



Mourning Becomes Electra: The Phenomenon of Systemic Entanglement in the Family Systems

Mourning Becomes Electra: Aile Sistemlerinde Sistemik Dolaşıklık Olgusu

Onur EKLER*

Öz

Bu makale, Eugene O'Neill'in ünlü üçlemesi *Mourning Becomes Electra* adlı eserinde Mannon ailesindeki sistemik dolaşıklık olgusunu tartışmayı amaçlar. Ayrıca, bu üçlemenin, Alman psikolog Bert Hellinger tarafından geliştirilen ve son zamanlarda popülerleşen "aile dizilimi" teorisi için öncü bir eser olarak okunabileceğini savunur. Bu teoriye göre, geçmişte çözülmemiş bazı çatışmalar veya olaylar, döngüler halinde hareket eden bazı bilinçdışı dolaşıklıklara neden olabilir ve kuşaklar arası acıya yol açabilir. Başka bir deyişle, atalardan gelen lanet ve/veya günahın kalıtsal olabileceğini ve çözülmediği takdirde ailenin gelecekteki üyelerinin yaşamlarına da benzer acılar yaşatabileceğini savunur. Bu teori, rasyonalist bilim tarafından küçümsenmiş ve sözde-bilimsel olarak etiketlenmiştir. Ancak, rasyonel bilimsel zeminde çok az ya da hiç kesin açıklaması olmaması, Antik Yunan'dan günümüz dünyasına uzanan farklı bağlamlarda kendini gösteren bir olguyu es geçebileceğimiz anlamına gelmez. O'Neill, Aeschylus'un *Oresteia*'sını bulunduğu dönemin Amerika'sının dinamiklerini göz önünde bulundurarak yeniden yorumladığı *Mourning Becomes Electra*'da bu olgudan yola çıkıyor. Sağlıklı olmayan aile sistemlerinde sistemik dolaşıklıkla gelecek nesillere tekrarlayan acılar yaşatıp yaşatmayacağı tartışmasına yer veriyor. Bu bağlamda, bu üçleme, aile bağlamındaki sistemik dolaşıklıkla bu mistik işleyişi üzerindeki perdeyi kaldırmak için araştırmacı bir gözle okunabilir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Aile, dizilim, trajedi, suç, O'Neill.

Abstract

The present article aims to discuss the phenomenon of systemic entanglement in the Mannon family in Eugene O'Neill's famous trilogy, *Mourning Becomes Electra*. It also argues that this trilogy can be read as a pioneering work for the recently popularized theory of "family constellations" by Bert Hellinger, a German psychologist. According to this theory, some unresolved conflicts or events in the past may cause some unconscious entanglements to move in loops and induce intergenerational suffering. In other words, it argues that ancestral curses and/or sins can be inheritable. If not resolved, they can inflict similar sufferings on the lives of the future members of the family. This theory has been snubbed and labelled as pseudoscientific by the rationalist science. However, having little or no definitive explanation on rational scientific grounds does not mean we can breeze past a perennial phenomenon that manifests in different contexts from Ancient Greece to today's world. O'Neill takes off from this phenomenon in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, a re-interpretation of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, considering the dynamics of his contemporary America. He argues whether systemic entanglement in unhealthy family systems may inflict repetitive suffering on

* Asst. Prof. Dr. Hatay Mustafa Kemal University, School of Foreign Languages. E-mail: onur.ekler@mku.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-0750-0417

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future generations. This trilogy may be read with an exploratory eye to lift the veil on this mystical functioning of systemic entanglement in the family context.

Keywords: Family, constellation, tragedy, guilt, O’Neill.

