

# “The Man Was Dead and so He Had to Kill the Things He Loved”: “Medusation” as Metatheatre in Eugene O’Neill’s Mature Plays

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This study is about Eugene O’Neill’s use of “medusation” as an effective metatheatrical device and foremost achievement in his art. Occurring onstage as an unexpected “anagnorisis”, the medusation is a traumatic experience that engenders ritual death. This author argues that the medusation is a quintessentially metatheatrical act, inasmuch as here O’Neill carries out a commentary on the function and functioning of theatre, through the consciously fictitious events that unfold on the stage. In the Introduction, the author reviews its development in O’Neill’s plays, from the more traditional melodramatic situations of the early works to the subsequent portrayal of a self-defeating pattern calling for psychological violence and symbolic death. In the section called “Medusation”, the author addresses the concept of medusation in order to account for the process whereby O’Neill’s people, annihilated by their sudden glimpses into the other within themselves, undergo major physical and spiritual change. In “Case Studies”, the author analyzes the chief correlatives of medusation: the dead-in-life, the death mask and the dead double. The author’s point in this paper is, thus, to show how extensively and pervasively O’Neill deploys medusation in order to signify a rite of passage that engenders metatheatrical death. Its outcome may either be the perpetuation of an endless spiral of violence and self-defeat, or a premise for rebirth arising from the characters’ assumption of responsibility as to their share of guilt in the evil of the world, together with the renewed human sympathy and understanding that this awareness brings along.

*Keywords:* Eugene O’Neill, medusation, metatheater, theater, American drama

## Introduction

As a blossoming playwright eagers to draw attention to his work, Eugene O’Neill initially abounded on Grand-Guignol and Montecristo-like stage effects. As newspaper reviews report—and as scholarly works such as John Henry Raleigh’s 1964 essay, “Eugene O’Neill and the Escape from the Château d’If”, subsequently remarked—both O’Neill’s audience and his critics have often pointed out that the playwright’s taste for melodramatic situations was much more developed than he was ever ready to admit. In Christopher Bigsby’s (2006) words, “(n)othing inhibited” (p. 15) Eugene O’Neill’s imagination, not even when it came to lingering

on misgeneration, incest, illness and death. Consumptive, suicidal and stillborn characters stalk the stage of O’Neill’s early and middle phase plays, which touch on tuberculosis (*The Web* (1988a), *Beyond the Horizon* (1988a) and *The Straw* (1988a)), cannibalism (*Thirst* (1988a)), abortion (*Abortion* (1988a)), shell shock (*Shell Shock* (1988a), *The Sniper* (1988a)), and madness (*Ile* (1988a)). *Before Breakfast* (1988a), the “thoroughly Strindbergian” (as cited in Törnquist, 1969, p. 71) O’Neill monologue, focuses on a sexual battle that ends up with the suicide of the male protagonist. *Bound East for Cardiff* (1988a), the Conradian play that earned O’Neill the limelight, deals with an injured sailor, who is portrayed in his agony and death.

Not even after becoming a successful playwright did O’Neill’s bent for delving in the pain-ridden side of humanity abate. On the contrary, in a famous 1925 letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn, the playwright declares that the “glorious, self destructive struggle” of “seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives (...) is the only subject worth writing about” as well as the essence of “the Greek dream in tragedy (...) the noblest ever” (Bogard & Bryer, 1988, p. 195). Accordingly, violence under this Greek ideal, if less explicit, becomes ostensibly subtler—and more morbid, in the plays of the so called middle phase, as the nightmares of miscegeneration (*All God’s Chillun Got Wings* (1988b)), infanticide (*Desire Under the Elms* (1988b)) and incest (*Desire, Dynamo* (1988b) and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1988b)) loom over the successful plays of the 1920s and the 1930s, triggering murders, suicides and abuse.

Nevertheless, a significant development in O’Neill’s vision of the world, hence, in his portrayal of it, was already on the way. As Bigsby (2006) put it, “(t)he church of (O’Neill’s) drama was constantly being reconsecrated to different faiths, faiths which he served with total commitment, only to abandon them for others” (p. 15). As he had already turned from his initial commitment to Conrad and Strindberg to his subsequent classical tastes, from naturalism to “supernaturalism”, and from realism to expressionism, and back, in his maturity O’Neill resolved to change his attitude towards violence and spectacular pain by relegating them offstage, a theatrical device he had already used in early plays, such as *Abortion* (1988a), *The Dreamy Kid* (1988a), *Before Breakfast* (1988a), and *Desire Under the Elms* (1988b), and that progressively came to stand as a sign of a personal and artistic development.

