ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS

THE STUDY OF LITERARY TOPOI AS AN AREA OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: THE CASE OF "MURDER FOR LOVE"

EL ESTUDIO DE LOS TÓPICOS LITERARIOS COMO ÁREA DE LA LITERATURA COMPARADA: EL CASO DEL "ASESINATO POR AMOR"

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the position of literary topoi in the field of comparative literature using Escobar (2000) and Laguna Mariscal's (1999) definition of topoi. One of the requirements for distinguishing a topos from similar literary terms is its recurrence in literary history from the classical tradition towards modern literature. As a result, the study of literary topoi always constitutes evolution, development, and comparison. To show this in practice, we introduce "murder for love" as a literary topos and trace its development in Eugene O'Neill's tragedies *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). The results of the study validate the necessity of comparison (in the sense of looking for parallel structures or syntaxes) when examining literary topoi. Consequently, when analyzing the development of "murder for love" in O'Neill's plays, it is essential to look for its architextual relationships with classical texts, such as Medea narratives.

Keywords: literary topoi, comparative literature, classical reception, Eugene O'Neill, murder for love.

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo examinar la posición de los tópicos literarios en el campo de la literatura comparada partiendo de la definición de los tópicos literarios de Escobar (2000) y Laguna Mariscal (1999). Uno de los requisitos para distinguir un tópico de términos literarios similares es su recurrencia en la historia literaria desde la tradición clásica hacia la literatura moderna. En consecuencia, el estudio de los tópicos literarios

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siempre implica evolución, desarrollo y comparación. Para mostrar esto en la práctica, presentamos el "asesinato por amor" como un tópico literario y analizamos su desarrollo en las tragedias de Eugene O'Neill *Deseo bajo los olmos* (1924) y *A Electra le sienta bien el luto* (1931). Los resultados del estudio validan la necesidad de la comparación (en el sentido de buscar estructuras o sintaxis paralelas) al examinar los tópicos literarios. En consecuencia, al analizar el desarrollo del "asesinato por amor" en las obras de O'Neill, es fundamental rastrear sus relaciones architextuales con los textos clásicos, como las narraciones de Medea.

Palabras clave: tópicos literarios, literatura comparada, recepción clásica, Eugene O'Neill, asesinato por amor.

1. Introduction[1]

Despite the postmodernist approaches to literary theory which claim the impossibility of distinguishing literary terms and the overlapping of some of the crucial concepts of literary criticism, in the last few decades, critics have strived to illuminate the definition of topoi. Most of the relevant studies follow Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (originally published in 1948), which introduced the idea of topoi as "a category of literature" (Gómez Luque 2018: 20). For Curtius, topoi were "rhetorical commonplaces" (1983: xii) whose function was to help the author direct the reader towards the subject-matter (79). In fact, a great part of Curtius's work was dedicated to his consideration of "recurrency" as a fundamental requirement of a topos (Scholz 1986: 170)[2]. However, his discussion lacked "theoretical rigor" (Curtius 1983: xvii), since he did not specify the distinctions between a topos and similar terms, nor clarified its characteristics. This motivated the later critics to try to delineate Curtius's practice. Aguiar e Silva (1972), Leeman (1982), Escobar (2000 & 2006), and Laguna Mariscal (1999 & 2014) are among the most important literary scholars who have tried to propose more precise definitions of topoi following Curtius's approach[3].

In his *Teoría de la literature*, for example, Aguiar e Silva introduced literary topoi as "the schemes of thought, sensitivity, argumentation, etc., that pass from one literature to another and from generation to generation, and that tend to crystallize in stereotype or cliché" (1972: 390). Leeman, similarly, offered a short

[1] The author is deeply indebted to Professor Gabriel Laguna Mariscal for his insightful suggestions and to Mr. Graham Clarke for the stylistic revision of the article.

[2] Scholz argues that Curtius's objective was actually to emphasize the "factual continuity of European literature, and thus European culture in the face of the rise of fascism" through the analysis of literary topoi as recurrent "semantic units", which were "the only relevant element in the abstract model of European literature" (1986: 177).

[3] For a history of scholarship on topoi after the publication of Curtius's book, see Gaycken (1976: 1-15). López Martínez (2007) also examines the concept of literary topoi following Frenzel's definition of motifs and analyses their position in the theories of comparative literature.

definition of topoi as "a literary treatment of a certain idea in such a way that the cultured reader discerns a certain tradition pattern" (1982: 189). These two definitions distinguish some specific traits of a topos, such as content, structure and tradition (see Gómez Luque 2018: 45-50). The final part of Leeman's statement follows Curtius's explanation of the rhetorical function of literary topoi in antiquity (see Curtius 1983: 79 and López Martínez 1990: 167)[4]. Although these definitions are illuminating, their scope lacks applicability for not offering concrete examples or case-studies.

