

Orestes' Quest for Personal Identity in Sartre's *The Flies*

Muhammad Yahya Cheema

ABSTRACT

This research paper ventures to show that Sartre's *The Flies*, unlike other modern renderings of the play, depends, thematically and structurally, upon the choices that Orestes makes. Sartre's Orestes is a lost prince in search of his own identity. The play starts with Orestes' quest to find his true self and ends on his existential decision of defiance and sacrifice. The title 'guilt-stealer' is taken from the text of the play itself ("...Supposing I take over all their crimes. Supposing I set out to win the name of "guilt-stealer", and heap on myself all their remorse...") and signifies the decision-making powers of Orestes, an attribute not associated with the Greek Hero's character in perhaps any other version of the myth.

In a locale where plague reigns supreme, flies scourge guilt ridden humans, sordid imagery haunts the milieu, saviours need somewhere to belong to and sadistic gods seek hideouts to eavesdrop, Sartre's version of the Electra Myth comes to life. Continuing the tradition of reworking of ancient Greek myths in the pro-holocaust scientific ageⁱ, Sartre uses the myth of Electra to incorporate his existential themes into *The Flies* for a modern audience. Sartre's *The Flies* is closer, in spirit, to the rendering of the myth by Euripides. However, he borrows lavishly from other Greek versions of the myth as well, changing the story and adding to it to suit his own purposes. His Orestes is a lost prince in search for his own identity, whereas Electra in *The Flies* represents Sartre's idea about the human will giving into the will of God. Both the siblings are contrasted in terms of their choices. Where Orestes becomes the "guilt-stealer"ⁱⁱ by taking the guilt of others upon himself through his own free will and, thus, becoming the saviour of Argos, Electra becomes guilt-ridden and chooses to repent to Zeus, the greatest Greek god. The main action of the play is, thematically, dependant upon the choices Orestes makes. His isolation at the end of the play brings the existential solution to the essential human question. Also, there are strong anti-Nazi thematic concerns in his play and Sartre's existential philosophy of free human will becomes a recurring *donnée*.

Sartre gained fame as a novelist with the publication of *Nausea*. In this novel he argues that inactive passivity is the only available choice for human beingsⁱⁱⁱ. But during the Nazi occupation of France, Sartre's philosophical ideals changed drastically and while in a German prison camp in 1940, he wrote and produced *The Sun of Thunder*, which puts forward the importance of free human will and action. His new found belief in free action prompted him to write *The Flies* in 1943, which takes the idea a step further. In this revamping of Electra myth, Sartre emphasises the importance of choice and action; and the fact that his famous treatise on the existential philosophy *Being and Nothingness* came out the same year as *The Flies*, makes this play important in various respects.

The first scene of *The Flies* opens with these stage settings: “A public square in Argos, dominated by a statue of Zeus, god of flies and death... [his] image has white eyes and blood-smearred cheeks” (235). The atmosphere suggests a plague-ridden city where Zeus’ statue is blood-stained and his attributes are not those of a god but of a monster. This milieu can find its own peculiar parallels in the 1943 Nazi-occupied Paris in which Sartre was writing this play. When the play opens, we are presented with Orestes straight away, accompanied by his loyal tutor, both finding their way to the palace of Aegisthus. *The Flies*’ beginning is not only innovative but, also, helps in setting the tone of the play for its audience. In its settings it is closer to Sophocles’ *Electra* where the play starts with the Tutor and Orestes on the stage. However, the scene in Sophocles’ *Electra* is “before the house of Agamemnon, now the house of Aegisthus, at Mycenae, overlooking the plain and city of Argos” (69). *The Flies*, on the other hand, does not start anywhere near the palace where the main action of the play takes place. The innovation, in this regard, becomes evident. Sartre’s protagonist will have to find his own way which represents the basic human condition in relation to its milieu. Even in Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*^{iv} and Euripides’ *Electra*^v where the plays begin with Orestes offering libations on his father’s grave and a peasant telling his story respectively, Orestes is led to the place of action by other characters and his own efforts are limited to accomplishing his task only, which is imposed upon him by Apollo^{vi}. Unlike these Greek versions, Sartre reworks the whole situation, putting Orestes in a philosophically complex situation where he will have to work hard for his own freedom by making a conscious choice. We can see that Sartre’s focus is on Orestes and his struggle from the start. This focus is, to a large extent, due to the fact that the existential concerns regarding a myth lay heavy concentration on the second stage of it. “Existentialism...”, writes Slochower in a journal article, “...centres on the second stage of the myth, that which is concerned with the revolt of the individual against the mythical collective” (42). Continuing to build his thesis he further argues:

Thus, basic to the graph of the traditional literary myth is the notion that there is a common ground to

human experience, that man lives in the same universe of matter and motion, and that he functions in typical and recurrent emotional and psychological patterns... the literary myth objectifies man's communal existence. It voices our collective beginnings and our collective goals. (43)

We see, thence, that Orestes' situation presented in *The Flies* becomes the collective human problem as he sets out to find his own identity.

