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FAMILY AS A SYSTEM IN CRISIS IN CHRISTOPH RANSMAYR'S *ODYSSEUS, VERBRECHER. SCHAUSPIEL EINER HEIMKEHR* AND MARINA CARR'S *PHAEDRA BACKWARDS*

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As a part of the UIP-2020-02-3695 Analysis of Systems in Crisis and of New Consciousness in 21st Century Literature *installation research project, which is being carried out at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek and is financed by the Croatian Science Foundation (https://askins21.ffos.hr/english/),*[1] *this paper focuses on two contemporary plays of Western European literature:* Odysseus, Verbrecher. Schauspiel einer Heimkehr *(2010), written by the Austrian author Christoph Ransmayr, and* Phaedra Backwards *(2011), by the Irish playwright Marina Carr. In both plays, the*

[1] This project is financed by the Croatian Science Foundation. All the quotations cited here, originally in Croatian and German, are translated by the authors of the paper.

HRZZ Hrvatska zaklada za znanost

authors use the original myths of Odysseus and Phaedra, reimagining them in a contemporary context in order to show the universality of their experiences, but above all to comment on the society and especially the family as a system marked by crises and conflicts instead of heroic deeds. In this light, the analysis focuses on the text and context within which the state of society and the family are explored. The research is primarily based on the sociological reflections on the system, crisis, and family, drawing on the theoretical approach of the German sociological theorist Niklas Luhmann and focusing on society and social systems. In the selected plays, the family as a specific type of system is examined as well as its dynamics in relation to social changes. In addition to the examination of thematic, compositional, and genre features of the plays, the comparative analysis will reveal their differences and similarities regarding several aspects: the self-concept in context of the family as well as the causes, manifestations, and consequences of the crisis. In other words, its effect on the characters and their transformations will be explored.

Keywords: *Christoph Ransmayr; Marina Carr; contemporary drama; crisis; myth*

1. Introduction

If one defines crisis, in the broadest sense of the term, as "a deep, comprehensive disturbance in the life of an individual or community, with strong and more or less severe and permanent consequences" (Kovačec 1996: 506), one may conclude that crisis has become an integral part of everyday life. Not only are we exposed to news about various types of crises from different parts of the world on a daily basis, but we have also become witnesses to crises affecting different systems, such as individuals, families, local communities, cities, countries, continents, health, ecosystems, and so on.[2] Considering the fact that the family is an inseparable part of society and that the family system consequently finds its respective place in literary works (Albrecht 1954: 426), this paper aims to analyze the representation of family as a system in crisis in contemporary drama, specifically, the plays originally written in English and German from 2000 onwards.

[2] System in this paper is observed through the lens of socio-cultural theories from the second half of the twentieth century. See also: Luhmann, Niklas (1991) *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie,* Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main; Luhmann, Niklas (1995) *Social Systems*, Stanford University Press, Stanford; Parsons, Talcott (1966) *The Structure of Social Action. A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers*, Free Press, New York.

The impetus for these reflections and this paper comes from the UIP-2020-02-3695 *Analysis of Systems in Crisis and of New Consciousness in 21st Century Literature* installation research project, carried out at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek and financed by the Croatian Science Foundation.[3] The research of literary works – both dramatic and prose works – originally written and published in Croatian, English, and German between 2000 and 2022 has shown that there is a large number of plays addressing systems in crisis. According to data presented in the project report, out of a total of 467 literary works constituting the primary text corpus of the project, 208 plays thematize systems in crisis. Moreover, the data shows that among those, 206 literary works represent the family crisis specifically, making this type of crisis the most frequently addressed in the literary works within the scope of the project[4].

In the two selected plays, *Odysseus, Verbrecher. Schauspiel einer Heimkehr* (2010), written by the Austrian author Christoph Ransmayr, and *Phaedra Backwards* (2011), by one of the most prominent contemporary playwrights in Ireland, Marina Carr, the family is recognized as a dominant system in crisis. In *Odysseus, Verbrecher. Schauspiel einer Heimkehr*, Ransmayr takes the classical myth of Odysseus, a paragon of "the composite hero of the monomyth who is a personage of exceptional gifts" (Campbell 2008: 29), the most famous returnee in the world literature and the motif approached in different ways in the post-Homeric literary tradition (Frenzel 1976: 558–565; Frenzel 2008: 320–332; Auerbach 2001: 5–27), and portrays Odysseus as a war returnee, traumatized by his experiences on the battlefield. In Ransmayr's play, Odysseus is not celebrated a role-model, since he fails to regain control of Ithaca and keep his family together. Odysseus' aggressiveness affects people around him and deepens the conflicts between his family members. In contrast to the ancient Greek myth, the Penelope in Ransmayr's play seeks independence from Odysseus and is willing to take the power in her own hands. Alternatively, *Phaedra Backwards* is based on the Phaedra myth, which also dates back to the ancient Greek times[5] and has found its place in different

[3] The project (https://askins21.ffos.hr/english/) includes the research of systems in crisis in dramatic and prose works published in English, German, and Croatian languages from 2000 until 2025.

[4] Report is available here: https://puh.srce.hr/s/ZjQgSmbtjnF2524.

[5] Sophocles' play thematizing the Phaedra myth as well as the first play on the Phaedra myth by Euripides have not been preserved. It is Euripides' second play dealing with this topic, *Hippolytus* (428 BC), that has been preserved. See also: Frenzel 1976: 607.

literary variations and adaptations ever since (Frenzel 1976: 607–611). Marina Carr takes the ancient Greek myth and contextualizes it in modern times. The play begins at the end and the author presents the plot and characters as swiftly moving between the past, present, and future. In Carr's version, the well-known motif of a stepmother who harbors intense feelings toward her stepson takes a twist since Carr portrays Hippolytus as the pursuer of illicit love. The rift between the spouses, Phaedra and Theseus, is present from the very beginning of the play and the tensions subdued earlier, especially in Phaedra's family history, eventually come to the fore. Apart from this, in Marina Carr's take on the myth, Phaedra is fully aware of her actions and knows that there are no gods out there to be blamed for her deeds.

