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OEDIPUS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA: SHEILA WATSON'S BLEND OF MYTH AND MODERNITY

Abstract: *The paper discusses the key mythological motifs which Sheila Watson used in the multilayered fiction of her Four Stories (1979): the Oedipus family cycle with a number of its analogies in the ironic (post)modern world, the change of Daedalus into a real estate entrepreneur, and the fragments of Greek myth and the Bible which nowadays seem to have no place in the world as interpretive guidance. The texts in question always straddle the gap between the old and the new and this fluctuation undermines a singular meaning, since not even the narrators can be certain whether the events resemble the myth by pure chance or by some act of fate. The pregnant node of conflicts from Sophocles' Antigone is deftly displaced in Watson's stories across narrative situations often verging on the absurd, but still echoing the classical origins. The most notable difference is that the younger generation in Four Stories manages to counter the elders' repression through their own diminutive subversive actions, like securing a little bird's burial.*

Keywords: *ambivalence, myth, displacement, Oedipus plotline, conflict, irony, absurd, repression, subversion.*

Introduction

Canadian literature nurtures the phenomenon of artistic doubleness perhaps more intensively than many other literary traditions in the Western civilisational circle, a fact noted by Linda Hutcheon several decades ago,¹ and an early example straddling modernism and postmodernism could be found in Sheila Watson's myth-based *Four Stories*, all of them intertwined with the Oedipus narrative. The stories themselves may be said to form a miniature cycle consisting of three texts published in relatively close succession – “Brother Oedipus” (1954), “The Black Farm” (1956) and “Antigone” (1959) – and a story more distantly based on

¹ Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies*, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 15.

Greek mythology, though still part of the “family” plotline: “The Rumble Seat” (1975). The fourth short story may be seen as a form of commentary, like the classical satyr-play, a comic work.² The texts alternate between the allusions to contemporary Canadian society, perhaps ranging from Watson’s actual childhood in British Columbia, where her father served as the superintendent of the British Columbia Provincial Mental Hospital in New Westminster, and the mentions of fundamental issues in classical myth, also touching upon the Christian religion and voodoo beliefs.

Ambivalence pervades the epistemological foundation of all the stories from the outset of “Brother Oedipus”, when the narrator tentatively declares: “Our brother’s name was Oedipus. Perhaps our father, who was a doctor, chose the name in some moment of illumination as he snipped and sewed together fragments of human life. Perhaps he chose it during his long hours of consultation. He did not say.”³ However, it would not be critically profitable to inscribe the author’s own identity into the narratorial instance, as the common opinion is that we learn about the events through Haemon, not a woman.⁴ The titular character states late into the story: “Then my sensible brother here can inherit the earth and marry the king’s daughter, and live happily ever after...”,⁵ which is ample proof that the gender identity does not rely completely on Watson’s own history. The narrator in the next two stories is also Oedipus’ brother, but the perspective changes into a communal narrator in “The Rumble Seat”,⁶ who may have taken up the role of the classical chorus, or the impersonal simultaneously integrated/disintegrated subject in the poststructuralist frame of reference.

The Shifting Concept of Family

The inescapable socium of the entire story collection is the family, with its unquestionable structure of kinship: Oedipus, Haemon, Antigone, Ismene, even Daedalus and Europa, but a careful reader should avoid taking for granted any fixity among the actants in the texts – the social group formed by the mythological Oedipus is certainly not a functional family in its own right, but a deeply flawed community, resting on incest, the only taboo that is both natural and social. Given the fact that Oedipus is both brother and father to Eteocles, Polyneices, Ismene and Antigone, and that Creon is Jocasta’s brother and Haemon’s father, Haemon destabilises and relativises the fraternal concept whenever he refers to Oedipus as “our brother”. Oedipus was cursed by the gods even before his birth

² Valerie Legge, “Sheila Watson’s ‘Antigone’: Anguished Rituals and Public Disturbances”, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, No. 2, 1992, p. 42.

³ Sheila Watson, *Four Stories*, Toronto, The Coach House Press, 1979, p. 7.

⁴ Judith Miller, “Rummaging in the Sewing Basket of the Gods: Sheila Watson’s ‘Antigone’”, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, No. 2, 1987, p. 213.

