



Stylistic study: A Feminist Impact on the Characters' Interactions in Tennessee Williams' Orpheus Descending

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ملخص. تمت دراسة العديد من الأبحاث حول مسرحية "أورفيوس الهابط" لتينيسي ويليامز فيما يتعلق بنظريات النسوية والأسلوبية؛ ومع ذلك، لم يكتب أي باحث دراسة شاملة ومتكاملة حول المسرحية وبنيتها في تفاعلات الجنسين المختلفة من خلال دمج هذين المنهجين. انطلاقاً من هذا، ومن أجل سد هذه الفجوة وتقديم تحليل متعدد الأبعاد لـ "أورفيوس الهابط"، يأخذ هذا البحث في اعتباره شكل المسرحية، ومحتواها، وسياقها، والجوانب النسوية باستخدام نظرية ميلز في اللسانيات النسوية من الموجة الثالثة. تقدم هذه الطريقة متعددة التخصصات إطاراً شاملاً لعرض طريقة التفاعل بين الشخصيات الذكور والإناث، والعناصر الأسلوبية للنص الدرامي التي يمكن أن تساهم في تفسير النزاعات وسوء الفهم الذي يحدث غالباً في خطاب المسرحية. علاوة على ذلك، توفر النظريات والأساليب الأسلوبية مثل "إدارة الدور" أداة لغوية لدراسة عناصر الحوار والجوانب اللغوية في "أورفيوس الهابط" وشخصيته الرئيسيتين، فال و"الليدي"

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة والجنس، النسوية من الموجة الثالثة، التمييز الجنسي، الأسلوبية النسوية، إدارة الدور، "أورفيوس الهابط"، تينيسي ويليامز

Abstract. Various studies have previously been done on Williams's Orpheus Descending with regard to theories of feminism and stylistics;



however, no researcher has ever written a thoroughly comprehensive examination of the play and its structure of different gender conversation by incorporating these two methodologies. Keeping this in mind, in order to fill that gap and present a multidimensional analysis of Orpheus Descending, this study takes into consideration the play's form, substance, context and the feminist aspect by using Mills' third wave feminist linguistics theory. This innovative multidisciplinary method delivers an all-inclusive framework to demonstrate the way of interaction between male and female characters, and the stylistic elements of dramatic text that can lead to explain conflicts and misunderstandings which tend to happen in the play's discourse. Moreover, stylistic theories and frameworks, such as Turn Management, provide a linguistic tool for investigating the conversational elements and linguistic aspects of Orpheus Descending and its two main characters, Val and Lady.

Keywords: language and gender, Third Wave Feminism, sexism, feminist stylistics, turn management, Orpheus Descending, Tennessee Williams

1.1. Introduction

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) is among the most creative and vastly renowned American playwrights of the twentieth century. He presents vivid descriptions for the isolated, the flawed, and other castaways of society, and he has a genuine concern for their distress, which may explain his plays' continuing admiration (Foley, 2013, p. 5). He also has a profound social conscience and is a master of characterization, since he has created characters that are clear representations of the American psyche in particular and human kind in general (Kinney, 1983, p.1).

He shows the predicament of frail, powerless yet courageous women who are victims in a Southern male-controlled society, in which they are both humiliated and broken in their search for selfhood and freedom, as a result of which, Williams appeals for humanity to define the issue of marginalized women in a harsh and indifferent world (Foley, 2013, p. 5). In his play Orpheus Descending (1957), he tells the story of a young enigmatic folk singer who finds himself in a small town in rural Mississippi. He makes a relationship with a passionate woman who is stuck in a loveless marriage and has an unfortunate past.

1.2. Statement of the Problem



Many critics and literary researchers like Drake (1970) concentrated on Orpheus Descending's heavy use of symbols and allusions. Attention was also paid to Williams' representation of sexual repression as a result of society's hypocrisy and double-standards of religion, thus generating a battle between the forces of light and those of darkness. However, the former loses in most of Williams' plays but they never give up (Quirino, 1964, P.22).

