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The Picture of Patriarchy, Desire for Money and a Voice against Feudalism in *Desire Under The Elms*

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Abstract:

This paper is based on the study of American Society. Through the deep study of Eugene O'Neill's drama *Desire Under the Elms*, it is clear that people want to have success at any cost. There is no value of humanity and sympathy. There is a lack of mutual understanding. All have become totally materialistic for their self-interests. The clear picture of malicious patriarchy, feudalism and lust for money can be seen. People do not have time for their children and the children also do not have time for their parents. Everyone is running from each other in a mad race to get more and more money.

Keywords: American Society, patriarchy, money-minded, desire for materialistic things and incestuous love.

The American dramatist, Eugene O'Neill wrote *Desire under the Elms* shortly after the death of his brother Jamie in 1924, when the world was controlled under the conventional, a severe order of Puritanism, malicious blood of Patriarchy and the understandable fascination for materialism. This play represents the picture of the capitalistic society, in which people have become very materialistic for their own interests. As Olivia Coolidge says in *Eugene O'Neill*, "Desire solved O'Neill's financial problems for the immediate moment, but it did not heal the split among the Provincetown Players" (167).

The title of the play itself foretells the sentiment and the mood prevalent throughout the play, which is that of strong desire. Moreover, this desire comes to the characters' desire for perfection (Ephraim Cabot), position or place (Peter, Simeon and Abbie) and individuality or identity (Eben), in a materialistic world where although they force in their goals, they throw with the force of fate into their dreadful end.

The story revolves around a grubby, remote farmhouse of 1850 in New England under two mammoth trees of Elms. In the play, there is a father, Ephraim Cabot, who is seventy-five years old, has lost two wives. His two elder sons are from his first wife: Simeon, who is thirty-nine years old and Peter who is thirty-seven years old. Eben, who is only twenty-five years old, is the son of Ephraim's second wife. Abbie is the third pretty faced and astuteness wife of Mr.

Cabot. She is only thirty-five years old. All these characters are living in an incongruous and ambiguous world. All of them have lost the meaning of their life. They are grudging over each other.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill creates the figure of the 'father' as an archetype of the archaic hard, hubristic and ruthless father. O'Neill introduces him, as an incarnation of the human will to power. Fredrick Wilikins describes Ephraim Cabot, the father, as "the spokeman of a materialistic society that destroys the souls of other men, and as a puritan protagonist he always has an appropriate biblical quotations for every missed he performs." He does not want to abandon his property even after his death. He dislikes his sons because he thinks that they are not like him. They are timid and stupid.

O'Neill depicted the Puritan's rigid life in this play. The land was necessary to the puritan's lives as they entirely depended upon it for their livelihood. In this play, Ephraim Cabot plays the role of a Puritan-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). In ancient times, the puritans were dominating others and in modern times, the capitalism is dominating the poor. There was clash among the relationships, and this clash can be seen today.

Early in the play, in scene one, the father-son relationship exposes the conflict of father-son, which is represented in the antagonism of the three sons, Simeon, Peter and Eben, towards their father "Slaved Sim 'n' him 'n' Eben to death" by making stone walls "to fence them in" (*The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* 207). They fight like vultures for the piece of flesh (in the play, it is the land). The farm for which they pay their life is nothing but walls of stone 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. (*The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* 208-09)

Ephraim married Eben's mother in order to get her farm in his own hands. She became a victim of Ephraim's hotheaded egotism, like the other members of the family. Eben's desire to have the farm and to revenge are the two factors of his character. On the one hand, he loves his mother, who was very soft, and on the other hand, he is greedy, lusty and dominated like his father. He thinks that only for the reason of his father, his mother is nowhere? She has lost her life for the reason of over work.

EBEN. Didn't he slave Maw t' death?

PETER. He's slaved himself t' death. He's slaved Sim 'n' me 'n' yew t' death-on'y none o' us hain't died-yit. (*The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* 207)

As Doris V. Falk points out:

Ephraim has enslaved his sons to the farm, and let his second wife, Eben's mother, die overworked and love-starved. Now, her spirit- the Dionysian instinctual life force- opposes the Puritanical Ephraim and his God. Her self-sacrifice, her longing for beauty, her need of natural sexual love demand fulfillment. (*Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension* 95)

Ephraim wears the mask of a true Puritan; he thinks that it is his desire to rule over others. He thinks that he is right in making every decision and never cares for the feelings of others. He thinks that it is the duty of others to follow his rules. It is his thinking (like a capitalistic) that he is so worried about his society (property), while his sons are fools, who can never think what is right or what is wrong for them. His sons unmask their father's Puritanical faith revealing his inner reality of religious pretense:

SIMEON. (imitating his father's voice) I'm riding out t' learn God's message..., he says. I'll bet right then an' ther he knew plumb well he was goin' whorin', the stinkin' old hypocrite!. (*The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* 215)

Ephraim as a Patriarch, is ruling over his house, and enjoying the sex relation not only with his successive wives, but also with the village prostitute, Min. His sons are jealous of him, and at the same time they want to do the same things as their father is doing, they possess everything as their father possesses. They also go to Min, a village prostitute as they tell to Eben that:

PETER. All they is... Sim knew her- an' then me arter-

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

SIMEON. (with a grim) Ay-eh! We air his heirs in everythin!. (*The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* 210-11)

O'Neill depicted the psyche of people in the industrialized society. It is not the fault of children for their behavior. They are behaving as they are learning from their elders. It is the duty of elders to change their behavior so that their children can learn a good lesson. If they are maltreating their children same as with animals, the children will adopt the same attitude and will respond in the same way.

