

O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*: A Tragedy of Extreme Desire

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Abstract

Most critics agree that Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) appears with an instinctive perception of what modern tragedy should be. Essentially, he is recognized as a great American playwright whose vision of life was tragic. Most of O'Neill's plays are powerful tragedies though they are not tragedies in the Aristotelian sense. Their themes may have certain features in common with those of his predecessors but their forms and interpretations are different. They are essentially modern tragedies which deal with problems that are concerned with human desires and beliefs.

Not in acts, O'Neill completed *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) in three parts each with four scenes as a modern transformation of Greek tragedy with highly American overtones. It represents the first of O'Neill's explicit attempts to write an American tragedy using the basic plots of ancient Greek tragedy. O'Neill borrows from the stories of three well known Greek heroes: Oedipus, the man who engaged in killing his father and incredibly married his mother; Phaedra, the woman who lusts for her stepson; and Medea, the mother who kills her own children. The study explores the play with the extremity of desire in passion, sin and redemption.

المستخلص

رغبة تحت شجرة الدردار: مأساة الرغبة المتطرفة لكاتبها يوجين أونيل

بحث مقدم من المدرس : د. سهير نافع عبدالعزيز الشايع
تخصص أداب في اللغة الأنجليزية

يتفق معظم نقاد المسرح الأميركي ان يوجين أونيل يمتلك فهما خاصا لما يجب أن تكون عليه التراجيديا الحديثة وأنه كمسرحي أميركي كبير قد أمتلك رؤية تقييم لمأساة واقعه بامتياز فقد قدم مسرحيات قوية على الرغم من أنها لا تحمل مواصفات التراجيديا حسب معايير أرسطو. حيث أن هذه المسرحيات تشترك مع أسلافها من حيث المحتوى المأساوي لكن لها أشكال وتفسيرات مختلفة. جوهرها هي مسرحيات تناولت مشاكل تتعلق بطموحات ومعتقدات سيطرت على أبطالها لتقودهم الى نهايات مؤلمة. قدم أونيل مسرحية **رغبة تحت شجرة الدردار** في ثلاث أجزاء معتمدا على فكرة أستوحاها من مآسي أغريقية بملامح أميركية حديثة. الدراسة تهدف لكشف التطرف في الرغبة والعاطفة، وكذلك في الخطيئة والخلاص.

O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*: A Tragedy of Extreme Desire

"Early in the twentieth century, O'Neill set the stage for a tradition of serious American drama that has grown and flourished into the twenty first century."

O'Neilleian Concept of Tragedy

Tragedy as a concept has evolved through different phases, in each of which it has acquired certain features and characteristics. It has a variety of meanings and applications in criticism and literary history. In drama, it refers to a particular kind of play, in which the main character is brought to ruin or suffers extreme sorrow, especially as a consequence of a tragic flaw, moral weakness, or inability to cope with unfavorable circumstances. According to Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.), a tragic play often recounts an important and causally related series of events in the life of a king, leader or an eminent person. Such events are usually treated with great seriousness and often culminate in catastrophe. Aristotle's definition remains among the best and is often used as background for later tragedies. However, many plays which have been written after Aristotle do not conform completely to his definition in terms of form and content. Moreover, tragedy is no longer a depiction of the ordeals of kings or princes. It is now mainly concerned with the lives of those people who are ordinary and simple. It can reflect the type of perplexity and chaos in which modern man lives. This type of life is a result of the dangerous deterioration of manners and morals among people under the impact of the fundamental changes of beliefs and ideology in almost all fields of life.

O'Neill is considered the first American playwright who aims to revive tragedy on the modern American stage. His modern successors follow the same thematic way he tackled to create tragedies that are concerned with secular and social problems and not of high rank people. As such, he was the first American playwright to be honored with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936. He started a revolution in the American theatre and put the American drama on a firm footing to be typically American. He was also awarded three Pulitzer Prizes (the highest American prize for literature) for his great contribution to American tragedy. His forty seven plays have an intensity of passion and a sense of theatrical action. These plays reflect his courage and endless experimentation with various methods of the naturalists, realists, and expressionists creating a new theatre in America. They also confirmed his combined great theatrical talent with an intuitive understanding of the human psyche. He presented a series of tragic plays which represent American society and culture between the two World Wars.

