

NIETZSCHEAN READING OF TOM MURPHY'S PLAY: "THE SANCTUARY LAMP" AND OVERCOMING NIHILISM

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Abstract: This article is an analysis of a play by Tom Murphy, "The Sanctuary Lamp", against the background of Nietzschean philosophical concept of overcoming nihilism as well as an attempt at discovering the parallelisms between Murphy's characters in their search for the essence of existence and their desire for a meaningful life and Nietzschean philosophy. In the play, self-realisation of an individual, that is, overcoming nihilism, is mainly achieved by means of one's individual strength, which is characterised by the ability to combine destruction and creation, employ one's will to power, create new values, affirm life as it is, forget and forgive one's enemies, and employ art in life. The playwright conveys an individual's loss of purpose and the inevitable chaos in the aftermath of the death of God and the methods to surmount this nihilistic condition. The study comes to the conclusion that all the above Nietzschean elements build a solid background for Murphy's drama, where the dramatist draws a picture of systematicity of existence of an individual who struggles to attain meaning.

Keywords: Nietzsche, nihilism, will to power, Irish drama, Tom Murphy.

Nietzsche's philosophy embodies the refusal of previous epistemology, which has been based on religion and moral codes. His philosophy views the universe as an alien factor and describes the ways to identify methods of attaining the purpose of existence in such a world. In other words, Nietzsche delineates nihilistic way of existence out of which there are ways to follow. The announcement of the death of God, which makes the universe alien for the humankind, exposes man to the realisation of meaninglessness of life and labour and the urge to find meaning of existence somewhere else. As people used to place the

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meaning of their existence close to God and his principles, Nietzschean philosophy contradicts it because there is no God in a Nietzschean universe. Not surprisingly, Nietzsche advises people to look for meaning of life in other places. In the light of these major Nietzschean concepts it is possible to accommodate Tom Murphy's plays in a philosophical context since his characters display articulacy in their ambition to realise themselves in this absurd world devoid of God.

Murphy addresses the questions of nihilism, such as an individual's loss of guidance and aim, his realisation of the greatness of suffering without any reward and his spiritual loneliness, in his plays. In "Bailegangaire" (1985), for instance, Mommo and her granddaughter Mary feel despondent due to their awareness of meaninglessness of existence. "The White House" (1972) puts under discussion the loss of identity due to the death of one's idol. The condition in which the characters are caught without a purpose in life causes the feeling of displacement. For example, despite the fact that "On the Outside" (1961) portrays the differences between the wealthy and the poor, the real theme is one's inadequacy to affirm his present situation and to get accustomed to his immediate circumstances. Like Murphy's other plays, it attempts at describing a man who has lost his place and home, and who feels himself in Limbo. "The Gigli Concert" (1983) is another play which dramatises a man's displacement: the Irishman cannot accept his background and pretends to be the famous Italian tenor, Gigli. In this line of thinking, Mahony outlines Murphy's main ideas in his plays as follows:

Deracination; the threat or reality of exile; ostracization within small communities; unfilled longings that seem at first merely romantic, but which are much more complex; questions of faith and belief; and the desire of man to strive for the fully realized life – all these are the playwright's thematic markets (1998, 135).

Murphy's characters undergo a sense of being lost between faith and atheism while they try to find meaning somewhere else.

Tom Murphy seems to explore the theme of repudiation of all metaphysical power and truth in his plays, which leaves his characters devoid of any guidance and of any guarantee of a meaningful life. However, he envisages different techniques to overwhelm the despair generated by the guaranteed maxim of disbelief in God that he stridently declares in his works. Hence, together with the establishment of the legitimacy of nihilism in his plays Murphy appears to suggest to his characters several formulations to overcome it.

The portrayal of his characters is marked by his thoroughgoing analysis of people's disorientation in the universe after the acknowledgement of the death of God. This idea of a decentered universe, spiritually lonely humankind, and the ways to overcome nihilism suggests parallelisms between Tom Murphy's drama and Nietzsche's philosophy; and "The Sanctuary Lamp" is a good example of such a parallelism. "The Sanctuary Lamp" dramatises the theme of nihilism and the portrayal of how the characters try to dissolve it. It was written in 1975 and when it was staged for the first time, it was received with rage due to its content. However, after its staging in 2000 and 2003, it was affirmed as one of the playwright's best plays.

