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The Feminine Position of Auditor in Yeats’s Purgatory

by MARGARET SOENSER BREEN

In A Vision Yeats defines woman in relation to male creativity:

When my instructors see woman as man’s goal and limit, rather than as mother, they symbolize her as Mask and Body of Fate, object of desire and object of thought, the one a perpetual rediscovery of what the other destroys; the seventh house of the horoscope where one finds friend and enemy; and set this double opposite in opposition to Will and Creative Mind. (213)

Yeats’s passage is careful to distinguish between woman as “man’s goal and limit” and woman as mother. The discrimination is, of course, erroneous, for when man desires woman he must inevitably acknowledge her reproductive capacities. Nevertheless it proves an essential assertion for the poet who wishes to locate the origin of his art within himself.

Relegating motherhood to the blindness of the muses’ gaze, he may imitate his enemy’s creativity without paying tribute and celebrate the maiden friend whom his verse has made in his own image.

Within twenty years of its initial drafting, this aesthetic perspective bespoke a crisis in Yeatsian representation. A Vision suggests a purgatorial constellation for creative process: the lady pursued vanishes, only to reappear and be pursued anew; all the while, the poet’s presence remains unwavering and unchallenged. If this pattern was initially intended to suggest the artist’s mastery, by the late 1930s it carried quite different implications. Yeats’s final works are largely preoccupied with the impotence of old age and with political developments, such as the increasing independence of Ireland’s rule from the Anglo-Irish gentry with which the poet aligned himself. Whereas the fracture of female identity in A Vision had urged on the artist to the “perpetual rediscovery” of woman, it now suggested the inescapable reflection of himself. The woman could only be perceived via the self-imposed structures of his authority. In “Man and the Echo” the awareness of a woman unaccounted for in his theories crashes against the constructions of his verse:

1. For a related discussion, see Douglas Archibald’s Yeats. In his analysis of Purgatory, Archibald observes,

The lit-up house becomes an emblem for the active imagination just as the purgatorial state in A Vision is “a symbol of the imagination at work.” But this Purgatory is a symbol of the imagination under duress and recoiling. The old man is crazed in very late-Yeatsian ways. He is driven into fury by his own despair, by the intractability of his circumstances, and by horror at what grows around him. (159)
Did words of mine put too great strain
On that woman's reeling brain?
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lay wrecked? (li. 12-15; emphasis added)

The poet's words do not recuperate a woman's past innocence; instead the "strain" or filtering of woman becomes coupled with the awareness of writing's participation in social destruction. "Perpetual rediscovery" transforms itself into "eternal unrecoverability": the effacement of woman's [sexual] difference, the precondition for Oedipal blindness (Irigaray, Speculum, 63), becomes the poet's figure for the social compromise of his language, as well as the loss of Anglo-Irish authority over mother Ireland. Nowhere is this equation more thoroughly at work than in Yeats's penultimate drama, Purgatory.

Purgatory is often read as an expression of Yeats's rage against an Ireland which seeks the destruction of the landed Anglo-Irish gentry through the breakdown of caste distinctions. The play's main character, a half-crazed pedlar, murders his lower-class father, and later his son, in an attempt to restore the racial purity of his mother's noble family. These killings do not, however, succeed in counteracting his parents' class miscegenation; instead they, too, participate in the destruction of social order. In the wake of gender prescriptions which assess man and not woman as the transmitter of culture, the Old Man cannot choose to identify with his mother's gentility rather than his father's violence. As their shared brutality suggests, the Old Man is inevitably marked by his father's actions. And therein lies the horror of Purgatory. Attempting to define himself in terms of his matrilineage rather than his patrilineage, the Old Man only proves able to assert his maternal bond by denying its efficacy, that is, by assuming the decisiveness of patriarchal authority.

In the play a sixty-three-year-old pedlar returns with his sixteen-year-old son to the ruins of their ancestral home. Burned to the ground around the time of Parnell's death by the pedlar's drunken father, the once grand house now serves as the nesting place for scavengers. The sight of its roofless, weather-beaten remains fills the Old Man with an Oedipal rage.