O'Neill's play *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916) marks a major breakthrough in the history of American drama as the audience could for the first time see a native drama based upon the life of the native soil. As the twenties was a period of exploration of new thoughts and ideas, O'Neill was, therefore, exposed to all the cross-currents of historical and contemporary ideas in the domain of literature and philosophy. The thoughts of Freud (1856-1939) and Jung (1875-1961) accelerated the artistic and intellectual movement of the time. Moreover, O'Neill found himself among the radical thinkers like John Reed (1887-1920) and anarchists like Terry Carlin (1855-1934). At Provincetown, he was to find

recognition for his talent, as this New England town, known as “America’s oldest Art colony” was already beginning to play a significant role in the foundation of American drama. Followers of realistic tradition in drama presented arguments on the stage about states of mind or social systems. O’Neill burst upon the world of drama with fights, drunkenness and violent language with an emphatically American accent. He captured the psychological and emotional roots of real people in his plays like *Beyond the Horizon* (1920) and *Anna Christie* (1921).

Nietzsche (1844-1900), Strindberg (1849-1912) and Ibsen (1828-1906) were already O’Neill’s intellectual mainstays. Accompanied by Terry Carlin, his Irish mentor, he reached Provincetown where he found congenial companions among the radicals of the day. Subsequently, many of his short plays were staged. In 1920, O’Neill established his reputation as the leading dramatist of America and he became sure of himself as such. He looked around him to see what was happening and picked up his materials. Pre-twentieth century American drama had dealt with superficial theatricality which was stifling of any creative stimulus. Producers were feeding the audience with light comedy and sentimental drama far removed from the realities of life. The historical perspective of the drama of the twenties was made up of European forces rich with intellectual and artistic challenges. The fertilizing contact with European artistic life in the twenties quickened the creative imagination of the American mind. The First World War put an end to the decades of American insularism and isolation from European culture.

O'Neill became the symbol of that Provincetown group which represented the growing rebellion of the American intellectual against a commercial civilization. He had behind him a rich tradition of tragic literature in the works of the Greeks, the Elizabethans and of course the great moderns like Ibsen and Strindberg, who were the new interpreters in the theatre of the characteristic spiritual conflicts which constitute the drama of that day.

Greek elements in O'Neill's plays are conscious borrowings from the ancient myths. O'Neill's conscious use of Greek myth in the plot structures of two of his finest tragedies *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), are proof of the fact that he was indebted to Greek tragedy which inspired him in his use of symbols and myths with modern psychological perspective. His professed intention was to recreate a modern tragic equivalent of the Greek sense of fate (without the inclusion of God) in the twentieth century. He wrote realistic sea-plays and ended with tragedies of gloom. Moreover, the autobiographical elements grew in the plays written in his last years. O'Neill chose for his plays subjects like social injustice and conflict of races. The conflict of capital and labor and the problem of man versus machine also attracted his attention. He was preoccupied with the theme of fate in a society which suffers from spiritual sterility.

O'Neill will not be outdated, for his concern was with almost all techniques of modern drama. He dealt with tragedy which is outside time. Whatever his faults are, O'Neill will always be remembered for his contribution to the field of tragedy. John Gassner sums up O'Neill's

contributions to the world of drama saying: "Find fault with O'Neill and find fault with the entire American stage: find merit in him and you find worth in its striving or straining toward significant drama."