The publication of scholarly essays by two Spanish professors, Ángel Escobar (2000 and 2006) and Gabriel Laguna Mariscal (1999 and 2014), has eliminated some of the obscurities in defining literary topoi and applying them to classical and modern texts. Escobar analyzes their history and definition from a linguistic point of view. To him, a literary topos should meet several requirements: it should be anonymous, not belonging to any particular author or specific artistic production[5]; it should be universal, with a certain "conceptual density"; and it should be traditional or recurrent, including both originality and the imitation of traditional themes[6]. Literary topoi should have a "variable extension", although they tend to be brief. They are distinguished by their conceptual character and rhetorical function "often of persuasion or invitation to action" (2000: 137-142. See also Gómez Luque 2018: 50).

Similarly, according to Laguna Mariscal, three factors distinguish a literary topos: its possession of semantic content — an idea, image, or plot scheme — that is neither too general nor too particular and an underlying ideology; its realization within a specific, perceptible, and definable literary form (with respect to structure, line of argument, rhetorical form, style, and lexical imagery); and its development from the classical tradition towards modern times (1999: 201; 2014: 27-30). Despite the fact that these critics utilize different linguistic or philological approaches to the definition of topoi, the characteristics they offer seem to refer to similar domains of literary criticism[7]. The table below demonstrates the ways in which their ideas could be correlated:

[4] Similarly, Márquez considers a rhetorical topos as a means for understanding the subject and detecting the formal arguments (2002: 254-255).

[5] Greene points to the same issue. According to him, the origin of a topos does not matter; what matters is "to recognize its conventionality", that is "to know it as a product of history" (1982: 50).

[6] According to Escobar, the current concept of a literary topos was "fully prefigured [...] in ancient times" (2006: 7). See also Highet, who considers the modern world (including literature) a continuation of the classical Greek and Roman tradition (1951: 1-21).

[7] Both critics try to apply their definition of topoi to literary texts (Escobar 2018 and 2019; Laguna Mariscal 2013, 2014 and 2019).

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Table 1.

Comparison of Laguna Mariscal and Escobar's definition of topoi

Laguna Mariscal (1999 and 2014)	Escobar (2000)
Conceptual content	Conceptual character
Literary form	Variable extension
Evolution in literary history	Anonymity and tradition
Recurrence in literature	Universality
Underlying ideology	Rhetorical function

Thus, whenever we try to investigate the presence of a topos in a modern text, we should first make sure it fulfills certain requirements. In other words, we need to validate that we are dealing with a topos and not a similar concept, such as a theme or a motif. In a recently published article, Nazemi *et al.* (2022) investigate the similarities and differences between literary topoi and other key concepts of literary criticism. According to this study, topoi and motifs share several similarities since both are universal or recurrent elements, have a similar level of concretion, and, in some cases, share the same structural level. Distinguishing a topos is possible by validating its requirement of "tradition", that is, development from the classical literature (2022: 196-198)[8]. This is what Laguna Mariscal calls "recurrence in the history of occidental literature" (1999: 201) or "reception" (2014: 30), and what Escobar deems "traditional" (2000: 139)[9].

Clearly, it is not possible to trace all the representations of a topos in literature even if we limit our scope to a given historical period or genre. To validate the "recurrence" of a topos, it is sufficient to give some examples to show that it has been a dynamic element of the literary tradition. Here one simple conclusion could be made: all topoi are motifs with an origin in antiquity, but not every motif could be considered a topos. Taking the given definitions by Escobar and Laguna Mariscal into account, a question arises: if we analyze the development of a topos in a given text, are we dealing with the approaches of comparative literature?[10] In the present

[8] Seigneuret (1988: xxi), Márquez (2002: 254-255), and López Gregoris (2021: 707-715) have also illuminated the distinctions between topoi and other similar terms, such as themes and motifs.

[9] One of the significant flaws in the scholarship related to topoi is limiting its scope to Western literature, which is in contrast to its universal character. This problem requires extensive research beyond the scope of the present study.

[10] In an interesting monograph titled *El tópico literario: teoría y crítica*, López Martínez highlights the position of topoi in the field of comparative literature using a variety of literary perspectives (2007: 48-108). In the present article, however, we consider this question from a different point of view by using the definitions of topoi proposed by Escobar and Laguna Mariscal, which are detailed interpretations of Curtius's approach.

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article, we intend to answer this question and locate the position of literary topoi in the realm of comparative literature studies by using the two definitions discussed earlier.

2. Literary topoi and comparative literature

As many critics have argued, the analysis of literary topoi in different texts follows the approaches of thematology, which is itself an area of comparative literature.[11] Thematology deals with "the transnational spreading and evolution of homogeneous topic, motif, and theme" (Cao 2013: 169). Since its goal is the "diachronic analysis" of the function of thematic elements that operate as "intertextual connectors" across national, cultural or linguistic borders[12] (Gómez Luque 2018: 26), it implies a historical approach (including evolution and comparison), which are the key elements of comparative literature studies[13]. As Cao further explains,

> As a branch of Comparative Literature, thematology tries to break the boundaries of space and time and synthesizes various national cultures. It focuses on the spread, evolution, cause of formation of the same subject matter, motifs, themes among the international literatures, and the different treatments by different authors. And thus we can deeply understand the different styles and achievements of different writers, their own characteristics of different ethnic literatures, as well as communications and impacts among different ethnic literatures (2013: 69).