Introduction

Not knowing why and whence, the grim
Life-crushing blow is dealt.
The father's sin upon the child
Descends, and sin is silent death
(Oates and O’Neill Jr., 1938, p. 303)

Eugene O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), a modern interpretation of Aeschylus’ famous trilogy, *Oresteia*, presents a Greek sense of tragedy in modernist literature. Numerous studies have offered different interpretations of this masterpiece. The academic studies by Susan Harris and Georgia Nugent have examined the trilogy with a feminist approach. While Harris features Lavinia’s body as the site of exploitation by societal forces, Nugent analyses the female characters’ suppressed desires in light of Freud’s theory of the Oedipal complex (Harris Smith, 1995; Nugent, 1988). A. Ayşen Arslanoğlu, in her study, “The Formative Effect Of Past On The Perception Of Time And Selfhood”, has featured the transference of the Oedipal curse to the later generations in the Mannon family and has also stressed the shaping effect of the past on the present and future actions of the members of the Mannon family (Arslanoğlu, 2012, p. 6). Another critic, J. Stafford, discusses how the poisonous relationships in the Mannon family reflect the rottenness in contemporary American society (1962, p. 550). Moreover, the studies by Doris M. Alexander, M. M. Chirico and Joseph P. O’Neill focus on the mysterious operation of fate in the house of the Mannons (1953, p. 923; 2000, p. 81; 1963, p. 483). Despite a wide array of research on the trilogy, the primary critical responses highlight O’Neill’s attempt to revive the Greek sense of tragedy. In their article, Norman T. and Pratt, Jr. have read the trilogy as O’Neill’s conscious attempt to revive the Greek taste of tragedy in modern times (1956, p. 163). Stephen A. Black similarly argues the possibility of a Greek sense of tragedy in the modern sense in the trilogy (2004, p. 167). Although the studies above have referred to the notion of inherited curse/guilt as part of their discussion, the phenomenon of systemic entanglement or, to put it in Hellinger’s definition, “the unknowing repetition of another’s fate” (Hellinger, 2001, xvii) in O’Neill’s debated trilogy has not received full attention. Taking this notion as the main narrative concern, this article offers an alternative reading of this masterpiece as a literary case for the enigmatic notion of the systemic entanglement in the family constellation approach, particularly claimed by psychologist Bert Hellinger.

On the Notion of the Systemic Entanglement in Family Systems

Systemic entanglement means a knot or crisis in one’s life not caused by one’s acts but by some systemic forces that belong to the collective unconscious of one’s family system (Franke, 2017, p. 96). In other words, some turbulence of an unknown cause in one’s life may result from other family members’ actions in the family system. Although this phenomenon has aroused great interest among people thanks to recent studies on psychotherapy, it has been a frequently employed enigmatic topic for literary and religious studies since prehistoric times. This phenomenon manifests in these works as intergenerational curses, guilts, sins, and punishments. To illustrate, God’s curse on Adam and Eve and their descendants upon the original sin, or Noah’s curse on his son, Ham and his descendants may corroborate the possible existence of this mystical phenomenon. Judeo-Christian God substantiates the phenomenon’s presence in the family with these lines in the book of Exodus. God says, “Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (20: 5). One striking point in the above-examples is that some ancestral curses, guilts or punishments can be inheritable. These examples imply the possible

impact of some ancestral unresolved conflicts on the morally innocent people in the later generations of the family.

The phenomenon of systemic entanglement is not limited to the Judeo-Christian context. It is similarly traceable in the Ancient Greek world, particularly in the myths or tragedies that employ the accursed houses of Labdacid and Atreus. Both families are closely associated with the idea that the hereditary transference of guilt/sin/curse/punishment to later generations can be possible. In his seminal study on ancestral curses, Martin West features some ancestral curses in the house of Labdacid. He mentions that Laios rapes Pelops's son, Chrysippus, which causes him to commit suicide (1999, p. 42). After this tragic event, Pelops curses Laios and his descendants (1999, p. 42). The systemic curse in the family causes parricide (Oedipus kills his father) and later fratricide (Oedipus's sons kill one another). In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the chorus, expresses the curse in the Labdacid house with these lines: "Blest are they whose days have not tasted of evil. For when a house hath once been shaken from heaven, there the curse fails nevermore, passing from life to life of the race" (qtd. in Oates and O'Neill Jr., 1938, p. 439).