2. John Heath-Stubbs, for example, argues that the play symbolises the corruption of the old Anglo-Irish aristocracy, which allowed itself to become contaminated by contact with the rising bourgeoisie. (The Darkling Plain, 205; also quoted in Vendler, 196, and Wilson, 153)

Nathan sees the Old Man's relation to his mother in terms of a Yeatsian allegorical construction of class rather than of gender:

The Old Man's brutalized fineness is the only direct expression in the play of the lineal aristocratic superiority thrown away by his mother. (243)

Related themes are discussed by Whitaker and, more importantly, Torchiana. The former argues that Purgatory's subject is the Fall. The latter demonstrates how the play functions as a political allegory beginning with the death of Parnell through the sixteenth anniversary of the establishment of an independent republic.

3. The pattern of gender relations which instructs Purgatory's tragedy is present throughout Western literature. One need only think of Antigone, Oedipus, King Lear. Lear, for example, dictates the terms of his own tragedy by insisting that his daughters tell him what he wants to hear. The result is that he casts off the one daughter who truly loves him.
against his father and compels him to recount the history of his family's debasement which he casts as his mother's story. The daughter of landed gentry, his mother forfeited with her marriage to a stablehand her social connections. Disinherited from his maternal ancestry, the Old Man conceives of her as metaphor for the ineluctable mark of his father's caste and sexual desire. His attempts to exercise his mother tongue end in mimicry and thereby signal the persistence of his servant-class roots. So the Old Man determines the retribution demanded of her for her violation of class endogamy. Having regarded his father as the guilty agent in the rupture of a noble line, the Old Man at sixteen murdered his lower-class parent. His mother, constructed by her gender as accessory rather than partner in marriage, he supposes in purgatory, condemned to the reenactment of her wedding night. He imagines her: silently standing by the bedroom window, she hears the sounds of the hoofbeats which signal her husband's approach. The Old Man, too, cocks his ear to the phantom clatter and in so doing inscribes himself within the epistemological limbo to which he has relegated his awareness of his mother. He cannot rid himself of his father's memory.

Fashioning himself as his mother's moral intercessor and social representative, ultimately he proves neither. After listening to the account, his own son refuses to accept its classification as family tragedy. The Boy, mirroring at sixteen the Old Man's own Oedipal struggle at the same age, approves of his grandparents' sexual union and supports the rupture of class barriers. In anger, the Old Man stabs and kills him; but like the patricide, the murder cannot banish the awareness of the couple's violation of endogamy. The Old Man can neither reinstate his mother's Anglo-Irish line nor resist his patrimony of brutality. As long as the dramatically silent sound of the hoofbeats echoes in his ear, he remains caught in purgatorial terror.

Within the Oedipal drama, language's function is inherently doubled: the articulation of one's circumstances remains inextricable from the suppression of voices of others' experience. Oedipal discourse precludes the possibility in language of the constitution of a female subject unmediated by male representation (Irigaray, *This Sex*, 85). Her own voice silenced, woman is bound to discourse as its auditor. As Nietzsche writes in *Joyful Wisdom*, woman is "only ear"; she is "a great ship gliding silently along like a ghost," and as such lends definition to "man...in the midst of his hubbub," his articulation (98–99).4

Purgatory provides an example of the twofold nature of Oedipal expression. The Old Man's narration cannot be divorced from the silence of his mother's auditory role. This interdependence between the mother's muteness and her son's speech is crucial for understanding the play. For even as the Old Man inhabits the position of protagonist, his mother

determines the framework of the play's dramatic action. *Purgatory* is the Old Man's Oedipal construction of his mother's story, a construction, Yeats suggests, wrought by every Anglo-Irishman in his relation to mother Ireland:

...a spirit suffers because of its share, when alive, in the destruction of an honoured house; that destruction is taking place all over Ireland today.5

Focusing on the Old Man's desire to define himself as the repository of the purity of an Anglo-Irish lineage and therefore solely as his mother's child, the play emphasizes the character's inability to escape patriarchal mediation of selfhood.6 Throughout, the Old Man seeks to identify with his mother's landed background and erase the signs of social rupture caused by her marriage to a servant. But his identification with his mother confines him to the roles of auditor and mimic—of auditor because of the social construction of his mother's gender; of mimic because of his entrapment in a language determined by class miscegenation.