The Structure of the Tragedy of Desire

Desire Under the Elms (1924) begins with the three brothers Peter, Simeon and Eben awaiting the return of their father, Ephraim Cabot. The two older brothers dream of escaping to find their fortune in California "An' we're startin' out fur the gold-fields o' Californi-a!" (1.4.24.25) while Eben is scheming to gain control of the farm, which he believes his father has stolen from his mother who died of hard work in the farm: "It's Maw's farm agen! It's my farm! them's my cows!" (1.4.17.24) When the three men learn that their father is about to return home with a new young wife, Eben helps his brothers pursue their dream of traveling west to find gold by buying their shares of the farm with the money his father has hidden in the floorboards. Thus, Eben is left as the sole heir to Cabot farm. The old father arrives with his new young wife Abbie Putnam who has spent a harsh and hopeless life and now plans to compensate that with Ephraim. Abbie finds herself attracted to her husband's son, a man much closer to her in age and vitality: "... about her personality the same unsettled, untamed, desperate quality which is so apparent in Eben." (1.4.23.3)

At the beginning of part two, when Ephraim tells Abbie that he would rather burn the farm down than leave it to Eben, but that he will only leave the farm to a male heir, she recognizes her opportunity. Vowing to him that she will bear him a son, she sets out to seduce Eben. Abbie succeeds by

promising Eben to give him the love he seeks from his dead mother. Part two concludes with scene four in which Abbie and Eben declare their love for each other. "An' I love ye, Abbie! now I kin say it! been dyin' fur want o' ye-every hour since ye came! I love ye."(2.3.48.30) Meanwhile Ephraim remains blissfully unaware of the betrayal that has just been perpetrated by his wife and son.

Part three starts with the townspeople who have come to celebrate with Ephraim Cabot the birth of his son, whom they all know to be Eben's, which makes the celebration highly ironic. Abbie wanders looking for Eben who is sitting in a room upstairs. Eben then expresses his resentment at having to keep his paternity secret, and Abbie reassures him that she loves him and "Somethin's bound t' happen". (3.2.64.10) The father then meets Eben and tells him that the farm will be passed on to the new son born to him and Abbie. Eben reacts with rage at the idea that he has been used by Abbie, and his impulse is to kill her; Cabot steps in his way, just as Abbie enters. She tries to comfort Eben who turns on her and accuses her of deceiving him in order to steal the farm, and he vows to leave her and the farm behind. When he suggests that the birth of their son has changed everything, Abbie contrives to win his love back by removing the obstacle that she understands has now come between them. After that, when Eben learns that she has murdered their son, (to overcome the obstacle) he reacts with horror and continuing distrust of the woman he had previously claimed to love, suspecting first that Abbie intends to pin the murder on him and then that she selfishly did it to hurt him (ye killed him fur bein' mine!).(3.3.67.21) As he vows revenge and races off to get the sheriff to arrest her, Abbie collapses in grief over losing Eben's love.

At the end of part three, Cabot learns that Abbie has murdered the baby, and that Eben, and not he, is the father. "I hate ye! I love Eben. I did from the fust. An' he was Eben's son-mine an' Eben's- not your'n!" (3.4.71.26). Furious that she has killed the baby and dazed by the reality of what has transpired between his wife and son; he resigns himself to his lonesomeness. At first, he vows to destroy the farm and leave to seek his fortune with his other two sons in California, but when he learns that the money he has saved is gone (exchanged by Eben for his brothers' shares of the farm), he resigns himself to follow the hand of God and remain on the farm alone. "God A' mighty, I be lonesomer'n ever!"(3.4.73.4) Meanwhile, Eben returns from the sheriff's having a change of heart. He throws himself at Abbie's knees, asks for forgiveness, declares his love for her, and vows to share in her punishment whatever that may be "prison 'r death 'r hell r' anythin." (3.4.75.1) As the sheriff escorts them off to their punishment; Abbie and Eben admire the "purty" sunrise and declare their undying love for each other. The sheriff gets the last words in the play, which reinforces the deep sense of irony at the heart of the drama: "It's a jim-dandy farm, no denyin'. Wished I owned it!"(3.4.77.27)