Similarly, the case of systemic entanglement can also be observed in the loop of the intergenerational curse, guilt and punishment in the house of Atreus. The ancestral guilt begins with the founder of the house, Tantalus, who God heavily punishes after he is caught while stealing from God in a feast where he offers his son, Pelops (Colakis et al., 2007, p. 207). Pelops is cursed by first betraying his future wife, Hippodamia's father, and then killing Myrtilus, the charioteer (p.207). Inheriting the curses of his ancestors, Pelops' sons, Thyestes and Atreus, had a fight over the kingship, and Thyestes was banished. Realizing the secret affair between his wife, Aerope and Thyestes, Atreus kills Thyestes' sons and offers them to Thyestes at a banquet organized seemingly for reconciliation. Upon this tragic event, Thyestes curses Atreus and his descendants. Thyestes has another son, Aegisthus. He plays a vital role in actualizing his father's curse on the descendants of Atreus (p.209-210). Aeschylus' *Oresteia* studies the effects of these ancestral curses on the descendants of Atreus. Atreus' sons Agamemnon and Menelaus start an expedition against Troy. On their voyage to Troy, Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter, Iphigenia, in return for a favourable wind. This sacrifice triggers the family curse (p.212). In the absence of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra fell in love with Aegisthus, the son of Thyestes (p.212-13). They kill Agamemnon on his return. The systemic entanglement is not resolved yet. Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, returns and avenges his father by killing his mother and her lover (p. 215).

In his book on the ancestral fault in ancient Greece, Gagné binds the reason for the repetitive appeal to the systemic entanglements in the family systems in the classical tragedies to "a principle of ancient Greek theology and the moral function of tragedy as a genre" (2013, p. 94). However, the intriguing but irritating question is echoed in one of Solon's famous speech at the beginning of the 6th century BC. He says, "The guiltless will pay for the deeds later: either the man's children, or his descendants thereafter" (qtd. in Gagné, 2013, p. 4). Being held accountable for the ancestral guilts, curses, sins or traumas and subjecting to the unbearable sufferings poses a big question that is still shrouded in mystery.

Although rationalist science rejects the possibility of systemic entanglement caused by some inherited curses and guilts in the intergenerational family line and shuns it as a paranormal activity or superstition outside the scientific realm, recent scientific research conducted in epigenetics, neuroscience and behaviourism claim otherwise. In his op-ed article, Mike Mariani claims tragic curses can be real (2015). He corroborates his argument by referring to some experiments on inherited mental and behavioural patterns. He highlights a study by the researcher Dias on how ancestral behaviours imprint some codes on newly-born mice. In this experiment, the scientists witnessed that the newly-born mice unconsciously reacted to the scent of acetophenone to which their parents were exposed (Mike Mariani, 2015). This experiment shows that the newly-born mice may bear the inherited fears from their parents. Mariani also alludes to the inherited traumas of the children of the victims of the Dutch Hunger Winter in 1944-45 and the Holocaust (2015). The researches show that the future generations of the victims of the Dutch Hunger Winter tend to suffer from obesity, and the ones descending from the victims of the Holocaust suffer from post-traumatic stress (2015). Mariani's article is worth considering to ground the possible transference of systemic entanglement caused by some past tragic occurrences on a scientific basis. It insinuates the relative inefficacy of rationalist science in comprehending the enigma behind the

intergenerational transference of the systemic entanglements triggered by some possible ancestral guilts, curses, sins, or traumas. The phenomenon of systemic entanglement has gained renewed credibility with these recent scientific studies.

