

Taboo and Greed as Reflected in O'Neill's "Desire Under The Elms"

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Abstract

The present paper tackles the social and moral degeneration under the effect of taboo and greed as reflected in Eugene O'Neill's play "Desire Under the Elms". The paper aims at showing to which extent the people have been affected by these two concepts in terms of social and moral criteria. The paper also aims at depicting the tragic cases which take place in rural New England farm life in the mid-nineteenth century as a result of adultery, financial possessiveness tendency and incest. The paper also aims at showing the power of the play "Desire Under the Elms" in delving inside its dramatic characters to discover the nature of human beings.

Accordingly, the present paper attempts to focus on the styles of logically overcoming the concepts of taboo and greed and how to stop practicing the forbidden social behaviors which dismantle the sacred ties of the family. Again, the paper attempts to highlight the logic ways of reaching the correct tools to remedy the social diseases.

Key words: Aberration, Blood lust, Yearning, Murder, passion

المستخلص:

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية الانحطاط الاخلاقي والاجتماعي الناتج من تأثير الممارسات المحرمة والجشع كما انعكس ذلك في مسرحية يوجين أونيل "الرغبة تحت شجرة الدردار". تهدف الورقة البحثية الى إظهار مدى تأثر الافراد بهاذين المفهومين من الناحية الاخلاقية والاجتماعية. تهدف الدراسة ايضا الى تصوير الحالات المأساوية التي حصلت في حياة المزارعين في نيو إنغلاند في منتصف القرن التاسع عشر كنتيجة لممارسة الزنا، وقتل الرضع و زنا المحارم. كما وتهدف الدراسة الى استعراض قوة المسرحية في الخوض داخل شخصياتها الدرامية لاكتشاف الطبيعة البشرية. وفقا لذلك، فان الورقة البحثية الحالية تحاول التركيز على اساليب التغلب على الجشع والممارسات المحرمة وبشكل منطقي وكذلك كيفية إيقاف ممارسة السلوكيات المحضورة اجتماعيا والتي من شأنها تفكيك الروابط الاسرية المقدسة. كما وتسلط الورقة الضوء على الطرق المنطقية للوصول الى الوسائل الصحيحة لمعالجات الامراض المجتمعية. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** الانحراف، التعطش للدم، اللهفة، الجريمة، الشغف

Taboo and Greed as Reflected in "Desire Under The Elms"

The American Eugene O'Neill is one of the greatest playwrights in the modern age. He is the founder of the serious American drama. Moreover, he gives the international reputation to the American drama. In a comparison with the European playwrights, he is the greatest one among them in the twentieth century. "Desire Under the Elms" (1924) is O'Neill's masterpiece from which he gets the uppermost point as he uses the complex and bad behaviors of possession in the family. In his play, he highlights the tangling between both the motivation of psychological possession and the motivation of material possession. He shows how each one leads into the other. His use of the age-old forbidden idea (taboo), complicatedly linked, as it is, to the Oedipus complex, has a dissimilar importance for the common problems. The reader of his play gradually may discover that the play discusses the theme of finding the meaning of the life including the aberration as a motivation of blood lust which is developed by the depressing demands of possessiveness. As the play proceeds, one may notice that each character gives a version on the subject of ruin in human life and the individual's full submission to the will to possess. At the beginning of the play, O'Neill presents on the stage two enormous elms with a huge shadow that broods oppressively over the house of a family. This description gives a sinisterly sight and