Similar to this verbal constriction is the Old Man's class delimitation. His desire for an upperclass identity leads him to suppose that his mother experiences a purgatorial agony because of her marriage to a stablehand—an agony which, as class is determined by patrilineage in the play,7 a gentleman's marriage to a servant woman would not have aroused. In order to end his own and his mother's presumed torment, the Old Man attempts to eradicate his patrilineage by murdering his father and later his son.8 He does not succeed.9 His social position as pedlar, determined by his father's class and his mother's precarious class status, remains unaltered by these murders. Denied by social and linguistic construction the possibility of a direct, unmediated relation to his mother, the Old Man's bond with that highborn parent remains mitigated by that with his lowborn father. For the Old Man, his mother remains all ear, echoing the activity of her servant husband.

**The Mother**

In order to understand the futility of the Old Man's attempt to break the purgatorial cycle, one must consider the play's representation of the

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6. Accordingly, when Nathan writes of the parents, "These presences are developed by the Old Man's comments, but could conceivably be his illusions" (247), he is attempting to establish an erroneous distinction—the play exposes the social myths which construct identity, real or illusory.

7. The Old Man becomes a pedlar because, as he observes, "he is his father's son."

8. I hope that the framework of this paper enables me to address the issue which Melchiori considers inexplicable:

in *Purgatory* Yeats wrote his own *Oedipus at Colonus*; the Old Man killing his son under an obscure compulsion that no amount of reference to Yeats's own theories and principles can clarify. (253)

9. In describing the play as "a purgatory in which there is no hint or at least no emphasis on Purgation" (quoted in Tuohy, 219), Eliot does not consider that the problematical core of the play is not its conception of purgatory, but rather its entrenchment in Oedipal representation.
mother. *Purgatory*’s setting provides two primary traces\(^\text{10}\) of the mother.\(^\text{11}\) Her presence is suggested by the shadow cast on the window of the ruined house, the principal feature of the scenery, and, again, by the house itself. Looking at the remnants of the structure at the beginning of the drama, the Old Man remarks to the son,

> My mother that was your grand-dam owned it.

Woman physically houses her descendants. During gestation biological function and metaphoric possibility coincide. So, too, the identities of mother and still silent child: they fuse together, become indistinguishable. For Oedipus to be born, he must abandon the maternal home and replace mother with flickering memory. For him, signification is exchanged rather than recreated; within the disparate realm of language, his logical continuity depends upon the parity of substitution and not the reproduction of meaning.\(^\text{12}\) For him, woman’s effusion is calculated as an unstable figure: thus the Old Man’s memory of his mother’s shadow.\(^\text{13}\) At one time she was the owner of “the big old house,” of

> This scenery and this countryside,
> Kennel, stable, horse and hound.

But his mother died in childbirth; and the Old Man’s most persistent memory is of a social figure steadily erased by his father’s actions:

> he squandered everything she had.

Storehouse rather than creator of upper-class inheritance, the mother in *Purgatory* cannot sustain her father’s noble line. The mother serves as landed property rather than as landowner (Irigaray, *This Sex*, 185). The Old Man remarks,

> ... that house.
> I think about its jokes and stories.

The Old Man tries to imagine the upper-class banter of his maternal forebears. Implicitly, it is the language of the house’s male members, “great men [who] grew up, married, died.” Within this setting, his mother is a strikingly nonverbal presence. Her decision to marry the Old Man’s father occurs in silence: “She ... looked at him and married him.” A mute participant in the household’s action, the mother, having chosen a servant

10. According to Derrida, “trace” is a name for the distance between experience and language.
11. As Ure points out, the tree also serves as a sign of the mother.
12. For Kristeva, woman is sacrificed in the socio-symbolic order. Within the Oedipal framework, which Kristeva embraces, woman can only be represented in the presymbolic (see “Women’s Time” in *The Kristeva Reader*). While this position can account for the mother’s muteness in *Purgatory*, it cannot explain the Old Man’s attempted identification with his mother. Irigaray’s critique of the Freudian model which displaces the origin from woman’s body onto the symbolic Oedipus has provided the theoretical basis for my analysis of the drama.
13. “A woman’s face,” Yeats writes in *On the Boiler*, “may foretell a transformation of the people, be a more dire...omen than those trumpets heard by Etruscan seers in middle air” (see *Explorations*, 434). Central to *Purgatory*’s apocalyptic vision of Anglo-Irish culture is the mother’s representation as a shadow.
Margaret Soenser Breen 47

for a husband, relinquishes the possibility of being a receptacle for a pure Anglo-Irish line and language. Her marriage to a stablehand excludes her from even an auditory role in her family. As the Old Man describes her parents’ reaction to her marriage,

Her mother never spoke to her again
And she did right.