Contrary to the condescending attitude in the rationalist science that is too elitist and mechanical to consider the mystical functioning of quantum energy in the family constellation and its possible impacts on future generations, some recent theories—stigmatized as pseudoscientific—argue that the transference of the blocked energy in the family line through the inheritance of such ancestral unresolved conflicts as guilts, curses, traumatic memories, stories might induce some unconscious entanglements in the dynamics of the family system. One notable theory among them is the “family constellation” theory put forward by Bert Hellinger, a German psychologist known for his studies on the systemic entanglements in the family and larger systems. In *Love’s Hidden Symmetry*, Hellinger argues that everyone is an integral part of the family system to which they belong (1998, p. 70). He also posits that the most profound bond brings people together (Hellinger and Hövel, 1999, p. 78) and that each family system has its constellation and order. Each family member has an equal right to belong to this order (74). Each order has a complex array of relationships among its members. To Hellinger, “when this order is not respected, crises or illnesses arise” (74), and if not healed, it causes some entanglements that might systematically affect the future generations in the system. In his introduction to Hellinger’s *Love’s Hidden Symmetry*, psychologist Hunter Beaumont compares the systemic laws of relationship to a whirlwind. He says,

we can’t see [whirlwind] until it grasps the desert sands or fallen leaves and throws them swirling into the air. We know the whirlwind only by its effect on the visible world. The Orders of Love are dynamic, systemic forces blowing and whirling in our families and intimate relationships. We know the disorder caused by their turbulence—as leaves know the whirlwind—in our suffering and illness. (Hellinger et al., 1998)

The family member can only realize the whirlwind when the order is broken. It is possible to metaphorically compare the family member to a fisherman who is deeply preoccupied with fishing and cannot perceive the whirlwind surrounding him/her until some turbulence makes one raise one's head above, or, in Sartre's terms, to a watchman who only deals with the components of the watch when it is dysfunctional (Sartre, 1984, p. 38). Beaumont notes that not the whirlwind but its impact on the individual makes one realize the unconscious entanglement in one’s life (Hellinger et al., 1998). This entanglement may not be related to the consequences of one’s actions. As Franke argues, it may stem from a systemic multi-generational entanglement caused by the ancestral family members in the family system (2017, p. 96). In her definition of systemic entanglement, she says,

systemic entanglement means that one person takes on the fate of another (one other) person or spends his or her life caught up in the memory of that person. For example, a child can help to carry on the fate of the mother, who in turn is following her brother.³⁴ In many families, this line can be followed back through several generations. (2017, p. 96)

In an interview, Hellinger claims that the intense emotions and behaviours caused by the inexplicable complication in the dynamics of the current situation signal the systemic entanglement in the family system and, more precisely speaking, the inherited guilt and curse from previous generations (1998, p. 161). In another interview, when Hellinger is asked to exemplify the existence of the systemic entanglement, he mentions one of his advisees, a lawyer’s investigation of a possible connection between three suicidal cases at the age of 27 on December 31 in the family and the family’s past. In his research, he found out the injustice inflicted by the advisee’s great-grandmother when her husband died at the age of 27 on December 31. In addition to his suspicious death, his great-grandmother did not pass her husband’s inheritance to his son but to the son of her future relationship (Hellinger & Hövel, 1999, pp. 4-5). Hellinger says, “This is the way entanglements work” (p. 5). He further adds that the reason behind the lawyer’s research and his visit to him is that he feels suicidal and has discovered that his cousin has turned 27 and also has bought a pistol to

commit suicide (p. 5). Hellinger claims that the people suffering from systemic entanglements, like the lawyer in the example, are the victims of the systemic forces at work (2001, p. 338). As in the lawyer's case and many other historical examples, systemic entanglement is also evident in the Mannons family in O'Neill's trilogy. With this background, it is now possible to offer a thorough analysis of this phenomenon in the trilogy as a pioneering literary case for the recent studies on family constellation approaches particularly in the literary and dramatic works.