monotonous to the life (O'Neill 2). He elucidates the social relation in which all forms of strong desire are tangled under the huge shadow of these elms. In his book "Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society" Trudgill argues that the term "taboo" can be characterized as a certain social forbidden behavior or regarded as immoral or improper. He states that Taboo is a concept "that deals with behavior which is prohibited or inhibited in an apparently irrational manner" (2000 p.18). Linguistically, Trudgill says that taboo is associated with aspects that are not said, and particularly with words or expressions that are not used. It's clear from the above argumentation that taboo works on two dimensions with a very close connection to each other; first as a social behavior and second as a linguistic verbal. Both of them are prohibited because they are viewed as immoral in a specific situations. In his article "Literature in America" (1989:368) Conn describes the play "Desire under the Elms" as it contains multiple forms as it is appeared on the characters tragic course: a will of power, lust, and yearning. The play presents a story of passion, adultery, and murder folded within the circumstances of cheerless nineteenth century. Conn clarifies more on the characterization of O'Neill's plays and emphasizes the obvious detail together with his characteristic concern in the psychology of motivation. The play shows the blending of O'Neill's carefully constructed realities with symbolism. The desire of possession, from another hand, dominates the situation and acts in a form of gluttony and self-glorifying as it is reflected in Ephraim Cabot (the father of Eben), Peter, Simeon and the owner of the farm (originally the property of Eben's mother). The farm is a symbol of a life lived in loneliness and solitude, missing the warmth of fellowship and human love because the very narrowing demands which it made up on his energies and interests. Ephraim does not distinguish it as such, but he touches that the wish for possession is the derivation who drives him to identify himself and the farm. He desires no other person to be the owner. He says; "if I could, in my dyin' hour. I'd set it afire an' watch it burn—this house an' every ear o' corn an' every tree down t' the last blade o' hay! I'd sit an' know it was all a-dying with me an' no one else'd ever own what was mine, what I'd made out o' nothin' with my own sweat 'n' blood!" (II, 1). The vitiating effect of strong possessiveness here raise the desire of owning the farm and to be shared between his two sons and also shows the evil thoughts inside their minds. One can notice the transition of the desire for possession from inanimate to animate things. Ephraim keeps his two eldest boys stunned in ambition and cowed in spirit by controlling their thoughts. He instilled with his two boys his desire of possession the farm as an object of material ownership but not as an inherent part of their beings. Their desire is mingled with fear. With Eben, there is more confrontation and resistance. He desires to own the farm too, even more strongly than his half-brothers because he wants it as a connecting link between himself and his mother who died a long time ago. His confidence and belief had built by his father's toughness of spirit and severe demands upon her physical strength. Abbie, the third wife begins to think cunningly and actually of having a child in order to inherit the farm in any way while Ephraim still makes the demands of total submission to his role as owner. She is the mistress of the family and the new mother to his sons, He enthusiastically wishes that she gives birth to a child so that the farm will be inherited by his blood and flesh. Ephraim did not feel satisfied and never reached the place he is wished despite his constant struggle to preserve his position, things and complete possession of the property. O'Neill explains Ephraim's case that the spirit of possession kills if permitted to go unchecked. The frustration and destruction of Ephraim's life is complete as Eben and Abbie are taken away to jail at the end of the play. Just like Oedipus complex, Eben feels that his father, Ephraim, is responsible about his mother's passing and thus he deserves punishment. Eben's behavior shows the gap between the father and the son. This definitely shows the case of the disintegration of the family and the chasm which O'Neill embodies it perfectly in this play. Eben believes that by possessing the farm he will be able to keep his father away and will be able to re-establish his own relationship with his mother (Healy, Bronner, and Bowers 148). A principle says that the proscription of patricide and incest is of crucial significance in creating the personality. In his book Totem and Taboo Freud concludes that "the beginnings of religion, ethics, society and art meet in the Oedipus complex." (Freud, 1960, 202). The son's unconscious competes with his father for the love of his mother. In O'Neill's *Desire Under The Elms*, the major character is Eben, who suffers hardly from Freud's Oedipus complex. It grows from Eben's unconscious rivalry with his real father (Ephraim) for the love of his step-mother, Abbie. Freud describes this complex relationships in his book The Ego and the Id saying The boy deals with his father by identifying himself with him. For a time these two relationships proceed side by side, until the boy's sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense and his father is perceived as an obstacle to them; from this the Oedipus complex originates. His identification with his father then takes on a hostile colouring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place with his mother. Henceforward his relation to his father is ambivalent; it seems as if the ambivalence inherent in the identification