The Tutor's anguish in bearing up with the difficult task of finding their way is presented in these lines: "A hundred times and more I've had to ask our way, and never once did I get a straight answer. And then the grilling heat! This Argos is a nightmare city" (235). "Pfoo! I can't think how you bear it", the Tutor further continues "– this emptiness, the shimmering air, that fierce sun overhead. What's deadlier than the sun?" (235). These lines, quoted from the first speech of the Tutor in the play, not only draw our attention to the fact that Orestes' task in *The Flies* is twofold, but also bring to the atmosphere of the play the kind of imagery which suggests sickness and emptiness. Orestes' twofold task now includes, unlike the Greek versions, finding his own way to the palace. The inclusion of this dimension into his already hard-to-choose task serves to develop his character in terms of a collective human nature with the precise one-liner "I was born here" (235). To understand the dynamics of Orestes' character development, we will have to understand the gist of Sartre's existential philosophy.

Sartre's philosophy of Being (i. e. existence) distinguishes between the "Being-For-Itself" and the "Being-For-Others". Whereas "Being-For-Itself" relates to the 'self', the "Being-For-Others" denotes the 'other' or the milieu in which the former exists. Since existence precedes essence, man is thrown in this world without any predetermined nature that controls him. Identities are constructed then by the individual consciousness (Being-For-Itself) and, consequently, the individual consciousness is responsible for all the choices made. In short, we exist first and

then determine our essence by means of choice. Isolated from the “Being-For-Others”, the “Being-For-Itself” then is further bisected into the unconscious being (‘en-soi’ or being-in-itself) and conscious being (‘pour-soi’ or being-for-itself). These two modes of the “Being-For-Itself” should then, argues Sartre, coexist harmoniously and create a functioning whole through the practice of free will. (*Being and Nothingness* 95-434). The character of Orestes develops, consequently, in accordance with Sartre’s philosophy. By saying that he was “born here”, Orestes’ character is shown to be in the stage of ‘en-soi’. He will, as the play will progress, soon realize, consciously, that he needs to belong somewhere to form an identity (of ‘pour-soi’).

As the play advances, we are introduced to the character of Zeus through a brief conversation between Orestes and the Tutor. We come to know that Zeus, disguised as a bearded human, has “followed [them] here” (236). By presenting Zeus, the mightiest of gods in Greek mythology, on the stage as a character, Sartre emphasizes his notion of existence preceding the essence. This is further evidenced by what Orestes attributes to Zeus by saying that “He is only a traveller like ourselves” (237). If god himself is a traveller just like others, then there remains no question of a predetermined nature or destiny. They will all have to find answers along the way, shaping their conscious beings, as they travel in this world. As the play will progress, we will see that even Zeus has no answers. Sartre’s atheistic philosophy doesn’t allow anyone to have a readymade answer to any situation; rather choices made by practicing one’s own free will become the solution to “Being-For-Itself”.

Just before Zeus steps up to the Tutor and Orestes, the Tutor speaks about the flies: “These flies in Argos are much more sociable than its townfolk” (237). These flies, in the play, become a symbol of the original (Christian) sin, sent by gods to the inhabitants of Argos after the murder of Agamemnon. These flies sting them to remind them of their guilt, and, consequently, the people of Argos repent to gods. The Tutor, in his same speech

from which I quoted above, says to Orestes who is surrounded by flies now:

Well, this should please you – you who are always complaining of being a stranger in your native land.
(237)

The Tutor's tone is satiric as he mentions, mockingly, that the flies, which are now stinging Orestes, are the only creatures who welcome him in Argos by gathering around him. The information that the Tutor gives (that Orestes is surrounded by the flies and they are clinging on to him; and that he always complains of being a stranger in his own native land) is, however, of key importance. Orestes is an 'outsider' to Argos and is a stranger. He nourishes a depravity in himself because he feels that he does not belong to any place in the world. As we will learn later in the play^{vii}, Orestes never had a chance to form bondage with his own house and his own city. This very city is, consequently, not welcoming to him now when he returns. The only ones welcoming him now are the flies and we know that at the end of the play, these very flies will turn into furies and will haunt him. This suggests that the consequence of his moral choice, made later in the play, is already starting to define his existence, his identity. He will belong to Argos finally only through his choice of matricide. The flies, thence, serve to dictate the structural centrality of the play which is the moral choice of Orestes. We should, however, distinguish between the structural importance of this environment presented in the play and the possible interpretation of it as a deterministic tyranny of the milieu. Sartre's existential plays are "not interested in arranging in advance the motivations or reasons which will inevitably force action" (Vowles 215-16). The flies do not determine Orestes' choices in advance. They, rather symbolically, indicate the structural importance of Orestes' quest for his own identity.