The Phenomenon of Systemic Entanglement in the Mannon Family

Performed on October 26, 1931, at the Guild Theatre in New York after two years of hard work and dedication, *Mourning Becomes Electra* has received a highly positive reception from the reviewers. According to Barrett H. Clark, an essential critic of O'Neill's works, it is not an ordinary play among O'Neill's oeuvre (1947, p. 123). He argues that de-mythologizing the Greek notion of fate in his adaptation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* to a Puritan setting in New England, O'Neill quests for "a rational explanation of life and death, and what used to be called sin and evil" (1947, p. 125). As implied here, O'Neill's search goes beyond the tragic character; it is for the life forces that shape the individual's motives and acts. In his talk on his plays, O'Neill notes,

I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind—Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it—Mystery certainly—and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. (qtd. in Clark, 1965, p. 505)

As Dowling mentions, this is why O'Neill endeavours to uncover the hidden force in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, unlike the show-shop realities of his early experimental plays (2009, p. 367).

In his working notes, O'Neill also explains the reason for choosing Aeschylus' *Oresteia* as an exemplary work, arguing that the Greek tragedies feed on the struggle between man and fate as a mystical force (Clark, 1947, p. 128). However, the problem for O'Neill is whether it is possible "to get modern psychological approximation of Greek sense of fate into [*Mourning Becomes Electra*], which an intelligent audience of today, possessed by no belief in gods or moral retribution, could accept and be moved by" (p. 128). As hinted here, O'Neill tries to explain it on a more rational basis. As Barrett notes, fate, to O'Neill, is "what happens to human beings because of what they are, not what some god tells them to be" (p. 136). Therefore, O'Neill deems it a mystery of psychological, genetic, historical and cultural origins and finds it worth writing about to show its substantial presence in our lives.

Mourning Becomes Electra consists of three plays: *Homecoming*, *The Hunted*, and *The Haunted*. As previously mentioned, the trilogy is set in the Puritan context of New England, which O'Neill assumes bears some resemblance to the religious context of the Greek tragedies in terms of reflecting the tragic impacts of a crisis-induced-entanglement in the deterministically fated family. Tracing the systemic entanglement in the intergenerational familial relations of the Mannon family stuck in a Puritan context with its strict codes on societal relations, O'Neill tries to prove the mystical presence of the hidden forces—deriving from some explicable human-oriented factors—in the family constellation. In doing so, the trilogy involves some recurrent events experienced by intergenerational family members just as a broken record repeats itself. O'Neill notes that "fate—theme demands this repetition" (qtd. in Clark, 1947, p. 535). In the trilogy, O'Neill creates some mask-like characters with striking physical and behavioural resemblance to one another to flash on the recurrent events. In his notes, he says that mask conception is necessary for "a dramatic arresting of visual symbol of separateness, the fated isolation of this family, the mark of their fate which makes them dramatically distinct from the rest of the World" (p. 535). "The pale life-like mask"—a joint facial characterization of all members of the Mannons—demonstrates the impact of the systemic force on the family members in the same constellation and keeps the Mannon family aloof from the families with no systemic entanglements. O'Neill's use of masks is worth mentioning since they are used to emphasize the

presence of the systemic entanglement in the past of the family that causes, if we put it in Dorris M. Alexander's words, "a fated recurrence of attitudes" (1953, p. 932).

The recurrent events in the family system signify the presence of a systemic entanglement in the collective unconscious of the family, possibly induced by an unresolved conflict. The members whose lives have been affected by this entanglement in the family system experience repetitive occurrences until they resolve the conflict and heal the system. If not resolved, it may even affect future generations in the same constellation, causing the recurrent acts and motives of the members of the family system. O'Neill grounds his trilogy on such a conflict that affects future generations.