The author believes that this late attitude of O’Neill’s reaches its full ripeness in *The Iceman Cometh* (1939). Here, Hickey kills his wife before the play begins and in order to put an end to her pipe dreams, i.e., to “save” her. Likewise, Parrit’s suicide takes place offstage, and to the other characters’ general indifference. Moreover, Parrit’s death is in itself an act of love, meant to atone for his betrayal of his mother. Above all, the violence displayed in *The Iceman Cometh* (1988c) goes far beyond physical suffering, having rather to do with the psychological assaults that Hickey perpetrates upon the inmates of Hope’s bar, with the ambivalence of his messianic purposes, and with the unreleased aggression that breaks out as soon as the salesman has enacted his plan. On account of this, Hickey stands out as the main symbolical figure of *The Iceman Cometh* (1988c), and as a living incarnation of the Iceman in the title, who puts together ambivalence and death, the two main issues of the whole play; “LARRY—(...) for Death was the Iceman Hickey called to his home” (O’Neill, 1988c, p. 667).

Ambivalent are, indeed, Hickey’s “bughouse preacher” (O’Neill, 1988c, p. 702) poises, and so are also his relationship with Evelyn, Parrit’s attitude towards his mother, as well as Larry’s “grandstand philosopher bunk” (O’Neill, 1988c, p. 629). The pipe-dreams leitmotiv is itself utterly ambivalent too, and puzzling. For in *The*

*Iceman Cometh* (1988c) ambivalence is inevitably connected to death, or rather to the inner death that makes characters want to kill the things they love, and from which no character in the play is spared.

This very issue of the characters’ symbolic death as a trigger for their suppressed violence and unreleased aggression is to be found in *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1988c), too. Here, as in *The Iceman Cometh* (1988c), it is the men’s incapability to cope with the Eternal Feminine, namely with what Walter Davis (1994) called the metaphysical “mother” (p. 30), that conjures Jim Tyrone’s impending feelings of incest and sexual abuse in Josie’s presence. Just like Jamie’s character in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (1988c), Jim is but another living incarnation of the protagonist of Wilde’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Here, in O’Neill’s reading, not only is inner death seen as a consequence of someone’s self-inflicted punishment, which comes before and apart from the world’s judgment upon it, but a close connection is also envisioned between the characters’ symbolic death and the physical changes this brings about. Correspondingly, in *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1988c), if at his first appearance Jim “(l)ooks like a dead man walking slow behind his own coffin” (O’Neill, 1988c, p. 874), as the play reaches its climax he comes to achieve “the drained, exhausted peace of death” in sleep, his face looking “pale and haggard in the moonlight” (p. 933), an unmistakable correlative of the dead body he will soon become.

But it is, of course, *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (1988c) that is pervaded, more than any other O’Neill’s play, by the double-bind that the characters’ metatheatrical death brings along. Incapable of escaping from the deranged bonds of their dysfunctional family, all the members of the Tyrone family keep dislocating the aggression that runs through them into verbal assaults, immediately followed by hasty apologies. All dead, they have to kill the things they love. Accordingly, ghosts proliferate throughout the play, starting from baby Eugene and the empty spaces symbolically left for him (the wicker couch away from the four chairs, the reading lamp against the four-sockets chandelier), all the way to O’Neill’s own Walpurgisnacht, in Act Four, when the dead come forth and appear for what they really are. As for Mary, in Edmund’s words, she is “a ghost haunting the past” (O’Neill, 1988c, p. 811). Edmund too depicts himself as “a stranger (...) who must always be a little in love with death!” (O’Neill, 1988c, p. 812). Jamie is, again, the reincarnation of Wilde’s dead-in-life, whose “dead part (...) doesn’t want to be the only corpse around the house” (O’Neill, 1988c, p. 821). As O’Neill’s biographic and artistic trajectory reaches its climax, Edmund, the playwright’s artistic double, is able to speak out about how evil and the dead-in-life leitmotiv interconnect, as he points out that life itself is but “the three Gorgons in one. You look in their faces and turn into stone. Or it’s Pan. You see him and you die—that is, inside you—and have to go on living as a ghost” (O’Neill, 1988c, p. 796).