This is exactly what the approaches of literary topoi also try to achieve: the diachronic analysis of architextual relationships[14] between the texts which share the same structure. Consequently, a modern text which encompasses a topos has an architextual relationship to all the other texts (classical or modern) which incorporate the same topic syntax. In the context of the analysis of literary topoi, this syntax is the "form" discussed by Laguna Mariscal (1999: 207). For example, as we will see later in this study, the literary topos of "murder for love" comprises five chronological stages and possesses an intermediate level of semantic content. The

[11] Sinha refers to the position of topoi in thematology (2021: 52-69). See also López Martínez's chapter on the position of topoi as "the common place" in thematology (2007: 47-56). Domínguez, *et al.* highlight the role of thematic units in comparative literature studies since they link a literary work to other works (2015: 69).

[12] According to Gómez Luque, thematology deals with elements that constitute recurrences through various literary texts in different cultural traditions (2018: 26).

[13] Seigneuret argues that thematology possesses an eminent position in comparative literature (1988: xviii). Similarly, Altenburger considers thematology a "subfield" of comparative literature (2009: 53). Elstein and Lipsker suggest that comparative literature has borrowed some elements from thematology (1995: 96). See also Naupert (2001: 13-23).

[14] According to Gerard Genette, architextuality refers to "the relationship of inclusion linking each text to the various kinds of discourse of which it is a representative" (1997b: xix).

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same syntax can be found in works from different linguistic, historical, or cultural backgrounds. This justifies the necessity of comparison or opposition[15].

Furthermore, as discussed earlier, a topos should fulfill several requirements, one of which is its recurrence in the classical tradition and its development towards modern literature. For this reason, an investigation of the development of the topos in different literary narratives (including both classical and modern texts) as well as a comparison of the parallel structures in the representations of the topos is a necessity. This leads to another conclusion: that thematology belongs to comparative studies since it highlights the "external relations of the texts" as well as their "aesthetic nature" (Cao 2013: xxiii). Obviously, both fields of literary criticism constitute comparison in accordance with the principles of the French and American schools of comparative literature[16]. Thus, an examination of a diachronic relationship between the texts that incorporate variations of a literary topos corresponds to the objectives of comparative literature studies.

Laguna Mariscal's three-fold definition of comparative literature can help us understand this better. Accordingly, comparative literature includes three modalities (1994: 283):

1. A diachronic approach that links literary works of the same language, but belonging to successive temporal stages.
2. A diatopic approach whose objective is to compare literary texts that are produced close in time, but belong to different languages.
3. An approach that contrasts works that belong to different temporal and linguistic spheres simultaneously.

If we intend to validate the authenticity of a topos in a given text, we should look for its parallel structures in classical and modern texts. Thus, depending on the language or historical context of the production of the text, we deal with one of the principles mentioned above. This makes it fit into the realm of comparative literature. Now it is appropriate to show how these abstract terms can be applied in practice. To this end, we introduce the literary topos of "murder for love" and examine its development in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), taking their architextual relationship with some classical texts into consideration.

[15] López Martínez considers this relationship even more interesting than the relationship between authors who may have a factual connection (2007: 11).

[16] The French school deals with "the origin and influence" of a literary element while the American school approaches the "aesthetic comparison without restricting to the relations between facts and influence" (Cao 2013: 169).

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3. "Murder for love" as a literary topos

Love and death have a close relationship in world literature. There are lovers who commit suicide for an unrequited love or those who murder their rival. There are also lovers who wish for death when experiencing heartbreak without achieving it, or those who suffer lovesickness and finally die. "Murder for love" as a literary topos could be defined as the lover's act of murdering the beloved or someone who hinders the fulfillment of a relationship. As such, the lovers do not hesitate to eliminate those who impede the achievement of their desires (Librán Moreno 2011: 289).

The first characteristic of a literary topos regards its meaning. That is to say, a literary topos must have an intermediate semantic content (Laguna Mariscal 1999: 201) or a conceptual character (Escobar 2000: 140-141) that makes it similar to a motif (Nazemi *et al.* 2022: 197). "Murder for love" fulfills this requirement because it is not as general as a theme or subject, nor as specific as a sub-motif. The table below illustrates the semantic content of "murder for love":

Table 2.

Illustration of "murder for love" in terms of content

Level	Literary Terms	Example
General	Theme	Murder, love, death, etc.
Medium	Motif / Topos	Murder for love
Specific	Sub-motif	- Reasons behind murder (jealousy, revenge, removing obstacles, etc.) - Identification of the victim (beloved, rival, family member, etc.) - Used methods (poison, knife, shooting, etc.)

It is important to remember that literary topoi are not decorative components but argumentative elements with a "rhetorical function" to enrich the meaning of the text and reflect an opinion that the author tries to transmit to the reader (Escobar 2000: 142 and 2006: 11. See also Laguna Mariscal 2014: 27)[17]. The ideology behind "murder for love" is the overpowering nature of love in taking away reason and causing destruction in human life[18].

The second requirement for the identification of a literary topos is the expression of this semantic content through a specific literary form (Laguna Mariscal

[17] Escobar considers a topos as "a form of an already preluded trope" which causes "estrangement" in the reader, but also reminds them of other similar sequences (2019: 462).