At this moment in the play, Zeus approaches Orestes and the Tutor, and his first speech in the play tells us that the flies were sent to Argos when Agamemnon was murdered^{viii}. We also learn that it is the "Dead Man's Day today" (238). The way Zeus

narrates to Orestes his father's murder and the reaction of the people to it, is closer to the sadistic nature of an orgasmic climax: "...but they rolled their eyes in a sort of ecstasy, and the whole town was like a woman on heat" (239). To elaborate on the idea of punishment, Zeus entraps an old woman in black mourning clothes and delights in teasing her with some strangely Christian notions: "...you'd do better to think of yourself, and try to earn forgiveness by repenting of your sins" (240-241). The old woman's answer includes the description of her young son's condition: "...he never plays or laughs for thinking of his original sin" (241). Sartre, in these lines, is mocking the Christian notion of Original sin and predetermination. Zeus' lines "They have guilty conscience, they're afraid – and fear and guilty conscience have a good savour in the nostrils of the gods" (243) are an obvious pun on the Christian morality. These lines can also relate to an anti-Nazi theme. In that case, Sartre would appear to mock the passive inactivity and would appear as a hailer of free action against tyranny.

Zeus also contrasts Orestes with the inhabitants of Argos in their first encounter: "You cannot share in their repentance, since you did not share their crime. Your brazen innocence makes a gulf between you and them" (234). Where the people of Argos are guilt-ridden and burdened by the duty of repentance, Orestes is free of guilt. The themes of freedom and belonging are further elaborated in the following speeches of Orestes and his Tutor. Orestes, comparing himself with a dog, laments about the fact that there is nothing around which he could call his:

ORESTES. Why, an old, mangy dog, warming
himself at the hearth, and struggling to his feet with
a little more memories than I! at least he recognizes
his master. His master. But what can I call mine?
(245)

Orestes has no memories of this city. He owns no past. And he, certainly, owns no present in the city. The Tutor answers his lamentation by attributing the freedom of choice to Orestes' ("you

are free to turn your hand to anything” (246)). Orestes, in his reply, does realize his own freedom but his freedom in terms of his not belonging to anywhere makes him say that he is “free as air” (246). He does appreciate the fact that he is freer than others in the sense that he has no ties, morally or physically, but he still yearns for personal property in terms of emotional belongings. He gives voice to this sentiment while replying to the Tutor’s argument:

THE TUTOR. Ah, that’s talking sense. For what would you have gained by living in Argos? By now your spirit would be broken, you would be wallowing in repentance.

ORESTES. Still, it would be my repentance. And this furnace heat singeing my hair would be mine. Mine, too, the buzz of all these flies. (247)

A few lines later he adds:

ORESTES. But, mind you, if there were something I could do, something to give me the freedom of the city; if, even by a crime, I could acquire their memories, their hopes and fears, and fill with these the void within me, yes, even if I had to kill my own mother. (248)

This strong sense of depravity plays a central role in his decision later in the play, as is indicated in the lines themselves. Here he appears as a man ‘free like air’ but, like air too, not belonging anywhere. When later he will meet Electra, her rejection will prompt him to ‘steal’ the guilt of Argos and make it his own, thus filling the void within him. Central to these lines, also, is Sartre’s existential philosophy. Orestes is alienated from his milieu and he will remain an outsider throughout. Even at the end, he will not be able to become an inhabitant of Argos but will disappear from the stage taking the flies (turned to furies) with him.