⁵ Sheila Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁶ Valerie Legge, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

due to his father Laius' sin against Pelops' hospitality. When he was not left to die on Cithaeron but taken to King Polybus, where he formed the conscious part of his personality, he heard a hint of his adoption. Fate willed it that both the biological father and son should go to the Delphic oracle at the same time, and in an argument, Oedipus murdered Laius at a crossroads. It is worth noting that Watson's Oedipus was perhaps named so incidentally, and that he broods over a tree in his garden that obstructs his mother's drain in her own yard, but he finds peace only beneath that tree. He mentions "the individual uncounscious" that is in tune with the growing things⁷ as if he wanted to escape the suffering that awareness brings to the beholder. The entire cycle demonstrates a capillary ambivalence at the foundations of the characters involved, especially Oedipus: on the one hand, the Greek original (notwithstanding a number of variants of some plot details in the classical tradition) was dynamic, active and did valiant deeds for Thebes, but Watson's character is pensive, uxorious, and under a dotting influence of his mother, who is left unnamed in the short stories. Therefore, we can only presuppose a mysterious, fluctuating signified whenever the name Oedipus is mentioned, as only fragments of classical myth can comply with the events devised by Watson – and quite frequently, non-events, dialogue and absurdist parody which occupy long portions of the texts take over our attention and offer new views of ancient questions.

Even the author herself was not able to give a solid explanation why she wrote the Oedipus cycle; when prompted by the interviewer that she started "with what seems to be almost archetypal and mythic landscape, and as the story continues, it gets more specific, more and more concrete until you get the actual geographic landscape in part of the region", Watson replied: "I began to work that way when I wrote 'Brother Oedipus.' I don't know why I started the Oedipus thing."⁸ Perhaps, like in her assessment of the function of poetry, "poems have a special meaning for me but they transcend any personal meaning, and create a now which is accessible to anyone",⁹ these narratives combine the strictly local historical features with the patterns of symbolic representation, "a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain why the world is as it is."¹⁰ Due to a European resurgence of the interest in the myth of Antigone throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, and Sigmund Freud's monumental influence exerted through the postulate of the Oedipal complex as the basis of family dynamic in (at least) the Western world, the mythical basis reworked by Watson is not just any

⁷ Sheila Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁸ Daphne Marlatt, Pierre Coupey and Roy Kiyooka, "Interview / Sheila Watson", *The Capilano Review*, No. 8–9, 1975, p. 353.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

¹⁰ Martin Kuester, "Myth and the Postmodernist Turn in Canadian Short Fiction: Sheila Watson, 'Antigone' (1959)", in: *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations*, ed. Reingard M. Nischik, Rochester, NY, Camden House, 2007, p. 169.

classical plotline, but arguably one of the most widespread stories in existence. George Steiner claims that only one literary text expresses all the five constants of conflict in man's condition: the confrontation of men and of women; of age and of youth; of society and of the individual; of the living and the dead; of men and of god(s), and that is Sophocles' *Antigone*.¹¹

Watson brings about a fundamental shift in perspective when the Greek original is set against the 20th-century version in that she allows the marginal character of Haemon to act as the focaliser in the first three stories; the young man who was Antigone's fiancé confronted his father's command after she was immured alive, so he entered her tomb and saw that she had hanged herself, and on the spur of the moment, he took his own life with a sword. Since the original offers little talking time to Haemon, the Canadian author creates a major hiatus, decentres experience and transforms a scenario of exclusion into a scenario of integration. According to Héliane Ventura, the re-placing of focus lays the foundation for a major generic change from tragedy to comedy, during which process the narrator even glosses over the fact that Antigone is Oedipus' daughter.¹² The story cycle never fails to foreground the family or close cousins as the primary zone of interest, where the main arguments or events are given bearings, whereas the external world (British Columbia or any other myth-infused locus), whose inhabitants are rarely introduced, arguably plays a lesser role. A major function of ritual constantly suffuses the Greek myth and rests on the clash between Creon's decree that Polyneices should be left unburied and the divine law that the dead must be buried within a certain time period accompanied by a set of strict rules – the body is laid out at home, then carried in a procession on the next day, and the chamber of the dead is only accessible to the closest female relatives. Antigone risks everything with her unyielding devotion to her brother, and is finally proven right when the prophet Tiresias declares that even the gods refused his sacrifice due to the ruler's cruelty, thus punishing the entire community for his arrogance.