The classical myth of Odysseus and the myth of Phaedra revised in these two contemporary plays – *Odysseus, Verbrecher. Schauspiel einer Heimkehr* and *Phaedra Backwards* – provide fertile ground for the exploration of the family as a system in crisis. The analysis of these two plays will show how the family crisis emerges and how it is manifested. Special attention will be paid to the characters and how the crisis affects them: Does the crisis change the characters? If so, in what way? Do the characters do their best to overcome the crisis, to keep the *status quo*, or do their actions exacerbate the already-existing crisis and/or create new one(s)? The assumption is that every crisis affects the members of a community, whether it is large or small, and that it has certain transformative effects. A crisis, as an unexpected occurrence, creates the need for the community to somehow "reset" or re-establish its previous level of development and recognize any irregularities. It can be assumed that each member of that community, in crisis situations, also resets and reacts in a way they consider best.

2. Crisis and the Family

Crisis is omnipresent in everyday life, affecting both us and systems integral to our immediate or broader environment, as well as people and systems globally. Apart from that, crisis as a phenomenon is addressed within different scientific and academic fields and disciplines, and across a range of human activities. Crisis is a concept defined in various ways, ranging from the earliest ancient Greek definition, which sees crises as "the moment that influences the further positive or negative development of a thing or situation" (Kešetović – Toth 2012: 37), to Dattilio and Freeman defining it as "an existential moment when something is interrupted, bro-

ken or destroyed in order to make room for something new or different... From this perspective, it can be said that crisis is a 'critical', decisive moment when a problem is forcibly broken down into its component parts and solved" (Dattilio – Freeman 2011: 456). It is crucial to emphasize that crisis is always a "turning point", a "danger to goals and values" (Kešetović – Toth 2012: 43), and it can be experienced at the individual or collective level (Ivanović 2014: 9-29). Furthermore, it is essential to differentiate crisis from catastrophe, since catastrophe is beyond human influence, and its outcome is invariably negative (Kešetević – Toth 2012: 43).

Crisis is also a narrative pattern that has historically taken on multiple forms and, according to Leschke, turns out to be "a kind of collective antidepressant" (Leschke 2013: 30). Crisis can affect any social system that functions primarily through communication, like any family does. Examining the family within the framework of Luhmann's social systems theory underscores the significance of communication among its individual members. Luhmann who describes the family as a social system defines communication events as integral elements of the social system: "All system formations in society are [...] dependent on communication, otherwise one could not say that they take place in society" (Luhmann 1997: 14). Luhmann's theoretical approaches show that society is a communicatively closed system that is exclusively self-determined and dependent on self-organization. If there is no communication, the system becomes fragile and more prone to crises. The family, described as "a fundamental social institution, even though it is traditionally, legally and essentially a completely private matter of its members" (Janković 2008: 7), can also be affected. There are numerous definitions of the family, and it is almost impossible to choose one that encompasses all of its nuances (Janković 2008: 17–18). Nevertheless, one could state that the family is a "fragile dynamic structure" (Jurčević Lozančić 2011: 142), which offers a space where the individual achieves their first interpersonal contacts and relationships, and provides the foundations for later social interactions with the world (Brajša-Žganec – Lopižić – Penezić 2014: 276). As a "fragile dynamic structure," family can be affected and changed by both internal and external factors. Changes may refer to the interpersonal relations within the family, the roles family members play, expectations family members have of one another, or expectations, duties, and roles society places on family members (Janković 2008: 7; Maleš 2012: 13). Reflecting on the major changes that occurred in the family in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,

Maleš emphasizes that in the postmodern family, "the emphasis is placed on individualism, personal interests and progress, while traditional values are neglected, which often leads to conflicts within the family, and subsequently to its disintegration" (Maleš 2012: 13). Janković coined the term *insufficient families* for families in crisis that are torn by internal conflicts, that is,

> families that do not manage to face their problems, but deepen them even more and extend them to conflicts among family members, which worsens the familial situation. Members of such families are dissatisfied with themselves, other family members, and the family as such. Relations between family members are increasingly damaged, conflicts are more frequent, and their competence to perform the roles imposed on them or that they have chosen for themselves is decreasing. (Janković 2008: 100)

3. Homer Reloaded. Christoph Ransmayr's Anti-Hero and His Influence on the Family

The play *Odysseus, Verbrecher. Schauspiel einer Heimkehr* (*Odysseus, Criminal. A Homecoming Play*) by the Austrian author Christoph Ransmayr (b. 1954), was first performed in Dortmund in 2010 as a part of the *Odyssey Europe* theatre project. It explores the ancient myth of Odysseus, focusing on the themes of being abroad, being homeless, and returning home. An ideal example of linking these themes is the ancient Greek epic poem *Odyssey*, one of the oldest and most complex works in Western literature that is attributed to the Greek poet Homer and first recorded in writing at the turn of the eighth and seventh centuries BC. The original, Homer's, myth depicts the adventures of King Odysseus of Ithaca and his companions returning to Ithaca from the Trojan War. Despite intending to simply return home, Odysseus' journey becomes an *odyssey* as he faces numerous misfortunes, preventing his safe return to his faithful wife, Penelope. Twenty years later, Odysseus returns to Ithaca and learns of the situation in his royal palace. His wife is being pressured to remarry as many have given up hope of the king's return. With the intention of bringing order to the neglected kingdom and reuniting with Penelope, the goddess Athena disguises Odysseus into an old beggar, after which he stealthily approaches

the suitors and palace intruders and kills them. Gödde states that in the ancient tradition, Odysseus is the survivor and the returnee. His ability to endure harrowing ordeals and dangerous adventures, but also to use cunning to overcome resistance and finally return to his homeland and family, is in a way the trademark of this character (Gödde 2018: 164).

Homer's *Odyssey* is one of the most influential pieces of Greek poetry, inspiring many authors from antiquity onwards. In ancient Rome, not only Cicero and Horace dealt with the motif of the Odyssey, but also Virgil in his *Aeneid*. Modern authors, such as Gerhart Hauptmann in *The Bow of Odysseus* (1914), Franz Kafka in *The Silence of the Sirens* (1931), and Bertolt Brecht in *Correcting Ancient Myths: Odysseus and the Sirens* (1933) have either reconstructed or deconstructed the character of Odysseus, reflecting the greatness and misery of the modern man (Ringler-Pascu: 2015: 243). The Odysseus motif can also be found in contemporary literature.[6] Recent adaptations of Homer's *Odyssey* in the German-speaking area include Friederike Mayröcker's *Odysseus-Variations* (1989), the play *Ithaka* (1996) by Botho Strauss, and Tymofiy Havryliv's novel *Where Is Your Home, Odysseus?* (2009). Ransmayr's play also shows that the literary couple of Odysseus and Penelope continues to attract the interest of authors. The myth is still alive and shaped in different ways, sometimes even distorted, which is visible in Ransmayr's play.