The play is mainly based on nihilistic views such as announcing the death of God and overturning the traditions. Murphy painstakingly examines these cardinal issues and pronounces his views on nihilism and its aftermath throughout the play. The lamp of the church "signifying the constant presence" (Murphy 1994, 106) depends on people's care, the lack of which eliminates any idea of God and his presence. As long as people make the lamp burn, there is God; otherwise, there is no divinity. The "*great columns to dwarf the human form*" (Murphy 1994, 101) mark the physical attributes of the church by which people are threatened and which emphasize the playwright's ideas in relation to the absence of the abstract power of religion. Religion uses the physical appearance of the church more than any other metaphysical power to make people believe in the almightiness of this kind of spiritualism. The setting of the play, the overturned confession-box and the position of the pulpit, underline the subversion of the church and the religion.

Nietzsche's philosophical ideas in reference to the absurd universe are echoed in Murphy's "The Sanctuary Lamp" through the characters' speeches about the futile existence. Francisco is the main character who denounces pious people. When he talks to Maudie, he maintains that "there's no one to bless you. And, worse, there's no one to curse you" (Murphy 1994, 156). God has evaporated himself, according to Francisco's statements, and people are utterly bereft of meaning and hope because the future is unknown, and there is nobody to guide them.

Nihilism constitutes the core of Nietzschean epistemology, and the philosopher attaches as much importance to the methods to overcome meaninglessness after the death of God as he does to nihilism. In a Nietzschean context, surmounting nihilism is possible

only when a human being can destroy and create, employ his will to power, become God, affirm grief, and forgive and forget his enemies. Another significant concept by which people add meaning to their existence in a Nietzschean universe is art, which reflects people's inner world and reveals their true feelings and through which people abandon the veil of traditional dictates and have access to their innate nature.

Although Christie Fox argues that there is "Murphy's relentless pessimism and stagnation in the sins of the past" (2003, 145), there is always a tiny hope for transcendence and his plays encapsulate the examples of overcoming pain and despondency by means similar to those observed in Nietzschean philosophy. Therefore, it would not be erroneous to say that "[t]he atmosphere of his work is electric, poised somewhere between hilarity and despair" (Gleitman 1997, 264). Hence, it can be concluded that the dramatist is optimistic because he thinks that pain and hilarity always come together. "The Sanctuary Lamp" is among these plays which have the theme of hope in a god-forsaken universe. While presenting the theme of nihilism, the play provides the characters with the methods of overcoming this temporarily blurred stage of existence. And these methods can be analysed against the backdrop of Nietzschean concepts.

"The Sanctuary Lamp" brings opposing poles of destruction and creation together and this fusion evokes the Nietzschean binary oppositions of destruction and creation as one of the possibilities of coming out of the nihilistic phase. One of the essential features of the strong people who are able to surmount nihilism in Nietzsche's epistemology is the ability to create a new life, which is possible through destruction. Löwith says that "Nietzsche calls his world of will to power a 'Dionysian world' of eternal self-creation and self-destruction" (1944, 172). For Nietzsche, "[t]he desire for *destruction*, change, and becoming can be an expression of an overflowing energy that is pregnant with future (my term for this is, as is known, 'Dyonisian')" (Nietzsche 1974, 370¹). Likewise, Tom Murphy considers this kind of destruction possible in his characterisation of Francisco; "this is the same vision that Francisco propounds from the pulpit, the vision of an apocalyptic beatitude being won through

¹ The numbers after Nietzsche's works signify the numbers of the chapters from where the quotation is taken.

waywardness and despair” (O’Toole 1987a, 91). Francisco is self-destructive, and it is evident from his speeches, in which he firstly desires destruction and then a new beginning. He reveals it when he talks to Maudie: “And I’d like the whole place to fall down. . . . And singing and dancing and talking to Jesus here and everything? Very nice” (Murphy 1994, 129). Francisco reveals his destructive nature again when he wants to confront Harry, who wants to punish him due to his squalid behaviour regarding Olga, Harry’s wife. Although Harry does not make any efforts to meet Francisco, they meet because Francisco comes to see Harry. Francisco does not try to evade Harry’s cruelty; thus, as Mahony discusses, “‘The Sanctuary Lamp’ contains the threat of violence throughout” (1998, 139). Francisco desires war and fighting both literally and metaphorically – as it is seen from his behaviour – and this is the meaning of his life.