Watson's Rendition of the Vegetation Myth

The first story introduces a mythological trait which will persist throughout the collection, although with decreasing frequency – when Oedipus is contemplating by the willow, the narrator says: “If you grasp the willow, [...] it might come away like Persephone's shrub. You would have your cave; the thing is probably rooted in hell.” This evident allusion to one of the most famous vegetation myths is countered ironically by Oedipus, a product of the 20th century as much as of ancient Greece: “I rather suspect [...] that it is rooted in our mother's drain.”¹³

¹¹ George Steiner, *Antigones: The Antigone Myth in Western Literature, Art and Thought*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 231.

¹² Héliane Ventura, “The Energy of Reiteration: Sheila Watson's ‘Antigone’”, *Recherches anglaises et nord-américaines*, No. 29, 1996, p. 185.

¹³ Sheila Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

The passive stance of Oedipus seems to rub off on Haemon as well, when he tells his wife (her definitive identity in the first story is anybody's guess) why the status quo of the banal tree should persist: "And the individual unconscious scorns insurance. It is insured by the great vegetation myth which promises more than any insurance company can offer."¹⁴ The antitheses of the classical and contemporary thought and practice will provide much of the interpretive potential in all the four stories, even more so as the dialogues can often be construed to refer to an amalgam of those two realities, myth and contemporaneity opalescently radiating at least two meanings parallelly. Oedipus is quite aware of the cycle of living beings, that "we share our life with the cow and, like the berry, ripen to decay",¹⁵ but he is reluctant to cut down the willow tree. The tree appears to be an objective correlative for his modernist-like procrastination in the world of events that are only hinted at, almost never materialised.

In the next story, Uncle Daedalus is represented as the creator of the Black Farm, which looks rather like a Canadian than a Greek landscape; in addition, he has contributed to the contemporary world with a number of inventions, and he is fond of using an array of industrial products from gadgets to detergents, unlike the traditionally minded Europa. In order to preserve some acres of the environment, she needed his help in purchasing the estate where she hopes the flowers and trees will persist for at least one more generation. Unfortunately, when Daedalus sets his mind on creating a totally black farm and sees that no animal can achieve that uniform hue, he burns down the entire pasture in a fit of anguish. Again, the closure deviates from common myth-based expectations of catharsis and balance in the narrative, and opens up more questions than it answers. The story "Antigone" features fewer elements of the vegetation cycle, apart from the spatial allusion to the Fraser River (or seen in the mythological paradigm, the Inachos, the Kephissos, or the Lethaios), which can serve as the motivation for Antigone's question how often we can cross the same river.¹⁶ The caricatural burial of the sparrow on the premises of the city and its mental asylum should function as a low-key analogy to Antigone's brave act of honouring Polyneices, when she defied her uncle to give burial rites to her brother,¹⁷ although, like the shameful fact of who fathered Antigone, the brothers' names are also left out of the short story. It is through the use of the "images and music of traditional literature, especially religious literature, Watson extends this local struggle into a universal one and makes significant a seemingly unimportant event."¹⁸ The importance of just about any life – human or animal alike – is highlighted in the solemn ceremony which has as its object a six-inch sod of earth, a poignant

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁷ Judith Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

reminder of the six-foot grave of a human. Haemon readily recites parts of the Catholic Office of the Dead: “Deliver me, O Lord, from everlasting death on this dreadful day. I tremble and am afraid”,¹⁹ thus bridging the gap between the trivial and the sublime, the heathen and the Christian. The final text focuses on a TV interview conducted with Oedipus, who now bears the name “our uncle”, but the reality here is refracted through a mass media filter, and not a single mention of vegetation ritual occurs in the symbolically laden framework of the TV studio and the rambling talk between Oedipus and the host. The latter even says at one point in the conversation, when Oedipus assumes his role of a Theban noble addressing the fictional audience, that “we must [...] demythologize.”²⁰