However, in Ransmayr's adaptation of the myth, Odysseus does not appear as a role-model and hero who succeeds in regaining control of Ithaca and winning back his wife. He is an aggressive and traumatized war returnee who is now waging war in other ways. The following sections examine how Ransmayr appropriates and distorts the mythological foil both to comment on and criticize contemporary society, highlighting the dangers it poses to itself. The analysis focuses on the social subsystem of the family and highlights the conflicts between the family members that affect the family and thus create a crisis. The reasons behind the crises and the situations they arise in are analyzed as well as what they ultimately mean for the family and its continued existence. Therefore, a closer look will be taken at the role of the female protagonist Penelope, Odysseus himself, and their son Telemachus.

[6] Heinz-Günther Nesselrath offers an insight into the representations of the Homeric odyssey in the English, German, and Italian-speaking countries in his academic essay: Nesselrath, Heinz-Günther. 2013. Odysseus heute: Homer in der Literatur der Gegenwart. *Jahresheft der Göttinger Freunde der antiken Literatur,* 12, 10–27.

Notably, Ransmayr adapts Homer's epic in the form of a dialogue within the dramatic genre, featuring *dramatis personae* of Odysseus, Telemachus, Penelope, Eurycleia, Athena, Eumaios, Philotios, Melanthos, Antinous, Eurymachus, Amphinomus, the Chorus of the Crippled and Fallen, and two unnamed servants. The play itself takes place in a post-war period, which is described as "Post-war as all-time, *un*time pending between present, future and an indelible past" (Ransmayr 2010: 8). In this regard, Jug notes that the author paints a postmodern, chaotic picture of a world in which time is a relative and indeterminate aspect (Jug 2012: 252). However, in a way, it also indicates that the story of King Odysseus is not alien to any time or literary epoch and that the motif is employed repeatedly. The play is divided into eight scenes set on a deserted beach, in a shepherd's camp in the mountains, in an idyllic hilly landscape, in a dilapidated ceremonial hall, and on a flight of steps marked by bloody drag marks.

Ransmayr highlights the central motifs of homecoming and the family in his rendition of the Homeric heroic epic. The motif of homecoming is used in the opening scene, *Welcome to Ithaca,* in which Odysseus, labeled as a criminal both in the title and the cast, returns to his homeland after an extensive journey. In this contemporary adaptation, Ransmayr introduces a unique twist by portraying Athena as a parodic deconstruction of the traditional goddess of wisdom. In this innovative approach, Athena manifests as an armed sandpiper, engaging in ship plundering and collecting flotsam, thus offering a modern and intriguing reinterpretation of the classical character. She states:

> *Athena*
>
> You are certainly not welcome. This is my territory. (Ransmayr 2010: 13)

This imparts a sarcastic undertone to the scene's title, as Athena makes it clear to Odysseus that he is not welcome anymore:

> *Athena*
>
> Do you think that Ithaca, in mourning of your bloody pilgrimage to Troy, has put on its finest attire and waited all this time for your return, with bated breath, motionless, and in untainted bliss? (Ransmayr 2010: 19)

She emphasizes that Ithaca has undergone significant changes during the years of Odysseus' absence, affecting both the landscape and its inhabitants. The cast of characters at the beginning of the play already indicates a change from their original roles, through the descriptions added to their names: Odysseus, the criminal; Telemachus, the prodigal son; Penelope, the forsaken; Eurycleia, the madwoman; Athena, the sandpiper; Antinous, the first reformer; Eurymachus, the second reformer, Amphinomus, the third reformer. With her comment and the reference to the "finest attire", which is an allusion to Odysseus' wife Penelope, Athena shatters his illusions about a cohesive family and a devoted, joyful wife awaiting his return. Odysseus expected to return to the familiar state, which, as Jug notes, is associated with certain ideals, such as the image of women and mothers (Jug 2012: 128). Ransmayr distorts these familiar images, dispelling Odysseus' illusions about Ithaca and its people being frozen in time during his absence, awaiting his return. Instead, Ithaca has become a place immersed in chaos, with snow covering the island, the landscape and the people suffering due to climate changes, pollution, piles of rubbish, and the rampant construction trend, while Odysseus recalls that construction was only slowly beginning before his journey. In addition to these challenges, Ithaca is struggling with issues such as unemployment, migration, and terrorism, connecting Ransmayr's dramatization of the heroic Homeric epic to the present time. This scene provides insight into the first tragic and poignant moment of Odysseus' return, reminiscent of the portrayal of return in Homer's *Odyssey* (Matzig 1949: 54) where Odysseus also fails to recognize his homeland due to Athena placing a veil over it. In Ransmayr's play, Odysseus, who initially does not recognize his home island, must finally accept that Ithaca has deteriorated. Confronted with this reality, he disappointingly realizes that not much remains of the longed-for and desired image of home and remarks:

> *Odysseus*
>
> If this smoking desert shall even bear the name of Ithaca, I am no longer Odysseus" (Ransmayr 2010: 20).