[18] That is the reason why the term "love" is sometimes used interchangeably with "madness" (Laguna Mariscal 2011: 367; Thornton 1997: 19-23).

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1999: 201). "Murder for love" usually occurs in the context of tragic works (verse or prose) and comprises five chronological phases:

1. The lover's excessive passion
2. His/her experience of an unrequited love
3. His/her madness and blindness to reasonable thinking
4. His/her decision to act
5. The action of murder

The appearance of the topos is usually accompanied by images of hatred, anger, frustration, and haste. The protagonist also demonstrates symptoms of madness.

Finally, the topos should show recurrence in literary history (Laguna Mariscal 1999: 201). It should be anonymous, but with a universal character (Escobar 2000: 137-138). We do not know the exact origin of "murder for love", but we are aware of its frequent appearance in classical and modern texts. As mentioned earlier, since topoi are living elements of human experience and appear abundantly in literature and culture, it is impossible to trace all their representations. For this reason, we could refer to some significant texts to verify their traditional and universal character. Below we discuss the development of "murder for love" in works by Euripides, Virgil, and Ovid among classical texts, moving to Eugene O'Neill's modern American tragedies as a sample to verify the authenticity of "murder for love" as a topos.

3.1. Committing murder to remove the obstacles to love

Lovers have various motivations for committing murder. One of the most important is to eliminate the obstacles to love, even if the victims are friends or family members (Librán Moreno 2011: 289). This topos occurs in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In book 8, Scylla kills her own father to help her beloved achieve victory in war. According to this story, Scylla is madly in love with Minos in the midst of a war, so she considers patricide the best way to help Minos and prove her love:

> et, puto, vincemur. Quis enim manet exitus urbem,
> cum suus haec illi reserabit moenia Mavors
> et non noster amor? Melius sine caede moraque
> impensaque sui poterit superare cruoris (8.60-63).

Scylla considers her father the most important obstacle to their relationship and wishes he did not exist: "hunc ego solum / infelix timeo, solus mea vota moratur. / Di facerent, sine patre forem!" (8.70-72). Burning with love, she is ready to sacrifice whatever hinders her achievement of it: "Altera iamdudum succensa cupidine tanto / perdere gauderet quodcumque obstaret amori" (8.74-75). One night she

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takes a purple lock of her father's hair as a token to offer to Minos in order to help him achieve power (75-80; see also Nugent 2014: 160).

> Suasit amor facinus. Proles ego regia Nisi
> Scylla tibi trado patriaeque meosque penates.
> Praemia nulla peto nisi te. Cape pignus amoris
> purpureum crinem, nec me nunc tradere crinem,
> sed patrium tibi crede caput. (8.90-94)

Of course, in this story, Scylla's act is considered equal to patricide, "for she claims that she is in effect offering Minos her father's head, not just his hair" (Newlands 1997: 197). As Nugent contends, "Nisus's kingship depends upon a magical lock of purple hair", and Scylla's act signifies betrayal of her father and "handing over her city to the attacker" (2014: 160). Minos, frightened by Scylla's action, refuses to accept the gift and insults his lover, whom he now considers a monster of evil:

> Sceleratаque dextra
> munera porrexit. Minos porrecta refugit
> turbatusque novi respondit imagine facti:
> "Di te summoveant, o nostri infamia saecli,
> orbe suo, tellusque tibi pontusque negetur.
> Certe ego non patiar Iovis incunabula, Creten,
> qui meus est orbis, tantum contingere monstrum". (8.94-100)

At the end, Minos achieves victory, but Scylla can never achieve love due to the crime of betraying her father and her country[19]

A similar case happens in Ovid's *Tristia* where the poet recounts the story of Medea's elopement with Jason. According to this story, Jason steals the Golden Fleece and flees with Medea and her younger brother, but is pursued by her father, King Aeetes. She fears capture, and so thinks of a wicked idea to distract Aeetes "et pater est aliqua fraude morandus ait" (3.9.20). Her plan is to murder her innocent brother, Apsyrtus, then cut his body into pieces and distribute them in different places. She believes that her salvation will be possible with the death of Apsyrtus: "vicimus inquit: 'hic mihi morte sua causa salutis erit'" (3.9.23-24).

> protinus ignari nec quicquam tale timentis
> innocuum rigido perforat ense latus,
> atque ita divellit divulsaque membra per agros
> dissipat in multis invenienda locis,
> neu pater ignoret, scopulo proponit in alto
> pallentesque manus sanguineumque caput.
> ut genitor luctuque novo tardetur et, artus

[19] For more interpretations of the myth see Valpy (1821: 37-39), Dixon-Kennedy (1998: 276), Kidd (1999: 88-89) and Franco (2014: 106).

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dum legit extinctos, triste moretur iter. (3.9.25-32)

With her brother's murder, Medea can finally elope with Jason and gain his love. That is to say, "Medea's relationship to her brother was sacrificed in the interests of her relationship to Jason" (Edinger 1994)[20].