Opalescence of Conflicts in the Modern Mythology

On the track of Steiner’s remark about the five crucial conflicts shown in *Antigone*, these texts supplement the Greek tragedy through the very dialogue with the hypotext in which Watson’s stories engage, across a two-millennia hiatus and after a long process of grafting European culture onto North American soil. Perhaps the cardinal underlying characteristic of this fiction is its high potential for diverse forms of antagonistic juxtaposition of ideas, sentiments, conclusions, narrative and anthropological motifs. It does not have to be by pure chance that one of the essential rifts is given in the first short story, while Oedipus is talking about the cost of living, and his mother wryly retorts: “The point under discussion [...] is the cost of dying.”²¹ To Oedipus, the natural cycle of growth and decay is a non-negotiable dialectic, but his mother, with a matter-of-fact proposition of a suburban Canadian housewife, only demands that the tree be cut down. Where the contemporary consciousness tries to clear the hurdles pragmatically, Oedipus persistently tries to measure out the problem and criticises the technocratic, regimented society which has missed the point of being humane. In an instance of attenuating the myth, Oedipus in Watson’s fiction is fortunately “stranded between the rocks of wife and mother”, who are two different individuals, voicing his fear: “If I cut down the tree, my mother will triumph over my wife.”²² Contrary to the original, he has no children, and he is jovial about the fact that one Oedipus is enough – seen from the Sophoclean perspective, this statement offers immense relief to any reader familiar with the original Oedipus’ fate.

“The Black Farm” constructs a somewhat different set of antagonisms, with Daedalus and Europa occupying centre stage; Uncle Daedalus made huge technical improvements to the world, but Europa is more traditionally minded, turned towards a relaxing life with nature, not wishing to subvert the natural resources as mere commodities, like he did when he helped the prairie inhabitants advance

¹⁹ Sheila Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

from wagons to tractors to cars, and then his corporate class started a reverse reaction with sales of leisurely sentiment to the affluent class. The duality of actions in the text can be well seen in the constant disputes led between Daedalus and Europa, but it is even more evident in the narrator's remark that Daedalus and Oedipus are the true antagonists: "I see now dimly that Oedipus railed at our uncle because he saw in him what I think poets have called his own antimask."²³ The reader also catches a glimpse of the rift inside Daedalus himself, when Haemon concludes that Oedipus motivated their uncle to change his perspective on doing business: "Up to that time he had moved about his affairs sometimes by oscillation, sometimes by rotary synthesis. Now he assumed direction."²⁴ Daedalus' circular motion turned into linear, with a precise, albeit bizarre goal: to develop an estate with all elements in a pitch-black colour (the house, the fittings, the flowers, even the animals), but the master's belongings would be golden in hue. He soon realises that nature will prove him wrong in searching for a "natural uniformity", and that absolutes in this world are unachievable.

"Antigone" revolves around the strange transgression committed against the system of order by a group of modern mythological characters; the narrator (most probably Haemon, since the Greek myth has him as the protagonist's fiancé), Antigone, Ismene and a handful of others transgress the strict rules of Creon's mental asylum to assert their free will in the seemingly trivial ritual of burying a sparrow on the hospital lawn. In Valerie Legge's opinion: "Watson juxtaposes a desire for order and stability within institutions, communities, and government against an ominous threat of madness and anarchy. This creates tension as single-minded characters like Antigone and Creon are torn between personal desires and obligations and an equally strong sense of civic duties and responsibilities."²⁵ The dualism of the city as opposed to the wilderness on the left bank of the river in this semi-mythical town of New Westminster only enhances the interpretive possibilities with all the textual lacunae offered to the reader: Antigone's brothers, whose actions have an immense importance to the Greek myth, are left unnamed, Creon rules a modern-day kingdom organised around medical sedation, not around the ancient healing rituals, so he cannot control occasional outbursts of his inmates' lunacy: Helen walking naked down the narrow cement path, Atlas [...] eating the dirt which held him up, hands shaking the bars and [...] fingers tearing up paper, etc.²⁶ Apart from the hospital's seclusion from the rest of the world, a dividing line is also set up within such a hierarchical community – family, asylum soon become arenas for explosive confrontations; initially offering sanctuary to afflicted individuals, these institutions turn inward on themselves and eventually

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁵ Valerie Legge, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

²⁶ Sheila Watson, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 43.