A juxtaposition of the past and the present Ithaca indirectly suggests that the transition to the capitalist system is in place. The reformers, who represent this system, are now in control of Ithaca and are enforcing reforms favoring a particular group. Odysseus decides to regain Ithaca by force, so he "becomes a butcher again at the abyss between his desired ima-

ges and reality" (Ransmayr 2010: 3), which is an allusion to the endlessness and omnipresence of war. In an interview, Ransmayr reflects on this, stating: "My returnees are dragging the war behind them. The only thing [Odysseus] really brings back from Troy is war" (Gmünder 2010: 25). Another reference to this endlessness and omnipresence is the Chorus of the Crippled and Fallen – a group of people murdered by Odysseus in the war. The chorus perpetually accompanies him, embodying his guilty conscience. In the fourth scene, Odysseus engages with the chorus, attempting to justify his actions in war:

> *Odysseus*
>
> Leave me, leave me. Leave me for heaven's sake.
>
> *Chorus of the Crippled and Fallen*
>
> We are heaven after all, we want to stay with you forever. We love you, we won't leave you. You killed us, but we love you.
>
> *Odysseus*
>
> Leave me alone! It was war. War! I paid heavily with my homesickness, my imprisonment, my wanderings.
>
> *Chorus of the Crippled and Fallen*
>
> And we even more with life. (Ransmayr 2010: 50)

Prior to the Chorus, Athena had already articulated her criticism of the war, labelling Odysseus' spoils as a "flea market" (Ransmayr 2010: 25). In her opinion, everything he brought to Ithaca is useless, worthless, and cannot justify war, death, and other losses. The consequences of war are also visible in the first scene, when Odysseus accidentally falls on Athena and says so, which prompts Athena's comment on the rapes during the war:

> *Athena*
>
> Slipped. That's what it's called when heroes bury women under them. How many times did you slip during the war? From what it could be heard in the news from women who survived, Troy was particularly slippery. (Ransmayr 2010: 23)

Upon his return, Odysseus, who volunteered for the war and left his family to fend for themselves, endeavors to compensate for his neglect, particularly regarding his paternal responsibilities. When Odysseus reunites with his wife, the extent of his alienation from his family becomes evident, as the royal couple's unemotional encounter is accompanied by mutual accusations. Penelope is bitter because she had to wait a long time for her husband, who, unlike other women's husbands, did not write to her at all. She accuses Odysseus of having left her and their son on Ithaca without any protection. This initial conflict among family members serves as a catalyst, escalating into a crisis which deepens with each subsequent conflict. Penelope exacerbates the tension by disparaging the war, deeming it a territorial expansion and resource-seeking endeavor. Both Athena and Penelope successfully diminish the significance of Odysseus' war victory, thus causing further dissatisfaction and disillusionment in Odysseus, which speaks in favor of Ransmayr's figures of Athena and Penelope being enlightened and persistent in demystifying the war. While Odysseus continues to yearn for honor, Penelope emphasizes the family's well-being, which constantly leads to her disappointment. For instance, she suspects Odysseus of extramarital affairs, a claim confirmed by the Chorus of the Crippled and Fallen. In light of these conflicts, it can be said that Ransmayr dismantles the idealized image Odysseus and Penelope's relationship presented in Homer's *Odyssey*, portraying instead a dysfunctional dynamic riddled with conflicts and crises.

As the play unfolds, it becomes evident that Penelope is no longer the wife he left behind on Ithaca. This transformation is apparent on various levels; not only has her attitude changed, but her distress is compounded by the physical toll of aging – a poignant indicator of time wasted in futile waiting:

> *Penelope*
>
> Look at me, I've gotten old. Old without you. You made me grow old alone and longed in silence for my youth from afar. Did you get a different look at reality than you wanted to get? Was I ever anything but your dream? Who dreams, sleeps. You slept through our lives." (Ransmayr 2010: 96)

Penelope even goes so far as to deny the existence of the returned Odysseus:

> *Penelope*
>
> But the man I loved stayed in the war... And the woman he left suffers like a widow. (Ransmayr 2010: 97)

Their alienation becomes even clearer, emphasizing once again the endlessness and omnipresence of war, ultimately leading to the alienation of the marital couple. Unlike the Penelope of the ancient myth, who awaited her husband with longing, Penelope in Ransmayr's play demonstrates understanding for the reformers who have gained control over the entire island. Furthermore, she acknowledges their merit:

> *Penelope*
>
> Unlike the sovereign, they at least irrigated the fields of Ithaca, built canals and dams, fertilized fallow land and drove looters out to sea. (Ransmayr 2010: 94)

Two different settings collide here, a dichotomy illustrated by Ransmayr with the idealist Odysseus and the realist Penelope. On the one hand, Penelope perceives an improvement in the quality of life in her homeland due to the reforms. On the other hand, Odysseus disagrees and is still clinging to the past. These ideological differences trigger the next conflict and exacerbate the family crisis. Consequently, Odysseus contemplates resolving his problems by eliminating the reformers.

Only the son, Telemachus, regards his father's return as positive and decides to join him in the act of murdering the reformers. Fearing that Odysseus might jeopardize their peace and the life values she instilled in her son, Penelope attempts to thwart their intentions but fails. This situation also highlights the contrasting parenting styles employed by Odysseus and Penelope. Finally, in the eight scene, Odysseus and Telemachus kill the reformers, as indicated by the scene's title, "Blood". Telemachus sees this act as proof of his maturity and manhood since he, as his father, seeks respect and pride. This confirms the psychoanalytical view on the crucial role of the father in the individuation process of male offspring as well as the father's emotional influence. Odysseus justifies their deed with the following words:

Odysseus

> Enemies. We nipped a civil war in the bud. We saved Ithaca from the reform. [...] We had no choice. We had to do it. These reformers were deaf to my every word. And they were blind to my homecoming. Blind and deaf! [...] It's over, over! We had to do it. They forced us to do this. We had to do it. (Ransmayr 2010: 104–105)

The father turns his son into a criminal, which serves as the catalyst for the next and greatest conflict in the family, marking the climax of the crisis. Unaware that his father's once formidable position has long since waned, the son remains oblivious to his father's underlying desire for recognition and pride. Following the deed, Telemachus belatedly recognizes his mistake, loses his composure, and suddenly begins to hear the Chorus of the Crippled and Fallen, who greet him sarcastically:

Chorus of the Crippled and Fallen

> Welcome to the realm of heroes, little one. (Ransmayr 2010: 109)

This results in the psychological stress for the son, which inhibits the development of the father-son relationship. The father-son conflict solidifies due to the father's lack of empathy and their different perceptions of the deed; while the son laments the killings, the father remains convinced of their necessity. Penelope mainly blames Odysseus, labelling him a criminal, a characterization echoed in the title of the play:

Penelope

> You did the worst thing a father can do to his son, you made him your equal. You, Odysseus the Criminal, you made him your equal. [...] You've covered his hands in blood. You taught him how to kill. (Ransmayr 2010: 109–110)

