

A Disintegration Family In Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms

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What is the American family? This question was answered by John de Crevecoeur, in "what is the American?" (1782), when he said: "I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have four wives of different nations."¹ In fact, Crevecoeur summarized the history of the American family, in particular, and the American man, in general.

There are many kinds of family systems in the world; the English family is but one of them. Bert Adams, in *The American Family* (1971), says that "the majority of families in the United States may or may not closely resemble one's own."² Whether the American family resembles other families in the wide world or not is a matter of the American's concept of the family. Contemporary researchers of the family insist that no definition of the family fits the reality of all the cultural groups and historical periods. Perhaps the best way to define the diverse forms of this social institution is to draw attention to its character. In this connection, the family may be defined as "a state of mind rather than a particular structure or set of household arrangements"³, for its theoretical conception, the family has been considered in America as a social instruction. The term 'institution' is used in nominalist sense, to mean a group of persons organized according to cultural principles to carry on activities which fulfill their basic individual and social needs as human beings.⁴ Similarly, Arthur W. Calhoun, in *A Social History of the American Family* (1945), states that "American family life seemed to the observer from Europe to be strangely lacking in closeness and warmth. A visitor to America wrote: 'Domestic life in America has the appearance of being cold and formal'."⁵

It may be useful to mention that the political, economic and social developments which accompanied the growth of the American family affected the changes in the family relations and values.

One of the reasons behind the reduction of ties and the weakness of relationships among the family members is the growing of different institutions and organizations to support the family. These highly developed institutions provide specialized facilities and services at higher cultural levels than is possible for the family alone. Thus, people could obviously secure larger and more reliable satisfactions than by their individual or family efforts. We may conclude that the family lost some of its former functions or now shares them with other institutions.⁶ Keniston defines the family today as the 'needy' family that needs and uses support in raising children, and thus, this family estranges its children and participates in the breaking down of family relationships in the future.⁷

It may be said that democracy separates and isolates the members of the family from each other, too. It loosens social ties, but tightens natural ones. Tocqueville prophesies a family of freedom as an escape from artificial feudal relations into a natural harmony of free individuals. But, later on, the modern family cuts itself off from the world. "All the energy of the group is expended on helping the children to rise in the world, individually and without any collective ambition: children rather than the family."⁸

The father think that he has fulfilled his mission while he scatters his boys everywhere. The children grow up, leaving home, starting families of their own, and, finally, living apart from the family support. "This mythic cycle reinforces the capitalistic and American ideals of personal autonomy, individualism and competition. Capitalism's ideology implores parents to raise children who are "winners".... the separation and recreation over direct family perpetuation provides the instructions for such a 'winning' model."⁹

In fact, the chief effects of the family change are reflected in family relationships. The crisis of family relationships can be summarized in family disintegration, marital

conflicts and adjustments, status of women, parent-son clash and problems of children and youth.

Family drama, or 'domestic' drama, is centered on characters' intimate relationships, their actions towards each other and their responses to the surrounding circumstances and events. Usually, the plot lines become more realistic, and the description of the conflict arises from 'ordinary' events in 'ordinary' lives. The characters are ordinary people like us, taken from the lower and middle classes of society, who struggle with everyday problem, such as poverty, sickness, crime, family strife and other problems within marital and paternal relationships. Specifically, Stephanie Coontz, in *The Way We Never Were* (1992), refers to a 'family drama' as "a staged play that contains any group of two or more persons who engage in ongoing intimacy and obligation, whether they do so because of birth, marriage, adoption or choice."¹⁰

The American dramatist's concept of family is centered on his dream of the ideal family and his desire to make peace with it rather than understand it. He is part of this society and he lives the experience, therefore "the playwright of family life have digested the experience; have made sense out of it for the world of the play."¹¹

In this respect, dramatists such as Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams exposed the raw tensions of the American family, and confronted problems of the lost individual in an industrial and mechanized society through statements of psychological and spiritual displacements, loss of connections, loneliness and self-deception.

In general terms, the world of American family drama shows a concern for family failure and destruction. The power of their plays comes from the industry of this concern. Whatever it is about, the play is likely to be rooted in these struggles. From O'Neill on, American playwrights have been obsessed with the failure of family harmony and with family integration. The world of the American drama is made up of family struggles and disappointments and "the protagonist searches for freedom and longs for security. He may escape from the family, may triumph over its oppression, or may be destroyed by it. If he survives, he recapitulates the struggle in his own marriage or with his own children. Or, as survivor, he is left alone and anguished by the loss of family."¹²

This struggle is not a new one; it is connected with deeply held attitudes concerning the Americans' dream of an ideal family system of freedom and democracy which emerged with the emergence of democracy in America.