It is important to note the difference in this reworked version of the myth and the Greek renderings. Nowhere in any other Greek version is Orestes shown struggling to belong somewhere. In Euripides' version, especially, it is Electra and not Orestes who first appears on the stage. When we see Orestes, he is already conscious of his moral obligation to avenge his father (108). However, it is noteworthy that Orestes does not unveil his true identity to Electra, when he faces her, right away (112-114). They become friends instead (115). Sartre keeps this textual detail intact. When we meet Electra for the first time in *The Flies*, she has come with her offerings for the statue of Zeus (248). Her offerings, however, are not reverent sacrifices or wine, but are "ashes from the hearth, peelings, scraps of offal crawling with maggots" and "a chunk of bread too filthy even for our pigs" (249). Her words are, in keeping with the irreverent offerings, aggressively blasphemous as well. When she encounters Orestes, Orestes hides his true identity and tells her that he is Philebus from Corinth (250). In their conversation, Electra confides in Orestes and tells him that she is waiting for her brother to come to Argos and avenge their father (251-252).

Clytemnestra then enters and her conversation with Electra (253-259) brings out the conflict between the heroine and her closest familial relative. They both display an attitude of hate towards each other and the force of their insulting dialogue may remind some of us the conversation between Electra and Clytemnestra in Euripides' *Electra* (139-144). However, it is important to note that in *The Flies*, Clytemnestra attributes Electra's irreverence to her innocence ("It is easy for young people, who have not yet had a chance of sinning, to condemn" 257) and appears remorseful for her own guilt: "And that Queen Clytemnestra bears the heaviest load of guilt" (256). Important to note, also, is the fact that Clytemnestra sees her own self in Electra: "What I detest in you, Electra, is – myself. Not your youth – far from it! – but my own" (257). The same kind of resemblance will be found by Orestes in Electra's appearance at the end of the play. The first act ends shortly after this encounter. Electra pleads

to Orestes to stay in Argos one more day and witness the Day of the Dead with Electra (259).

Basic themes established, the second act now develops these themes in rapidity. It is the Day of the Dead and people of Argos are gathered in front of the cave which, when opened, will begin the ceremony formally. As the people await their King and Queen, they indulge in conversations which reveal their guilt-ridden situation and the fact that the king is governing them by nourishing guilty consciousness in them, and proving himself, thence, to be the perfect representative of Zeus (261-267).

Electra, however, has plans of her own. She appears on the stage in her “prettiest [white] dress” (268), and begins to dance (270) defying all the norms which governed the Argive society since the death of her father Agamemnon. The situation, not in accordance with Zeus’ twisted and sadistic purposes, is intervened: “This is too much... I’ll shut that foolish wench’s tongue” (271). This divine intervention serves to re-establish Zeus’ and Aegistheus’ tyrannical regime over the people of Argos.

It is noteworthy that this ceremony is a pure artistic invention of Sartre, and he accomplishes manifold tasks through it. Firstly, this ceremony is used to make Orestes stay another day at Argos. Secondly, it serves to show the current situation of the people of Argos who are enslaved in their guilt and are ruled by the god and his stooge in fear and depravity. Thirdly and most importantly, it prompts the chain reaction in Orestes which ends with his final choice of leaving Argos, taking the furies with him.

Another important aspect of this scene is Orestes’ active decision to unveil his true identity to Electra. In Euripides’ *Electra*, Orestes never tells her his true identity. This task is accomplished by the Old Man who points to Orestes’ head and tells Electra that “this scar on his brow; He fell and cut it once at home, chasing a fawn with you” (124). In The Flies, however, he reacts daringly to Zeus who wants to punish Electra for her irreverence. “Mind what you say”, says Orestes boldly, “that woman is my sister” (272).

This is the fourth choice that we see him making in the play. His first choice was to return to Argos, his second choice was to find his way to the palace and his third choice was to stay another day to witness the ceremony. This choice, however, is the first in the chain of the choices he makes that bring about the finale of the play. By choosing to disclose his identity to his sister, he has, in fact, taken the first step towards establishing his identity as Electra's brother and the son of Agamemnon. This very choice, also, will affect him later when he will choose to murder the murderess of his own father.

He has told Zeus that he is Electra's brother, but Electra doesn't know of his true identity as yet. He now tries to convince Electra to leave the city with him by suggesting that she "[is] in danger" and thence "mustn't stay a moment longer in this city" (272). But Electra refuses. She is clinging on to her dreams both literally and figuratively. She awaits the saviour, she awaits her brother:

ELECTRA. He will come; he's bound to come. He is of our stock, you see; he has crime and tragedy in his blood, as I have – the bad blood of the House of Atreus. I picture him as a big. Strong man, a born fighter, with bloodshot eyes like our father's, always smouldering with rage... (274)

Orestes, ironically, is anything but a born fighter. He was brought up in a "happy, peaceful city" (275) and was instructed in philosophy, and, consequently, is a total opposite of what Electra imagines him to be. When Orestes learns what Electra has been thinking about all these years, he puts asks her what her reaction would be if Orestes was not what she thought he would be. Electra answers in a staunch tone:

"Then I'd spit in his face, and I'd say: 'Go away, you cur; go and keep company where you belong, with women. You're a grandson of Atreus, and you can't escape the heritage of blood'". (275)

But even these scathing remarks are not enough to stop Orestes from revealing his true identity to his sister. He is desperate to be able to belong somewhere and would not leave an opportunity like this. Consequently, he informs Electra that he is Orestes. Now that Orestes is here in front of her, Electra, who has awaited his arrival for fifteen years, feels lonelier than “when [she] didn't know [him]” and “was waiting for the Orestes of [her] dream” (275). She rejects him bitterly (“you're not my brother; you're a stranger” (276)). This is the most crucial moment in the play. This rejection prompts Orestes to say:

“Here I am, back in the town where I was born, and my own sister disavows me. And now – where shall I go? What city must I haunt?... Nobody is waiting for me anywhere. I wander from city to city, a stranger to all others and to myself, and the cities close again behind me like the waters of a pool.”
(277)

His desperation to belong somewhere heightens as he begs Electra to accept him as her brother:

It's my one chance, and you, Electra – surely you won't refuse it to me? Try to understand. I want to be a man who belongs to some place, a man amongst comrades. (278)

This becomes the most crucial moment in the play because this is the last chance for Orestes to own someone, to become someone, and to belong somewhere. This desperation and scarcity of options renders him incapable of a decision and he turns to Zeus and asks him for a sign. Zeus, eavesdropping, makes light flash out round the stone, thus showing Orestes a sign to leave Argos. Orestes, now presented with a clear sign to choose his path, however, chooses another path to walk (“I say there is another path... my path” (280)). He chooses to “take a burden on [his] shoulders, a load of guilt so heavy as to drag [him] down, right down into the abyss of Argos” (280), and pronounces his sense of

belonging in potent wording: “You are my sister, Electra, and that city is my city” (281).

It is important, however, to note that in this play, Orestes doesn't decide to avenge his father and his sister Iphigenia because of the act of murder itself. His decision is prompted by his search for his own identity. Unlike the Greek renderings of the myth by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the choice of killing his own mother is not a moral choice for Orestes. In this play, this choice becomes an existential choice. To some extent, one can find certain similarities between Orestes and Shakespeare's Hamlet in this regard, though they differ as characters enormously.

The second scene of act 2 shows Orestes murdering the king and the queen with Electra's help. Aegisthus confronts Orestes saying that he is tired of living and Orestes should kill him and set him free. When Orestes moves on to kill Clytemnestra, however, Electra is already labouring under the burden of guilt. At this moment in the play, we are presented with a contrast of the siblings' situation. Orestes and Electra, both, are presented as free beings in the play. Orestes is without any ties and doesn't share the guilt of the people of Argos. Electra, though a slave in her own house, is free from guilt as well and nurtures the feelings of revenge. Both states of freedom presented in the play, however, are proven to be superficial this scene in the play. Orestes' freedom was superficial because he didn't belong to any place, and never practised his free will, whereas Electra's freedom was superficial because she was living in a world of dreams. When she confronts reality, her nerves give away, and she tries to stop Orestes from committing matricide by saying that Clytemnestra “can do [them] no more harm”. Electra chooses to not to avenge her father and, later in the play, to repent over her guilt, begging for forgiveness. Where Orestes becomes the true free being in existential terms, Electra chooses to become a slave. The second act ends with the deed done and the flies change into furies and attack Orestes and Electra who take shelter in Apollo's shrine.

The third act shows the aftermath of Orestes deed and is, basically, a reworking of *The Eumenides* of Aeschylus. The furies await the awakening of the siblings and are eager to tear them into pieces. Zeus, however, is wiser. He comes there to seduce them into repenting of their sins. "I have come to save you both" (305), says Zeus, "If you repudiate your crime, I'll see that you two occupy the throne of Argos" (306). But Orestes bitterly defies the god and tells Zeus that "...[his] whole universe is not enough to prove [him] wrong... you are the king of gods, king of stones and stars, king of the waves of the sea... but you are not the king of man" (309). He not only defies Zeus, but also narrates his existential separation from nature ("Nature sprang back, my youth went with the wind, and I knew myself alone, utterly alone in the midst of this well-meaning little universe of yours" (310)). Orestes' freedom has a price. His realization of his conscious beings prompts his separation from nature, from the universe, from the milieu. Electra gives up all hopes of becoming free and repents to Zeus ("I repent, Zeus. I bitterly repent." (313)); and Orestes steals the guilt of the people of Argos:

As for your sins and your remorse, your night-fears,
and the crime Aegistheus committed – all are mine,
I take them all upon me. Fear your dead no longer;
they are my Dead. And, see, your faithful flies have
left you, and come to me. (316)

Finally, after narrating the story of a flute-player who took the plagued rats of Scyrose with him, he vanishes from the city.