Odysseus acts like a criminal both because he places himself above democratic laws and because he decides the fate of other people. The term "criminal" is not solely used in the context of a war criminal, but more significantly in portraying Odysseus as a failed father, as emphasized by the author himself: "The title *Odysseus, Criminal* refers less to the war criminal and more to the father Odysseus" (Gmünder 2010: 25). In Ransmayr's play,

the theme of the family and the motif of fatherlessness emerge as even more central than the notions of wandering and returning home. The play implicitly criticizes societal norms and tradition, particularly the expectation within the family structure that compels the son to validate his masculinity by assuming the role of the father. In this sense, Odysseus' crime becomes apparent in his failure to fulfil his paternal responsibilities, a realization that only dawns upon him during a conversation with his son:

> *Telemachus*
>
> A lot of my friends call their dads by their first names.
>
> *Odysseus*
>
> Idiotic. Fathers aren't their sons' buddies.
>
> *Telemachus*
>
> Then what are they?
>
> *Odysseus*
>
> Their… their protectors, breadwinners, advisors, teachers… simply fathers.
>
> *Telemachus*
>
> Only mum protected me.
>
> *Odysseus*
>
> I was at war. (Ransmayr 2010: 62)

Penelope undertakes the role of Telemachus' father during the years of Odysseus' absence, indicating a shift where matriarchy takes precedence over patriarchy. The restructuring brought about by the influence of female emancipation results in a change in roles and a transformation of the family form. Felson-Rubin's assertion that, in Homer's world, women are responsible for the family's welfare but lack control over their own destinies (Felson-Rubin 1994: 93) is not entirely applicable to Ransmayr's reinterpretation of the Odysseus myth. Penelope, persisting in her self-perception as a widow, chooses to go on without Odysseus, taking charge of her own destiny and asserting independence. This marks a notable shift in

the attitude towards women and their roles within the family, which is one of the aspects that Ransmayr intended to emphasize.

Despite Odysseus' efforts and his radical actions, he finds himself unable to restore the old order as a rupture has emerged between the past and the present. The pangs of conscience, the reproaches of Penelope, his son Telemachus, and the Chorus of the Crippled and Fallen, coupled with his unmet expectations upon return, make it impossible for Odysseus to reconnect with the family and home he once abandoned. His hope was ruined from the start and, in the end, he remains a lonely man since his family also falls apart.

4. Phaedra (Un)bound: The All-Consuming Family Crisis in Marina Carr's *Phaedra Backwards*

The Phaedra myth revolves around a Cretan princess, the daughter of Minos and Pasiphae, who marries the Athenian king Theseus, who had previously wanted to marry her sister, Ariadne. Despite being married to Theseus, Phaedra falls in love with her stepson Hippolytus, which leads to a tragic ending: Hippolytus' death and Phaedra's suicide. Different authors have various interpretations of the exact details which led to their doom. According to one version, Phaedra resists her love for her stepson, and when she can no longer control it, she takes her own life to save her and her husband's honor. In another version, she seduces Hippolytus, and when he rejects her, she accuses him in front of Theseus of having tried to seduce her, thus causing Hippolytus' demise. However, the truth comes out and Phaedra commits suicide in fear of punishment. According to other versions, Phaedra herself or her nurse, Enona, admits to her husband that she had falsely accused Hippolytus (Zamarovský 1973: 94). There are also interpretations that Phaedra, just like her mother Pasiphae, may be a victim of the family curse (Reckford 1974: 311). Pasiphae is the mother of four sons (Deucalion, Glaucus, Androgeus and Catreus) and two daughters (Ariadne and Phaedra), but she falls for the sacred white bull and gives birth to Minotaur, the half-bull, half-man. Her unnatural love is influenced by Poseidon to take revenge on Minos for not offering him that bull as a sacrifice, even though he had promised to do so when he got it from him. Minos disregards that fact and punishes Pasiphae in the same way she had sinned – he has her sewn into a cowhide and throws it in front of a bull that tears her to pieces (Zamarovský 1973: 234).

Phaedra's character has appeared in numerous literary works, of which Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Ovid's *Heroides IV*, Seneca the Younger's *Phaedra*, and Jean Racine's *Phèdre* are the most famous. It also served as an inspiration to many modern authors, such as Eugene O'Neill in *Desire under the Elms* (1924), Marina Tsvetaeva in *Fedra* (1927), Robinson Jeffers in *Cawdor* (1928), and Mary Renault in *The Bull from the Sea* (1962). Phaedra continues to attract the attention of playwrights and novelists, thus there are numerous contemporary interpretations of the myth, including Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996), Charles L. Mee's *True Love* (2001), Frank McGuinness' *Phaedra* (2006), Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* (2021), and Laura Shepperson's *Phaedra* (2023).

Marina Carr's *Phaedra Backwards* was commissioned by the McCarter Theatre for the Performing Arts, Princeton, New York, where it was first performed on 18 October 2011. The play is a retelling of the Phaedra myth which focuses on Phaedra's relationship with her family, that is, with her husband and (step)children, as well as her parents and siblings. Carr states: "I wanted to go back into her family and see how that had shaped her, so it deals as much with the Minotaur and Pasiphae as it does with Phaedra. It takes elements, motifs and images from everywhere and runs with them" (Carr 2015: 9). The play starts with the prologue and is followed by ten scenes in which the following characters appear: Phaedra, Theseus, Hippolytus, Hippolytus' girlfriend Aricia, Girl (Phaedra's and Theseus' daughter), Pasiphae, Minos, Ariadne, Inventor, Nanny, Child Minotaur, Child Phaedra, and Child Ariadne. It is set on the terrace surrounded by the bay and the mountains, as well as in the dining room, while the narration is set in modern times and is not linear because the past and the present are constantly intertwined, which is described as follows: "Time. Now and then. Then and now. Always" (Carr 2015: 75).

The title, *Phaedra Backwards*, is a concise explanation of the play that portrays the reinterpreted myth backwards, that is, starting with Hippolytus' death and then recounting the intricate details of the family crisis manifesting itself through lies, reproach, betrayal, while the family is hastily lunging towards the abyss of catastrophe which ends with multiple deaths. In order to better understand the crisis that affects the family as a whole, the focus of the analysis will be on Phaedra's relationship with other members of her family. In the play, she is being haunted by her past and present family relationships and confronts both her living and dead family members.