On the other hand, American drama focuses on the family relation with society. In a society where the conception of social life is individualistic, drama has to deal with how the character copes with such a society and how the family deals with the problems which beset it with such tedious familiarity: "most characters do not cope at all but only react passively.... They wait until the problems work themselves out, following predictable and stereotyped patterns of behavior as they do.... They are at the mercy of their emotional pursuit of the domestic ideal, and the solutions which occur are accidental. In such circumstances, the family becomes a defensive unit isolated from the world."¹³

The years from 1900 to 1930 saw a great variety of dramatic styles. In addition to Realism and Naturalism, the playwrights had their experiments with epic, symbolism, Expressionism, and commonly used psychological affairs. Consequently, domestic drama developed to be a combination of all these things. The classification of domestic dramas become unclear thematically and technically. As far as themes are concerned, "the dramatists dared to explore such untraditional subjects as (1) the complexities of human experience, (2) the moral and social values of American life, and (3) the economic and political problems created by technological changes and a great World War."¹⁴ the technique of the play was characterized by some psychological devices, such as minimal scenery, telegraphic dialogue, talking machines, and characters portrayed as types rather than individuals.¹⁵

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill is regarded as a greatest figure of the American theatre. With him the American drama has been developed into an outstanding art. In his plays

O'Neill has embodied the trends and conflicts of his own time; he rebels against the narrowness, mindedness, hypocrisy, crudeness of feelingness, and the materialistic short sightedness of his age.¹⁶

Throughout his plays, O'Neill reflects the reality of the American society. He simultaneously functioned as a social critic and moral guide as he believes that:

The playwright must dig at the roots of sickness today as he feels it ... the death of the old God, the failure of science, and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find meaning for life.¹⁷

It must be noted that the deepest emotional drive in O'Neill's plays is usually based on the father-son, father-daughter and mother-son relationship. To briefly consider O'Neill's concept towards paternal relationships, one can notice that the fathers, in his works, represent the powerful old patriarchs who rule over the minds if not always the wills of their families, reflected by Ephraim Cabot in *Desire*, Abraham Mannon in *Mourning*, and James Tyrone in *A Long Day's Journey*, while the mothers are used by their men like their lands. At the same time, the mother represents the whole world for her sons and "the magic fountain which incarnates mirror-like the child's desire for maternal reunion."¹⁸ On the other hand, the sons and daughters seem to be lost within a complicated atmosphere of familial relationships, and the fraternal relationship incarnates jealous, hatred and competition.

It is obvious that from the beginning to the end in the world of Eugene O'Neill, the dilemma of family life is the common denominator. His concept of the American family developed through the phases of his career, O'Neill set out to discover the forces at work in family life. The prophecy of family harmony had failed. Instead, the family was a battleground, a clash of wills in which the struggle for power over (or escape from) its members involved illusions of peace and harmony. This struggle was best represented in his third play, *Desire Under the Elms*.

Desire Under the Elms represents one of the supreme moment in the history of American tragedy, because it is "the first important tragedy to be written in America."¹⁹ O'Neill's treatment of the story seems almost Greek, both in the specific similarities and in the atmosphere of determinism. In a letter to A.H Quinn in 1925, O'Neill stated the impact of Greek theatre had upon *Desire Under the Elms*, he wrote that:

I tried to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble debased lives. I am always acutely conscious of the force (fate), God, our biological past creating our present whatever one calls it (mystery certainly), and of the one eternal tragedy of man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about, and that possible – or can be – to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfiguring modern values and symbols in the theater which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity of a dream, but where the theater is concerned, one must have a dream, and the Greek dream is the noblest ever!"²⁰

The more perceptive critics, since then, began to recognize the classical influences on O'Neill's work. Barrett H. Clark wrote that: "O'Neill turned to the Greek tragedy for a medium through which he might express dramatically another aspect of one of the problems of modern life".²¹ As far as the Greek influences are concerned, Jay Ronald agrees with Edgar F. Racey on that *Desire Under the Elms* is based on the Greek myth of *Phaedra and Hippolytus* as well as *Oedipus Tyrannus*. They saw that:

From *Desire Under the Elms* on, throughout O'Neill's canon, the factor that determines the destiny of O'Neill's characters is the conflicting influence of 'father and mother'. Their overwhelming troughly equivalent to Oedipus and Electra complex.²²

In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill made a radical change. He changed the pattern of the old Greek tragedies and created an essentially a new myth as Racey concluded that:

O'Neill reached back in time to mythic circumstances derived from an earlier culture and reshaped them to the basic story of human desire and its aftermath he narrated for modern world.²³

O'Neill once remarked that, "I have always loved Ephraim so much! He is so autobiographical".²⁴ Such remark led the critic Philip Weissman to make an interesting observation as he believed that: "*Desire Under the Elms* could be considered as an unconscious autobiography, and Ephraim Cabot is to be recognized as Eugene's image of his father".²⁵ But the play, in fact, is not an autobiographical one. O'Neill set in his play in 1850 in New England (American in the nineteenth century) to represent the Puritans' rigid life at that era. Many critics, now, consider *Desire Under the Elms* as a historical play as Harold Clurman who states that:

O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* makes us look to our national past with new eyes, because the past creates the present and the future.²⁶

O'Neill chose 1850, because the bitterness of people's life was appropriate to the bitterness he intended to portray. The land was essential to the Puritans' lives as they entirely depended on it for their livelihood, besides its eternal significance. Their relationship with the earth is more than reciprocal; owning it, they were owned by it as Travis Bogard says that: "They are possessed by its energy and power".²⁷ The representative of the Puritans in this play is Ephraim Cabot – the father in whose image O'Neill, to use Harold Clurman's words, "has developed a modern tragedy of psychological and sociological aspects that convinces the quality of human truth".²⁸

Desire Under the Elms is one of O'Neill's naturalistic plays. It makes, as Timo Tinsanen says, "the peak of O'Neill's naturalistic period".²⁹ The play is divided into parts instead of acts. Timo also remarks that: "O'Neill called his acts "parts" in memory of the trilogies of Greek Tragedy; so as *Desire Under the Elms* might be considered his first trilogy".³⁰

It should be emphasized that before 1924, familial relationships in O'Neill's drama are seldom affectionate, but the useful variety of family discord is that between husband and wife. In *Desire Under the Elms* appears, for the first time, an example of the bitter hatred that exists between father and son and the affectionate love between son and stepmother. "This kind of relations had appeared in literature before Freud but never in pre-Freudian days had the motif appeared with such grim regularity as it had since about 1910."³¹ Thus, in this play O'Neill's concept of the family reflects the most intense expression of the family dilemma to date.