The underlying problem that causes the systemic entanglement in the Mannon family is the love affair in the past that involves Abe Mannon, David Mannon and a Canuck girl (Marie Brantôme) working as a nurse in the house. Both brothers love the same girl, but Marie Brantôme returns David's love. Furiated by the news of her pregnancy and also out of jealousy, Abe disowns David and deprives him of all his inheritance rights. Brant tells Lavinia of the aftermath of the disinheritance with these lines:

He knew my father and mother were starving! But the money didn't last my father long! He'd taken to drink. He was a coward — like all Mannons, [...]. Then one night he went out and he didn't come back. The next morning, they found him hanging in a barn! (Eugene O'Neill, 1999, p. 47)

Hellinger argues that an odd one in the group must be excluded in order to inhibit evil within the group (Hellinger et al. 1998, p. 10). Taking Hellinger's argument for granted, one can understand why Ezra Mannon, Abe's son and Lavinia's father, denies David's right to belonging. However, his father's acts for protecting the family's code of honour seem to be pretentious since he apparently does it out of spite. For its sake, Abe commits some atrocious acts towards David and Marie Brantôme. As a result of his malice, David commits suicide and Marie is starved to death. In this sense, it may not be wrong to claim that Abe takes on the role of perpetrator with respect to Hellinger's views. However, David's exclusion from the family has some different effects on him as a victim. The loss of his sense of belonging may comprise a guilty conscience in him, which eventually leads him to commit suicide. As Hellinger says, "We have a guilty conscience when we deviate from the norms of our group and must fear that our right to belong is jeopardized or damaged" (Hellinger et al., 1998, p. 7). Considering that his extramarital love affair with Marie Brantôme is a sin in the Puritan context, David feels guilty. He thinks he has betrayed the family heritage and is not following the family norms.

As mentioned earlier, Hellinger claims that a healthy family system does not tolerate the exclusion of a member by force and adds that every member has an equal right to belonging (1998, p. 153). If one's right to belonging is denied by another's atrocities, injustices or unfair judgements, he says, "that person's fate will be unknowingly taken over and continued by a later member of the family" (2001, p. xvii). In other words, one's denial of belonging to one's family causes unconscious entanglements that might impose the repetition of the excluded member's fate on later generations if not compensated (p. xvii).

The unconscious entanglement caused by Abe Mannon's atrocities towards David Mannon and Marie Brantôme gives rise to the dynamics that make the later generations stuck in the repetitive existence. Doris M. Alexander's apt quotation from "What is wrong with Marriage" by G.V. Hamilton and Kenneth McGowan well points the case: "It is merely despair over the way in which the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children, and the children, growing up, inevitably repeat the process. In this respect, the family circle seems vicious" (qtd. in Doris M. Alexander, 1953, p. 934). In the trilogy, it is seen that the characters are trapped in a similar vicious circle. They become the surrogates of their ancestors, unconsciously bearing their sufferings, guilts, traumas, and sins.

As previously noted, unconscious entanglement can be felt and traced by its symptoms and impacts on family members. As well as O'Neill's use of the physical likeness among the family members as a usual symptom of the manifestation of the entanglement, his assignment of the townsfolk with a choral function—an integral part of the ancient Greek tragedy—is noteworthy in that the audience is conscious of the events that cause the systemic entanglement. For example, Seth, a long-term house gardener, knows the family's

past deeds. The reader/audience learns the injustices done to David and Marie Brantôme thanks to Seth's gossiping to the townsfolk. Like other townsfolk, he thinks the ghosts haunt this mansion. Like a choral member, he delivers some critical information that links the old scandal and Brant's haunted image: "There's somethin' about his walk calls back David Mannon, too. If I didn't know it was him, I'd think it was David's ghost comin'" home (p. 39). He incites Lavinia to investigate the true identity of Captain Brant: "He ain't only like your Paw. He's like Orin, too — and all the Mannons I've known" (O'Neill, 1999, p. 37). His warning of Lavinia about Brant's family origin can be interpreted as an omen for the impending danger in the family. Even though Seth is a minor character, his taking on a role similar to a choral member's in ancient Greek tragedies is crucial in linking the intergenerational events that cause the systemic entanglement in the Mannon family.