For other critics, the play was an archetype, because of the existence of not only one but two definite myths. The first one is Jesus Christ and the second is the Greek classic myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Furthermore, the essential mechanism of myth makes the play the center of all Williams' works that have been inspired by myths (Drake, 1970, p.18). The title, the names of certain characters, and the tragic ending of the play are all evidences to back up the claim that Orpheus Descending is a mythic play, and an archetype (Drake, 1970, p.20-22).

Recently, Orpheus Descending has been analyzed as an expressionist play since it was a projection of Tennessee Williams' thoughts and desires with a highly personal vision and also, the play has a lot of features that qualify it to be an expressionistic play such as dreams, monologues, abstract dynamism and scream, that are found in characters' speeches throughout the play (Rafati, 2012, p.118-122).

What critics discussed about Orpheus Descending in earlier and recent times is mainly the mythic aspect, symbolism, psychological struggles and sexual repression of the many characters in the play and also it was discussed as an expressionist drama. On the other hand other well-known plays by Tennessee Williams such as A Street Car Named Desire and The Glass Menagerie received more critical attention some of which were even analyzed in a stylistic manner such as the studies done by Fang (2008) and Nalliveetil (2016). Williams' use of language in general, and his female characters' language in particular, are so much significant throughout his plays, especially in that of Orpheus Descending. However, critics have not discussed this aspect thoroughly because the early reception of the play was negative; critics were complaining about the plot and repetition of themes of earlier plays. In addition, the play is demonstrating how the representations of male and female language is different from one gender to another as a whole, but at certain times they are strikingly similar. It can be traced through the discourse and actions of characters, therefore this is a significant area of study that need to be marked and shed light on.

In the present research, Orpheus Descending will be analyzed stylistically through the use of language and gender theories, such as those of Tannen (1990).





The theory presented will be applied on the play to analyze how the language use is affected by gender, whether it is a man or woman and whether there is any specific way or style of speaking that can be attributed to a certain gender. Third wave feminism and feminist stylistics theories like those of Mills (2002, 2006) and Susan Ehrlich, Miriam Meyerhoff, and Janet Holmes (2014) will also be applied to the play since they present such issues of women being oppressed by patriarchal society and their reactions to it whether they would be resistant or would be inclined and passive. These elements are embodied in the discourse of the characters in the play which can be traced through the use of stylistic tools such as turn management and feminist approaches, in order to provide a better and richer understating of the play, and the situation of women at the time of writing it.

The present study will focus on the way male and female are addressed with dissimilar gender roles distribution in society, and to explain the way the verbal communication of men and women mirrors these differences. In addition, the study will prove that the line between those gender roles is a transparent one, and it will question whether there is a specific way or style to both genders at all. Theories of Feminist Stylistics, Language and Gender and Third Wave Feminism will be applied to the discourse and conversations of the characters of Tennessee Williams' Orpheus Descending in order to call attention to male and female differences in communication and dialogues throughout the play.

1.3. Review of Related Literature

This section will display the sources that the present thesis will be depending upon in analyzing the play. By considering these sources systematically, they will be categorized by topic into four groups 1) studies about Orpheus Descending 2) Resources dealing with the historical and political background of the play 3) Books and articles about Language and Gender, Third Wave Feminism, Feminist Stylistics 4) Stylistic tools. It is appropriate to mention that each of these classifications are part of this thesis. However, the following studies will be ordered chronologically as follows:

A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation (1974) by Gail Jefferson, Harvey Sacks and Emmanuel Schegloff was the most significant work at its time to discuss turn management and conversational communications. Their work was relying on the exploration of natural conversation as the speakers use certain techniques to take their turn in speaking. The system or organization used in turn management is related to timing, overlaps





and eye contacts. Other factors related to stylistic are culture differences and gender.