Rather than placing the emphasis on Man's lot in the universe. O'Neill introduces in *Desire Under the Elms* a picture of a rural family dismantled by greedy desires of possession. Being about farmers' strong relation to the land, the play is classified by Travis Bograt as a "folk" drama wherein characters "identities" and dreams are often forged by their attachment to the land.³² Another view of the play is that it represents a psychological treatment of violent "possessive instinct and physical passion" that grow quite destructive because of long suppression.³³

Furthermore, O'Neill has had literary adoptions from other writers and philosophers, both classic and the modern ones. Eugene O'Neill reintroduces the grandeur of Greek tragedy and transmutes the Greek myths into the modern insights of man and life. O'Neill embodies his modern plays with classical myth patterns, characters and themes and weaves them into the current philosophical ideas.³⁴ *Desire Under the Elms*, a tragedy in three parts by O'Neill produced in 1924 and published in 1925. The last of O'Neill's naturalistic play and the first to which he re-created the starkness of Greek tragedy, *Desire* draws from *Euripides Hippolytus* and *Jean Racine's Phedre*, both of which feature returning home with a new wife falls in love with her stepson.

The play opens in 1850, on a farm of Ephraim Cabot, the hard-working, God fearing man. His first two wives have died. Ephraim Cabot abandons his farm and his three sons who

hate him. The youngest son, Eben, steals the father's money and buys out his brothers who are headed towards California. Shortly after this, Ephraim returns with his new wife, Abbie. The second act describes the increasing hatred of Abbie for her old husband since she has married him only to own the farm. Abbie becomes pregnant by Eben. The third act begins a year later with a party celebrating the birth of a new son. Abbie lets Ephraim believe that the child is his, but she later kills the infant when she sees it as an obstacle between herself and Eben, engaged, turns Abbie over to the Sheriff, but in the final scene, he is convinced of her love and he accepts his share of blame for the crime. The younger lovers are led to their punishment, and old Ephraim is left alone again within his farm.³⁵

The title of the play itself foreshadows the feeling and the mood prevalent throughout the play, which is that of strong desire. And this desire comes to be the characters, desire for reaching perfecting (Ephraim Cabot), identity (Eben), and position (Peter, Simeon, and Abbie) in a materialistic world where although they are driven in their goals, they are thrown with the force of fate into their tragic end.

The play is divided into three parts, the first concerns the revolt of the Cabot brothers against their tyrannical father. The father against whom the brothers are in rebellion is Ephraim, "progenitor of the tribes of Israel, the archetypal patriarch (and for O'Neill, the father-figure). His name the 'fruitful' may be an underlying source of irony by the end of the play and it is significant that his "fruitfulness" is the greatest source of his Hubris"³⁶ Cabot is a self-centered, loveless man and like his God, he is "old, hard and lonesome" (p.1 S.2). His own God is a "tyrannical, ascetic, restrictive embodiment of puritanism, like Ephraim."³⁷

In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill creates the image of the "father" as a prototype of the primal, hard, hubristic and ruthless father. O'Neill introduces him as an embodiment of the human will to power. Fredrick Wilkins describes Ephraim Cabot, the father, as "the spokesman of a materialistic society that destroys the souls of other men, and as a Puritan protagonist he always has an apt biblical quotations for every missed he performs".³⁸

Although Ephraim Cabot is "one of O'Neill's most remarkable creations"³⁹, still O'Neill's love of the father is not shared by many critics. Doris Falk finds Ephraim as, "a self-centered, loveless man who has projected his own personality into that of his God, a tyrannical, ascetic restrictive embodiment of Puritanism".⁴⁰ She also identifies his God as "only an image of his own ego".⁴¹ In spite of that criticism, the essence of Ephraim's character is not narrowness; on the contrary he is more complex. In order to understand his character, the following points should be taken into consideration: the Puritan tradition, his conception of God with whom he identifies himself, and the meaning of the omnipresent stones with which he has struggled all his life.

Ephraim Cabot is introduced as a hard figure, and his hardness is well reflected even in O'Neill's description, "His face is as hard as if it were hewn out of a boulder" (p.1 s.4).⁴² Joseph Wood Krutch asserts that: "Ephraim Cabot is a hard man, and hardness to him is a virtue that is solidified by the fact that the word 'hard' is mentioned 34 times in the play, and Ephraim alone uses it 18 times. Phrases like 'grow hard', 'hard man', and 'God's hard', are utterances Ephraim enjoy repeating."⁴³ The farmer believes that being a man is being hard enough to possess his world without question as to his authority. Ephraim actually equates being hard with being God-like figure:

God's hard, not easy! God's in the stones! Build my crutch on a rock – out o'stons an' I'll be in them! (p.2 s.2)