from the beginning had become manifest. An ambivalent attitude to his father and an object-object relation of a solely affectionate kind to his mother make up the content of the simple positive Oedipus complex in a boy". (1962, 21-22) The emotional ambivalence is the dominated feelings between Eben and Abbie, his step-mother of his own age. Although he knows she is a mother-substitute and finds her attraction to him revolting, he is attracted to her erotically. Abbie, his father's wife, helps him understand and eventually realize his Oedipus need. He displaces his father as the rightful owner of the farm and home in order to make her his property. Even before this incest desire, Eben attempted to replace his true father with a substitute that was unrelated to his deceased mother: a local prostitute that his father had previously seen. O'Neill expects the ultimate outcome of the play in the following scene between Eben and his brothers after he has returned from Hin's house with important news of the marriage of their father. "SIMEON—"Min'd make a true faithful he'pmeet! EBEN—What do I care fur her—'ceptin' she's round an' wa'm? The p'int is she was his'n —an' now she b'longs t' me! An' Min hain't sech a bad un. Wait'll we see this cow the Old Man's hitched t'! SIMEON—Mebbe ye'll try t' make her your'n, too? Eben: Her—here—sleepin' with him—stealin' my Maw's farm!" (I, iii) Even if his bitterness was somewhat subdued by the final tangible evidence of his abiding love for Abbie, his guilty, evil, and sinful death emphasizes once more the danger and tremendous possessiveness of possessiveness. Abbie Putnam, as a main character, acts as a woman who is driven to pulverization of self and of the things she cherishes and loves by the crave for ownership is carefully done. She clearly defines her situation in one of her speeches saying that "A woman's got t' hev a hum" (I, iv) The significance of this sentence lies in the riches of significant emotions of women associated with the word "home." Abbie looks upon a home as not merely lodging and safety in the physical sense, but also as a spiritual anchor. In owning and controlling the house, Abbie realizes the ultimate purpose of her existence. Although she was aware that her marriage to the elderly man would not provide her fulfillment, she still sees it as a step in the right direction. The first of what was expected from life is the acquisition of the home and farm. She quickly understands that Eben will be the method of obtaining all future happiness. Because the marriage is based on greed and betrayal, she realizes that marrying an old man is not enough for her desires, but as a goal in her mind is to own the house and the farm. It does not take her long to comprehend that Eben will help as the means for all further satisfaction. She uses her husband's son (Eben) as a sexual craving to satisfy her sexual desires. Things that are built with dark and bad intentions end up falling, even if they take a long time, and this is what happened with Abbie, who wanted to use Eben's love to reach her goal of total possession of her husband. When Eben accepted the incestuous relationship, he gave her the opportunity to have a son after the death of her husband, who was an old man. The final end was against her wishes as the ultimate possessor, led her to destroy herself and the things she loves—her child and Eben. The issue of ownership of the main characters did not end with Abbie and Eben, but even reached the sheriff of the city, where he looked with envy and wished to get the farm and own it. He says enviously "It is a jim-dandy farm, no denyin I. 'wished I owned it!" (III, iv). O'Neill, in this play, wants to show that greed and possession are not limited to legal matters and the desire to own property, but reached the point of committing crimes and adultery, even incest and this is what happened between Eben and his father's wife (Abbie). In his book *Literature in America* Peter Conn relies on his conception that there is not a single play for O'Neill is typical in the twentieth century. The multiple themes and forms in the play such as lust, greed, will to power, possessiveness in behaviors lead to their tragic course. Conn says that "A story of repression, passion, adultery, and murder unfolds within the walls of cheerless nineteenth century New England Farmhouse. The setting is at once starkly realistic and a symbolic stage for the dramatization of the subconscious." (368). He more adds on the characterization of O'Neill's plays that it confirms the evident fact that along with his characteristic interest in the psychology of motivation. O'Neill's plays also illustrate merging of carefully constructed realities with symbolism. The subject of incest and greed is evident in the title of the play, especially in the first title as it gives many annotations and mixes between taboo and greed. The foremost vital meaning of desire here is Abbie's illegal, sensual desire for Eben, the lust of the flesh, to which he too reacts completely after time. After the coming of Abbie to the farmhouse as old Cabot's wife, she begins to feel erotic passion and to show suggestive enthusiasm for young Eben. Abbie cunningly desires an illegitimate son by Eben to get the farm and property of Mr. Cabot. However, Eben initially accuses and rebukes her of trying to filch his "Maw's Farm," but falls victim to her persistent waving and her slow seduction. Afterward this fleshly desire is transformed into sincere and perfect passion of both Abbie and Eben, even if in the end their love affair turn badly out to be a tragedy when Abbie, in a fit of passion, chokes their newborn to show her love for Eben and Eben censures her for not taking the life of old Cabot. Moreover the word "Desire" means Abbie's desire to own the farm and Eben's