Thematic Approach of the Tragedy of Desire

Desire Under the Elms (1924) raises questions of moral relativism. Whereas Cabot's references to God and scripture assume a traditional system, the behaviour of Eben and Abbie challenges that system. The marriage of Ephraim to Abbie appears unnatural, which is emphasized when Abbie and Eben are immediately naturally attracted to each other, more so

than are Abbie and Ephraim, as indicated in the stage directions and dialogue. "Don't be afeered! I'll kiss ye pure same's if I was a Maw t' ye... Don't ye leave me, Eben."(2.3.47.31) Yet Ephraim frequently refers to something unnatural in the house, suggesting that it is the adulterous and incestuous relationship between Abbie and Eben that is unnatural in a moral sense. "An' mebbe I suspicioned it all along. I felt they was somethin' onnatral." (3.4.72.8)

These moral questions are raised again when Abbie murders her baby to prove her love for Eben. In this case, with the murder of a baby, O'Neill seems to stack the deck. It is difficult to justify this action with any argument of moral relativism. Is taking killing a helpless infant justified because it is done to save a relationship? It seems not, according to the law. As the sheriff arrests Abbie for murder, he asks no questions about the motive, and she seems determined to accept her punishment. Eben, who has not had a direct hand in the murder, makes a case against himself, as he vows to share in Abbie's punishment; he says he is equally guilty by association, for putting the idea of murdering the baby in Abbie's mind. Of course, when he accepts punishment along with Abbie, it is implicitly for the other sins he has committed. In the end, however, although punished, Abbie and Eben have each other. As such it seems that crimes and sins will be punished, but at the same time, that love triumphs over all. Although they admit their guilt and accept their punishment, both Abbie and Eben seem content, indeed exultant, in their love for each other. Human beings are sometimes driven by innate forces stronger than their learned ideas about right and wrong or what, according to society, is natural. O'Neill's tragedy

does not resolve these complex moral riddles; it only raises them for the audience's consideration of what it means to be human.

One key word in the title of the play, elms, suggests an important theme of the play when understood in the context of O'Neill's use. As described in the stage directions, these trees "protect" and "subdue"; their "sinister maternity" suggests an ambivalent attitude about motherhood, and by extension, about family. As a child develops and matures, the family is obviously a source of protection from the outside world, but at the same time, it can overprotect a child to the point of oppression, in which case the maturing child begins to feel confined and even stifled as an individual. Through his description of the elms, O'Neill seems to place the burden for this paradoxical effect on the mother, an emphasis that is reinforced throughout the play in Eben's relationship with both his deceased mother and his new stepmother. Ironically, in promising to protect him, as his mother would, Abbie seduces him, which releases him from his "subdued" role as son, and allows him to become her lover.

The seduction of Eben suggests another major theme of this play that is also found in its title, desire. Each character wants to possess something, or someone. Peter and Simeon desire wealth and they leave the farm to seek their fortune out in California. The three main characters Ephraim, Eben and Abbie all desire to own the farm, and they become locked in an intense struggle for possession of it. Desire of the flesh also drives both Eben and Abbie, and their lust for each other becomes confused with their desire for the farm. When that lust turns to love, the desire of their hearts overcomes their desire for the farm. When driven by desire, human beings behave irrationally and sometimes immorally. Moreover, O'Neill may also be

referring to those Americans who are driven by the desire to attain the American dream whether in the gold of California or in the forbidding soil of the farm, and thus risk becoming corrupted by that dream at the expense of their souls. This is what makes the final line of the play so ironic: "It's a jim dandy farm, no denyin'. Wished I owned it!" (3.4.77.27) The Sheriff, another ordinary American, covets the farm, without any knowledge of, or concern for, the cost.