"Murder for love" meets the requirements of a topos through its revitalization in modern literature. Eugene O'Neill's twentieth-century American tragedy *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) presents an elaborated version of this topos in a modern rural context. It tells the story of excessive passion in an inappropriate context: Abbie falls in love with her son-in-law, Eben. It is hard to consummate the relationship because Eben resists her advances, but finally they unite, and a baby is born. Ephraim invites everybody to celebrate because he assumes that he is the father, but during the party a crisis breaks out. Ephraim and Eben have an argument, and Eben learns that Abbie has told Ephraim that Eben assaulted her[21]. This makes him shocked and outraged.

> CABOT (EPHRAIM)–Ha? Ye think ye kin git 'round that someways, do ye? Waal, it'll be her'n, too–Abbie's–ye won't git 'round her–she knows yer tricks–she'll be too much fur ye–she wants the farm her'n–she was afeerd o' ye–she told me ye was sneakin' 'round tryin' t' make love t' her t' git her on yer side . . . ye . . . ye mad fool, ye! (*He raises his clenched fists threateningly.*)
>
> EBEN–(*is confronting him, choking with rage*) Ye lie, ye old skunk! Abbie never said no sech thing!
>
> CABOT–(*suddenly triumphant when he sees how shaken Eben is*) She did. An' I says, I'll blow his brains t' the top o' them elums–an' she says no, that hain't sense, who'll ye git t' help ye on the farm in his place–an' then she says yew'n me ought t' have a son—I know we kin, she says–an' I says, if we do, ye kin have anythin' I've got ye've a mind t'. An' she says, I wants Eben cut off so's this farm'll be mine when ye die! (*with terrible gloating*) An' that's what's happened, hain't it? An' the farm's her'n! An' the dust o' the road–that's your'n! Ha! Now who's hawin'? (1988a: III.ii.365)

Eben doubts the sincerity of Abbie's love: "So that's her sneakin' game–all along!–like I suspicioned at fust–t' swaller it all–an' me, too. . . !" (III.ii.365). He then insults Abbie and tells her what he heard:

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[20] A more detailed account of this myth is given by Apollonius of Rhodes. See Bremmer (1997: 83-85).

[21] The play echoes the myth of Hippolytus and Phaedra for the incestuous love of a married woman for her son-in-law, his rejection and her act of revenge. Abbie reports Eben to her husband, but regrets it and takes it back. See Bran (1999: 2820), Dowling (2009: 116), Neerudu (2020: 70), Piquer (2020: 118-119), Maleki *et al.* (2020: 127-129), Liapis (2021: 49) and Nazemi & Laguna Mariscal (2022). Many critics consider Euripides's *Hippolytus* and *Medea* as the main sources of influence for this play. See Sanders (1968: 490-499), Hays (1969: 423), Narey (1992: 49), Bloom (1995: 37-38), Brietzke (2001: 180), Madran (2006: 455), Bryer & Hartig (2010: 129), Práce (2012: 10), Bloom (2014: 253), Lambropoulos (2015), Majumdar (2016: 43), Hermann (2017: 59) and Dubost (2019: 132).

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> EBEN–(*unheeding*) Ye've made a fool o' me—a sick, dumb fool–a-purpose! Ye've been on'y playin' yer sneakin', stealin' game all along–gittin' me t' lie with ye so's ye'd hev a son he'd think was his'n, an' makin' him promise he'd give ye the farm and let me eat dust, if ye did git him a son! (*staring at her with anguished, bewildered eyes*) They must be a devil livin' in ye! T'ain't human t' be as bad as that be! (III.ii.366)

Abbie tries to explain the truth, but Eben is so furious that he does not listen. After a declaration of hatred, he gives up on his love (III.ii.367-368)[22]. Eben believes that the child meant Ephraim's property would pass to her after his death: "He'll steal the farm fur ye!" (III.ii.368). For this, he hates her. Abbie, however, is truly in love with Eben, and does not hesitate to regain his trust and love by any means. During the argument, Eben states that he wishes the baby had never been born: "I wish he never was born! I wish he'd die this minit! I wish I'd never sot eyes on him! It's him–yew havin' him–a-purpose t' steal–that's changed everythin'!" (III.ii.367). This gives Abbie an idea: to murder the child and prove that she did not have any material interests in the relationship with Eben. When Eben confesses that he loved her before the birth of the baby (III.ii.367) this makes her even more determined to commit infanticide. As a result, Abbie considers the child the only obstacle in their relationship. She declares her intentions to murder the baby, but is not taken seriously by Eben: "I'd kill him fust! I do love ye! I'll prove t' ye. . . !" (III.ii.368). By this, Abbie, "as a Medea figure" tries to take "fate into her hands" (Majumdar 2016: 48) and retain the lost love.

Later in the play, she commits infanticide. Feeling simultaneously frightened and victorious, she informs Eben about her act (III.iii.369). At first, Eben is shocked and enraged by the news and decides to inform the sheriff (III.iii.371), but his feelings change and he finally believes in Abbie's love and asks her for forgiveness (III.iv.374-375). Although at the end of the story they are taken away by the sheriff, with death most likely awaiting them, it is clear that with the infanticide Abbie was able to eliminate the obstacles to her love and achieve Eben's trust. The play ends with Abbie and Eben's declaration of love (III.iv.377)[23].