Ephraim's Puritanical faith has made him a hard and unsympathetic man. J. E. Cirlot Quotes Genesis, discusses the mythic and religious meaning of the stone which Ephraim identifies himself with, "this stone which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house".⁴⁴ According to Cirlot's explanation, the stone may symbolize something eternal that can never be lost or dissolved that "which could be compared to the mystical experience of God within one's own soul".⁴⁵ So if the stones have spiritual ordering principle at work, then the stones on the Cabot's farm, from which Ephraim has built walls, have honorific significance pointing to

the qualities in his character. The stoniness of the Cabot farm is first indicated in the play by the stage direction. "*The south end of the house faces front to a stone wall with a wooden gate at center opening on a country road*".⁴⁶ They early in part one, scene one, Ephraim's son Peter complains: "Here – it's stones a-top o' the ground – stones a-top o' stones – makin stone walls – year a-top o' year – him 'n' yew me 'n' then EBEN – makin' stones walls fur him to fence us in!" (p.1 s.1) The walls also bear symbolic significance; O'Neill considers them as a proof of Ephraim's faithfulness to his inheritance. In their book *O'Neill*, Arthur and Barbara Gelb describe the source of inspiration for those walls saying that: "The playwright's farm in Ridge field, Brook farm was an inspiration for the Cabot farm".⁴⁷ It was recorded that O'Neill told a young man from the Provincetown Players that the kind of stone wall which bordered Brook farm was what he was writing about in *Desire Under the Elms*. O'Neill pointed out to a wall and told the young man that:

Though it now runs through a weedy, uncultivated area... it had once marked a boundary of tilled soil. These walls were symbols of the Old New England farmers' roots... reproachful moments to the farmers who left their fields to go out west where there were no stones and where farming was easier [O'Neill then] quoted some of Ephraim's lines...⁴⁸

Among the three kinds of relationship in the play, the father-son relationship is the most prominent one. The play describes the powerful effect of a strong father on his sons, reflecting the "unmistakably puritanical outlook and sharply patriarchal family attitude."⁴⁹ Early in the play, in scene one, this relationship reveals a kind of father-son conflict represented in the hostility of the three sons, Simeon, Peter and Eben, towards their father "slaved sim 'n' him 'n' Ebent death" by making stone walls "to fence them in" (p.1 s.2). The farm for which they paid their life is nothing but walls of stone which grow to be built in their hearts as Eben says:

An 'makin' walls-stone atop o' stone, makin 'walls till yer heart's a stone ye heft up out o' the way o' growth onto a stone wall in yer heart! Something there is that does not love a wall (p.1 s.2).

Their hatred to their father comes to its climax when Eben "prayed he's died (p.1 s.2) and the other two supported him. The three sons hate their father, because they dislike at being driven, their hostility to walls of stone are aspects of their antagonism to the Old Testament God. The hard God is in the stones and in the father."⁵⁰ However, the first development in the play reveals the revolt of Peter and Simeon against their father when they know that he has got married for the third time, and he is on his way to the farm with his young married bride. They decide to depart for California, the land of their dreams, to look for gold. So, they curse their father, mock and jeer at him, and stage a dance before him to celebrate their freedom. But their half-brother Eben, decides to stay, because that the farm right-fully belongs to him by inheritance from his mother. In addition to his sense of enslavement, the farm is another reason for Eben's hostility toward his father, who exhausted his mother to death, and the son contemplates avenging his mother's death. In turn, Ephraim shows the same kind of hatred and rejection for his sons. He hated them "cause they was soft, they coveted the farm without knowin' what is meant." (p.1 s.2)

Like his half-brothers, Eben hates his father too. He holds him the responsibility of his mother's death. Eben says that his father, instead of showing gratitude to his mother, "killed her!" (p.1 s.2). Eben's mother was good and gentle woman, as Peter and Simeon describe her, "PETER (reminiscently) she was good t' Sim 'n' me. A good step-maw's scurse. SIMEON she was good t' everyone." (p.1 s.2) Another important reason that makes Eben hate his father is that Ephraim usurped the farm from his mother. He did not marry Eben's mother out of love, but to possess her farm. In fact during the nineteenth Century marriage was a business deal; man not married to increase his state by taking over his wife's inherited property in a legal way.⁵¹ Ephraim himself states the fact that the family of Eben's mother had contested him on the property of the farm:

I tuk another wife – Eben's Maw. Her folks was contestin' me at law over my deeds t' farm – my farm! That's why Eben keeps a – talkin' his fool talk o' his bein' his Maw's farm (p.2 s.2)

Ephraim married Eben's mother, "purely in order to get the title deeds of the farm into his own hands".⁵² She, like every member of her family, was a victim of Ephraim's explosive egotism. In fact the two elms that hover over the play in the "sinister maternity" of the two large elms.⁵³ The elms are given clear description by the stage direction which opens the play:

Two enormous Elms are on each side of the house. The bend their trailing branches down over the roof.... They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof. (Prologue, p.2)

Eben's desires for possessing the farm and for revenge are two factors that determine his character. On one hand, he is an image of his father symbolizing greed, lust and domination. On the other hand, he is a lover of beauty and charm. These double traits in Eben's character are analyzed by Doris Falk, she says that: "O'Neill makes this double identity quite clear with Eben constantly asserts that he is the 'heir' of his mother: 'I am Maw – every drop O' blood!', but his half-brothers keep reminding him of that he is the 'spitting image of his father' ".⁵⁴

Ephraim's sons unmask their father's false puritanical faith revealing his inner reality of religious pretence: "SIMEON (*imitating his father's voice*) I'm ridin' out t' learn God's message...., he says. I'll bet right then an' thar he knew plumb well he was goin' whorin', the stinkin' old hypocrite!" (p.1 s.3) Ephraim is a patriarch ruling his house with an iron hand, and also enjoying sex-relation not only with his two successive wives, but also with "Min" the village prostitute. His sons are jealous of him, and at the same time they want to do what their father is doing, and possess everything he possesses. They even go to the same prostitute as they tell Eben that:

PETER All they is.... Sim knew her – an' then me after –

SIMEON An' Paw kin tell yew somethin' too! He was fust!

