the differences between the madness of Orestes in the different plays by Euripides and Aeschylus. See also Padel (1992: 162-192). For a comparison of different versions of this story in classical literature see March (2001: 566-570). For an interpretation of the original myth see Hamilton (1942: 350-363).

(τροχηλατεῖ /μανίαισιν) (34-35)[11], a disease which is caused by «inner disturbance» (Theodorou, 1993: 35)[12].

He constantly blames himself for performing this deadly action and ruining his own honor (*Orestes* 466-468): «Ah me! my wretched heart and soul, it was a sorry return I made them! What darkness can I find for my face?» (ὦ τάλαινα καρδία ψυχή τ᾽ ἐμή, / ἀπέδωκ᾽ ἀμοιβὰς οὐ καλάς. τίνα σκότον / λάβω προσώπῳ;). Before killing his mother, he was filled with rage and eagerness to avenge the death of his father. However, immediately after his will is satisfied and he reaches his goal, he realizes that it was a great mistake and regrets his actions. It is at this moment that he cannot compensate for the wrong action and suffers mental restlessness. When Menelaus asks him when he has experienced regret, Orestes replies: «On the day I was heaping the mound over my poor mother's grave» (ἐν ᾗ τάλαιναν μητέρ᾽ ἐξώγκουν τάφῳ) (402). In other words, Orestes experiences *anagnorisis*, but only after the death is accomplished[13].

Moreover, Orestes decided to kill his mother under the influence of a god (153-165)[14]: «It is Phoebus, who commanded me to kill my mother» (Φοῖβος, κελεύσας μητρὸς ἐκπρᾶξαι φόνον) (416). Therefore, now only gods can save his life and rescue him from this madness. That is why, «racked by remorse and pitifully weakened by disease» (Wright, 2008: 54-55), he decides to ask Menelaus, Helen's husband and king of Sparta, for help. However, once Menelaus refuses to help them in the trial, Orestes and Electra devise a new plot against him, Helen and their daughter Hermione. The purpose of this scheme is to exert revenge and to force their forgiveness in the trial (*Orestes* 1598-1624). Eventually, while they attempt to kill Menelaus's daughter, a god appears as *deus ex machina* (as in many of Euripides's tragedies) and solves the conflict. However,

[11] For an interpretation of Orestes's symptoms of madness see Wright (2008: 55-56).

[12] Ross (1989: 114) believes that in classical tragedy the concept of madness is usually driven by «external causes». It has been argued that the madness demonstrated in this play is very tangible since the audience can see all the details including «what triggers it, its development, peak, and dying away» (Theodorou, 1993: 35).

[13] Padel (1995: 79) believes that this madness serves as a form of punishment for Orestes.

[14] In Greek tragedies, the madness of the hero is «always provoked by the gods» (Ross, 1989: 114). Padel (1995: 216) also suggests that Orestes is «caught in divine conflict». See also Willink's (1986: 166, 179) emphasis on the «god-sent madness» of Orestes.

the *topos* of murder for guilt with all its stages remains as the leading principle of the plot[15].

2.2. Virgil's Aeneid

In classical Roman literature, Amata's sense of guilt and her consequent suicide in Vergil's *Aeneid* could be considered a good representation of the *topos* of madness for guilt and remorse[16]. According to this story, Amata, the wife of king Latinus and the mother of Lavinia, wishes her daughter married Turnus, her favorite suitor, while Latinus accepts her marriage with Aeneas (Vergil, *Aeneid* VII 45-80). Filled with «wrath and fear» and wishing to take revenge, Amata propitiates a war between Aeneas and Turnus (VII 346-348):

> Huic dea caeruleis unum de crinibus anguem
> conicit inque sinum praecordia ad intuma subdit,
> quo furibunda domum monstro permisceat omnem.
>
> [From her Stygian hair the fiend
> a single serpent flung, which stole its way
> to the Queen's very heart, that, frenzy-driven,
> she might on her whole house confusion pour].

The war does not progress as she expects, and she is falsely informed that Turnus is also dead. Feeling guilty and remorseful, she decides to hang herself (XII 598-603)[17]:

[15] This relationship between guilt caused by aggression and madness provoked by remorse is similarly represented in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, where «Primitive guilt, vengeance, and madness are intrinsic to the mythical narrative» and therefore, «to its subject and theme» (Feder, 1980: 78).

[16] Amata felt so guilty that she thought she deserved death (Farron, 1993: 102).

[17] For more interpretations of Amata's story, see Moskalew (1982: 172), Farron (1993: 102-103) and March (2001: 81).

infelix pugnae iuvenem in certamine credit
exstinctum et, subito mentem turbata dolore,
se causam clamat crimenque caputque malorum, 600
multaque per maestum demens effata furorem
purpureos moritura manu discindit amictus
et nodum informis leti trabe nectit ab alta.