When reading this story and pondering the recontextualization of "murder for love", it is impossible to analyze the appearance of this topos without considering

[22] In O'Neill's tragedies, lovers choose abandonment of the beloved as a reaction to their feeling of unrequited love. This attitude can be found in several plays such as *Anna Christie* where Matt leaves Anna when he hears about her past, or in *Mourning Becomes Electra* where Peter finds out about Lavinia's lies and decides to abandon her. Similarly, in *Beyond the Horizon* Andrew thinks of going on a sea journey when he realizes that Ruth has decided to marry his brother. See Nazemi (2022: 100) and Nazemi & Laguna Mariscal (2022).

[23] While the play begins with excessive passion and desire, the couple's relationship "is redefined [at the end] by their peaceful embrace before they head to jail in anticipation of their hanging". This signifies "a form of love that is freed from desire" (Dubost 2019: 137).

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classical stories such as Medea's murder of her brother for the love of Jason or Scylla's patricide for Minos, which both include the same underlying structures. In this way, the analysis of the literary topoi fits into the realm of comparative literature. In fact, on various occasions, critics have mentioned Euripides's *Medea* as the main source of influence on this episode because in both stories a mother commits infanticide: "both are works of passionate hatred as well as love, and both center upon tragic victims rather than tragic heroes" (Narey 1992: 49)[24]. Moreover, Abbie, like Medea, "kills what she loves" (Madran 2006: 457). Euripides's Medea murders her own children, as does Abbie; however, their motivations are quite different. Medea tries to take revenge on Jason's betrayal by murdering her own sons. She does not intend to conquer Jason's love and even plans her escape after the murder (Euripides, *Med.* 780-810). Abbie commits murder specifically to regain Eben's lost love (see Mahfouz 2010: 8).

> ABBIE–(*clinging to his arm–with passionate earnestness*) If I could make it–'s if he'd never come up between us–if I could prove t' ye I wa'n't schemin' t' steal from ye–so's everythin' could be jest the same with us, lovin' each other jest the same, kissin' an' happy the same's we've been happy afore he come–if I could do it–ye'd love me agen, wouldn't ye? Ye'd kiss me agen? Ye wouldn't never leave me, would ye? (III.iii.368)

Perhaps it is better to consider Medea's fratricide in *Tristia* and Scylla's patricide in *Metamorphoses* as closer parallels to Abbie's pedicide in *Desire Under the Elms* since they share similar motivations (see Nazemi & Laguna Mariscal 2022). In the three stories, the lovers do not hesitate to sacrifice a family member to achieve their love, using the victim as a "scapegoat" (see Gupta & Mahal 2014: 197). The three lovers make this decision at a moment of crisis when it is the only remaining solution, performing it in haste without rational thought. Medea commits murder when she is afraid of being caught by her father, Scylla performs it before Minos achieves victory alone, and Abbie accomplishes it before Eben abandons her. Thus, the passionate lovers do not linger, and instead act on the spot. Abbie believes that by murdering the baby she will retain Eben's love, while Eben, like Minos, responds with anger and insults his lover. The lovers demonstrate their cruel side to their beloved by committing murder, which causes terror in their beloved.

Abbie, like Medea, is finally capable of achieving love: Jason marries Medea and Eben declares his love to Abbie. Nevertheless, as we will see, Medea's life with Jason does not last long, as is the case in O'Neill's tragedy, when the sheriff comes to arrest the couple. Jason betrays Medea for another woman and Minos abandons Scylla. Eben returns to Abbie and confesses his love for her, but only after he has reported her as a murderer. That is how Eben, like Jason and Minos, contributes to the termination of the relationship.

[24] Narey argues that O'Neill incorporates Medea's passion as well as its attachment to "the maddening fury of hate and the convoluted ecstasy of love" in his tragedy (1992: 49).

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3.2. Committing murder to punish the beloved

Another motivation for the lovers to commit murder is to punish the beloved for their lack of faith. In *Medea*, Euripides tells the story of Jason's marriage to Creusa and his abandonment of Medea: "γυναῖκ᾽ ἐφ᾽ ἡμῖν δεσπότιν δόμων ἔχει" (Euripides, *Med.* 694)[25]. Medea is then exiled from the country so as not to be an obstacle to this marriage: "ὄλωλα: καὶ πρός γ᾽ ἐξελαύνομαι χθονός" (704). But before this happens, she devises a plan. At the beginning of the tragedy, she laments this betrayal and asks Aegeus for help (750-755). Once she is assured of Aegeus's assistance, she has an idea: to kill the princess by sending her gifts that contain poison as well as slaughtering her children to cause pain to Jason (780-810). She justifies her plan with the idea that she should not allow anyone to scorn her for not having punished the wrongdoer:

> τί δεῖ με πατέρα τῶνδε τοῖς τούτων κακοῖς
> λυποῦσαν αὐτὴν δὶς τόσα κτᾶσθαι κακά;
> οὐ δῆτ᾽ ἔγωγε: χαιρέτω βουλεύματα. (1046-1048)

She follows the scheme as planned. A messenger informs her about the death of Creusa and her father, King Creon, by poison (1165-1170) and fire (1185-1190).

