

A REVIEW OVER DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS

Laura Alexandra Petrea (Șopterean)
PhD. Student, UMFST „George Emil Palade” of Târgu Mureș

Abstract: The present paper deals with Eugene O’Neill’s play, Desire Under The Elms and the Greek Mythology, who has a big influence over it. In O’Neill’s writings, there are a lot of biographical elements which determined him to write plays, and at the same time, his life makes him read a lot of information and Greek tragedy. The writer’s life events which have influenced him, and then the specific terms are defined and presented. These two important aspects are found in Eugene O’Neill’s plays, and in the light of these, I can analyze the play.

Keywords: O’Neill, myths, elms, play, 1924

Desire Under the Elms was published in 1924. While writing it, Eugene O’Neill had a deep depression because of incidents which took place in his family, the death of his parents and brother and the first divorce. Maybe that is the reason why this play is so tragic. “At that time, O’Neill’s view of the human condition and mankind’s prospect had long been darkening. He deeply felt a sense of isolation, alienation, and degradation prevailing the whole America” (Jing). His own tragic life and that transitional period of America from free capitalism to monopoly capitalism made O’Neill write this tragic story of a family destroyed by desire – the desire of being rich, the desire of fortune and money, the desire of having anything that cannot have. In this play, every character desires something that he or she cannot achieve.

The play consists of many elements belonging to Greek tragedies and also it contains many new elements like supernaturalism, language, fortune, some comic elements and degeneration of the tragic hero. There is a mix between the traditional and modern, which is very impressive.

Eugene O’Neill is unquestionably American greatest playwright who won Noble Prize for literature in 1936. He wanted contemporary American drama to achieve the power of the ancient Greek tragedies. Before O’Neill’s time, Americans saw only imported plays from Europe, melodrama’s farces and sentimental comedies. (Jing)

Desire Under the Elms is three parts play, and it presents a very complex relationship of Cabot’s family. As O’Neill mentions at the beginning, “The action of the entire play takes place in, and immediately outside of, the Cabot farmhouse in New England, in the year of 1850”(O’Neill 2). The main character, Eben Cabot, is the first who appears. The farmhouse has a strange description, two elms are on each side of the house, and they seem to hug the house and protect it and at the same time to subdue. Also, the house is grey and needs painting; the elms are the only ones who give life with their green color.

There is sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house 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. (O'Neill 2)

I think that through this description of the trees, the author is trying to present the haunting past. Eben's father had two wives who died. The first wife is Simeon, and Peter's mother and her name are Jen and the second wife's name is Min, and she was the mother of Eben. Although they are not present in the play, they are still haunting. Jen is not mentioned so much, but Min or well-said Maw is a very important character, although she is never seen and never appears on stage. She is mostly a ghost who haunts in the story.

The main theme of the story relates the love story between Eben, his father named Ephraim Cabot and his stepmother, Abbie Putnam. It is very strange, the fact that Eben doesn't love his father and between them is a fight for fortune and revenge. O'Neill describes Eben:

He is twenty-five, tall, and sinewy. His face is well-formed, good-looking, but its expression is resentful and defensive. His defiant, dark eyes remind one of a wild animal in captivity. Each day is a cage in which he finds himself trapped but inwardly unsubdued. There is a fierce repressed vitality about him. He has black hair, mustache, a thin curly trace of a beard. He is dressed in rough farm clothes. (O'Neill 3)

Desire Under the Elms is a drama which relates to traditional Greek tragedies and at the same time with modernism because O'Neill was contemporary with it. The elements from Greek are the ghost, the Oedipus' complex, Phaedra, Medea, chorus, revenge, haunting past, murders, and the modern elements are the supernaturalism, degradation of the tragic heroes, comic elements and also the setting.

Oedipus Complex, like Freud name it comes from Greek tragedy by Sophocles in which the king Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother. Freud concluded that "boy's unconscious rivalry with his father for the love of his mother" (Freud 202). Bogard noticed the fact that in this case, "we are dealing with a real case of psycho-sexual fixation on the mother, with its concomitant feature-hatred of the father" (103). In this case, is the same fixation: Eben hates his father and accuses him of killing his mother and even wishes him to be dead "EBEN (with a sardonic chuckle) Honor the father! (They turn, startled, and stare at him. He grins, then scowls) I pray he's died" (O'Neill, 5).