SIMEON (*with a grin*) Ay-eh! We air his heirs in evrythin'! (p.1 s.3)

Eben's determination to avenge his mother, and take the farm for himself reflects his father's greed, and in seducing his father's paramours including a neighboring prostitute, as well as his step-mother, Abbie, Eben duplicates his father's lust. Frederick Wilkins concludes that: "While Eben is emotionally bound to his mother in her desire for love, he is intellectually bound to his father in his possessiveness."⁵⁵

In his article, "Myth as Tragic Structure in *Desire Under the Elms*", Edgar F. Racey traces the classical parallels in O'Neill's play, he says that: "As a classical tragedy *Desire* is both successful and complete. The time is spring, season of awaking and season of ritual. It is a season which has sent Ephraim out t' learn God's message t' me in the spring like the prophet's done"⁵⁶ Old Ephraim Cabot finally appears with his new young attractive wife - Abbie Putnam. Ephraim's personality is graphically sketched by the stage direction as follows:

Cabot is seventy-five, tall and gaunt, with great, wiry, concentrated power, but stoop-shouldered from toil. His face is as hard as if it were hewn out of a boulder, yet there is weakness in it, a pretty pride in its own narrow strength. His eyes are small, close together, and extremely near-sighted, blinking continually in the front to focus on objects, their stare having a straining, in growing quality. He is dressed in his dismal black Sunday suit. (p.1 s.4)

The father-son animosity surfaces briefly at the end of the first and second parts of the play. However, this deep-rooted hatred develops into violence in the next scene. When Eben boasts that the farm is his, Ephraim calls him a blind mole for not realizing that it now belongs to the new child and Abbie. He repeats Abbie's story about Eben's advances and his own promise to grant her whatever she wanted if they should have a son. The father recalls the price she demanded: "I want Eben cut off so 's this farm I'll be mine when ye die!" (p.1

s.4) Enraged by Abbie's apparent betrayal, Eben vows to murder her, and the father and son sink in a murderous fight.

It may be said that the only bond between Ephraim and his older sons, Simeon and Peter, is mechanical. Ephraim provides them with lodging and food, and in return he makes them work on the farm. He treats his sons as instruments not as human beings. In their revenge on their tyrannical father, Simeon threatens Ephraim to rape his new wife "an 'rape your new woman! Whoop!'" (p.1 s.4). Being attracted to their step-mother, the dialogue of Ephraim's sons is charged with Freudian touches.

Racey analyses the biblical significance of Simeon and Peter's names, he states that: "While Simeon symbolizes cruelty and stands for the proverb 'an eye for an eye', Peter represents the nature of the rock".⁵⁷ Peter is the one who picks up a rock to cast it at his father's house through the window to hit his new step-mother. Ephraim explains the hatred between him and his sons as he tells Abbie that: "the hated me 'cause I was hard. I hated them 'cause they were soft. They coveted the farm without knowin' what I mean." (p.2 s.2) The two elder brothers predict that strife will soon take place between their father and Eben as they repeat that, "Dog'll eat dog" (p.1 s.4) therefore they revolt against their father, and accept Eben's offer to sign necessary documents to leave to California. They are glad to have the money, and no longer, "slaves t' stone waals" (p.1 s.4). While Cabot's two elder sons set off to California, Eben decides to stay and fight his father and his new wife for his right in the farm.

The farm and the farm-house stand for emotional and material society desired by all. It is the dominant passion that has its control upon all the characters in this play. But the farm of Ephraim, besides being the most essential assets to any farmer, is "the source of the salvation".⁵⁸ By half of a century of uninterrupted labour, he has turned a few barren hill sides into a farm. He wasted all his life to have the most desired farm in the region. The farm in its present prosperous condition is Ephraim's fruit of his 50 years of long hard toil. He tells Abbie about how he has turned a stony land into a flourishing farm:

I picked 'em up an' piled 'em into walls. Ye kin read the years o' my life in thm walls, everyday a hefted stone, climbin' over the hills up and down, fencin' in the fields that was mine, whar I made thin's grow out of nothin'-like the will o' God, like the servant o' His hand. (p.2 s.2)

Before analyzing further the father-son relationship, one needs to shed light briefly on the fraternal relationship in the play. One may notice that there is no emotional bond between the brothers. After they hear of their father's marriage, Eben persuades his half-brothers to sign a paper relinquishing to him their eventual shares in the farm, and he steals his father's money to pay them. To come to a conclusion, almost all the characters in the play are caught in a web of "lust for property which uproots human love and whirls in fury to blind destructiveness.... In *Desire*, O'Neill rebelled against American cultural development, which placed material values above spiritual goals. He saw beauty, art, and all human relations corrupted by the insane pursuit of gold."⁵⁹ In other words, O'Neill's concept of the American family is based on a deep analysis of American society. He sought his dramatic material in contemporary American society with its materialistic culture, which compensates the traditional moral values, and the family becomes an obvious focus for this concern.