[she, poor soul, believed
her youthful champion in the conflict slain;
and, mad with sudden sorrow, shrieked aloud
against herself, the guilty chief and cause
of all this ill; and, babbling her wild woe
in endless words, she rent her purple pall,
and with her own hand from the rafter swung
a noose for her foul death].

As the poet describes Amata's mood, we realize that before the act of suicide she experiences anguish, guilt, and despair: «mad with sudden sorrow, shrieked aloud against herself, the guilty chief and cause of all this ill» (*subito mentem turbata dolore, / se causam clamat crimenque caputque malorum, / multaque per maestum demens effata furorem*) (XII 599-601). However, it is too late to compensate for the past. That is why she concludes that death is the only remedy for her mental suffering.

2.3. Shakespeare's Macbeth

Madness for guilt is a recurrent *topos* in Shakespeare's plays. One of its most famous manifestations is Lady Macbeth's remorse and her guilt-driven madness in the last act of *Macbeth*[18]. Unlike classical narratives, in this tale Lady Macbeth's guilt is not caused by divine intervention but is the result of her own actions (Ross, 1989: 114). After persuading her husband to kill the king (who is also his cousin), she is trapped by her own conscience. She walks while sleeping, talks about her deeds and

[18] Numerous critics have examined the sense of guilt in *Macbeth*: Scheff (1997: 148), Schimmel (2002: 150-152), Teubert (2004: 138-141), Eigen (2005: 183), Katchadourian (2010: 28-32), Aden (2012), and Hobgood (2013: 33-36).

constantly rubs her hand in an effort to clean the blood of the ones they have murdered (*Macbeth* 5.5.17-27).

> Since his majesty went into the field, I have seen her rise from her bed, throw her night-gown upon her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it, write upon't, read it, afterwards seal it, and again return to bed, yet all this while in a most fast sleep (*Macbeth* 5.1.3-7).
>
> Doctor. What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands.
> Gentlewoman. It is an accustomed action with her, to seem thus washing her hands; (*Macbeth* 5.1.23-26).

Finally, not being able to resist her conscience and fight her «infected mind» (see 5.1.61-69), she commits suicide, leaving Macbeth in despair (5.5.17-27).

2.4. Hawthorne's «Roger Malvin's Burial»

In 1832, Nathaniel Hawthorne published anonymously the short story «Roger Malvin's Burial», which would later be included in the collection *Mosses from and Old Manse* (1846). In the story, after a battle called Lovell's Fight (1725), Roger Malvin and Reuben Bourne, two injured soldiers, struggle to reach home. They decide to have a rest near a rock. Malvin, the older soldier, asks Reuben to leave and save himself. At first, Reuben insists on staying and continuing the journey with Malvin; eventually, he agrees to go, with the justification to find help and rescue Malvin (Hawthorne, 1996: 89-93). Once he arrives home, he forgets about his promise. He marries Dorcas, Malvin's daughter, but he hides the truth from her. This triggers his sense of guilt (97)[19], a feeling which haunts him over his years of life with Dorcas and makes him a troubled person:

> but concealment had imparted to a justifiable act much of the secret effect of guilt; and Reuben, while reason told him that he had done right, experienced in no small degree the mental horrors which punish the perpetrator of undiscovered crime. By a certain association of ideas, he at

[19] Hawthorne (1996: 97) describes that «During the marriage ceremony, the bride was covered with blushes, but the bridegroom's face was pale». Critics believe that Reuben's abandonment of his friend was not a crime or sin, rather, his «failure to admit his desertion or the failure to redeem his vow» is the cause of his guilt (Erlich, 1972: 378).

> times almost imagined himself a murderer. For years, also, a thought would occasionally occur, which, though he perceived all its folly and extravagance, he had not power to banish from his mind (98).

Reuben regrets his past action of abandoning his friend, but he cannot not compensate for it. Furthermore, not knowing what has happened, everybody considers him a hero. That is the reason why he does not dare to confess the truth.

> He regretted, deeply and bitterly, the moral cowardice that had restrained his words, when he was about to disclose the truth to Dorcas; but pride, the fear of losing her affection, the dread of universal scorn, forbade him to rectify his falsehood (97).

Consequently, the guilt turns him into «a sad and a downcast, yet irritable man» (98). One day, the family decides to go on a trip (100). He realizes it is the same time of the year as the day he had left his friend (102-103). His thoughts become a mixture of truth and illusions and he keeps obsessively thinking about what happened that day. In one moment, noticing a shadow, he thinks he has found a deer and immediately fires his gun (104). Instead, he discovers that he has shot his own son in the same place as his father-in-law, Roger Malvin, died (107)[20].

This story illustrates all the stages of the *topos* of madness for guilt. First, he leaves his friend selfishly to save his own life. He reaches *anagnorisis* when everybody considers him a hero and it is too late to rescue the friend. Not being able to compensate the mistake, he suffers remorse, as a result of which «His guilt works outward into the realm of real action: he mistakes his son for a deer and kills him on the very spot when Malvin's bones lie unburied» (Slotkin, 1973: 478). His madness for guilt causes another tragedy in their life.