This last act brings about the final resolution of the play in terms of Sartre's own philosophy. Orestes finds his freedom and as he realizes that he is separated from Nature around him, he chooses, once again, to stick to his freedom and defies god. On the other hand Electra gives in to Zeus and repents. Orestes' quest for his identity comes to an end when he leaves the city, taking the furies with him as his won prize. He frees his people by avenging his father (Sartre, unlike the Greek versions, emphasizes that he kills Aegistheus no merely to avenge his parents, but to free his

own self and his people) and then disappears like a true hero. Aegistheus, in the play, can be viewed as a symbol for Nazi tyranny. Viewed in these terms, Orestes becomes the liberator of all humanity which suffered under the unlawful regime of Hitler.

The discussion above ventures to establish that Orestes' quest for his own identity is at the heart of Sartre's play *The Flies*, which is a philosophical rendering of the Electra myth.

Notes

ⁱ From Soyinka's 'post-colonial' rendering of *The Bacchae* to Walcott's version of *The Odyssey*, from Ted Hughes's confessional *Alceste* to Heaney's poetic *Cure at Troy*, and from Brecht's 'alienated' adaptation of *Antigone* to Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest*, the modern literature is full of such examples. One may wonder that in modern scientific age what importance a myth can have. Levi Strauss gives us an answer. In today's world where science has given answers to many problems deemed philosophical in ancient times, argues Levi Strauss, humans still need myths to bring experience and conscience together. Finding a harmonious interaction between the classical theory of 'tabula rasa' which argues that human mind begins as a clean slate and theory of Plato who suggested that certain amount of information is innate in human mind, Levi Strauss stresses the importance of myth in contemporary world to understand human nature and its functions (5). He further goes on to tell the story of a skate who, in an ancient Canadian myth, tries to dominate the South Wind and succeeds. The story, says Levi Strauss, is obviously not true, but rather than rejecting it by simply labelling it as 'absurd' we will have to inquire why the ancient story teller chose to tell the story of a skate and the West Wind. He chose to do so, answers Levi Strauss, because the binary question of human existence rested on

the wind itself. The West Wind threatened human existence in old days as people were not able to hunt when it was blowing (16-17). Thence, argues Levi Strauss, in this myth the scientific and the mystic come together, co-existing in a harmonious whole and the mythic symbols help us to view human experience and consciousness simultaneously (18). His argumentation so far helps him to reach to the logical conclusion that "...there is really not a kind of divorce between mythology and science" (18).

These mythic symbols have recently drawn attention of the modern artists towards their applicability in our age. In the book *Introduction to Mythology*, the authors venture to argue that myths are not mere stories and their purpose is not limited to mere entertainment. These stories hold special importance as some of these are "associated with a living religion still being practiced at the time the myth is told; others are more secular in nature, but still include values and perspectives that inform the society and culture of the storytellers" (4). They further argue that in the modern world even scientists and historians study myths (17) as most academic disciplines have ability to study mythology for their own special purposes (18). Playwrights and poets, consequently, have recently been adapting many Greek myths to mould these symbols to convey their own sense of human condition. Ted Hughes, for example, finds in Euripides' *Alcestis* an artistic space which enables him to form his own confessional tone throughout his version of the myth. "This house! This horrible empty box!", says Admetos in Hughes' *Alcestis*, "In it, one huge wound – that took the life / And is now cold" (82-83) "...The mind tries to be its own doctor. / But every thought of her / Rips off the dressings, sets the blood flowing afresh" (84). One cannot help but find in these lines kind of anguish which gripped Hughes after Plath committed

suicide. It seems as if Admetos has become Hughes himself and is mourning the death of Plath in poetic grandeur.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Orestes speech in act 2, scene 1:

ORESTES. ...Supposing I take over all their crimes. Supposing I set out to win the name of 'guilt-stealer', and heap on myself all their remorse; that of the woman unfaithful to her husband, of the tradesman who let his mother die, of the usurer who bled his victims white? (281)

ⁱⁱⁱ The protagonist in *Nausea* realizes the separation of human consciousness from nature and thence mocks all political commitment and nurtures disdain for those who commit themselves to active action. To read more about the evolution in the political thought and philosophy of Sartre, please refer to Thomas R. Flynn's journal article.