It is clear throughout the play that Phaedra and Theseus have a loveless and unhealthy relationship full of resentment, power-play, and abuse. First of all, they indulge in a series of conversations about their extra-marital affairs, whereby Phaedra states that she slept with thirteen other men, not counting Theseus (Carr 2015: 95). Likewise, in a monologue, he states that he slept with three thousand and eleven women (Carr 2015: 103). Both of them see their lovers as trophies, as a proof to themselves that they can possess them and, in a way, as some kind of egoistic self-fulfillment. For example, Phaedra says to Theseus: "It may seem ridiculous to you but people fall for me... a lot" (Carr 2015: 105), and Theseus recounts the story of his relationship towards women by saying:

> *Theseus*
>
> Women find me enchanting. That's the point. That's the only point. Even my wife. I only have to look at her in a certain way and she dissolves. Or my daughter's little school friends, they know too I possess the enchantment. You think this is vanity? It isn't. I was born with it. And owning up to what you have been given is not vanity. It is courage. To date I have slept with three thousand and eleven women. I keep a record of them. Once I've been confused and bedded a woman thinking it was for the first time. Only once. Do I remember them all? Yes, I do. Every last one of them. Don't ask me for names but I could recite to you textures, crevices, alignment of limbs, the way light falls on certain backs on certain evenings in certain seasons, et cetera, et cetera. ... It's good for the soul to have an obsession. So. That's how I spend my time, my real time. (Carr 2015: 102–103)

Phaedra's and especially Theseus' behavior can be compared to Fromm's concept of radical hedonism and individual egoism, which implies that everything a person wants, they want exclusively for themselves and that they are satisfied only with possessing, not sharing. Thus, the person must become greedy, because if their goal is to have, their self-realization depends on the amount they have, which is why they seduce, destroy, or exploit in order to gain more. Although the premise of the so-called *The Great Promise of Unlimited Progress* is that radical hedonism and egotism, selfishness, and greed will lead to harmony and peace, it turns out they actually create a society of unhappy people: lonely, anxious, depressed,

destructive, dependent people (Fromm 2008: 2–5). In addition, Fromm states that sexual desire can be a consequence of love, but that it can also be caused by the anxiety of loneliness, the desire to conquer or be conquered, vanity, the desire to hurt or even destroy (Fromm 1986: 52). This is further confirmed through Phaedra's statements that Theseus gives her nothing to live for and that she feels as if she has been thrown off a cliff, which proves that she is unhappy in her marriage. Another example is Phaedra's drinking problem, which seems to be caused by Theseus presence: "I'm sober, always sober, have to be drunk to put up with you. When you swim and sway before my eyes then you're almost bearable, when there's three of you I can fantasize there's half a man" (Carr 2015: 89). In this part of the play, it transpires that Phaedra must often be carried to bed due to her becoming unconscious from the amount of alcohol she consumes. Theseus seems disgusted by her behavior and when asked what he does to her while she is unconscious, he states: "In the beginning all sorts of unspeakable things. / *Phaedra* And now? / *Theseus* When I hurt you now I want you to know" (Carr 2015: 90–91), which proves that their marital crisis does not only imply them distancing themselves from each other and engaging in verbal arguments, but it is also implies that there is physical abuse at hand.

The family crisis is also reflected in damaged relationships with their children. In the play, we do not learn much about Phaedra's and Theseus' relationship with their daughter, named only *Girl* in the play, but it is hinted that the Nanny keeps the Girl away from Phaedra because she considers Phaedra a bad influence. For example, the Nanny says that she will not bring the Girl to dine with Phaedra because she has school tomorrow and does not need one of Phaedra's onslaughts (Carr 2015: 107). Although Theseus states that the children are the only reason he bothers coming home, since there is no love between him and Phaedra and their marriage is a mistake, his relationship with his son Hippolytus is far from perfect. First of all, he reproaches Hippolytus for not being as successful as him at the same age: "At twenty I had you. At twenty I'd made my first million. At twenty I wrestled a bull to the ground. ... You're a runt, a nothing, a lout, a dreamer of crimes who is seedily immaculate, obscene in your pristine torpor" (Carr 2015: 121). Theseus is irritated by Hippolytus' passivity, indifference, and him living off Theseus' generosity, which is only deepened by Phaedra saying she wants to sleep with Hippolytus, but only because she wants to provoke a reaction from Theseus to make an evening more interesting. Un-

like in Euripides', Seneca's, and Racine's version of the Phaedra myth, in which Phaedra is consumed by an illicit desire towards her stepson, Carr gives Hippolytus the role of the pursuer of illicit love. Although he has a girlfriend, Aricia, Hippolytus does not seem to love her and tries to persuade his stepmother to confess her love for him, but he fails. The only times Phaedra makes advances toward him is when trying to provoke a reaction either from Theseus or Aricia. At one point, Hippolytus wraps himself around her, starts kissing and seducing her, to which Phaedra almost succumbs to, but says: "But yours is the wrong mouth on mine, the wrong hands. Go away, little boy, little boy blue, you don't interest me beyond five seconds" (Carr 2015: 111). It is notable that Hippolytus exhibits the symptoms of Oedipal complex, which is characterized by child's sexual desire towards his mother, or in this case his stepmother, which can be caused by him wanting to face the threatening supremacy of his father since Hippolytus does not seem to be able to meet Theseus' expectation: "If you had fucked her and repented I would've forgiven it, but this girly dithering. I need to see some shadow of the young bull in you, some shade of the bull-slayer that came down from me" (Carr 2015: 121), which ends in Theseus banishing Hippolytus from the house. Employing introspection, delving into Phaedra's family dynamics, Carr gives a deeper insight into the causes of the broken relationship between Phaedra and Theseus. To start with, the relationship between Phaedra's parents, Pasiphae and Minos, can be compared to Phaedra's and Theseus' relationship – both men are absent from the family, arrogant, and have a hard time accepting their sons as they are. The main factor that causes the crisis between Pasiphae and Minos is the death of their son and the birth of Minotaur, which occurred due to Minos refusing to return the sacred white bull and Pasiphae conceiving the child with it:

> *Pasiphae*
>
> The white bull you stole, penned in. The white bull who trampled down our son because you refused to return him. [...] You fled! I had to bury him. Three years old. I had to burn his clothes. You let the white bull in, you let him mow down our son, you let him haul me into the unimaginable and I have returned with him. This is our dead son reborn from the white bull who took him. (Carr 2015: 99–100)

As Minos returns from his travels, he repeatedly grabs the Child Minotaur and flings him to the ground while calling him a thing, a monster, a mutant, and an evil growth, and his wife obscene, a bull fancier, and a monster-maker. All the while, he does not even acknowledge his two daughters, Phaedra and Ariadne.