Here we have Freud's words about this complex and the scientific explanation:

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 regarding 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 coloring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father is ambivalent; it seems as if the ambivalence inherent in the identification from the beginning had come 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. (Freud 21-22)

However Eben is twenty-five years old, and he lost his mother when he was only sixteen, he still calls his dead mother "Maw" like he is a child and there is a deep connection between them. Everything he does, he thinks of her, he wants to be like her "EBEN

(intensely) I'm Maw – every drop o' blood!" (O'Neill 6). Their relationship is so close, and his mother is always in his thought, she is like a god for him.

Also, his mother is perfect in his view and Eben thinks that everything belongs to him because he is his heir and accuses his father and his brothers of killing her "Why didn't ye stand between him 'n' my Maw when he was slavin' her to her grave – t' pay her back fur the kindness she did t' yew?" (O'Neill 6), "She was good t' everyone. I'm her – heir." (O'Neill 6).

When his father brings him the new mother, Abbie who is only thirty-five years old he is very angry "EBEN (spitting with disgust) Her – here – sleepin' with him – stealin' my Maw's farm! I'd as soon pet a skunk 'o kiss a snake!" (O'Neill 12) And doesn't accept the idea that another woman will take his mother's place and then he is thinking at the fortune like it only belongs to him "EBEN (with queer excitement) It's Maw's farm again! It's my farm! Them's my cows! I'll milk my durn fingers off fur cows o' mine!" (O'Neill 14).

According to Freud, "we know nothing about the origin of this ambivalence. It may be assumed to be a fundamental phenomenon of our emotional life. That ambivalence, originally foreign to our emotional life, was acquired by mankind from the father complex, where psychological investigation of the individual to-day still reveals the strongest expression of it" (Freud 202). This play reflects Freud's words in a way because there is the ambivalence of love and hate, and from here, it comes to the rebellion theme.

The ghost (Maw), the revenge (on his father because he killed his mother) and the murder are very common in Greek tragedy. A good example is Hamlet, written by Shakespeare: at the beginning of the play, Hamlet's father's ghost comes to say that he has been murdered and asks for revenge. Here is the same story: Eben's mother's ghost needs to be revenged. Although she does not appear, the big elms represent her, because they are always present and cover the house's roof.

Eben and Abbie are attracted to each other, and a new love story will take place soon. "They stare into each other's eyes, his held by hers in spite of himself, hers glowingly possessive. Their physical attraction becomes a palpable force quivering in the hot air" (O'Neill 24). The desire is very strong and between them will be a connection, and Eben thinks that in this way will revenge on his father, by taking him his wife. Oedipus Complex is present again because he falls in love with her, and again, his father is his enemy. That love becomes so deep, and they feel it everywhere, although they are not together.

In the next room, EBEN gets up and paces up and down distractedly. ABBIE hears him. Her eyes fasten on the intervening wall with concentrated attention. EBEN stops and stares. Their hot glances seem to meet through the wall. Unconsciously he stretches out his arms for her and she half rises. Then aware, he mutters a curse at himself and flings himself face downward on the bed, his clenched fists above his head, his face buried in the pillow. ABBIE relaxes with a faint sigh, but her eyes remain fixed on the wall; she listens with all her attention for some movement from EBEN. (O'Neill 30)

This attraction between them is incest, and it is not normal. Ephraim does not observe it, but it feels that things are not the same and sleeping near the animals he can find peace. Eben's father and Abbie discuss a new heir, and they are planning to have a baby. Abbie needs the farm, the house because Cabot is sixty-eight years old and is something happens, she will be again on the road without anything and Cabot and his only son who stays with him, are enemies, and he wants to leave his farm to another child.

Abbie takes Maw's place and does everything Maw had done only to have Eben by her side.

EBEN Sometimes she used t' sing fur me.
ABBIE I'll sing fur ye!
EBEN This was her hum. This was her farm.
ABBIE This is my hum. This is my farm!
EBEN He married her t' steal 'em. She was soft an' easy. He couldn't 'preciate her.
ABBIE He can't 'preciate me!
EBEN He murdered her with his hardness.
ABBIE He's murderin' me! (O'Neill 36)

The love story between the step-mother and the son is real, and they are burning for desire. They are young and feel so much attraction. Abbie and Eben will have an infant.