^{iv} In Hughes' translation of *Choephoroi*, the play begins with these stage instructions: "Agamemnon's tomb, outside the palace of Argos" (91).

^v Euripides' *Electra* begins with these stage instructions: "The scene is outside the Peasant's cottage. It is night, a little before sunrise" (105).

^{vi} Cf. in *Choephoroi*:

ORESTES. Apollo's command is like Fate.
No man can refuse it.
The voice of Apollo, relentless,
Directs my feet, my mind, my hand

Towards this collision
Of killer with killer. (105-106)

In Sophocles' *Electra*:

ORESTES. When I went to learn from the Pythian oracle how I was to punish my father's murders, the reply was to go alone without men or arms to help me, and by stratagem exact the just penalty of death. That was the divine command. (70)

In Euripides' *Electra*:

ORESTES. Now I have come,
Sent by Apollo's oracle, to Argive soil,
To shed the blood of those who shed my
father's blood. (108)

In light of these quotations we can safely draw the inference that Orestes, in Greek version of the myth, not only knows what he has to do, but is also prompted to do so by gods. In *The Flies*, on the contrary, he makes his own choices by practicing his free will.

^{vii} Later in Scene I, Orestes narrates his depravity. He was taken away from his own city at a very young age and, consequently, was not able to live his own house and court young girls of his age. (244-247)

^{viii} Cf. :

ZEUS. ...I was here on the great day of Agamemnon's homecoming... There were no flies, then. (238)

And:

ZEUS. ...Fifteen years ago, to a day, Agamemnon was murdered. And what a change has come over the light-hearted folk of Argos since that day; how near and dear to me they are at present! (241)

WORKS CITED

Primary Sources

Aeschylus. "Choephoroi". Trans. Ted Hughes. *Aeschylus' the Oresteia: A New Translation*. 2nd ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. 087-145. Print.

Euripides. "Electra". Trans. Philip Vellacott. *Euripides: Medea and Other Plays*. London: Penguin Books, 1963. 105-152. Print.

Sartre, Jean Paul. "The Flies". Trans. Stuart Gilbert. *Jean Paul Sartre: Altona and Other Plays*. London: Penguin Books, 1960. 231-316. Print.

Sophocles. "Electra". Trans. E. F. Watling. *Sophocles: Electra and Other Plays*. London: Penguin Books, 1953. 068-117. Print.

Secondary Sources

Flynn, Thomas R. "L'imagination Au Pouvoir: The Evolution of Sartre's Political and Social Thought". *Political Theory*. 7.2 (1970): 157-180. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Sep. 2006.

Hughes, Ted. *Alcestis*. 2nd ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. Print.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Myth and Meaning*. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.

Sartre, Jean Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. 1st Indian ed. Chennai: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Slochower, Harry. "The Function of Myth in Existentialism". *Yale French Studies*. 1 (1948): 42-52. *JSTOR*. Print. 11 Sep. 2006.

Thury, Eva M. and Margaret K. Devinney. *Introduction to Mythology: Contemporary Approaches to Classical and World Myths*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.

Vowles, Richard B. "Existentialism and Dramatic Form". *Educational Theatre Journal*. 5.3 (1953): 215-219. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Sep. 2006.

Works Consulted

- Aeschylus. "The Oresteia". Trans. Philip Vellacott. *Aeschylus: The Oresteian Trilogy*. London: Penguin Books, 1959. Print.
- Anderson, Thomas C. *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1993. Print.
- Arnott, W. Geoffrey. "Double the Visio: A Reading of Euripides' Electra." *Greece and Rome*. 28.2 (1981): 179-192. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Sep. 2006.
- Barnes, Hazel E. "Myth and Human Experience". *The Classical Journal*. 51.3 (1955): 121-127. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Aug. 2006.
- Bates, William Nickerson. *Euripides: Student of Human Nature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1930. Print.
- Brecht, Bertolt. "The Antigone of Sophocles". Trans. David Constantine. *Brecht: Collected Plays; Eight*. Great Britain: Methuen Drama, 2003. 1-51. Print.
- Caute, David. "Introduction". *What is Literature? By Jean Paul Sartre*. Trans. Bernard Frechtman. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Césaire, Aimé. "A Tempest". Trans. Richard Miller. *The Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama*. 3rd ed. Ed. W. B. Worthen. Australia: Thomson Heinle, 2000. 1237-1253. Print.