[20] Sloktin (1973: 478) believes that this tragic ending is caused by Reuben's «flawed character».

2.5. O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra

In his cycle play, which is a recreation of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*,[21] Eugene O'Neill tells the story of Orin and Lavinia, who decide to kill their mother's lover, Adam Brant, to avenge their father's murder. After this action, they go back home to communicate the news to Christine, their mother, who is passionately in love with Adam. Not being able to bear her lover's death, she enters the house and shoots herself with a pistol. Moved by the suicide, Orin, who was always his mother's favorite child, reaches the moment of recognition and experiences anguish, guilt, and madness[22]:

> Orin: Vinnie! (*He grabs her arm and stammers distractedly*) Mother–shot herself–Father's pistol–get a doctor–(*then with hopeless anguish*) No–it's too late–she's dead! (*then wildly*) Why–why did she, Vinnie? (*with tortured self-accusation*) I drove her to it! I wanted to torture her! She couldn't forgive me! Why did I have to boast about killing him? Why–? (O'Neill, 1988: 2.V.1002-1003).

After this, in different parts of the play, O'Neill describes Orin's attitude: «he has grown dreadfully thin» and he has «blank lifeless expression» on his face (3.I.i.1015). He feels the presence of dead people in the house:

> Orin: (*strangely*) I've just been in the study. I was sure she'd be waiting for me in there, where–(*torturedly*) But she wasn't! She isn't anywhere. It's only they–(*He points to the portraits.*) They're everywhere! But she's gone forever. She'll never forgive me now! (3.I.ii.1016).

In fact, Orin suffers a guilt-driven madness like Euripides's Orestes, who «goes mad from the matricide» (Alexander, 2007: 42-43), while his madness doesn't necessarily mean being insane, as in the case of Lady Macbeth. Thus, his actions are all «deliberate» (Bogard, 1988: 353). What makes him feel ill is his suffering from regret and remorse. As he admits, «The only love I can know now is the love of guilt for guilt which breeds

[21] For studies which discuss the influence of *Oresteia* on O'Neill's writing of this play, see Pratt (1956: 165-167), Nugent (1988: 38), Burian (1997: 254-256), Khare (1998: 339-374), Robinson (1998: 76-77), Fischer-Lichte (2004: 300-306), and Alexander (2007: 31-58).

[22] For a study on the nature of guilt in this play see Hooti and Fakhri (2011).

more guilt–until you get so deep at the bottom of hell there is no lower you can sink and you rest there in peace!» (3.III.1037). That is the reason why he does anything to relieve himself from this feeling: «I want to be forgiven!» (3.III.1037). For example, he decides to confess and write down the whole truth (3.II.1026-1029). However, he is constantly being controlled and prevented from taking action by his sister Lavinia. Finally, when his madness reaches its peak, it manifests itself into sexual desire for his own sister:

> Orin: There are times now when you don't seem to be my sister, nor Mother, but some stranger with the same beautiful hair–(*He touches her hair caressingly. She pulls violently away. He laughs wildly.*) Perhaps you're Marie Brantôme, eh? And you say there are no ghosts in this house? (3.III.1042)

Lavinia, feeling overwhelmed with Orin's actions, expresses her resentment and wishes for his death (3.III.1042). Finally, not being able to resist the pain of remorse, he shoots himself with a pistol, just like her mother. His suicide not only relieves him from the world's pains, but also acts as revenge for Lavinia's abandonment of him (3.III.1043):

> It's the way to peace–to find her again–my lost island–Death is an Island of Peace, too–Mother will be waiting for me there– (*with excited eagerness now, speaking to the dead*) Mother! Do you know what I'll do then? I'll get on my knees and ask your forgiveness–and say–(*His mouth grows convulsed, as if he were retching up poison.*) I'll say, I'm glad you found love, Mother! I'll wish you happiness–you and Adam! (3.III.1042).

As we can see, all the stages of the *topos* of madness for guilt have been clearly fulfilled in O'Neill's modern American narrative, too.

3. Conclusion

This article intended to fill a gap in literary theory by differentiating between the term *topos* and other similar concepts, such as motif, theme, and leitmotiv. It is argued that literary *topoi* fulfill two basic requirements that distinguish them from a motif: origin in classical literature and fixed structure. Later in this study, the *topos* of 'madness for guilt and remorse' has been explored. It was argued that this *topos*

features in tragic works of any genre and comprises five stages. Its manifestations in different genres as well as historical and cultural contexts, including classical Greek tragedy (Euripides's *Orestes*), classical Roman poetry (Vergil's *Aeneid*), Renaissance English drama (Shakespeare's *Macbeth*), 19th Century American fiction (Nathaniel Hawthorne's «Roger Malvin's Burial») and Modern American drama (Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*) have been also studied. Despite the fact that all the examples rise from different temporal or cultural backgrounds, they share the same structure and follow the literary tradition established in Euripides's version of the myth of Orestes.

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