become prison-like.²⁷ The conflicts do not only happen inside the strictly controlled social groups, like mental wards, but also between the lovers, as Haemon bitterly acknowledges: “I should have loved Ismene for she would have taught me what Plato meant when he said in all earnest that the union of the soul with the body is in no way better than dissolution.”²⁸ While Ismene does not try to perfect the world, Antigone makes superhuman efforts to hold the world on her shoulders (like Atlas) or bring a message that there is life in the wilderness (like Hermes).²⁹ Ismene is visibly more content with the given world than either her sister or her fiancé; she does not worry too much about the suffering of Creon’s patients, and is more Platonic in her cognition of the ideal forms. Haemon’s function is more pronouncedly dual, because he tries to mediate between the emotional Antigone and the rational Creon, he is much more perceptive than his professionally burdened father, he notices the antagonisms in the unfolding events, but still keeps the moral stance of a common citizen, he knows about the old scandals from the family’s past, but he lets them remain in the shadows, he is aware of the excessive power that his heart has over his head, yet he persists in his relationship with Antigone.³⁰ The entire story indisputably focuses on Antigone’s subversive activity, seen here in the illegal burial of a little bird, as an act of defiance of Creon’s severe decree, but the *senex iratus* figure does not apply such brute force to the rebel as in the Greek play – when Antigone confronts him in this symbolic manifestation of hope in the free human spirit, Creon utters a phrase that men live because discipline saves their lives,³¹ and silently turns away from the girl. The text’s ending brings some optimism, no matter how absurd the form is in which it is given, that ossified, repressive order can be dismantled with bold acts of fearless questioning of the dictatorial authority.

“The Rumble Seat” takes place in the contemporary world of the TV interview and its immediate broadcast, and plastically illustrates the semiosphere in which mankind operates nowadays – direct contact without an intermediary is unimaginable, and all sorts of trivialities can intrude the studio conversation. The issue in this story is man’s relation to God or various deities that have followed man through history, and Oedipus declares at the beginning that “Dieu est mort”,³² setting off a series of rambling rebuttals where it is not always clear who is actually talking. Interspersing his speech with some French sentences, which also rivets the setting more firmly into contemporary Canada than classical Greece, Oedipus vehemently refutes the father-figure, the basic idea of most religions in the world, applicable both to Greek polytheism and Christianity (and obliquely, to Freud,

²⁷ Valerie Legge, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

²⁸ Sheila Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³⁰ Valerie Legge, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

³¹ Sheila Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Lacan and other psychotherapists who operated within patriarchal domains). The assault on thinking in parables and images from antiquity is also launched by Pierre, who utters his remark on the necessity of demythologisation.”³³ Intensifying the rebellion against the mechanical character of the punitive surroundings from “Antigone”, the talk show guest Oedipus defends the subjective aspect of man: “Must we [...] live by the clock after the clock-maker has been sacked? Are we a mechanical sequence, an organized seriality?”³⁴ Antitheses of man’s condition keep gushing forth in Oedipus’ tirade, and embody the basic ideas in purely physical form – are we continuous and fluid or rigid spatial hollows, structural cages or free-standing plinths, he wonders, and exclaims that man will remain a mystery even to the minutest materialist observation. He goes on to mention the conflict between his real-life childhood experience (kneeling on the asylum floor with insane people) and the church-going on Sunday, paradoxically, without his father, who was too busy with the hospital patients. Once during Mass, Oedipus and his sister sneaked in another family’s pew, and were overwhelmed by the cushioned seats and the air temperature, while the priest was delivering a sermon on the fall of Adam and by extension, of the whole human race. His sister took off a few garments and fell asleep listening to the story of Noah and gave him a profane idea that she “had gone to sleep like one of the fowl or the cattle or the creeping things that Noah had taken into the ark.”³⁵ His further trauma of religion was cemented when two nuns reproached his sister for showing her fine dress, with so many poor girls freezing around the world, which made him look for substitutes of belief elsewhere – Darwin, Voltaire, Trotsky, Yinger and Kant. Ironically, the child understood even then that the incident was not caused by their pride, but by pure fate, since neither he nor his sister had any choice in the matter of their clothing.³⁶

The Old Myth in a New Ironic Guise

This story cycle resorts to displacing a number of mythical events or motifs, which provides a lot of room for the impact of irony, when the classical trajectory dwindles into the modern commonplace, or even banality. Thus the willow in “Brother Oedipus” perhaps reaches as far as hell, but the main character replies that it rather stems from his mother’s drain, in a typical suburban Canadian detached house. The pensive Oedipus does not like the paradigm shift from the ancient healers and their rituals to the modern-day science as an offshoot of rationalism: “That age set loose a whole pack of surgeons – the economist, the social reformer, the town planner, the street cleaner, the organizer of departments