ABBIE stands for a second staring at him, her eyes burning for desire. Then with a little cry, she runs over and throws her arms about his neck, she pulls his head back and covers his mouth with kisses. At first, he submits dumbly; then he puts his arms about her neck and returns their kisses, but finally, suddenly aware of his hatred, he hurls her away from him, springing to his feet. They stand speechless and breathless, panting like two animals. (O'Neill 33)

Ephraim Cabot thinks that the child belongs to him, and gives a party with all the farmers from the neighborhood. The music is playing and here is another common element between Greek tragedy and O'Neill's tragedy. In the first tragedy, there is a chorus and O'Neill adapted it into his play. But the music brings sadness this time – Abbie is not happy, Eben is missing, and all the people are laughing in Ephraim's back because of that child. All of them know that the child belongs to Eben.

Eben becomes jealous of his father again because he stole him everything: his mother, his farm, his love, and now his child. This jealousy will cause the infant's death, Abbie kills the baby only to demonstrate to Eben that she truly loves him. Abbie wants to become his love exactly like his mother "Don't cry, Eben! I'll take yer Maw's place! I'll be everythin' she was t' ye! Let me kiss ye, Eben!" (O'Neill 36).

Jing mentioned that Eugene O'Neill achievement to Greek tragedy is reflected in this play because it centers on its artistic form.

Here are portrayed Greek myths like Phaedra, Medea, and Oedipus, the king but in another manner, because they are adapted to an American modern-mythical setting. The desire is present everywhere in the play, also in the title, and this desire created all the tragedies in Cabot's family.

Let's think about the improvements to the Greek tragedy. I think the first improvement can be the degradation of the tragic heroes because O'Neill created this oedipal figure on a normal person, a farmer, and with this thing, he doesn't respect the Greek tradition. The farmer is called Eben Cabot, and he is a common man and belongs to the middle class. This hero is compared to an animal, not with a god, "dark eyes remind one of a wild animal in captivity" (O'Neill 3).

Another element which is different from Greek tragedies it's the end when Eben and Abbie find out that they truly love each other and they do everything for their love although they go to prison. In Greek tragedies, everything is tragic, also the end, but here we can say that is a little bit funny - their destiny won't be good, but they can feel real love.

During the play, Eben Cabot's dependence and the desire which he has with his mother is a drama. While is trying to replace his mother with Abbie is always comparing her with his Maw.

The father, Ephraim Cabot, is described as a strong person, but he is afraid of loneliness. Although he was married twice and he has three sons, they don't have a bond, and there are no feelings between them. "I lived with the boys. They hated me' cause I was hard. I hated them' cause they were soft. They coveted the farm without knowin' what it meant. It made me bitter 'n wormwood" (O'Neill 38). So, there are no emotions and love between them; there is only hate because the father is not satisfied with their work. He always compares them to his mothers, and he says that they are not strong like him. The relationship between Ephraim and Eben is clear, Eben hates him; but what about the relationship between Ephraim and the other two sons? Peter and Simeon are two adults and are elder than Eben; the first is thirty-seven years old, and the second is thirty-nine years old. The mother was Jenn, the first wife of Ephraim. They are not individualized to much, because they have the same vision of life, both of them are middle-aged, and both of them are obsessed with money and material. The relationship with their father is mechanical, they are like some machines which work on the farm, and his father offers them a place to sleep and some food. Between the two elder brothers is a strong connection and Eben is separated from them. This thing can be observed still from the beginning of the play when they come together home, and Eben is alone. Another is an example is the way they sleep "Simeon and Peter and in a double bed, front. Eben's cot is to the rear" (O'Neill 10).

Simeon and Peter think rationally and are not obsessed with their mother. When they see Abbie, of course, they realize why she married his father, but they prefer to take his part of the money from Eben and go to make his own living into the west, where they think it is gold, in California. So, when their father and step-mother come at home, they go. They seem more mature and have a sense of humor to improve the beginning of the play.

ABBIE (with the conqueror's conscious superiority) I'll go and look at my house.

(She goes slowly around to porch).

SIMEON (with a snort) Her house!

PETER (calls after her) Ye'll find Eben inside. Ye better not tell him it's yewr house.

(O'Neill 19)

The tragic elements which are used in *Desire Under the Elms* represent the haunting past which still has effects on the present and future. The past is the one who controls the tragic action and is represented by Eben Cabot's mother who dominates the story, although she is not alive.