The true extent of the crisis becomes evident in the eighth scene, when Minotaur stops being only an omnipresent shadow haunting Phaedra and the whole family gradually appears as if for the final reckoning. It transpires that Minos killed Pasiphae by dragging her across the stones and hurling her off the cliffs, for which Minos tries to apologize, but is interrupted by Pasiphae telling him to save his apologies. Ariadne calls Phaedra a husband-stealer, and vice-versa, and asks her to give him back to her. Phaedra blames Ariadne for killing Minotaur together with Theseus: "You and Theseus didn't even have the decency to kill him clean. I can understand cold, clean murder, but that torture, he was some ancient sacrifice on your depraved altar" (Carr 2015: 111), which implies that, apart from her mother, Phaedra was the only one who loved her brother and was not afraid of him, at least until she found out that he had been mercilessly killing women:

> [*Minotaur addresses Pasiphae*]: I hurled myself on your kind, women who dream of the bull, women who cry to be abducted from their lonely beds, Women who thought they wanted the raw animal steam above them, behind them. They were the willing ones, until they saw where their will had led them. Did I care? I like a tussle and though it wasn't deliberate I left them in tatters. And then the times of frenzy. Did your white bull show you his frenzy? The scalding heat, the dripping eyes, the hoof on the throat, the screams as limbs fly and bones crack, the thrill of carnage, the banquet, blood of fresh thigh on this insatiable tongue. (Carr 2015: 115)

It is evident that Minotaur blames his mother for bringing him into the world and leaving him at the mercy of others, but also himself since he was terrified when the bull took over the man, as well as when the man took over the bull. Minotaur demands revenge on Theseus and wants to take everything he owns and loves. He resents Phaedra for marrying a man who killed him, but Phaedra argues that she protected Minotaur until she could, and sees Theseus as necessary to keep Minotaur at bay because he was "the only one [that] could bring a bull to his knees" (Carr 2015: 116).

This implies that she is, after all, afraid of Minotaur. He makes her pay for insulting him by surrounding her, together with the rest of her family, and feeding on her flesh, which he declares was a warning of what they are capable of if she does not obey to his wishes to allow him to take revenge on Theseus.

In the last scene, Phaedra states that she is aware that if she had the courage to kill Theseus, her children would be safe, but she does not, so she waits for the fulfilment of Minotaur's threat and prays that at least her daughter would be spared. She has one final argument with Theseus, when he calls Minotaur an animal: "And you're not an animal? And I'm not? And are we not surrounded by animals? You call the way you live human? This country human? ... Yes, he was terrifying. ... But that nature, that force in him was the same as what's in you and me and every other specimen I've come across that is called the human race" (Carr 2015: 123–124). It can be said that in this way, Phaedra is telling Theseus that it is not the body or any physical trait that distinguishes a man from an animal, but humanity, which is completely absent in Theseus, who claims that someone had to kill Minotaur, as well as in the majority of characters in the play. Although the kind of society the characters live in is not described in the play, Phaedra's statement implies that the society is toxic at large, which speaks in favor of Nietzsche's thought that the sensibility of most people is sick and unnatural (Nietzsche 1988: 32), as well as Fromm's statement that "the character traits engendered by our socioeconomic system, i.e. by our way of living, are pathogenic and eventually produce a sick person and, thus, a sick society" (Fromm 2008: 7).

The play ends with procession-like arrival of Pasiphae and Minos led by Minotaur, who is carrying Hippolytus, drenched after being thrown of the cliff. He then carefully lays Hippolytus at Theseus' feet. The procession is followed by Ariadne, who is carrying the Girl, whom she lays at Phaedra's and Theseus' feet and then states that everything is in harmony again. Minotaur then asks Phaedra to join them as he owes her a daffodil feast, which was a recurring motif throughout the play as Minotaur, Phaedra, and Ariadne used to eat daffodils when they were children. The daffodil has an ambivalent meaning as it symbolizes both death and rebirth, but also a dream (Chevalier–Gheerbrant 1987: 425), which can be applied to different layers of the play *Phaedra Backwards* – deaths which are the causes or consequences of the crisis, dream-like state which is achieved through the menacing omnipresence of the characters from the past, but also rebirth,

which can be said that Phaedra chooses when denying Minotaur's offer to feast on daffodils. Although at one point in the play she states: "And everything tells me there is no salvation for me, only things that happen to me, things to be endured and then forgotten" (Carr 2015: 116), in the end Phaedra manages to pick up her remaining pieces and choose to walk her own path, even if for a while: "The time for eating daffodils is past. The distance travelled from myself too great. I'll go on my own steam. I won't be long" (Carr 2015: 125). It can be said that by doing this Phaedra frees herself from the shackles of her family and finally becomes unbound.

5. Conclusion

As an extremely complex structure, the family has undergone many changes, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which have influenced its redefinition(s), function, and position in the society, and have led to the redistribution of roles, responsibilities, duties, and hierarchies of relationships between family members. Internal and external factors that affect and change the family can lead to conflicts between family members, which can further lead to crisis, either individual, where only one person is affected by the crisis, or collective, where crisis spreads and affects the whole family, or is even reflected in other systems outside of the family. As a system, both fragile and dynamic, the family is prone to crises. Crisis can pose not only a challenge but also a threat for the system, and it can take either a positive or negative outcome. How the crisis evolves and what comes out of it depends on individuals who either take actions to overcome the crisis or to deepen it. The latter is especially evident if families are torn by internal conflicts, which is the case in both plays analyzed in this paper.

In the two selected plays, Christoph Ransmayr's *Odysseus, Verbrecher. Schauspiel einer Heimkehr* (2010) and Marina Carr's *Phaedra Backwards* (2011), which make the text corpus of the *UIP-2020-02-3695 Analysis of Systems in Crisis and of New Consciousness in 21st Century Literature* installation project funded by the Croatian Science Foundation, the authors delve deep into the literary tradition, rewrite and even distort ancient myths, adapt them to modern times and thematize families affected by changes and conflicts, deeply absorbed in crisis.