Jordan Y. Miller, in his *American Dramatic Literature* (1961), sympathizes with old Cabot, because he sees him devoted to what he maintains as right and good; to him, he is not an evil person, for what he does is justified in the eyes of God. In addition, Miller thinks that Cabot falls short of tragic proportion, mainly because of the suffering he endures at the hands of his children who disappointed him, and as a result of his own limited views on what is "right". At the close of the play he rounds up the cattle to start life anew. What he has endured is part of God's hard way.⁶⁰

Significantly, Ephraim's ego fights against any community of privilege, isolating him and turning the family of security into a battleground. He frowns at Abbie's possessive inclination when she refers to the farm, the bedroom, and the house as "mine" (p.2 s.3). He

marries Abbie without considering her possessive instinct, to guarantee his immortality through possessiveness; his unborn son is the chance to deny his heirs and to transcend his own morality: "A son is me- my blood- mine. Mine ought t' git mine. An' then it's still mine-even though I be six foot under" (p.2 s.2). Likewise, Abbie marries Ephraim for the sake of a home. In her attempt to secure her position, she tries to get rid of Eben, the heir of the farm. At first she detests Eben and plots against him by telling her husband that Eben tried to seduce her but, at last, she falls in love with him.

Ephraim exploits every member of his family to improve the farm and therefore they hate him. They feel that they are mere instruments rather than being members of one family. To Ephraim love and possessiveness are equals. He wishes that he can take the farm with him to the other world of eternity, but he knows that he cannot. Therefore, he prefers to burn the farm than leaving to any one:

But if I could, I would, by the eternal! 'R if I could, in my dying' hour, I'd set it afire on an' watch it burn.....(p.2 s.3)

Ephraim extraordinary desire to possess the land drives his two older sons to become vagabonds, and drives Eben, later on, to sin. The farm, therefore, symbolizes the life-dying sterility of puritan ideals, for it wraps and twists the lives of those who are slave to it.⁶¹

Therefore, one needs to shed the light on the fraternal relationship in the play. One may notice that there is no emotional bond between the brothers. After they hear of their father's marriage, Eben persuades his half-brothers to sign a paper relinquishing to him their eventual shares in the farm, and he steals his father's money to pay them.

To come to a conclusion, almost all the characters in the play are caught in web of 'lust for property which uproots human love and whirls in fury to blind destructiveness.... In *Desire*, O'Neill rebelled against American cultural developments, which placed material values above spiritual goals. He saw beauty, art, and all human relations corrupted by the insane pursuit of gold."⁶² In other words, O'Neill's concept of the American family is based on a deep analysis of American society. He sought his dramatic material in contemporary American society with its materialistic culture, which compen-states the traditional moral values, and the family becomes an obvious focus for this concern.

In fact, in buying out his brothers' shares, to be the sole owner of the farm. Eben demonstrates his father's greed; in desiring the possession on his father's village prostitute, Mini, as well as Abbie, his stepmother, he reflects his father's lust. Even his name reflects a kind of contradictory relation with his father. Eben or "Ebenezer, the fuller version of his name, is the name given by the prophet Samuel to the stone he set up in the memory of divine assistance."⁶³

O'Neill makes use of the mother archetype to probe into Eben's personality must be based on his relationship with his mother. The main source of Eben's tragedy must be sought in his psychological quest for another figure. In his personality, there is an inner conflict between emotional demands for a woman and inner subjectivity. The origin of Eben's problem goes back to his early childhood. His 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 doesn't exist physically. Eben discovers that his father and his mother do not love each other. Eben's abhorrence to his father leads him to seek for emotional satisfaction of his feeling in his step-mother, Abbie. She is the first woman with whom Eben comes into contact, and she has a great role in the development of Eben's masculinity. He unconsciously responds to his step-mother and his hard and isolated self in 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.⁶⁴

From their first meeting, Eben and Abbie are strongly attached to each other. They are fated as being driven equally by sexual and financial lust. Abbie, then becomes not only an object of Eben's passion, but also an instrument by which he can avenge the wrongs which his father had committed against his mother. Doris Falk examines the psychological

motivations that drive Eben into an incestuous relationship with his step-mother, she says that:

In *Desire Under the Elms*, the Freudian pleasure principle is set against the repressive puritan ethic. [Eben's] father is the super ego and the Elms are the symbols of motherhood 'I'd'. thus, the conflict is between these two, besides Eben's image of his domineering father and that of his mother. Those opposing drive at war and find an out let just with the appearance of Abbie.⁶⁵

Yet the "unholy triangle"⁶⁶ of Ephraim, Abbie and Eben pictures the marriage relationship within the Cabot family. As for Abbie, marriage is as a kind of society and freedom, not through love and mutuality, but through insert. She justifies her marriage to Ephraim as a result of her torture at the hand of a drunkard husband, the death of her child, long labor, and poverty. Certainly 'home', to Abbie, is "a place of refuge from the hostile world", and thus, "the search for a home can be seen in a wider sense as a quest for a place with society, and even as an existential search for money."⁶⁷ But in Abbie's case, home doesn't necessarily mean family; what she looks for in Cabot's home is a place to live in but not love. Abbie's view of belonging reflects O'Neill's view of the breakdown of the American family, which substitutes love and mutual relations by materialistic demands.

Unexpectedly, Abbie who is, "free for once t' wuk agen in other folks' hums" (p.2 s.2), does not find her real freedom and the completion of herself as a person through making a new family with Ephraim but through her incestuous affair with Eben. Thus, "the desires of the three for possession- of land, of home, of body- go along with a profounder desire for companionable warmth which for a time Abbie and Eben find in each other, which Ephraim has known only with his farm-animals."⁶⁸ Abbie changes from the general possessor to the particular lover, and by killing her baby, she rejects the the farm and all else for the sake of love.