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

of public works and the curriculum reformer.”³⁷ He bitterly regrets the demise of an age which acted much more syncretically, and by extension, held myth and philosophy in higher regard, as indispensable to communal life and education in general. In contrast, these “surgeons” are equivalent to the strictly regimented professionals of our time, who only look at a handful of details, not the broader picture, and in Oedipus’ opinion, are capable only of partial healing. They deal with the symptoms, but not with the root causes of problems in the world, and miss the very point of what population healers are supposed to be. In bizarre opposition to what he did in the Greek myth, Daedalus from Watson’s prose now buys and sells view lots in a cemetery,³⁸ and is considerably less noble than the famed inventor of antiquity. He desperately wishes to make a monument to himself in the form of a perverted all-black farm, without any useful feature except the satisfaction of his vanity – his mythical counterpart constructed the Labyrinth and a number of buildings in Sicily and lower Italy,³⁹ but the modern Daedalus looks more like a deranged multimillionaire who increases capital for capital’s sake. He assumes some of fate’s authority when he says that people don’t know what they want: “They leave it to men like Freud and me to find out what they are really dreaming about.”⁴⁰ The inventor crosses into the realm of the symbolic when he sets himself side by side with the dominant psychotherapist of the 20th century, and moreover, he transfers Freud into the class of businessmen who sell their products as mere commodities to the people who lack spiritual fulfilment. In this ironic turn, one of the most celebrated designers of classical myth exploits the vacuum of modern consumer society, and follows that “direction”, not circle, to the absurd self-mockery.

The text “Antigone” combines much of what is old and what is new, of which the new bridge and the old bridge are only visible concrete correlatives – the entire field of reference in the story bridges the gap between the two eras, with a lot of evasion of unnatural events from the myth. Helen rebels explicitly against the superintendent’s (Creon’s) repressive psychiatric rule in an act of going stark naked, which she never does in the myth; Kallisto, a virgin priestess, daughter of a king, suffered a rape by Zeus, and in the short story she was alienated into the mental asylum through this act of violence – Kallisto’s rape prefigures Antigone’s live entombment, and in Watson’s story both women show much less prominent images of harassment than in Greek literature, where Antigone is ignored, and Kallisto is shorn.⁴¹ In both the original and the modern commentary, the ruler materialises his “desire for order and stability within institutions, communities,

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁹ Dragoslav Srejović and Aleksandrina Cermanović, *Rečnik grčke i rimske mitologije* [*Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology*], Beograd, Srpska književna zadruga, 1992, p. 106.

⁴⁰ Sheila Watson, *op. cit.*, pp. 20–21.

⁴¹ Héliane Ventura, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

and government against an ominous threat of madness and anarchy”,⁴² but the differences between the autocratic rule and swift entombment on the one hand and the mental hospital with its restraints on the other strike the reader’s eye as two quantitatively different systems of repression. When the bird’s funeral is over, Antigone warns Haemon that his father will punish them all, to which Kallisto replies with a biblical allusion: “He has on his garment [...] and on his thigh is written King of Kings.” The narrator conflates both the classical and the contemporary motifs of chastisement in one pithy sentence: “If I could see with Kallisto’s eyes I wouldn’t be afraid of death, or punishment, or the penitentiary guards.”⁴³ Regardless of intensity, the repressive system is indicated in both ages, in a seemingly diminishing scale of rigidity.

The final story showcases the highest number of examples of antagonism between the old and the new values, and its opening testifies to the irreversible shattering of the ancient framework: “The EEG [of God] has been flat as a flounder since Darwin sailed home on the *Beagle*.”⁴⁴ Both the guest and the journalist, a parody of the famous Pierre Berton,⁴⁵ try to dismantle man’s ritual-based customs through chaotic gibberish with multiple technical and consumer references, and ironically prove that there is no single totalising myth that could serve as ritual substitute for the biblical and classical fundamentals: Laius drives a Volkswagen, Oedipus receives religious instruction about God in his father’s hospital, mixes up Toronto with Thebes and proclaims the ecclesiastical establishment to be unaware of the significance of the sexual revolution. In a frenzied monologue, Oedipus prattles about the repressive upbringing he received from a few missionaries when he should have been taught practical survival skills in the Wolf Cub pack: “... where I once babbled incoherently to a white-bearded God to save me from bears.”⁴⁶ Pierre casually interrupts him, since he has heard this narrative too many times, and it has turned into a collective trauma of generations brought up in boarding schools. Oedipus gathers some strength to tell the journalist of his painful kneeling on the floor and misplaced search for God in an asylum, but Pierre, echoing the previous texts and dangers specialisations pose for society, interrupts him with a series of useless surrogates for faith: “We have our mental health clinics, our brotherhood weeks, our alcoholics anonymous conventions, our community chests and united appeal drives.”⁴⁷ This only incites his guest to retell the story of his own and his sister’s alleged sin at church, which functions as the second-order framing narrative, so similar to the TV screen that Oedipus’ nephews are watching from beginning to end. In a cacophony of cultural con-