Significant deviations from the original Odysseus myth are evident throughout Ransmayr's play. Penelope becomes the main protagonist and she is no longer a woman who waits patiently for her husband to return. In

the absence of the father figure, she performs both roles, of mother and father, which indicates a significant change and a shift in the paradigm – the woman becomes the active one, capable of taking care of herself and her family, matriarchy winning over patriarchy. Tormented and spiritually crippled by his war experiences, Odysseus is not capable of reconnecting with his family, which prevents the fulfilling of the myth of a happy family reunited in harmony and distorts the concept of the hero's journey; upon his return, Odysseus is neither reborn nor transfigured in a way to teach us "the lesson he has learned of life renewed" (Campbell 2008: 15). Ransmayr adapts the Odysseus myth to modern times in order to form a critique of a society which is marked by the climate crisis, but instead of dealing with it, it still wages wars, fights for power, and violates human values. The addition of the images from modern times to the Odysseus myth allows the private sphere of the family and its conflicts to shine through. One can conclude that the myth of the perfect family symbolizing harmony is not repeated in Ransmayr's adaptation of Homer. If the term crisis is used to denote a period of time that means a "phase of upheaval" (Koselleck 1982: 617) or a temporary state of emergency that can lead to a catastrophe, then the upheaval in Ransmayr's play is Odysseus' return, after which the harmony noticeably falters. The fact that the family system is neither preserved after years of separation nor is it re-established after the reunion means that the family relationships only deteriorated and are permanently damaged, which can be described as a catastrophe.

The family crisis inscribed in the original myth of Phaedra is preserved in Marina Carr's play. Yet, unlike the classical myth, which focuses mostly on the incestuous relationship between Phaedra and Hippolytus, in this play, by letting the plot and characters flow between the past, present and future, Marina Carr presents a series of events in a manner of time-bombs that explode one after the other, causing a chain reaction which ultimately leads to disaster. According to Carr, drama in general is all about the conflict and crisis, whereas she describes crisis as connected to the person's most secret fears, but also as a watershed since the aftermath of crisis depends on the character of the person, their resilience, and what they are recovering from.[7] Just like in Ransmayr's play, the female protagonist

[7] From the interview with the author conducted in Dublin, Ireland, on 6 October 2021, by Iris Spajić and Katarina Žeravica, within the *UIP-2020-02-3695 Analysis of Systems in Crisis and of New Consciousness in 21st Century Literature* installation project.

appears superior and undergoes personal development, but overall, the characters in this play do not actively and constructively approach solving the problems that cause the crisis, which in turn accumulate over time. Moreover, the characters have become estranged from each other, and their selfishness causes the collapse of their mutual relationships, and of the family as a system. The characters do not change through the play as they do not manage to overcome their personal suffering/crisis, so their passivity and (auto)destructiveness do not only make the overcoming of the family crisis impossible, but also turn the crisis into a catastrophe.

The analysis has shown that the family system is more vulnerable to crises when there is no communication, which, according to Luhmann, acts as a connector. The family crisis is in both plays reflected in the irreparably broken relationships between spouses and their damaged relationships with children. They are incapable of helping both themselves and others, the family they make is not based on the notion of collectiveness but rather on individualism – one's own interests are in the foreground rather than the wellbeing of the entire family. Either too weak, torn apart by internal conflicts, too absorbed in themselves, or estranged from one another, the characters in both Ransmayr's and Carr's play do not possess the necessary capacity to overcome the crisis. They do not use the crisis as an opportunity to evolve or to steer their lives in a more desirable direction. Their actions cause their mutual relationships and families as a system to collapse. Failed marriages and destroyed families leave no room for different outcomes and the crisis no longer can be influenced or reversed because it has turned into a catastrophe.

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SAŽETAK

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OBITELJ KAO SUSTAV U KRIZI U DJELIMA *ODYSSEUS, VERBRECHER. SCHAUSPIEL EINER HEIMKEHR* CHRISTOPHA RANSMAYRA I *PHAEDRA BACKWARDS* MARINE CARR

Nastao kao dio uspostavnog istraživačkog projekta UIP-2020-02-3695 *Analiza sustava u krizi i nove svijesti u književnosti 21. stoljeća* koji se provodi na Filozofskom fakultetu u Osijeku i koji financira Hrvatska zaklada za znanost (https://askins21.ffos.hr/), ovaj rad bavi se dvama suvremenim dramskim tekstovima zapadnoeuropske književnosti: *Odysseus, Verbrecher. Schauspiel einer Heimkehr* austrijskog pisca Christopha Ransmayra te *Phaedra Backwards* irske dramatičarke Marine Carr. U obje drame autori upotrebljavaju izvornu mitsku građu o Odiseju i Fedri koje rekonstruiraju i smještaju u suvremeni kontekst kako bi prikazali univerzalna iskustva, ali prije svega komentirali stanje društva i obitelji kao sustava sklonog krizama i konfliktima umjesto junačkim djelima. Ovakva namjera zahtijeva analizu orijentiranu na tekst i kontekst u kojem se zrcali stanje društva i obitelji. Taj se istraživački pothvat prvenstveno temelji na sociološkim promišljanjima o sustavu, krizi i obitelji. Budući da je fokus na društvu i društvenim sustavima, koristi se teorijski pristup njemačkog sociološkog teoretičara Niklasa Luhmanna. U tim okvirima se u odabranim književnim predlošcima na primjeru obitelji kao specifične vrste sustava proučava njezina dinamika u odnosu na društvene promjene i ujedno se utvrđuju temeljne odrednice sustava. Komparativna analiza će osim proučavanja tematskih, kompozicijskih i žanrovskih značajki iznjedriti razlike i sličnosti u analiziranim dramskim djelima vezano uz nekoliko aspekata: pitanje samopoimanja u kontekstu obitelji, uzroci, manifestacije i posljedice krize – kako utječe na likove i kako se likovi mijenjaju u interakciji s krizom.

Ključne riječi: *Christoph Ransmayr; Marina Carr; suvremena drama; kriza; mit*