Eben always looks for excuses and a rational justification for committing the sin of incest. Confused and unable to resist Abbie's temptation any more, Eben pleads to his mother for advice "Maw! What d'ye want?" and Abbie, "she's tell in 'yet' love me, Eben" (p.1 s.3).

Having persuaded him that his mother's soul will not rest in peace in her grave unless he takes sexual vengeance on his though father, Eben kneels down in total submission before Abbie, weeping like a child and releases all his love and passion for her. "An 'I love you' Abbie! - I kin say it! I been dyin 'fur want o'ye-every hour - since ye come! I love ye! (p.1 s.3)

Significantly, with the birth of their son, Abbie and Eben make up a new family unit in which the child interferes with the mutual absorption to characterize their love.⁶⁹ Abbie and Eben learn to give up the ownership of things to find love in each other. In killing her child, Barrett H. Clark, in his *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays* (1947), believes that "she would have killed Ephraim, the tyrannical husband, and he thinks that is what she ought to have done in the play."⁷⁰ It is true that near the end Eben temporarily breaks with Abbie, but not over possession of the farm, which no longer is equivalent to family love for him. His final reconciliation with Abbie reestablishes their community of love for him. In other words, in the Cabot family possessiveness and destruction accompany liberation and the creation of a new family.⁷¹ The family of security, represented in the hard Ephraim, must give way to the new, freer family. But this can be a false hope, for escape from the family structure does not bring renewal but withdrawal from society and death.⁷² Abbie and Eben must face punishment, but the law brings pain instead of order into the world of the play.

In fact, in *Desire*, O'Neill gives us an "epic thing to new England's inhibited life."⁷³ When the Sherriff appears, we see how far removed the lovers are from law and from Ephraim's possessiveness. The O'Neill's concept of the family reveals that familialism is a refuge and belonging through love not through possessiveness or material insert, and the family of security is inverted to demonstrate its falsity. At the end of the play, the old New

Englander, alone and surrounded by stone walls, identifies himself with the cows and finds his consolation with his "God's hard an' lonesome" (p.2 s.4) and out of any family order.

Psychologically, Eben's attachment to his mother and his struggle against his father has been interpreted by many critics in the light of Oedipus complex. The two lover, "psychologically and dramatically, are motivated: Eben by the Oedipus Complex and the desire for revenge, Abbie by her desire to provide Ephraim with an heir, thus assuring her chances of retaining the farm, and both of them by a strong sexual urge."⁷⁴ According to Freud, the deals with his father by identifying himself with him. When his sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense and his father is perceived as an obstacle to them, his identification with his father changed into a wish to get rid of him in order to take his place with his mother. An ambivalent attitude to his father and affectionate kind to his mother make up the content of the Oedipus complex in a boy.⁷⁵

In *Desire*, Oedipal patterns of incest emerge in Eben's love for Abbie, especially in the seduction scene, where Eben is obsessed by a strong desire for the mother figure and Abbie adopts a very motherly attitude. Eben feels through her that he gets his mother back. In addition, Freud appears in Eben's view of his relationship with Abbie as his mother revenge upon his father.

Again Freud is present in *Desire* in the father son relationship. Critics like Edwin Engel, in *The Haunted Soul* (1953), have remarked the that the play is charged with totem and taboo motifs.⁷⁶ Developing what he calls "the Drawinian concept of the primal horde"⁷⁷, Freud assumes that father-son hostility is one of the basic facts of primitive life. The primitive hordes were governed by the primal father who enjoyed intimate relations with the females in the horde. As his sons grew up, they were jealous with their father who stood in the way of their sexual demands and of their desire for power. The sons ultimately kill and eat the primal in a feast in which the totem animal, a substitute for father, is ceremoniously eaten by the whole tribe, shared equally as their guilt is shared.⁷⁸

Desire Under the Elms is concerned with the theme of rebellion as a rejection of parental and especially paternal authority. Old Ephraim Cabot, for example symbolizes the patriarch who ruled his family, the primal hordes, with an iron hand. The conflict between him and his three-grown up sons is symbolic of the father-son conflict in primitive societies. Cabot's sons grew jealous and rebellious and craved for the rights and privileges enjoyed by him; Peter, Simeon and Eben have relations with Abbie. Indeed, the Cabot boys never kill the father, but their resentment, their threat to rape his "new woman" (p.1 s.3), and their wish to see him dead represent, symbolically, the father's death, especially when Abbie informs Eben that she has killed "him" (p.2 s.3).⁷⁹

Desire Under the Elms has generally been dismissed as a domestic tragedy. In a domestic tragedy, the characters are ordinary human beings, generally taken from the middle class, and the tragedy is brought about by the transgression, usually sexual, of either the wife or the husband. In the present tragedy, also the characters all belong to the middle class of life. They are rustics, living on a remote New England farm. The domestic felicity is ruined and family life disrupted because of the moral transgression of Abbie, the step-mother and her sexual relations with Eben, and retribution and punishment for the sin they committed.