> ὄλωλεν ἡ τύραννος ἀρτίως κόρη
> Κρέων θ᾽ ὁ φύσας φαρμάκων τῶν σῶν ὕπο. (1125-1126)

Then, the death of the two sons is announced before Jason arrives to rescue them: "παῖδες τεθνᾶσι χειρὶ μητρῴᾳ σέθεν" (1309). The play ends with Medea and Jason's final conversation. Medea argues that Jason deserves to suffer this grief for his cruel act of betrayal: "σέ γε πημαίνουσ᾽" (1398). Jason insults her and considers her more savage than Scylla the Tuscan monster! (1342-1343).

> οὐκ ἔστιν ἥτις τοῦτ᾽ ἂν Ἑλληνὶς γυνὴ
> ἔτλη ποθ᾽, ὧν γε πρόσθεν ἠξίουν ἐγὼ
> γῆμαι σέ, κῆδος ἐχθρὸν ὀλέθριόν τ᾽ ἐμοί,
> λέαιναν, οὐ γυναῖκα, τῆς Τυρσηνίδος
> Σκύλλης ἔχουσαν ἀγριωτέραν φύσιν. (1339-1343)

In Virgil's *Aeneid*, another representation of "murder for love" appears. This epic poem gives a short account of the love triangle of Orestes, Pyrrhus, and Hermione. Once Orestes is informed about Pyrrhus's marriage to Hermione, he bursts into anger and does not hesitate to murder the rival immediately:

[25] Seneca retells this story in a tragedy. Nussbaum argues that in Seneca's *Medea*, there exists a mixture of "justification and horror" in a way that the protagonist becomes a murderer due to love. Consequently, "The wife's intense, unabated love then produces an upheaval that leads to tragedy" (1994: 446). For an analysis of different Medea narratives see Thorburn (2005: 327-333).

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> Ast illum, ereptae magno inflammatus amore
> coniugis et scelerum Furiis agitatus, Orestes
> excipit incautum patriasque obtruncat ad aras.
> Morte Neoptolemi regnorum reddita cessit
> pars Heleno, qui Chaonios cognomine campos
> Chaoniamque omnem Troiano a Chaone dixit,
> Pergamaque Iliacamque iugis hanc addidit arcem. (3.330-336)

Ovid's poetry also assimilates this topos. One good example is Polyphemus's murder of Acis in *Metamorphoses*. According to this narrative poem, the jealous lover kills the rival after seeing him accompanying his beloved. Similar to Medea whose purpose was to make her beloved grieve, Polyphemus's act leaves Galatea in pain and despair:

> cum ferus ignaros nec quicquam tale timentes
> me videt atque Acin "video" que exclamat "et ista
> ultima sit, faciam, veneris concordia vestrae!"
> Tantaque vox, quantam Cyclops iratus habere
> debuit, illa fuit: clamore perhorruit Aetne.
> Ast ego vicino pavefacta sub aequore mergor,
> terga fugae dederat conversa Symaethius heros
> et "fer opem, Galatea, precor, mihi! ferte, parentes"
> dixerat "et vestris periturum admittite regnis!" (XIII. 873-881)

As mentioned earlier, the topos develops in modern literature. An example is the two murders for love in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), a play cycle considered to be an imitation of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*[26]. In the first play, called *Homecoming*, Christine murders her husband, Ezra Mannon, in order to facilitate her marriage to Adam Brant. This is similar to what happens in *Oresteia* among Clytemnestra, Aegisthus and Agamemnon[27]. In the present study, we focus on the second murder in this trilogy, which is Orin's murder of his rival, Adam Brant.

In the second play, *The Hunted*, Orin (Ezra and Christine's son, serving as a soldier in the American Civil War) returns home. After hearing news from his sister Lavinia about a relationship between Christine and Brant, he bursts "into jealous rage" (2.I.958-959) and bitterly demands explanations from his mother and sister. Christine, however, refuses to confess the truth.

[26] Bigsby considers *Mourning Becomes Electra* "a self-conscious effort to recreate a modern Greek tragedy" (2018: xviii). For studies which refer to the reception of *Oresteia* in this modern trilogy see Highet (1951: 526), Asselineau (1958: 143), Williams (1966: 118-119), Raleigh (1989: 67-68), Khare (1998: 360), Fischer-Lichte (2004: 300-306), Törnqvist (2004: 233), Black (2004; 2005: 115), Dowling (2009: 364), Grafton *et al.* (2010: 10), Gray (2012: 428) and Wong (2019: 74).

[27] Many studies have been dedicated to the analysis of this murder and its relationship to the classical Greek tragedy. See Genette (1997a: 329), Scheaffer (2002: 338-339), McDonald (2003: 24-28), Dowling (2009: 369), Kabatchnik (2010: 314), McEvoy (2017: 119-120) and Liapis (2021: 41-42).