Thus, in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (1988c), O’Neill becomes aware that inner death and the ghosts it engenders are one and the same, as both come to be explicitly connected to the effect of Medusa’s stare. As the examples mentioned above, at this point physical injury, spectacular pain and abuse no longer stand in the foreground of his plays, which, on the contrary, have come to be populated by characters whose “self destructive struggle” has taken place inwardly, and whose appearance as chalky death masks is but a signifier of the inner death that ensues from it. As in Wilde’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, in O’Neill’s mature plays characters are dead on the inside, for they have to kill the thing they love. Or rather, they are already morally dead, read guilty, and so they have to kill the thing they love. Indeed, in O’Neill’s view, which he has Jamie disclose in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, “Wilde (...) has the dope twisted. The man was dead and so he had to kill the thing he loved. That is what it ought to be” (O’Neill, 1988c, p. 821). Interestingly, this is a markedly

subjective interpretation of the poem from the playwright’s part, for in Wilde (1998) there is virtually no clue that the prisoner’s wistfulness depends on his sense of guilt and not, rather, on the fact that “(t)hat fellows (sic) got to swing” (p. 2). Yet, it is O’Neill’s concern to draw a comparison between his characters and Wilde’s prisoner on account of their death-wish originated from guilt. What results here is multilayered metatheater: A fictitious man (Wilde’s (1998)) is compared to fictional characters (O’Neill’s (1988c)) who meditate on being dead inside, hence, figuratively. Lost in the maze of their double-binds and love-hate relationships, O’Neill’s people come, thus, to replace physical aggression with psychological violence, which they inevitably perpetrate “out of love”. As a consequence, the mood that pervades works such as *The Iceman Cometh* (1988c), *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (1988c), and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1988) is not altogether dissimilar from plays like *Trifles* (2006) and *The Verge* (2006) by Susan Glaspell, where the purposely spare use of explicit violence onstage only succeeds in conjuring it all the more powerfully and conspicuously.

### Medusation

Scholars Clair (1989) and Dubois (1994) would call the petrifying epiphany O’Neill discovered in his late plays a “medusation,” a term they coined with reference to Vernant’s seminal essay “Death in the Eyes: Gorgo, Figure of the Other” (as cited in Zeitlin, 1991). Vernant, a mythologist, discusses Medusa’s eerie power to turn into stone those who meet her stare, in the context of his overall discourse on the ways the Greek world used to portray otherness in terms of possible vs. impossible negotiation. According to Vernant, Medusa’s mask and its deadly effect would stand for the irreconcilable other, namely for “the terrifying horror of what which is absolutely other, unspeakable, unthinkable—pure chaos” (as cited in Zeitlin, 1991, p. 196). As Vernant reminded us, Medusa’s decapitated head hung at the entrance of the Land of the Shadows. Together with Cerberus, its function was precisely to keep apart the two worlds that must not come together.

In order to cross the threshold, one would have had to confront the face of terror, and beneath its gaze, to have been transformed oneself into the image of Gorgo, into that which, in fact, the dead already are: heads, empty heads, robbed of their strength and *menos*, (...) comparable to a man’s shadow or his reflection in a mirror. (as cited in Zeitlin, 1991, p. 121)

In Vernant’s formulation, in the instant of the medusation one is faced with someone’s post-mortem double self. “The face of Gorgo is the Other, your double. It is the Strange, responding to your face like an image in the mirror” (as cited in Zeitlin, 1991, p. 138). As the two become as one, the price of this merging is death.

A relevant example of medusation and its phenomenology appears in a famous 1950 poem by Cesare Pavese, “Verrà la morte, e avrà i tuoi occhi”. Written 35 years before Vernant’s essay, but anticipating the latter even in its title, Pavese’s poem provides an outstanding example of medusation in a literary text by deploying its main correlatives, namely, petrifying vision, mirror effects and the death double.

“Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi”  
 Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi.  
 questa morte che ci accompagna  
 dal mattino alla sera, insonne,  
 sorda, come un vecchio rimorso  
 o un vizio assurdo. I tuoi occhi  
 saranno una vana parola,  
 un grido taciuto, un silenzio.  
 Così li vedi ogni mattina