The Old Man’s attitude toward his mother is an ambivalent one, for the memory of her landed heritage recalls her inability to transmit her patrilineage. There also remains the gnawing question of volition. He imagines her choosing her husband with an explosion of silenced will: “She... looked at him and married him.” The Old Man is very aware of the father’s potential appeal to the mother:

Better-looking, those sixteen years—...
Younger.

And also he is aware of his mother’s potential conjugal pleasure:

Can she renew the sexual act
And find no pleasure in it, and if not,
If pleasure and remorse must both be there.
Which is the greater?

The problem, then, for the Old Man is not just that the mother is not man enough to sustain her family’s noble line, but, indeed, that she is too much woman. 14

For the Old Man the image of his conception embodies the rupture of an upper-class heritage, its debasement via sexual desire and patriarchal determination of class. And while the possibility of his mother’s defiance of conventional passive gender incites his ambivalence toward her, it is his father’s reworking of convention, his undermining of Anglo-Irish authority, which makes the Old Man hold his father most immediately responsible for the fall of the big house. The Old Man focuses his description of the mother not on the woman who died in giving birth to him but rather on the woman who makes love with her husband on the night of their wedding. The sexually loaded image foregrounds the father’s transgression of upper-class prerogatives, not the son’s own role as the trace of that transgression. 15 The Old Man attributes the metaphoric distance between himself and his mother’s family to the originating power of his father’s act:

Do not let him touch you! It is not true
That drunken men cannot beget,
And if he touch he must beget... 14, 15

14. To my knowledge, Heather Martin is the only critic who suggests the possibility of this reading.
15. This point is subsequently borne out by the description of the Boy’s birth. Once again, by focusing not on the actual event but rather on the moment of conception, the Old Man is able to reveal his assumption of patriarchal coverture of procreation:

I gave the education that befits
A bastard that a pedlar got
Upon a tinker’s daughter in a ditch.
The father's touch entails the violation and defilement of the house. By implanting himself, housing his offspring in the mother, he inverts the hierarchy of social metaphors. His rise from horse-groom to bridegroom of the upperclass entails the degeneration of the landed gentry's signifying power, for the Old Man's mother cannot reproduce the meaning of her heritage. The father has transformed womb into tomb, and so the Old Man laments,

But he killed the house; to kill a house
I here declare a capital offence.

Even as the father eradicates the mother's class history, he also reinscribes her marginal verbal position. Whether daughter or wife, she remains the silent auditor of a male language. In the vision of his parents' wedding night, the Old Man imagines his mother listening to the sound of hoofbeats which signal her drunken husband's return:

Look at the window; she stands there
Listening, . .

As if to underscore the mother's position as auditor, the lines are accompanied by the illumination of the window of the ruined house and the appearance of a young woman's shadow. This correspondence between staging and narration fashions the Old Man as a speaker of tragedy. Dramatically, the mother is ever a receptacle for male production — for a language based on the preclusion of her role as a speaker of her own story.

The Old Man

Insofar as the mother serves as her husband's auditor, so, too, does the Old Man. In recounting the family history to his son, the Old Man pricks his ear to the rhythm which echoes in his head:

Listen to the hoof-beats! Listen, listen!
Beat! Beat!

His adoption of the auditory position encodes the maternal bond in silence. The sound of the galloping horse, toward which both parent and child strain, is heard by neither the Old Man's son nor the audience. The clatter of hooves remains an imagined, Oedipal event. Identification with his mother precludes his orchestration of the drama. His inability to authorize Purgatory's action is indicated not only by the discrepancy between what the audience and what he himself hears, but also by his attempt to reproduce the sound of thudding hoofbeats: "Beat! Beat!" This mimicry bespeaks a temporary suspension of the Old Man's mastery over

16. It is essential that the sound of hoofbeats not be created as a stage effect as it marks the Old Man's attempt, albeit futile, to identify with his mother outside of the Oedipal sign system.
linguistic articulation; it indicates his incapacity simultaneously to main-
tain the auditory position of his mother and assert his autonomy from his
father's memory.\textsuperscript{17}