The primary concept of stylistic and feminism, introduced originally by Thorne and Henley (1975), centered on matters of patriarchy such as male control and superiority. Theorists categorized the social and political structures between the genders as a system that perceived and treated women as unequal to men since that society's standards had actually been set up by men themselves. Since women and men had division of labor, it produced a different kind of language usage, one is related to the powerful men and the other is associated with women. Language differences were in the structure, unequal access of certain words and phrases, and the impact on listeners (Rosaldo, 1976, p. 110).

One of the most influential studies about gender differences concerning language is contributed by Tannen (1990). She states that men and women do not have essentially two separate languages, but it is their speech style that is different. Tannen in her famous book *You Just Don't Understand* states that it is the societal expectations that marks the difference between the speech styles of both genders, therefore, women and men's speech can be summed up in manner of contrasts: Status against support, independence against intimacy, advice against understanding, information against feeling, orders against proposals, and conflict against compromise (Rosaldo, 1976, p. 112).

Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century (1992) by Rosalind Rosenberg describes American woman's social and economic status throughout the twentieth century. It gives an account to all women accomplishments during that period; women had their right to vote and to be paid the same amount of money as men for the same job. As a consequence, women became economically independent and had acquired legal rights. Women's traditional role of taking care of the house and children clashed with their career ambitions, in addition to that they faced social inequality (Rosaldo, 1976, p. 112).

Mick Short is one of the most valuable contributors in the field of modern stylistics. Short, Johnathan Culpeper and Peter Verdonk' *Exploring the Language of Drama* (1998) is a book of collected essays that provide a pattern of linguistic and stylistic analysis to literary texts, particularly plays. It is using different techniques to analyze the language of plays, such as Cognitive theories, Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis. The book offers practical examples of analysis by discussing major works of famous writers such as Shakespeare and Arthur Miller (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974, p. 696).

In 2002 Sara Mills wrote a paper titled *Third Wave Feminist Linguistics and the Analysis of Sexism*. It shows the manner third wave feminists deal with



linguistic analysis. The paper challenged the concept that men and women are homogeneous groups based on second wave feminists thought. However, Mills proposed that instead of thinking that there is a separate male or female language and style of communication, third wave feminist linguists claimed that there are gendered patterns decided by society.

In her article, Feminist stylistics (2006), Sara Mills defined the term feminist stylistics as "the analysis of the way that questions of gender impact on the production and interpretation of texts". She claimed that second wave feminist analysis of literary works depends only on the text, while in the third wave, it is broader and goes beyond the text itself. For example, the way female authors' writings are being judged, and how their gender is affecting their books' sales. Mills also focused on Sexism and how it appears through texts directly or indirectly (Sacks, et al, 1974, p. 696).

Sara Mills and Louise Mullany's (2011) Language, Gender and Feminism: Theory, Methodology and Practice is discussing feminist matters and complexities in a practical way by deconstructing language and discourse to show its relationship to the gendered patterns that are produced by society. The book deals with a new developmental stage of gender and language studies that needs more relevant critical analysis. Women now are different from those who witnessed the first and second waves of feminism since some of them socially and politically have more rights than ever. They present new issues and perspectives. Mills and Mullany are trying to address and to analyze them from a feminist and linguistic point of view. In their attempt to present a comprehensive overview and methodologies of the significant issues related to language use of men and women, Susan Ehrlich, Miriam Meyerhoff, and Janet Holmes collected multiple articles in a book, and called it The Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality (2014). It inspects the ways men and women assume their gender identities by talking and communicating their ideas. The book presents data and statistics that are conducted through social interactions in different groups (Sacks, et al, 1974, p. 697).

1.4. Research Questions

1. How can the third wave feminist ideas contribute to our understating of male-female relationship in the play?
2. What does the stylistic analysis of the language of the characters in the play reveal about the male-female relationship referred to in the previous question?