Nietzsche’s “will to power” is of great importance in his philosophy: “Only where there is life is there also will: not will to life but – thus I teach you – will to power” (1995, ‘On Self-Overcoming’). Will to power is a wide concept because there is a tendency in Nietzsche’s writing to make the equation between life and will to power. In relation to Nietzsche’s philosophy, talking about will to power means talking about life in general. Karl Löwith analyses Nietzschean concept of will to power and says that “[t]he death of God by which life loses its traditional ballast and standard of evaluation means that we have to replace the faith in a purposeful will of God by our own will” (1944, 171). Will to power in man should overcome God’s will; in other words, people should obey only their own power in order to realise themselves. Struggle between two people requires power, and this struggle is endorsed by Nietzsche. He claims that this world is like “a play of forces and waves of forces, at the same time one and many, increasing here and at the same time decreasing there” (1968d, 1067). Nietzsche postulates the concept of will to power to show that a man is the highest authority; and each will to power avoids appeasement because it is designed to fight and get more.

Tom Murphy employs the above mentioned power of a human being in “The Sanctuary Lamp” when he characterises Harry and Francisco. In the first conversation between Harry and Francisco it is apparent that they exhibit their power in different ways. Firstly, each wants to overcome the other by the power of his words. Francisco acts as if there is nothing wrong between the two. Thus, he wants to show his strength; according to him, Harry cannot frighten him because he is

stronger than Harry. His singing also emphasises his attitude towards Harry. Francisco tries to imply that life is beautiful and there is nothing that can change it. Harry's technique to tackle with Francisco is similar. He does not want to show Francisco that he has been waiting for him for a long time to take revenge for his wife's adultery with Francisco. It would reveal his weakness because it would demonstrate that Francisco was able to take his most precious possession. Just the opposite, he wants to make it clear that Francisco has not achieved that level of being able to hurt Harry. Next, Harry ignores Francisco, which is another way of showing his power. He deliberately neglects Francisco when he divides the fish and chips into two, for himself and Maudie (Murphy 1994, 135). Harry pretends not to see Francisco because he does not want him in their company. However, it is seen that it is difficult for Harry; his actions betray his intentions. In a Nietzschean context, this craving for victory is the sign of their search for meaning. Both of them are lost in this world; they do not have jobs or homes which marks their dislocation both mentally and physically. Thus, portraying themselves stronger than the other adds meaning to their misery. As life is a "meeting of force and force" (Swann 1991, 150), these characters come to understand that existing in this universe means struggling, not submission.

Tom Murphy's play dramatises Nietzschean idea of overcoming nihilism in creating new values. Nietzsche suggests that "[w]e require, sometime, *new values*" (1968d, 4); thus, overthrowing of old values embraces the generation of the new ones. This is exemplified in Tom Murphy's play when Francisco contemplates the creation of a new life for himself. Moreover, his penultimate speech pinpoints the belief in happiness without God: "And contrary to what they thought, I thought – same as any other sensible baby would – that Limbo was the place to get to. It was tropical really. Imagine, the only snag to Limbo was that you never got to see the face of God. Imagine that" (Murphy 1994, 159). According to his point of view, people are strong enough to create a state of bliss for themselves. Francisco rejects God's power, and thus, creates a new philosophy of life. Mahony translates Francisco's desire to have a new world as follows: he builds his future in Limbo, a place between heaven and hell, where people are without God. So, it is a safe place for him because he does not want to see capricious God (1998, 140). God is an obstacle for him because he wants to be responsible for himself. As O'Toole states, the

new religion makes man stronger than God and his justice is greater than God's justice (1987b, 155).

Harry, too, has got a new view of life: he believes in spirituality and like Francisco, he does not accept institutionalised religion. As Etherton maintains, "Harry is not showing faith in Christ but in the endurance of relationships beyond mortality" (1989, 139). Harry illustrates his faith in the sustainability of the union of beloved people when he has a conversation with Francisco:

And if a hole comes in one of the silhouettes already in that wall, a new one is called for, and implanted on the damaged one. And whose silhouette is the new one? The father's. The father of the damaged one. Or the mother's, sometimes. Or a brother's, or a sweetheart's. Loved ones. That's it. And one is implanted on the other. And the merging – y'know? Merging? – merging of the silhouettes is true union. Union forever of loved ones, actually (Murphy 1994, 159).

Both Francisco and Harry have lost something important in their lives and want to replace it with something valuable. Harry wants to be reunited with his daughter and Francisco wants to be free from God's dictates. And they want to realise it by means of their new religions.

Affirming life and pain is called *amor fati* in Nietzschean philosophy; and loving his own life requires a human being to accept his life in its totality:

My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be other than it is, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity. Not merely to endure that which happens of necessity, still less to dissemble it – all idealism is untruthfulness in the face of necessity – but to love it... (Nietzsche 1979, 'Why I am So Clever').