The heavy use of irony in the play enriches its thematic suggestiveness. Theatrical irony occurs when the audience is aware of something about which one or more of the characters in the play are unaware. For instance, Cabot's celebration of the baby's birth is ironic because the audience knows what Cabot does not know— that the baby is Eben's and not his. Similarly, the final line of the play, spoken by the sheriff and quoted previously, is ironic because the audience knows what the sheriff does not know — that possession of this farm has come at a severe and unforgiving price. The recurrence of so many incidents of characters' lack of awareness suggests a blindness that is characteristic of human existence. Through his use of irony, O'Neill suggests that there is an unknown, and perhaps unknowable, force that drives human experience. As much as humans believe that they control their own destiny, the evidence of life, ironically, suggests otherwise. On the other hand, the play describes the powerful effect of a strong father on his family. Ephraim Cabot, who is the primal father, oppresses the whole family. He is cruel, harsh and unable to relate to his sons. Ephraim is as hard as a stone. His symbol in the play is the stones: When I come here fifty odd years ago – I was jest twenty an 'the strongest an' hardest ye evr seen –ten times as strong an ' fifty times as hard

Eben. Waal- this place was nothing but field o' stones.

(2.2.40.15-18)

Ephraim is fond of hardness and isolation. Eben and his two brothers hate Ephraim, and there is no emotional bond among them. The only bond between Ephraim and his older sons Simeon and Peter is mechanical. Ephraim provides them room and food, and in return he makes them work in the farm. He is such a kind of man who takes great pleasure from the sufferings of people around him. With his paternal authority over his sons, Ephraim only torments his sons. The sons are resentful because of the way in which their father drives them. Simon expresses his feeling, that they are living in prison, in the following words: "Here it is stones atop o' the ground- stones atop o'stones- makin' stone walls- year atop o'year-him 'n' yew 'n' me 'n' then Eben- makin' stone wall fur him to fence us in!"(1.1.4.1-4) The father Ephraim has had many wives. His first wife is the mother of Peter and Simeon, the second, the mother of Eben and the new bride is Abbie. Ephraim makes his second wife, Eben's mother, work to death:

Eben: (fiercely): A fur thanks he killed her!

Simeon: (after a pause) no one killed nobody. It's allus somethin'. Tha's the murderer

Eben: Didn't he slave Mav t' death?

Peter: He's slaved himself t' death. He's slaved Sim 'n' me 'n'yew

t" death-on'y none o' us haint't died-yit.(1.2.7.8-13)

O'Neill makes use of the mother archetype to reflect Eben's personality. Eben's internal conflict is not to be missed, for it goes to the psychological

core of O'Neill's play. The exploration of Eben's personality must be based on his relation with his mother.

The main source of Eben's tragedy must be sought in his psychological quest for a mother figure. In the person of the protagonist, Eben, the play presents an inner conflict between emotional demands for a woman and inner subjectivity. O'Neill explores the dilemma in Eben's character. The origin of Eben's problem goes back to his early childhood. Eben's quest is only a reflection of the need for an emotional bond. Eben's mother always plays an active part in Eben's quest although she does not exist physically. She does not appear in the play. Eben narrates his infantile remembrances about his mother and father, his fondness for his mother and his hatred for his father to his brothers at the beginning of the play. He discovers that his father and his mother do not love each other. Eben's hatred of his father leads him to seek for emotional satisfaction of his feelings in his step-mother, Abbie. She is the first woman with whom Eben comes into contact, and she has a great role to play in the development of Eben's masculinity. Eben unconsciously responds to his step-mother as a woman. His hard and isolated self is the result of a lack of a strong father's love. Abbie, who is the figure of the mother archetype, forms the foundation of the mother-complex on the son. Moreover, one of the tragic elements O'Neill used in his play is the haunting past. The past in this play determines and controls the tragic action. It controls the present and creates the future. Throughout the play, we feel the dominance of Eben's mother although she is not seen on the stage. "But I'll git vengeance, too! I'll pray Maw't come back to help me- to put her cuss on yew an' him!"(3.2.63.23) On the other

hand, at the outset of the play, the symbolism of the protecting elms represents the dominance of the mother over the play. The maternal significance of the trees in the garden of the Cabot farmhouse is made explicit in their bending over the house like a mother who is embracing her child. They protect and shelter the house with their branches. The stage direction opens the play:

Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roofs. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles.