The systemic entanglement manifests itself with hatred in the later generations of the Mannons family. The family members hate one another. To show how hatred, the negative power that surprisingly draws one closer to the object of hatred, forms a strong bond among the family members, O'Neill establishes a connection between physical resemblance and hatred. In the trilogy, when Orin stares at Brant after he kills him, he is astounded by the shocking resemblance between him and his father. He says, "Orin—By God, he does look like Father!" (O'Neill, 1999, p. 189). In another part, Christine tells Orin, "Don't look like that! You're so like your father!" (p. 144). The arresting resemblance between Orin-Ezra-Brant is noteworthy, and so is for Christine-Lavinia-Marie Brantôme. O'Neill's portrayal of the aforementioned woman-characters with the "peculiar golden-brown hair exactly alike" is O'Neill's intentional device to show hatred incarnate. For example, Lavinia's hatred of her mother makes her become like her in every move. Brant's words justify this in the following lines:

Brant — Well, I suppose that's the usual way of it. A daughter feels closer to her father and a son to his mother. But I should think you ought to be born exception to that rule.

Lavinia — Why?

Brant — You're so like your mother in some ways. Your face is the dead image of hers. And look at your hair. You won't meet hair like yours and hers again in a month of Sundays. I only know of one other woman who had it. You'll think it strange when I tell you. It was my mother. (O'Neill 1999, p. 42)

As Falk rightly claims in his critical book on O'Neill's plays, the underlying theory of the force at work in the trilogy can be partly traced to Freud and Jung (1958, p. 136). The above lines also evidence their influence. O'Neill does not deny their influence on the trilogy. However, as he once stated in his response to Barrett's criticism of dependency on their theories:

Authors were psychologists, you know, and profound ones, before psychology was invented. And I am no deep student of psychoanalysis. As far as I can remember, of all the books written by Freud, Jung, etc., I have read only four, and Jung is the only one of the lot who interests me. Some of his suggestions I find extraordinarily illuminating in the light of my own experience with hidden human motives. (qtd. in Clark, 1947, p. 136)

Unlike Barrett's unfair criticism, O'Neill benefits from the recent psychoanalytic studies of Freud and Jung insofar as they are relevant to his quest for solving the puzzle of the enigmatic function of fate. O'Neill's originality lies in his incorporation of Jung's theory of collective unconscious and Freud's theories of Oedipal and Electra complexes in the trilogy in order to scientifically search for, as Chirico also asserts, how the hidden motives of fate, originating from the past, can actively affect the lives of the later generations (2000, p. 84).

Moreover, bringing new interpretations to Freudian complexes and relating them to the dynamics of Jungian collective unconscious, O'Neill wants to stress the presence of the systemic entanglement in the Mannon family. O'Neill's emphasis on the hatred-oriented resemblance rather than same-sex hatred is essential to feature some queerness in the Mannons' family system, compared to other healthy

systems where, taking Freudian complexes for granted, a usual pattern of same-sex hatred and psychosexual rivalry occurs. Highlighting the resemblance between the hater and the object of hatred in the family, O'Neill draws attention to the systemic entanglement that causes a recurring pattern of events in the Mannon family. In *The Haunted*, Orin realizes that they are caught in a systemic entanglement, and he says to Lavinia: “— (with a quiet mad insistence) Can't you see I'm now in Father's place and you're Mother? That's the evil destiny out of the past I haven't dared predict! I am the Mannon you're chained to!” (O'Neill, 1999, p. 252). Upon killing Brant and leading Christine to commit suicide, Orin is haunted by guilt-ridden consciousness and wants to confront with the past of the family by writing the history of the Mannon family:

Lavinia — (trying to keep calm — tensely) What kind of history do you mean?

Orin — A true history of all the family crimes, beginning with Grandfather Abe's — all of the crimes, including ours, do you understand? (O'Neill, 1999, p. 248)

Orin finds it a way of atonement for the injustices inflicted on the excluded members of the family in the past. He wants to compensate for the family's misdeeds and escapes punishment with this cleansing mission. If he had attained his goal, he could perhaps have healed the diseased family line and eased his consciousness and perhaps would not have committed suicide. However, Lavinia has blocked his efforts. She does not want it to be disclosed. The hidden curse drives Orin to commit suicide. As the last member of the Mannon family, Lavinia embraces the punishment rather than escaping it. She asks Seth to nail shutters so that no light can come in. She recompenses for the injustices of her family's past deeds by locking herself in the house.