- Charlesworth, Max J. *The Existentialists and Jean-Paul Sartre*. London: George Prior, 1976. Print.
- Coombes, Sam. "The Early Sartre and Ideology." *Sartre Studies International* 9.1 (2003): 54+. Print.
- Daigle, Christine. "Sartre and Nietzsche." *Sartre Studies International* 10.2 (2004): 195+. Print.
- Decharme, Paul. *Euripides and the Spirit of His Dramas*. Trans. James Loeb. New York: Macmillan, 1906. Print.
- Dowden, Ken. *The Uses of Greek Mythology*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Euripides. "Orestes". Trans. Philip Vellacott. *Euripides: Orestes and Other Plays*. London: Penguin Books, 1972. 297-361. Print.
- Ferrell, William K. *Literature and Film as Modern Mythology*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000. Print.
- Gilbert, Dennis A. "From Prague to Paris: The Beginning of Theater Semiotics and Sartre's Early Esthetic of Theater." *Sartre Studies International* 11.1-2 (2005): 195+. Print.
- Goldmann, Lucien and Sandy MacDonald. "The Theatre of Sartre". *The Drama Review*. 15.1 (1970): 102-119. *JSTOR*. Print. 11 Sep. 2006.
- Gordon, Haim, and Rivca Gordon. *Sartre and Evil: Guidelines for a Struggle*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995. Print.
- Heald, Suzette and Ariane Deluz, eds. *Anthropology and Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.

- Heaney, Seamus. *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes*. New York: The Noonday Press, [?]. Print.
- . "The Impact of Translation". *The Government of the Tongue*. London: Faber and Faber, 1989. 36-44. Print.
- Hogan, James C. *A Commentary on the Plays of Sophocles*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991. Print.
- Hughes, Ted. *Aeschylus' The Oresteia: A New Translation*. 2nd ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. Print.
- Jarrett-Kerr, Martin. "The Dramatic Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre". *The Tulane Drama Review*. 1.3 (1957) 41-48. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Sep. 2006.
- Jones, John. *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962. Print.
- Kahn, Ludwig W. "Freedom: An Existentialist and an Idealistic View: (Sartre's *Les Mouches* and Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*)."
PMLA. 64.1 (1949): 5-14. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Sep. 2006.
- Kitto, H. D. F. *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study*. London: Methuen, 1939. Print.
- Kleist, Jürgen and Bruce A. Butterfield, eds. *Mythology: From Ancient to Post-Modern..* New York: Peter Lang, 1992. Print.
- Kroth, Jerry. *Omens and Oracles: Collective Psychology in the Nuclear Age*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1992. Print.
- Leavitt, Walter. "Sartre's Theatre". *Yale French Studies*. 1 (1948):

102-105. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Sep. 2006.

Lloyd, Michael. *The Agon in Euripides*. Oxford: Oxford University, 1992. Print.

Murray, Henry A., ed. *Myth and Mythmaking*. New York: George Braziller, 1960. Print.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Shaun Whiteside. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

Olson, Robert G. "The Three Theories of Motivation in the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre". *Ethics*. 66.3 (1956): 176-187. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Sep. 2006.

O'Neill, Eugene. *Mourning Becomes Electra: A Trilogy*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1931. Print.

Raeburn, David. "The Significance of Stage Properties in Euripides' *Electra*." *Greece and Rome*. 47.2 (2000): 149-168. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Sep. 2006.

Ringer, Mark. *Electra and the Empty Urn: Metatheater and Role Playing in Sophocles*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. Print.

Sartre, Jean Paul. *Essays in Aesthetics*. Trans. Wade Baskin. New York: Citadel Press, 1963.

--. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1957. Print.

--. *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. Trans. Philip Mairet. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Schilpp, Paul Arthur. *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*. Revised ed. La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1997. Print.

Sherburne, Donald W. "Some Reflections on Sartre's Nothingness and Whitehead's Perishing." *The Review of Metaphysics* 48.1 (1994): 3+. Print.

Smyth, Herbert Weir. *Aeschylean Tragedy*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1924. Print.

Soyinka, Wole. "The Bacchae of Euripides". *Wole Soyinka: Collected Plays 1*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973. Print.

Storey, Ian C. and Arlene Allan. *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama*. MA, USA: Blackwell, 2005. PDF File.

Walcott, Derek. *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*. London: Faber and Faber, 1993. Print.

Wreszin, Michael. "Jean-Paul Sartre: Philosopher as Dramatist". *The Tulane Drama Review*. 5.3 (1961): 34-57. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Sep. 2006.