equally intense wish to become the only owner of the farm. "Desire" also suggests Eben's long-held desire to get revenge on his father for forcing his mother to exhaust herself within the farmhouse, which led to her early death. Mr. Ephraim Cabot craves not only the age of a hundred, but also the peace and quiet he gets only near the barn and in the company of his dairy animals. He craves mental support and sexual satisfaction from his chubby wife, Abbie. At last, "desire" proposes Simeon and Peter's desire to have the entire property. They want to get rich looking for gold as they leave for California. Furthermore, it indicates the desire of Simeon and Pietro to get rid of the rut they have cruel father. Thus, The concept of greed in "Desire Under the Elms" appears clearly by the major characters Eben and Abbie. The character of Ephraim from another hand, stands for greed and religious devotion while Eben and Abbie stand for greed and sexual passion. It may be said that "Desire Under the Elms" is an example of a new realistic play in which real life issues and situations are presented with an emotional understanding of the character's mind and behavior. The play shows the contradictory psychologies and the ability to commit major sins that are forbidden religiously in secret and in public, and the ability of humans to commit the worst deeds in order to obtain money, even at the level of the family itself. O'Neill attempts to convey the reality that most people live in, and that he wants from this work an in-depth reading in order to take a lesson from the characters of the play. O'Neil's illustrates a nonstop theme of shifted enthusiastic emotional desires and impulses to enslavement property, an incestuous desire, and profoundly perceptible father-son struggle woven with the most complex patterns incorporated by O'Neill to emphasize connections between different members of the damned Cabot family. The play permeates profound habit in the possibility of its emotional characters to anatomize the nature of human and stimulus. It refers to the modern Freudian hypothesis of Oedipus complex and the old Greek myths. "O'Neill's exploration of the subconscious in his plays, which was inspired by his study of Freud's theories, is an important aspect of his presentation of human nature and well worthy" (201, qtd in Boni). The house and the trees joining together to resemble a man and a woman is a representation of the joining of opposites energies. The fact that the tree and the house both have androgynous traits is one of the key explanations for the main reasons. Both their feminine and male characteristics are lost. Their new positions have given them a sense of unity. The masculine quality of the home is combined with the feminine quality of the tree to create a harmonious ensemble. Each lies covered up within the other. The picture of the total man finds its concrete frame within the unification of the house and the tree. They stand for the idea that opposites can be brought together. Eben is the victim of a dark motherhood. He addresses his mother as though she were still alive.. The claims of the action of the past make it a vengeance play. According to Normand Berlin in his book Eugene O'Neill comments that, "Eben's mother, like Hamlet's father, seems to be saying throughout: 'Remember me!' Mother hangs over the play and lurks within the play; she acquires a deterministic force as potent as the gods in Greek drama" (Berlin, 1982, 75). A great sin has been committed against Eben's mother by Ephraim. Eben and his father are always at odds, and he claims ownership of the land. Ephraim is accountable for breaking the law against Eben's mother. Her ferociously motherly presence broods over the action of the play. Eben feels suffering of his dead mother. The mother's existence was most strongly felt at the time of Eben's crime. Mother hangs herself all over the room like a curse. The mother's mysterious presence is best felt in the living room, where Eben and Abbie's passionate sexual desires are satisfied. It was my mother's living room: when she died, she lay there. It is a "A grim, repressed room like a tomb" (II, iii). One of Abbie's wishes is to have this bedroom as the only part of the house that doesn't belong to her. Once she comes in the room, she is terrified and becomes ready to escape. Eben carries within himself the perpetual image of his mother. Since the image of his mother is unconscious, it is projected onto Abbie unconsciously. Abbie has a dual role in the play as a mother and a lover. She stands for motherhood and sexual desire. When Abbie and Eben come in the room that looked like a tomb that hadn't been opened since Eben's mother died, Abbie starts playing her dual roles at the same time saying: "EBEN: They hain't nothin' much. She was kind. She was good. ABBIE: (putting one arm over his shoulder. He does not seem to notice—passionately) I'll be kind an' good t' ye! EBEN: Sometimes she used t'sing fur me. ABBIE: I'll sing fur ye!" (II, iii). After some time, Abbie's motherly love for Eben turns into intense and sensual love. Eben and Abbie's sexual union happens in an atmosphere full of incest, lust and Oedipal desire: "ABBIE: (both her arms around him – with wild passion) : I'll sing fur ye! I'll die fur ye! (In spite of her overwhelming desire for him, there is a sincere maternal love in her manner and voice – a horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love) Don't cry Eben! I'll take yer Maw's place! I'll be evrythin' she was t' ye! Let me kiss ye, Eben! (She pulls his head around....She is tender) Don't be afeered! I'll kiss ye pure, Eben – same's if I was a Maw t' ye – an' ye kiss me back 's if yew was my son – my boy – sayin' good-night t' me! Kiss me, Eben. (They kiss in restrained fashion. Then suddenly