Amor fati is not justifiable when a person selects particular elements of his life. Schoeman provides a clue to attain *amor fati* and says that affirming life in its totality is the same as to be satisfied with oneself. He clarifies this by stating that people should not be resentful (2007, 17). "The Sanctuary Lamp" has such strong personalities that affirm life together with its pain. The playwright asserts his position regarding this issue by inserting statements on the necessity of both pain and joy in life. Sheila McCormick argues that Murphy's discovery of a human's anguish has a reason: by exploring it, the playwright tries to find the ways to make the character experience emotional release (2007, 150). Acknowledgement of suffering helps Harry to overcome his temporary physical weakness. Harry becomes weak and unable to deal with his problems, yet he gains back his strength when Francisco tells him that Olga is dead. He "*rushes in, under the pulpit, and with a mighty effort lifts it off its base*" (Murphy 1994, 146). Harry, who is

not able to lift the empty pulpit at the beginning of the play, lifts it easily after he hears the news of Olga's death. Teresa's death has paralysed Harry, and Olga's death makes him come out of his passive condition: "By the end of Francisco's story, he lifts the pulpit at arm's length with Francisco in it – a Nietzschean superman born of despair" (Poulain 2002, 54). He becomes strong again both physically and mentally. His lifting of the pulpit is the transition from one dimension of the play to another. His regained power opens a door to the meaning of his life, that is a goal to overcome himself. Harry accepts suffering as a part of his life from now on.

Mercy is one of the features of a strong man in Nietzsche's epistemology. Nietzsche states that strong people can overcome nihilism and start a new life and in order to fulfill the requirements of strength, people have to be able to forgive their enemies:

To offend and be offended. It is much more agreeable to offend and later ask forgiveness than to be offended and grant forgiveness. The one who does the former demonstrates his power and then his goodness. The other, if he does not want to be thought inhuman, *must* forgive; because of his coercion, pleasure in the other's humiliation is slight (Nietzsche 1984, 348).

Nietzsche celebrates people who can forgive their enemies just because they do not pay great attention to their memory. He calls such people strong because these people channel their power to create something new: "To be incapable of taking one's enemies, one's accidents, even one's misdeeds seriously for very long – that is the sign of strong, full natures in whom there is an excess of the power to form, to mold, to recuperate and to forget" (Nietzsche 1968c, I, 10).

Tom Murphy puts under discussion this issue of forgiveness when he portrays Harry, who along with his physical power, is mentally strong. Although he experiences despair because of Francisco and Olga's affair, he forgives them. Mahony says that "[a]lthough Harry would like to exact revenge for the betrayal, he is strongly motivated to forgive. This latter urge is, he hopes, the requisite for his being forgiven for any responsibility he bears for his daughter's death" (1998, 138). Harry forgives Francisco and the play ends with the union of three characters, Harry, Francisco and Maudie sleeping in the same place (Murphy 1994, 160). Maudie, who seeks forgiveness because of her child's death, is forgiven by her dead mother, whose vision has been bothering her at nights (Murphy 1994, 118-119). Maudie forgives her grandparents, too. For a moment, between waking and sleeping, Maudie decides to go back to her grandparents: "I'm going home to gran. And to grandad. (MAUDIE *settles back to sleep in her*

compartment. Pause)” (Murphy 1994, 157). She has escaped her grandparents because they were treating her violently. Nevertheless, she resolves to face her fate as she is confident enough to mould her future. Then, in the end Harry forgives Francisco and they are able to start a new life. All three characters have experienced a lot of grief, however, their strength makes them forgive and unite in a harmonious state of forgiveness and reconciliation. Each of them forgets his past and the thoughts that have been torturing him for a long time.

Nietzsche talks about forgetfulness as an essential contribution to the concept of superhuman as forgetting helps a human being to concentrate only on the matters that deserve attention. It also provides a space in mind for new or cardinal thoughts. Ansell Pearson states that for Nietzsche living without a history is more vital and more fundamental than remembering the bygone events (1994, 70). Thus, forgetfulness leads into power:

Now this animal which needs to be forgetful, in which forgetting represents a force, a form of *robust* health, has bred in itself an opposing faculty, a memory, with the aid of which forgetfulness is abrogated in certain cases – namely in those cases where promises are made (Nietzsche 1968c, II, 1).

For Nietzsche, forgetfulness is the best way to keep psychological order. Active forgetfulness prevents a human’s mind from wasting its space for the storage of the past events. It serves to reserve a room for the new things which are more important than registering insolence.