The identification with the mother is necessary if the Old Man wishes
to present himself as the agent of Anglo-Irish caste purity. His desire to
privilege the maternal tie is apparent from his initial description of
purgatory:

\begin{quote}
\begin{verbatim}
The souls in Purgatory...come back
\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots
Re-live
Their transgressions, and that not once
But many times;...[And] when the consequence is at an end
The dream must end; if upon themselves,
There is no help but in themselves
And in the mercy of God.
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}

For the Old Man, the mother's soul is in purgatory because of her sexual
breach of class boundaries. Insofar as he imagines that her soul must help
itself to end its agony, he conflates his mother's identity with his own; he
construes himself as the instrument of her appeasement and kills both his
father and his son in order to eradicate the signs of miscegenation. Of
course, these acts reveal that the debasement which he associates with his
patrilineage is present in himself. After he kills his father, the Old Man
realizes, “I am my father's son.” The two murders suggest that the Old
Man, though he attempts to identify solely with his matrilineage, is
tormented by the awareness of the indelible mark of his father's class and
lust upon him. Nevertheless, the Old Man elects himself upholder of
upper-class privilege. He conceives of himself as a kind of scourge, a
violent vindicator of his mother's heritage. Ironically, while he terms his
father a “beast” and concludes that his son “would have...passedpollu-
tion on,” the Old Man sees himself as “a wretched foul old man / And
therefore harmless” (emphasis added).

The Old Man's attempt to purge his history proves impossible. The
savagery of his undertaking amplifies rather than eradicates class
miscegenation; nor does it effect the speech of landed gentry. As
Knowland has suggested, the Old Man's attempt to assume an upper-class
persona is apparent in his use of imperatives (230):

Study that house,
he directs his son at the play's opening,

Study that tree,
he again commands. But even as these orders mark his efforts to adopt an
authoritative voice, they are undercut by the inability of their amplifica-
tions to sustain rhetorical control:

\textsuperscript{17}. For a different argument which reaches the same conclusion, see Moore, 312-13.
Study that house.
I try to remember...
...but I cannot;

or again,

...study that tree,
What is it like?

...it's like—no matter what it's like.

The impotence of his language aligns the Old Man with his mother's passive position as auditor of male discourse. 18

Similar to this mimicry of an Anglo-Irish voice is the Old Man's effort to display upper-class cultivation by recalling the numerous volumes in the family library:

There were old books and books made fine
By eighteenth-century French binding...

The volumes remain a visual rather than an intellectual experience for the Old Man, and even the force of this mediation is reduced when he finally describes them in terms of their weight—"books by the ton" (Knowland, 234).

The pedlar proves unable to shine with the aristocratic polish of his maternal ancestors. After having killed his son he cradles the boy in his arms and sings,

'Hush-a-bye baby, thy father's a knight,
Thy mother a lady, lovely and bright.'

If mock epic romance, this lullaby is the closest the Old Man gets to an upper-class literary tradition. 19 The moment underscores the futility of cultivating one's voice by recalling either metaphors or mothers.

No, that is something that I read in a book,
And if I sing it must be to my mother,
And I lack rhyme.

The only work which the Old Man can fluently recite emphasizes the gap between his own education and the imagined one of his mother's male relatives. Even as his bookish infantilism mimics his mother's own original gendered role as upper-class mute, his conception of himself as half-breed entails his rejection of the dramatic possibility of either parent's being his auditor: these are "Deaf! Both deaf!"

18. I am indebted to Mena Mitrano for this connection between the Old Man's breakdown in speech and his mother's role as auditor.

19. For a different reading which nevertheless assumes this point, see Desai's comparison between the lullaby passage and the scene in which Lear enters carrying Cordelia (219).
Purgatory’s Form

In attempting to identify with his mother’s Anglo-Irish heritage, the Old Man isolates himself. This essential alienation is suggested by the play’s form. Focusing on the sound of the hoofbeats which, echoing in his imagination, allies him with his mother’s auditory position, the Old Man dismisses the voice of his only tangible companion, his son. Whereas the presence of both the Old Man and the Boy suggests the possibility of dialogue, Purgatory records the Old Man’s monologue. In a play which focuses simultaneously on the inextricability of male from female identity and the irreconcilability of upper- and lower-class voices, language does not exist so much between characters as within the ear of each.