Eben is the victim of a sinister maternity which is of his own creation. He talks to his mother as if she is not dead. The claims of the past make the play a revenge play. As Normand Berlin remarks, " 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 Greek drama". A sin has been committed against Eben's mother by Ephraim. Eben is in a continual antagonism against his father, and he insists that the farm is his. Ephraim is guilty of doing something wrong to her. Her fiercely maternal presence broods over the play. Eben feels it. The existence of the mother is sensed most strongly at

the moment of Eben's sin. Mother hangs over the play like a curse. The mysterious presence of the mother is best felt in the room in which the passionate sexual desires of Eben and Abbie are fulfilled. "Here in her hum- in the parlour whar she was."(2.3.48.18) One of Abbie's desire is to have that room which is the only part of the house not belonging to her. When she enters the room she is frightened and ready to run away especially when she asks Eben if there was something there. Eben answers "It's Maw. Hate ye fur stealin' hur place."(2.3.48.29) Eben carries with him the eternal image of his mother. Since his mother's image is unconscious, it is unconsciously projected upon Abbie. Abbie has double roles in the play as a mother and as a lover. When Abbie and Eben enter the tomb-like room which has not been opened since Eben's mother's death, Abbie plays her double roles at the same time:

Eben: they hain't nothin' much. She was kind. She was good.

Abbie:(putting one arm over his shoulder. He doesn't 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! (2.3.48.13-17)

Ultimately, in a very short period of time, Abbie's maternal love for Eben turns into a lusty sexual love. The sexual union of Eben and Abbie takes place in an atmosphere of lust, incest and Oedipal desire as the following lines tell us:

Abbie: (Both her arms around him- with wild passion) I'll sing fur ye! I'll die for 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 everything she was t' ye! Let kiss te pure, Eben – same's if I was a maw t' ye- an 'ye kiss me back 's if yew was my son –my son –say's good night t' me ! Kiss me, Eben. (They kiss in restrained fashion. Then suddenly wild passion overcomes her. She kissed him lustfully again and again and he flings his arms about her and returns her kisses...). (2.3.48.18-26)

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Conclusion

The full implication of the traditional interpretation as applied to drama from Sophocles to Shakespeare will not serve for O'Neill. At the same time, it is recognized that no discussion of tragedy can avoid Aristotle, nor can O'Neill be discussed as a playwright of tragedy without reference to Aristotle's definition; whatever the departures from Aristotle may be, that O'Neill does belong in the great tradition of tragedy is certain.

Unlike the works of Greek and Elizabethan dramatists, O'Neill's tragedy has no concern with the growth of the society or the history of a nation. His tragic focus is on the individual who is trapped by the circumstances of his life and the inescapable bonds of his heredity. O'Neill's plays exhibit a keen sense of loss of the individual's relationship with his family, his society's values, nature and god. Science and materialism fail to give O'Neill's heroes a satisfying meaning for life, or comfort from the fear of the unknown. Still, they are engaged in heroic struggle of human extreme desires.

O'Neill's tragic vision encompasses the life of the acquisitive middle class. Tragic characters wage a heroic battle against the crippling circumstances of a materialistic society which eventually prove stronger. Their tragedy lies in their protest and struggle under the impact of extreme desire to achieve heroism. However, as opposed to the Aristotelian concept of tragedy, we can say that O'Neill writes naturalistic tragedies. There is no supernatural destiny presiding over the O'Neillian universe. The past history of his family, and the biological and capitalistic social structures made by man prove catastrophic to the protagonist's desire to realize his/her human aspirations upon earth. O'Neill's antiheroes differ from tragic heroes of the Elizabethan period because a tragic hero (like Macbeth and Hamlet) is still primarily heroic but with a fatal flaw that brings about his downfall; while an antihero's flaws are often more prominent than his heroic qualities. Finally, O'Neill presented the American of his day in his tragedies. An extreme desire is among the subjects O'Neill chose to present like social injustice, the ruin of families and the conflict of capital and labour.

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