wild passion overcomes her. She kisses him lustfully again and again and he flings his arms about her and returns her kisses...)” (II, iii) In his “Desire Under the Elms”, O'Neill projects Eben's latent desire for his deceased mother using the Greek model of incest (which is forbidden). He uses the typical depressing aspects of Greek tragedy., John Gassner says that the action of the play is “true tragedy; the power of the passions, the impressiveness of the characters, the timelessness of the inner struggle between a son and a father ensure tragic elevation” (qtd. in Cubeta, 1962, 205). Normand Berlin comments on the Greek elements in the play saying that “*Desire Under the Elms* is surely his first ‘Greek’ tragedy-not as imitatively Greek as *Mourning Becomes Electra*, but Greek none the less-going to sources that deal with Greek myths, to the subject matter the Greeks treated, and invoking a determinism that is as potent as that found in Greek drama” (Berlin 71). The dramatist tackles the ancient Greek myths of his play as it has the elements of classical tragedy namely Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex, Seneca’s Phaedra and Euripides’ Medea.

Conclusions

After the procedures of researching, the present paper reached to the following conclusions:

- 1- The play “Desire Under the Elms” tackles different and important themes which are taboo, greed, and incest which spread in the American society during the 20th century. The themes are mainly presented within the Cabot family.
- 2- The events of the play focus on the illegal relationship between Abbie, Ephraim Cabot's third wife, and Eben, Ephraim's son. This relationship can be identified as a desire for revenge and possession.
- 3- O'Neill's declares the concept of greed and its effects on the characters by presenting a stiff family who lives in a material community and full of moral decay.
- 4- In his play, O'Neill presents Abbie and Eben in an incestuous relationship. This illegal relation highlights the severe outcome of violating the society in terms of taboo and moral boundaries. Moreover, this relation serves as a means of getting revenge of his mother's death because he attributes his mother's suffering to his father's harshness. This act may be considered as a rebellion against his father and an attempt to get his mother's legacy.
- 5- The play also shows the amount of the destruction that touches both the family and community in terms of compassion and mercy.
- 6- O'Neill benefits from his play “Desire Under the Elms” to show the effects of moral failings and to stimulate the societal responses.
- 7- By viewing the immoral actions, O'Neill addresses the audience to think about their social and common values and to consider the importance of keeping the moral integrity in terms of both the family and the society. O'Neill wants to show that the absence of mercy and compassion from a person's heart and are replaced by greed, this will results a large amount of forbidden sins especially the sexual relations between the relatives such as mother, sister, step-mother, stepson, etc.
- 8- The play works as an alarm warning contra the dangers of greed and taboo. In so, the purpose of the play is to raise the feeling of rejection towards such desires and to go towards moral and legal social behaviors.

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