1.5. Methodology

This study will analyze how the language of men and women are related to gendered patterns and not inherent differences between the two genders as it was previously claimed by first and second wave feminist linguists. Men's language is not necessarily dominant and powerful, neither is women's language essentially co-operative and powerless. It is the social context that decides the nature of expression, conversation and discourse of male and female speakers. The aforementioned notions are aptly applicable to Williams' Orpheus Descending because the characters he creates are clear and honest representations of reality, especially the characters of the study's target play.

1.6. Discussion

This section focused on the theories of feminism and those of language and gender in order to establish a feminist linguistic analysis framework to study Tennessee Williams' Orpheus Descending. The main theories discussed in his chapter evolved around Mills' notions of third wave feminism and feminist stylistics which will be the main theory to be applied on the above mentioned play. Mills main concern was to say that men and women language are not necessarily different in style or as a whole, instead, it is related to gender domains in which men or women express themselves according to the context or the situation they are in.

For understanding Mills concepts and ideas fully, this section began by providing theoretical information about Feminism and its two different types or periods, the first wave and the second wave. Then it discussed ideas of language and gender to back up the feminist linguistic aspect of the present study, and to show the proposed different use of language by males and females. The stylistic topic was also incorporated in the study to demonstrate how changing turns between male and female characters can be an indication of whether language is essentially different between the two genders or it is not. Consequently, the study main concern is exploring that issue.

This section focuses primarily on Mills' Feminist linguistics framework through studying the language of the two main characters whose linguistic behaviors and practices will be studied in detail later in the following pages. For presenting a systematic analysis of Val and Lady's language, the three extracts of the play are chosen purposefully in which the characters' language and conflicting interactions are more notable and revealing about their personalities. For this reason, all the selected frameworks which have been discussed in the preceding chapter will be used appropriately. Since the three linguistics approaches,





language and gender, third wave feminism and turn management are to a certain degree, interrelated and, applying them to the selected extracts can provide the basis for a more comprehensive linguistic analysis of the characters of Val and Lady.

Example:

LADY: Ge' me the drugstore, will you? I know the drugstore's closed, this is Mrs. Torrance, my store's closed, too, but I got a sick man here, just back from the hospital, yeah, yeah, an emergency, wake up Mr. Dubinsky, keep ringing till he answers, it's an emergency! [Pause: she mutters under her breath:] —Porca la miseria! —I wish I was dead, dead, dead....

The first extract is selected from act1, scene 2 in which Val has had come back to the store after spending a few hours with Carol Cutrere. He intends to ask Lady for a job in the store. Lady descends the stairs to call the drugstore to send her sleeping pills. While she is talking on the phone, she is surprised by Val's presence and ask him why he is in the store. Val tells her that Miss Talbot brought him to the store earlier at the afternoon in order to ask for job. Val also talks about how Carol wants to seduce him.

This extract illustrates a scene of a first-time meeting between a female dry-goods store manager, and a male wandering singer and musician. This scene is set in the store at the time of night. Lady is downstairs calling the drugstore to ask them bring her sleeping pills. In this example, when she is talking to the person on the other end of the phone, she uses a direct impetrative type of speech "wake up Mr. Dubinsky, keep ringing till he answers, it's an emergency". Rather than using a polite and an indirect request as it is expected from female interlocutors, she assertively demands to talk to the drugstore owner, Mr. Dubinsky. Thus, her emergent need for the pills and her status as a shop manager led her to choose this way of expressing herself. In other words, her style of speech was determined by the context of the conversation.

Conclusion

The results of the study, such as the idea that third wave feminism and language and gender theories are overlapping with each other, moreover, the idea of using stylistic tool as a supported theory to analyze the text more-fully and understandably to stand on the results more linguistically, in addition, the final section will employ the third wave feminist linguistics approaches to explain the male-female relationship in the play. The findings have discovered that there is an apparent need to mention that the important part of the play's portrayal of male and female characters and their distinctive language use cannot be overlooked.



For that reason, the study is dedicated exclusively to inspecting the role of context and status that determines the language use of different gender characters in the play text by using third wave feminist linguistic approach and stylistic.

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