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In different parts of the play, O'Neill provides information about the relationship between Orin and Christine based on passionate love and jealousy from both parties. In fact, in this three play cycle, each of the Mannon children, "is enamored of the opposite-sex parent" (Robinson 1998: 77), which causes obsessions and conflicts (see O'Neill 1988b: 2.I.959; 2.II.964 and 2.III.980). Christine also expresses her former love for Orin: "I loved you better than anything in the world!" (2.II.968), but now, having initiated an affair with Brant, she thinks of having Orin marry Hazel so that she can distract her son and flee with her love:

> ORIN–(*without looking at her*) What's made you take such a fancy to Hazel all of a sudden? You never used to think much of her. You didn't want me going around with her.
>
> CHRISTINE–(*coming forward and sitting across the table from him–in her gentle motherly tone*) I was selfish then. I was jealous, too, I'll confess. But all I want now is your happiness, dear. I know how much you used to like Hazel–
>
> ORIN–(*blurts out*) That was only to make you jealous! (*then bitterly*) But now you're a widow, I'm not home an hour before you're trying to marry me off! You must be damned anxious to get rid of me again! Why? (2.II.967)

Later in the play, Lavinia finds an opportunity to tell her brother the whole truth and asks him to follow their mother when she goes to meet Brant. They do so and find Christine and Brant kissing and expressing love in a ship in East Boston. They also overhear them planning an elopement in a couple of days (2.IV.990-993). This is where the topos of "murder for love" appears. After Christine says goodbye to Brant and leaves the ship, Orin, "in a savage, revengeful rage" and "distorted with jealous fury" (2.IV.990), shoots the lover:

> Orin steps through the door and with the pistol almost against Brant's body fires twice. Brant pitches forward to the floor by the table, rolls over, twitches a moment on his back and lies still. Orin springs forward and stands over the body, his pistol aimed down at it, ready to fire again. (2.IV.994-995)

It is important to note that Brant is not only Christine's lover, but also Orin's cousin. In fact, Brant is the son of Ezra's uncle David[28]. In the past, David had fallen in love with a nurse and had to marry her because he made her pregnant, so Orin's grandfather kicked them out and rebuilt the house to eliminate the disgrace (1.I.906). This presents a similarity to classical stories, such as the murders of Medea or Scylla: in this play the lover (Orin) does not hesitate to kill a family member for the sake of love.

[28] Similarly, in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra's lover, Aegisthus, was also Agamemnon's cousin and bore "strong facial resemblance to Agamemnon and Orestes" (Alexander 1953: 923).

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The motivation for this murder is to exact revenge upon the rival while also bringing grief to the beloved (or giving her a lesson). Unlike Aeschylus's Orestes, Orin does not seek to exact revenge on Brant or Christine for the murder of his father. In fact, his infatuation with Christine makes him hate Ezra to the extent that he is glad about his death: "I am glad, too! —that he has left us alone!" (2.II.968)[29]. Moreover, Orestes murders Clytemnestra while Orin eliminates his rival. He precisely kills Brant to punish Christine for the betrayal and to discard the rival. As Diggins observes, "What drives Orin to despair is not that his mother has murdered his father but that she has taken a lover" (2007: 217).

The fact that Orin murders Brant immediately after finding him kissing his mother makes his act similar to Polyphemus's murder of Acis in *Metamorphoses*. Both lovers' fury and jealousy cause their madness and hinder rational thinking. Orin and Polyphemus do not hesitate to kill the rival the moment they find them accompanying their beloved. Moreover, both intend to cause pain to the beloved: Polyphemus commits murder in front of Galatea while Orin proudly informs Christine about Brant's death (2.V.1000). Furthermore, the only thing that consoles Orin after discovering Christine's lack of faith is murder. His motivations are also similar to Medea's assassination of the rival in Euripides's tragedy: he aims to punish his beloved and cause grief and regret in her life. Thus, Orin murders his rival with the same attitude as Polyphemus, but with Medea's intentions. However, unlike Medea, who did not demonstrate regret after the consequent murders, Orin's feeling of guilt and remorse cause his madness and final suicide (see Nazemi *et al.* 2022: 205-206).

4. Conclusion

The present article aimed to fill some gaps in the understanding of literary topoi by analyzing their position in the realm of comparative literature. Using the definitions proposed by Laguna Mariscal (1999) and Escobar (2000), it was argued that the conceptual and traditional character of literary topoi must be assessed through a comparison of literary texts. In other words, to verify the authenticity of literary topoi in given contexts, it is essential to examine the development or evolution of their syntax in different classical and modern literary works. Thus, the study of literary topoi follows the objectives of comparative literature for its inclusion of parallelism, development, evolution and comparison. This further produces architextual relationships between texts that incorporate similar topoi.

To demonstrate this in practice, the topos of "murder for love" was introduced, and its development in a number of classical and modern works belonging to different genres, such as those by Euripides, Virgil, Ovid and O'Neill, was studied. It

[29] Genette interprets Orin's act of murder from a similar point of view. According to him, Orin committed murder because "he could not bear Christine's affair with Brant". Therefore, "he acted not to avenge his father but seemingly to eliminate a rival" (1997a: 329).

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is important to remember that literary topoi are universal in nature. Consequently, their representation is not restricted to Western literature. However, since the scope of the present study was limited, only a few significant examples from the Western tradition were selected to verify the recurrence of "murder for love" as a topos. Finally, the results of the study demonstrated the ways in which O'Neill's tragedies establish architextual relationships with the aforementioned classical texts for the development of the "murder for love" topos.

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