Murphy, too, deals with forgetfulness in detail in “The Sanctuary Lamp”: it becomes the main goal of the characters, as it is a method of attaining mental serenity and happiness. Firstly, Harry tries to forget his daughter’s death and Olga’s squalid acts and, in this he needs help: “Help me to forget” (Murphy 1994, 110). Harry’s craving to forget is the sign of his desire to be free and go on living in a happy psychological condition. Maudie, too, wants to forget and hers are similar to Harry’s feelings: she has experienced callous events, which have given way to her psychological and physical discomfort. Her granddad was suspicious of her being a prostitute and treated her violently because of this. Moreover, she was raped and, later, gave birth to her child. She wants to forget all these traumatic events to liberate her future: “I just want it to stop” (Murphy 1994, 121). Her thoughts about her background and the death of her son, Stephen, do not leave her, thus, enslave her. The main characters of the play want to awake from their death-in-life existence by forgetting their past

which holds their feet and prevents them from action and progress. Moreover, as Ansell Pearson contends:

The grief of man consists in the fact that life always reminds him of the 'it was', which Nietzsche describes as 'that password which gives conflict, suffering, and satiety access to man so as to remind him what his existence fundamentally is – an imperfect tense that never becomes a perfect one (1994, 69).

Thus, if a person forgets his past, he will get a visa to a joyful future, which is freed from the previous problems.

Nietzsche has got fervid faith in art, which is similar to his Dionysus in terms of importance: "Our religion, morality, and philosophy are decadence forms of man. The *countermovement: art*" (Nietzsche 1968d, 794). Art is in the nature of man; through art man depicts his inner world, which is so important in modern literature: "The phenomenon 'artist' is still the most transparent: – to see through it to the basic instincts of power, nature, etc.!" (Nietzsche 1968d, 797). Hence, life seems meaningful when art plays a role in it.

According to Nietzsche, art plays a great role in human beings' lives because it makes them endure and overcome the suffering in life: "Artists, if they are any good, are (physically as well) strong, full of surplus energy, powerful animals, sensual" (Nietzsche 1968d, 800). As Ansell Pearson puts forward, "for Nietzsche the importance of art consists in the fact that it enables us to carry on living" (1994, 159). Nietzsche regards this world as absurd because everything has lost its meaning; what is worse is that even the pain that people undergo, that is one of the characteristics of life, is meaningless. In this way, if, according to Nietzsche, ordeal is inevitable, human beings should find something that can furnish their suffering with value. Nietzsche's suggestion is art because it helps human beings to affirm their lives which are full of suffering.

Murphy's talent as a playwright and a careful observer lets him draw a picture of a new philosophy of life, which is perfectly accessible by means of art, and which he regards as a powerful magic to struggle against despair and absurdity. For Harry, his art is his strength, as O'Toole confers, he exhibits his inner thoughts through his performance (1987b, 151). Harry communicates through his art and performance, which have a direct bearing on his self-esteem: "Sixteen stone weight above my head before I was sixteen" (Murphy 1994, 125). Maudie has been able to find the meaning of her existence by means of her abilities to climb the top of the lamp-posts. This makes Harry jealous of her because he was experiencing the same feeling

through his talent, which, he thinks, he has lost now. Remembering his nickname given by the public makes him feel strong and important. In Nietzsche's philosophy, people should be strong to create meaning for themselves and these two concepts – strength and life's meaning – go hand in hand (Hill 2007, 69). In this play it is the same; Harry and Maudie have different abilities, which help them to overcome their problematic conditions and discover new horizons of life. As Spinks states, in their case, art is beyond morality and traditions, beyond good and evil; it is an inborn quality of a person, which helps him to change his opinions about existence (2003, 25).

In conclusion, the analysis of the dialogue between Tom Murphy's plays and Nietzschean philosophy prepares a solid ground for the dramatist when displaying an individual's horrendous condition and, at the same time, endowing him with the strength and the virtue to escape this condition. Thus, Murphy gives an individual back his privilege, which has been usurped by morality. His plays dramatise characters who can add colours to the black and white forms of existence through their realisation of the significance of other colours in life. In this dialogue between the dramatist's plays and Nietzsche's philosophical concepts, the former goes one step further by transferring the philosopher's ideas generated in the late 19th century into the modern world of the late 20th century. His plays involve a pragmatist model of today's population whom Nietzsche tried to portray more than a century ago. In other words, Murphy with a modern artistic sensibility re-contextualises Nietzschean ideas in the modern day Ireland in his attempts to offer a new frame of reference which disrupts and subverts the previous one based on morality and religion and thus, builds a bridge, through his art, between the late 19th and the late 20th century epistemes.

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