The lack of exchange between father and son foregrounds the father’s loathing of paternity. The pedlar tries to eradicate the Boy’s presence:

Old Man. Where are the jokes and the stories of a house,
Its threshold gone to patch a pig-sty?
Boy. So you have come this path before?
Old Man. The moonlight falls upon the path,
The shadow of a cloud upon the house,
And that’s symbolical... (my emphasis)

In an activity which recalls the mother’s social effacement, only a piece of the Boy’s question is incorporated into the monologue. But while the Old Man recasts his son as verbal shadow, the Boy cares little whether he hears his father. When the Old Man discovers the Boy’s attempt to steal away with their money, he cries,

Come back! Come back!
And so you thought to slip away,
My bag of money between your fingers,
And that I could not talk and see!

Talking and seeing, not listening, determine the father’s relation to his son. Interestingly, one of the few moments when the Old Man actually

20. At least two other critics (Miller, 304, and Jochum, 210) mention the monologue quality of the play, though neither (to my knowledge) considers Purgatory a failed dialogue.
21. I think this reading helps us understand the dramatic possibilities of the Boy’s relation to the Old Man, particularly in the following passage:

Old Man. ... study that tree,
Boy. What is it like?
Old Man. It’s like—no matter what it’s like.

The son’s remark functions not merely as a response to his father’s question; it is primarily a commentary on the Boy’s attitude toward the Old Man’s monologic tendencies. Indeed, as the incantatory quality of the initial lines of Purgatory suggests, the son does not perceive the father’s language as articulation as much as undulating sound:

Half-door, hall door,
Hither and thither day and night,
Hill or hollow, shouldering this pack,
Hearing you talk.
acknowledges the Boy as an audience occurs when the former recalls murdering his father:

Old Man. There's nobody here but our two selves?
Boy. Nobody, Father.
Old Man. I stuck him with a knife,
That knife that cuts my dinner now,
I ran away, worked here and there
Till I became a pedlar on the roads,
No good trade, but good enough
Because I am my father's son...

Dialogue is only possible insofar as it focuses on the Oedipal disruption of patrilineage.
The monologue, however, entails more than the father's rejection of his listener. Because the Boy does not consistently view himself as his father's audience, because he can conceive of himself as overhearing his father's speech, he is able to undermine the force of the Old Man's words:

Old Man. Better-looking, those sixteen years—
Boy. What are you muttering?
Old Man. Younger — and yet
She should have known he was not her kind.
Boy. What are you saying? Out with it!

Indeed the Boy suggests that the Old Man's speaking without an audience signals his madness:

Old Man. But there are some
That do not care what's gone, what's left:
Boy. Your wits are out again.
Old Man. Re-live
Their transgressions, and that not once
But many times.

The Boy is right—as far as he goes. What he, unlike his father, fails to realize is that madness stems from positing an auditor who refuses to listen. Like the monster in Frankenstein, the Old Man lacks a willing listener. He agonizingly describes his parents' ghosts as

Deaf! Both Deaf! If I should throw
A stick or a stone they would not hear;
And that's a proof my wits are out.

Purgatory assumes that the possibility for a community of meaning depends upon the parity of social exchange. Insofar as he associates his mother with the landed gentry rather than with his father's servant status, the Old Man suspends the possibility of engaging in dialogue with either of his parents' ghosts.
Conclusion

The Old Man's desire to align himself solely with his mother proves impossible to fulfill. Because he insists on the substitution rather than the reproduction of culture, he can assume neither the voice nor the values with which he associates his mother's landed ancestry. His attempts to recuperate an upper-class life-style are continually undermined by the memory of his father's lower-class history. Insofar as he tries to purify his mother's line by killing his father and later his own son, the Old Man becomes the tragic sign rather than heroic vindicator of his matrilineal heritage. As the sound of the hoofbeats once again echoes in his ear at play's end, the Old Man realizes that he is "Twice a murderer and all for nothing." Unable to extricate either his mother or himself from an Oedipal web of social construction, the Old Man remains ineluctably fixed in the role of crazed hearer of his father's language.

Works Cited