“Death Will Come and Will Have Your Eyes”  
 Death will come and will have your eyes—  
 this death that accompanies us  
 from morning till evening, unsleeping,  
 deaf, like an old remorse  
 or an absurd vice. Your eyes  
 will be a useless word,  
 a suppressed cry, a silence.  
 That’s what you see each morning

quando su te sola ti pieghi  
 nello specchio. O cara speranza,  
 quel giorno sapremo anche noi  
 che sei la vita e sei il nulla.  
 Per tutti la morte ha uno sguardo.  
 Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi.  
 Sarà come smettere un vizio,  
 come vedere nello specchio  
 riemergere un viso morto,  
 come ascoltare un labbro chiuso.  
 Scenderemo nel gorgo muti. (Pavese, 1998, p. 136)

when alone with yourself you lean  
 toward the mirror. O precious hope,  
 that day we too will know  
 that you are life and you are nothingness.  
 Death has a look for everyone.  
 Death will come and will have your eyes.  
 It will be like renouncing a vice,  
 like seeing a dead face reappear  
 in the mirror,  
 like listening to a lip that’s shut.  
 We’ll go down into the maelstrom mute.  
 —translated by Brock (2008).

### Case Studies

Of course, the medusation and its objective correlatives are to be found everywhere in O’Neill, as well, starting from very early examples, to the enhanced self-consciousness of the late plays. There, the petrifying moments when characters are symbolically killed by their meeting with “the Other, the double self, the Stranger” invariably merge with the leitmotiv of the dead-in-life, thereby turning the medusation into the main signifier of O’Neill’s developing rendering of violence from spectacular pain to inner death.

The first overt reference to medusation can be found in O’Neill’s 1920s experimental plays *The Emperor Jones* (1988a) and *The Hairy Ape* (1988b). In the former, the black protagonist’s glimpse into the irreconcilable Other within himself unfolds as a series of mirror reflections that culminate in his insanity and death. When it comes to *The Hairy Ape* (1988b), there Yank’s ill-fated evolution is touched off by his encounter with his double negative: the ultra-refined, feeble, white heiress Mildred Douglas. While the stoker sweats, shovels and swears, “pounding on his chest, gorilla like”, “(h)e sees Mildred, like a white apparition in the full light from the open furnaces doors. He glares into her eyes, turned into stone” (O’Neill, 1988b, p. 137).

As the instances above attest, vision stands out as a main premise of medusation. Nietzsche, O’Neill’s “literary idol” (as cited in Diggins, 2007, p. IX) had also hinted at this in *The Birth of Tragedy* (2007) when he writes about “the painfully broken gaze of the Dionysian man” (p. 37) who has “had a real glimpse into the essence of things” and is no longer capable to act; “knowledge kills action, for action requires a state of being in which we are covered with the veil of illusion” (p. 36). Incapable of action are also O’Neill’s medusated characters, whose immobility causes them to turn into what Törnquist (1969) called “the masklike faces in *Electra* (1988b)” (p. 110). Interestingly, in the introduction to his essay, Vernant also concerns himself with those figures of otherness “who are represented by a simple mask or whose cults contain masks” (as cited in Zeitlin, 1991, p. 195).

The masked or masklike face appears, thus, as the first and foremost consequence of medusation. And so does also its direct antecedent, the Mephistophelean mask, another powerful trope that engrossed O’Neill all throughout his early and middle phase, so that, arguably, his famous “Memoranda on Mask” is but an effort to develop such element: “For is not the whole of Goethe’s truth for our time just that Mephistopheles and Faust are one and the same—are Faust?” (as cited in Cargill, Fain, & Fisher, 1961, p. 118).

O’Neill’s (1961) concern in the “Memoranda on Masks” is, declaredly, to advocate an even more extensive use of masks as a means through which the theatre will be restored “to its highest and sole significant function as

a Temple where the religion of a poetical interpretation and symbolical celebration of life is communicated to human beings, starved in spirit by their soul stifling daily struggle to exist as masks among the masks of living!” (pp. 121-122). And yet, if one considers the O’Neill plays where masks are actually deployed, it can well be argued that these fulfill a much more specific function. In *The Great God Brown* (1988b), for instance, Dion Anthony’s mask “is a fixed forcing on his own face—dark, spiritual, poetic, passionately supersensitive, helplessly unprotected in its childlike, religious faith in life—into the expression of a mocking, reckless, defiant, gayly scoffing and sensual young Pan” (O’Neill, 1988b, p. 475).

As the play unfolds, Dion’s mask becomes even more terrible, “(a)ll of its Pan quality (...) changed into a diabolical Mephistophelean cruelty and irony” (O’Neill, 1988b, p. 498), which discloses its function as Dion’s post-mortem, i.e., medusated, double. Another O’Neill mask play, *Days Without End* (1988c), portrays two opposites and equal competitors, the one being the medusated alter-ego of the other. John’s “handsome” and “conventional” figure is, indeed, uncannily mimicked by his double Loving, whose appearance and clothes are, in fact, “in every detail exactly the same,” were it not for “an equally strange dissimilarity”: “For Loving’s face is a mask whose features reproduce exactly the features of John’s face—the death mask of a John who has died with a sneer of scornful mockery on his lips” (O’Neill, 1988c, p.113).