"The elm trees in the garden of the Cabot farmhouse, first of all, symbolize the primordial past, and they are at the same time a link between the present and the past. They are also the symbols of youthful energy and rejuvenation" (Jing) Jing explains the meaning of the tree symbol as being life and at the same time protection. The bond between elm's branches and the house represents Eben and Maw's unification. There is a strong connection with Hamlet because through something Eben's mother and Hamlet's father are still present and seem to ask for revenge.

Eugene O'Neill's play is written using the Greek model of incest, and that's why Eben is so attracted to his mother. The tragedy and the desire create the atmosphere of the whole play.

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 to Greeks treated and invoking a determinism that is as potent as that found in Greek drama. (Berlin 71)

The Greek myth of Phaedra is analogous to the story from *Desire Under the Elms*. In Seneca's Phaedra is also a family like Cabot's family where Theseus falls in love with Hippolytus, Theseus's son from another marriage. Phaedra is the step-mother who make passionate love offers to her step-son named Hippolytus. The step-son refuses all these

offerings, and his step-mother accuses him of rape. The father, Theseus, curses his son because of that and he is killed by a bull (Seneca 99-149). Eugene O'Neill followed this mythic story: Ephraim Cabot is the father Theseus and Abbie is the step-mother, Phaedra. Abbie is attracted by Eben's youth and falls in love with him, but she also lies the father that Eben is making loving offers. Eben and Hippolytus both reject their step-mothers at the beginning. The fathers have many wives, are old, curse their sons, and at the end, they remain alone. The difference is at the sons because Hippolytus dies, but Eben remains alive and still loves Abbie. The murder which is present in *Desire Under the Elms* is the course of Ephraim, the father, on his son but this course affected the son's infant, who is killed by Abbie.

Another Greek myth which is reflected in *Desire Under the Elms* is Euripide's *Medea*. Medea and Jason are husbands, and Jason wants to leave Medea and marry a new woman. He abandons her, and she decides to kill their children as revenge for the abandon and also to leave Jason without heirs. She thinks that is the best way to revenge and punish his ex-husband. This is a very big sin in Greek mythology when a person kills someone who belongs to his blood. Medea made a mistake because Jason leaves her free will to do anything she wants with her life, and the children should have their fate instead of murdering them (Euripides 1-47). In *Desire Under the Elms*, the story is a little bit different because Abbie, the one which correlates with Medea is married to a man and lies about their child because he belongs to another man, the son of his husband. So, Medea is Abbie and Jason is the step-son of Abbie, named Eben Cabot. The infant disinherits Eben, although he is his father. Ephraim thinks that he is the infant's father, although all the neighbor knows the reality. Eben is very confused because thinks that Abbie was incorrect to him and becomes angry. He rejects her love for him and utters, "I wish he never was born! I wish he'd die this minit! I wish I'd never sot eyes on him! It's him-yew havin' him-a purpose t' steal! That's changed, everythin'!" (O'Neill 39). That is the reason why Abbie decided to kill the childlike Medea killed her children. Both of them kill what they love because of the father's love: Medea killed the children to revenge on her husband Jason and Abbie killed his child to demonstrate Eben, the man she truly loves, that their love is more important than that child. Eben and Abbie are victims, and they love each other very much. Greek tragedy is present because, at the end of the play, they are responsible for their sinful acts, and justice is made. Abbie accepts his guild and says "I' got t' take my punishment – t' pay for my sin" (O'Neill 40), and Eben considers himself guilty for what he said and utters "I want t' share with ye, Abbie, - prison 'r death 'r hell 'r anythin'!" (O'Neill 40). They reunite and share their guilt because they love each other. Abbie's husband, Ephraim Cabot remains alone after the Justice is done.

O'Neill gives us a portrait of partners in sin who work out their redemption and who, within a modern context, evoke echoes of classical tragedy. O'Neill formed a story in a typical tragic pattern: his characters follow a course of sin and redemption in recognition of error and the assumption of responsibility. (Shaughnessy 97)

In this play is represented the ambivalence between love and hate, step-mother and step-son, the hate between father and son and myths which adopt the structure of Greek classical tragedies. *Desire Under the Elms* is a classical tragedy, but it is written in a modern way. "O'Neill successfully adopts the classical traits of tragedy portrayed in the Greek tragedy into the modern tragedy" (Jing)

All in all, *Desire Under the Elms* is a mirror of American society. It denounces the disastrous impacts of the myth of material prosperity and the life-denying Puritanism on Americans through the story of the New England family, the Cabots. It also exposes O'Neill gifted creating power, by which he recreated the Greek tragic spirit in this play. (Jing) .

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