Lavinia —(grimly) Don't be afraid. I'm not going the way Mother and Orin went. That's escaping punishment. And there's no one left to punish me. I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison! I'll never go out or see anyone! I'll have the shutters nailed closed so no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die! (p. 287)

Lavinia's rejection of starting a family with Peter shows her fear of the possible transference of systemic entanglement to the next generation. She says, “The dead are too strong! [...] I'm not bound away—not now, Seth. I'm bound here—to the Mannon dead” (O'Neill, 1999, p. 287). Lavinia's search for compensation for the atrocities committed in the past of the family to restore balance in the family system reminisces Hellinger's views on atonement. As Hellinger claims, “Atonement is a form of compensation, a blind urge towards balance. Just as in nature we observe a tendency to keep systems in balance, we find the same urge in the psyche” (2001, p. 135). Considering this view in a more speculative vein, one might say that Lavinia could have healed the systemic entanglement in the family system if she had let Orin's book be publicly disclosed. It could have helped to build an equilibrium back in the family system by unveiling the hidden crimes in the family's past. This act would have honoured the once-excluded members of the family. Instead, she prefers a self-inflicted punishment in the prison-like house with the dead—ending the family line—that, she thinks, can help to compromise with the dead.

Conclusion

Reading O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* as a pioneering literary work for Bert Hellinger's studies on the family constellations and also featuring O'Neill's views on the mysterious operation of fate, this article has questioned the possible reasons for and solutions to the enigmatic transference of unconscious entanglement to later generations. This study has also shown O'Neill's attribution of the source of such an enigmatic phenomenon not to God or a supernatural force on religious grounds—as we have observed in some historical literary and religious works—but to psychological, biological and genetic

factors. It has revealed that O'Neill's literary reflections have some encounters with Hellinger's views on the notion of systemic entanglement. We have observed that they both draw attention to unconscious entanglements caused by ancestral factors such as traumas, guilts, and sins, though they have some dialectical differences in style. The nexus point in their argument is the possible impacts of the unconscious entanglements induced by these ancestral factors on the later generations. They both feature how unconscious entanglements caused by some disruptive events in the earlier generations of the unhealthy family systems may create a vicious circle in which the later generations may re-experience a set of repetitive events unless such entanglements can be resolved. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, we have witnessed how the later generations of the Mannon family have suffered from the systemic entanglements resulting from ancestral sins. Establishing some parallelism through the physical resemblance between the earlier and later generations in the Mannon family and also through the spatial design of the Mannons' mansion, decorated with the ancestral portraits hanging on the walls, O'Neill intends to show the enigmatic transference of the unconscious entanglement, caused by Abe Mannon's atrocities or unfair treatments towards his brother David Mannon and his wife in the first generation of the Mannons' family line, to later generations. Beyond the moral dilemma concerning the victimization of the innocent descendants of the Mannons because of the ancestral guilts, O'Neill wants to make a psychological inquiry into the source of the systemic entanglement. As O'Neill once said, "The theatre should give us what the church no longer gives us-a meaning" (qtd. in Falk, 1958, p. 26). Developing a tragic expression of the systemic entanglement in the modern sense in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill tries to scientifically explain by de-mythologizing the mystical operation of this phenomenal activity in the problematic family systems. Although his handling of the issue has no direct contribution to the later psychoanalytic research on the notion of systemic entanglement in the broken family systems, O'Neill's similar approach in diagnosing the systemic entanglement in the Mannon family in the trilogy can perhaps help readers to develop a new insight into the trilogy by reading it as an early literary case for the recent studies on the family constellations.

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