As O’Neill’s Mephistophelean mask is discovered to be but Medusa’s mask, the doubles that this brings along are inevitably bound to be medusated doubles. As a matter of fact, O’Neill lifelong belief in the “duality in the soul of the individual” (as cited in Barlow, 1985, p. 85) led him to crowd his plays with mirror images long after he had put aside the experimental device of the mask. Even in his only comedy, *Ah Wilderness!* (1988c), the highly idealized character of Nat Miller finds his medusated double in Sid Davis, so that the perfect match between Nat and his wife Essie is uncannily mimicked by the impossible love between Sid and Lily, Nat’s sister. In *More Stately Mansions* (1988c), Sara Melody is ostensibly a mirror-image of Deborah Hartford, as Simon is of his elder son Ethan. Moreover, both Deborah’s and Simon’s personalities are split. In *The Iceman Cometh* (1988c), Larry Slade can well be viewed as an alter-ego of Hickey, as Evelyn is of Rosa Parrit. In *Hugie*, the night clerk performs the role of Hugie’s substitute. Again, in *A Moon or the Misbegotten* (1988c), Jim wavers between mock and desperation, loving and abusing behaviors, rage and searing guilt, as Josie clearly becomes his forgiving mother for one night. When it comes to *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (1988c), all characters have doubles there, whose correlatives are Wilde’s dead-in-life for Jamie, the dead sibling for Edmund, and the contrast between light and darkness for James. Interestingly, in her book *Final Acts*, Judith Barlow (1985) provided evidence as to the fact that, in the first drafts of *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (1988c), O’Neill planned to create an almost schizophrenic Mary—hence, similar to Ella in *All God’s Chillun’ Got Wings* (1988b)—whose “peculiar duality of characters” caused her to pass from girlish naiveté to:

another opposite self that suddenly breaks through, a hard, bitter, cynical, and aging woman who reminds one of her elder son; a woman who can taunt with a biting (??) cruelty, as if suddenly possessed by an alien demon of revenge. (as cited in Barlow, 1985, p. 85)

As Floyd (1981) pointed out in *Eugene O’Neill at Work*, O’Neill was so obsessed by doubles, both in terms of deadly alter egos and of medusated split personalities, that he planned to scatter them also in plays he eventually left uncompleted, such as “Jim and Self”, and the lengthy “The Last Conquest”, a “fantastic pageant dealing with the recurrence of an ancient duality in a possible realistic future”, appropriately set in “The Hall of

Black Mirrors in the Savior’s Palace on a night in the Future” (p. 328), and ending with “the parable of the Siamese Twins, illustrating ‘the duality of man-the opposites-nature of the opposites’” (p. 326).

### Conclusions

According to Robert Heilman (1968), the passage from melodrama to tragedy is accomplished at the moment when the feeling of pity, namely of self-pity, that arises from the perception of the evil in the outer world comes to be replaced by the awareness of some sort of self-division within someone’s own self. In other words, it is the discovery of the Other within oneself that overcomes the conventional idea of violence as a merely suffered occurrence and originates tragedy in Heilman’s view, and medusation according to Vernant. This is precisely what happens in O’Neill’s mature masterpieces, engendering the change of attitude that differentiates them from his early melodramatic plays. O’Neill’s characters’ gaze becomes then “painfully broken” due to the awareness that they are both victims and tormentors, as none of them is spared from his or her personal form of medusation. This author believes that behind such discovery of the dead double, portrayed in O’Neill through the correlative of Wilde’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, lies an underlying issue of self-responsibility, arising whenever the painful experience of the otherness of the world is replaced by the sudden intuition that the Stranger in Medusa’s eye is nothing but a mirror reflection. However ostensibly never fully resolved, this constitutes in the author’s opinion the peak of O’Neill’s artistic career, as well as his final and foremost achievement.

One must, indeed, experience ritual death in order to be born anew to the awareness that Manheim (1982) brilliantly called O’Neill’s “new language of kinship”, developed “in tears and blood”, through which the playwright could finally feel all the “deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for all the four haunted Tyrones” (p. 714), as well as for the rest of mankind plagued by self-inflicted violence and pain.

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