⁴² Valerie Legge, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁴³ Sheila Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴⁵ Martin Kuester, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁴⁶ Sheila Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

cepts ranging from bilingualism to Canadian topography, from religious societies to plain materialism, Pierre sadly realises that the TV show time – inexorably non-human and mechanical – is almost up, and he prepares for unwinding in an elegant bar nearby after the planned finish.

The surprising endings of all the stories do not bring any momentous resolution, since modern society's ontological pluralism allows individuals to pass each other by without collision, which is indispensable to tragedy and its final catharsis. This brother Oedipus will continue hiding a bottle of alcohol under the willow, Uncle Daedalus will embark on another real estate project, Antigone may bury another sparrow on the hospital turf, and the doubly distant collocutors, Pierre and any guest of his choosing, in the word salad of a TV show may appear later, in an equally pointless iteration of uncoordinated ramble, proving that ancient rituals had a tremendous unifying power, unlike the absurd fragmented existence of modern man.

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ЕДИП У БРИТАНСКОЈ КОЛУМБИЈИ:
АМАЛГАМ МИТА И МОДЕРНОСТИ ШИЛЕ ВОТСОН
(Резиме)

Текстови у збирци *Четири приповијетке* (*Four Stories*, 1979) Шиле Вотсон (Sheila Watson) налазе се у непрекидном саодносу са једним од најзначајнијих митова европске цивилизације – Едипу и члановима његове породице, и постижу иманентну двосмисленост кроз двоструки оквир модерне канадске провинције и класичне Грчке. У прве три приче, написане педесетих година 20. вијека, „Брат Едип“, „Црна фарма“ и „Антигона“, глас добија Хемон, чији идентитет можемо успоставити посредно по односу и референцама на друге ликове у сижеу. Вотсонова је у приче уградила и лични моменат, пошто је њен отац био директор локалне душевне болнице, те је и ова веза послужила за стварање ироније да функционише као строги Креонт у Теби. Мит о Едипу одјекује и кроз ауторкино преиспитивање става о динамици савремене породице проистеклог из Фројдове психологије, будући да су трагични и иншестуозни догађаји из Софоклове драме ипак неистакнути, па се њихов тмурни потенцијал само назире. Дедал је приказан као непрекидно активан трговац некретнинама, за разлику од траженог проналазача из антике, а такође је талац сопствене фикс-идеје да створи потпуно црну биосферу на фарми на којој би сијао контрастно као злато.

Приповијетка о Антигони на минијатуризован начин кристалише односе репресије коју врши Креонт, док се насиље над Калисто такође помаља као назнака митских збивања; умјесто сахране брата Полиника, Антигона покопава птичицу, и то на терену душевне болнице у Британској Колумбији, док наратору Фрејзерова ријека испуњава парадигму Лете или Инаха. То што се директор болнице само окрене и не казни Антигону успјех је њене субверзивне дјелатности. Посљедња прича, „Помоћно сједиште“, настала петнаестак година касније, ближе показује презасићеност људског рода сфером медија, јер се догађаји у ТВ студију прате кроз оквир екрана и уских временских формата емисије. Интервјуисани Едип се залаже за повратак митским обрасцима понашања, оптерећен је првобитним Адамовим гријехом, а водитељ изричито жели демитологизацију свијета. У хаосу постмодерног шума, Едип и саговорник не налазе заједнички језик, па долази до још једног завршетка без катарзе и смисла.

Кључне ријечи: двосмисленост, мит, премјештање, Едипов сиже, сукоб, иронија, апсурд, репресија, субверзија.

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