Edgar F. Racey Jr., describes the play as 'that play is a tragedy few will dispute (although early critics tended to see it as a mere shoddy domestic tragedy). It combines a traditional tragic theme (the Oedipus legend) with a dramatic reconciliation in the interests of a higher virtue (Justice) Abbie and Eben, as they are reconciled to their fate (which they will), assume a dignity which approaches tragic stature. As they acknowledge their guilt and enter into the process of expiation, their characters tend to become generalized, and O'Neill manages to suggest something approaching the idea of universal justice."⁸⁰

W. E. Bigsby, in *A Critical to Twentieth-Century American Drama* (1984), describes what happens "at the heart of *Desire*" as an image of "anarchy which is expressed through a quasi-incestuous relationship between a son and his stepmother. And the consequence is a

sterility of life when must be destroyed, a synthesis which must be denied.”⁸¹ If this is so, the play then portrays the sterility of rural family life. O’Neill destroys the romantic image of farm life. Farm life is a process of disillusion and disintegration; it “means narrowness of outlook, or moral degeneracy, or financial ruin, or brutality, or sexual repression, in short, a distinctively unlovely way of life.”⁸² More specifically, in portrays of sterility of a definite society – that of Puritan New England in the middle of the twentieth century. Thus, “*Desire*... dramatizes an aspect of the American past that helps to explain the continuing American character.”⁸³

Alan Lewis, in *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theater* (1965), describes the success of *Desire Under the Elms*, in part as “a success of scandal” in its attack upon Puritanism, the original American greed for lands that they sacrifice all their values for the sake of land and in its discussion of human relations.⁸⁴ Consequently, the family relationships in *Desire* are characterized by physical solitude, falsity of dreams and love, lack of mutuality and fulfillment, and above all, brutality. In O’Neill’s family drama, there is no way to reconcile order with natural, spontaneous family is no more than a wish.

It is obvious that through his concept of family, O’Neill emphasizes the importance of authority and order in family relationships. Freedom from them means a constant battle of the self against others. Accordingly, “in *Desire Under the Elms* neither mutuality nor self-assertion brings the harmony that is expected for each is destructive.”⁸⁵ The Cabot family embodies the cycle of futile escape from family.

The Cabots, in *Desire Under the Elms* are literally imprisoned trapped, in one way or another, on their rocky, impoverished New England farm. Their complex family relationships reveal the Puritan Legacy, which is replaced by pursuit for material possessions and physical desires. Ephraim, the father, is the embodiment of harsh paternity, religious fanaticism, and physical strength. He enslaves his sons and his wives. All the kinds of relationships within the family are devoid of love, communication, and understanding. The father and his three sons hate each other. Consequently, the fraternal relationships is characterized by hatred, envy, and materialistic interest. Eben’s prohibited relation with his stepmother is a kind of revenge upon his father and an attempt to escape out of the family sphere. Thus, the family members try to escape from the family limits to go to their freedom, like Simeon and Peter who fled to California to get gold. But their escape leads them to loss, alienation, and self-destruction. In his quest for spiritual and moral values, O’Neill was trying to discover the roots and sense of belonging of the American family, and then to find solution to the dilemma of the split self. Consequently, the family relationships, in *Desire Under the Elms*, are characterized by physical solitude, betrayal, falsity of dreams and love, lack of mutuality and fulfillment, above all, brutality. As a result, O’Neill family drama reveals that the American harmonious family is no more than a wish.

Conclusion

The American struggle for a family in a world in which the family is constantly threatened. Old feudal system of authority and status has been abolished. Free, warm, and spontaneous relations should follow. But what occurs seems like anarchy. The extreme of freedom was avoided, but only temporarily.

Eugene O’Neill dominated the family drama of the 1920s and 1930s, post-World War I. This period witnessed the retreat of the traditional social values in front of materialism, the inhuman scale, and the mechanical rhythms which Eugene O’Neill criticized in his realistic drama. His play, *Desire Under the Elms*, portrays the breakdown and alienation of the American family and examine family relationships from different historical, regional, ethnic, and cultural perspectives, focusing on how individuals and generations have defined the American dream and made the search their own.

The Cabots, in *Desire Under the Elms*, are literally imprisoned, trapped, in one way or another, on their rocky, impoverished New England farm. Their complex family relationships reveal the Puritan legacy, which is replaced by pursuit for material possessions and physical

desires. Ephraim, the father, is the embodiment of harsh paternity, religious fanaticism, and physical strength. He enslaves his sons and his wives. All the kinds of relationships within the family are devoid of love, communication, and understanding. The father and his three sons hate each other. Consequently, the fraternal relationship is characterized by hatred, envy, and materialistic interest. Eben prohibited relation with his stepmother is a kind of revenge upon his father and his an attempt to escape out of the family sphere. Thus, the family members try to escape from the family limits to get their freedom, like Simeon and Peter who fled to California to get gold. But their escape led them to loss, alienation, and self-destruction. In his quest for spiritual and moral values, O'Neill was trying to discover the roots and sense of belonging of the American family, and then to find a solution to the dilemma of the split self. Consequently, the family relationships, in *Desire Under the Elms*, are characterized by physical solitude, betrayal, falsity of dreams and love, lack of mutuality and fulfillment, and above all, brutality. As a result, O'Neill's family drama reveals that the American harmonious family is no more than a wish.

The importance of O'Neill as a social critic lies in the fact that he emphasizes the psychological aspects of the modern social order. He points out the disease of our acquisitive society. So we may conclude that O'Neill's concept of the American family looked more deeply and fully into the relationship between the individual and his family than did those who followed him. He reveals the breakdown of the American family but, to him, the individual is trapped within the family, has nowhere else to go, and is forced to live the cycle of family conflict and destruction.

Notes

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