Opponent’s Review

Petra Landerová, “Vertiginous Relations on Eugene O’Neill’s Desire Under the Elms and Mourning Becomes Electra” BA thesis

Choice of Topic:
Despite the rather oblique and somewhat misleading title, the proposed topic of this BA thesis is an interesting one and certainly worth investigating. The potential of the topic is partially realised by the resulting work.

Thesis statement / aims and objectives:
The work proposes an analysis of characters in the selected plays in the light of psychoanalytic theory and in relation to Greek tragedy. While the description of the project is clear enough, the unifying argument is less so. It would appear to be as follows: “O’Neill uncovers the layers of a human psyche and touches lightly upon the dark abyss, the unconscious, present in the human. By exemplifying the primal and innate forces that permeate the living reality of human beings, and a collective unconscious, O’Neill gives his plays the universal quality of human deadlocks and dilemmas” (4).

Structure and development:
The work opens with a largely biographical chapter on O’Neill’s family relations. Notably no source or sources have been cited for this summary. This introductory survey establishes to some extent O’Neill’s fixation with parental relationships and suggests that these biographical details are inflected in his work. This is indeed a relevant place to begin. However, what would have been helpful here would have been a more thorough analysis of O’Neill’s reading of both Freud and Jung, as well as of Nietzsche. There are several insightful essays on precisely these topics in the Cambridge Companion to Eugene O’Neill and Christopher Bigsby’s three volume history of American Drama includes a very detailed analysis of O’Neill’s background and development as an artist. Chapter two turns to a major issue in O’Neill’s dramaturgy—that of the tragic. Again the thesis shows awareness of the significance of tragedy to O’Neill’s theatre. That said, the comments made connecting Desire Under the Elms and O’Neill’s own experience of mourning on pages 7 and 8 are rather insubstantial. The description of Mourning Becomes Electra in terms of the Oresteia is adequate, however the assumptions made about Greek tragedy being merely about gods and goddesses are reductive to say the least. The Nietzschean theory of tragedy is outlined in basic terms but it would have been interesting to see this applied further to the plays selected. Chapters three and four then turn to the two plays mentioned in the title and attempt to psychoanalyse their protagonists with reference to Jung and Freud. Overall, the connections between the description of Greek tragedy and the analysis of the plays are quite oblique. The discussion of the plays might have been aided by some sense of the characters as artistic creations, rather than as personalities, and illustrative of O’Neill’s phrases and fixations as a theatre maker and his interest in types: the destructive female, the weak male and so on. The conclusion drawn from the close reading of character is that O’Neill’s work is instructive about the workings of the unconscious and that “hope springs eternal” is rather weak.

Research:
The research undertaken for this project is acceptable. It is a pity, however, that major works on O’Neill’s work by Christopher Bigsby have not been cited or consulted.

Use of sources:
There are no major formal or stylistic issues concerning the use of sources. Materials have been carefully cited throughout, apart from the introductory biography.

**Stylistics and language:**
Ms Landerová’s writing style is accomplished, although occasional errors in word choice are in evidence. One sentence comments on quotations from sources and peculiar word choices occasionally mar the style and register.

**Format:**
Generally formatting is well done although book titles within the text ought to be italicised rather than underlined and new chapters should begin on a new page and be numbered.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work “very good” 2, depending on the result of the defence.

27.8.2012
Clare Wallace, PhD