In the capitalistic society, people are falling into the well of imitation. They are imitating others as in this play; the sons are doing the same things as their father is doing. There is nobody who can differentiate between what is wrong or right. All are falling on the same filth because each one wants to go ahead. For the reason of materialistic mind set-up, there is no balance in relationships.

There is no emotional attachment among them. Three of them are greedy for money-oriented things. When they hear the news of their father's new marriage, Eben tries to convince his brothers to sign a paper relinquishing to him their eventual shares in the farm and to buy the

land he steals the money of his father to pay them. Almost all the characters in this play are caught in a web of rootless greed for property and there is no value of humanity. They have forgotten the fear of God. Alan Lewis in *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre* says, “In this play, 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 the play, Mr. Cabot exploits every member of his family to improve the farm. Every member of the family hates him and he lives alone with his cows. Everyone wants to run away from him, so that all of them can take a breath of relief. The family members feel that they are mere instruments rather than being members of the family. He plays with them as a kid plays with a plastic toy. A little kid picks the toys when he/she wants and throws away them when he/she desires. It is the same situation of Mr. Cabot; he only wants work from his family members. His first wife worked with him day and night like an ox and never complained about anything. When she passed away he brought a second, when she passed away, then he brings a third wife. He wishes that he can take the farm with him to the other world of eternity, but he knows that he cannot. Therefore, he likes to burn the farm than leaving to anyone:

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- this house an’ every ear o’corn an’ every tree down t’ the last blade of hay! I’d sit an’ know it was all a-dying with me an’ no one else’d ever own what was mine, what I’d made out o’nothin’ with my own sweat ’n’ blood. (*The Plays of Eugene O’Neill* 232)

Alan Lewis in *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre* 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).

Eugene O’Neill handled the family drama of 1920s and 1930s, Post World War I. This period demonstrated the retreat of the traditional social values in front of materialism and the inhuman scale. His play, *Desire under the Elms*, characterizes the collapse and separation of the American family and investigates the family relationships from different historical, regional, ethnic and cultural perspectives.

O’Neill’s *Desire under the Elms*, is regarded the first important tragedy to be written in America and won him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1936. This play represents the picture of the modern self-inhabiting in a society dominated by the instrumental Capitalism. The Cabot farm is presented as a world of cold and barren where everyone lives for one’s self and in defense of the other slaves. Family relationship and mutual concern for each other are absent among the Cabot’s family members. Mr. Cabot makes his wives and his sons slave to the farm. As a result,

he receives no attention and love from his family. So he feels lonely and cold. As Floyd elaborates, “The Cabots are consumed by a powerful, obsessive greed that causes them to exploit each other and the land. Insensate greed and lust are vices that, to O’Neill, demoralize these Puritans and ultimately cause their down fall” (*A New Testament* 275).

There is a proverb: as you sow, so shall you reap. Mr. Cabot sows the seeds of hate and greed among his family members and gets the fruit of hate and greed. His sons treat him in the same way as he treats them. He runs away from his sons desires, in the same way, his sons never cares what he desires. His sons do the same things as their father does. His sons run away from him and leave him with his cows.

After the marriage of Ephraim and Abbie, Simone and Peter decide to move to California for Gold (money). They think that there are fields of gold and they will become rich very soon. They do not need to work day and night in the farm of Mr. Cabot as Oxen. They leave their stepbrother to welcome his new maw and never think about their younger brother. They know that Eben will never allow entering, his father and stepmother, in his home and farm and there will be a fight between Eben and Ephraim; “Dog’ll eat dog!” (*The Plays of Eugene O’Neill* 211). After it, they meet, to Mr. Cabot and Abbie at the gate, before to move for California. They give a threat to their father that: “An’ rape yer new woman! Whoop!” (*The Plays of Eugene O’Neill* 223), and then move away.

Like his brothers, Eben at first seeks satisfaction in a dream of material possession. However, as the play proceeds it becomes clear that his hatred for his father and his legalistic claims of ownership are only indicators of a truer desire: to rediscover through identification with the land, and the security that the love of his dead mother brings him. He wants to fill the void created by the death of his mother. He wants not to possess but to be possessed by the force of his mother’s love, which he associates with the land. However, all this implies total renunciation of the self. For Eben, the true and the consummate condition of being are to belong to the land as an unborn child belongs to the womb.

Eben’s desire for the farm and for revenge is of two factors that determine his character. On the 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 V.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 brothers keep reminding him of that he is the spitting image of his father” (95).

Abbie is a widow of thirty- five, she agrees for marriage for the reason of shelter and money. She does not love Mr. Cabot, but his property. She is fascinated towards Eben who is too young and they involve in incestuous relationship. She wants a child from Eben, because Mr. Cabot is too

old for it. On the other hand, Ephraim Cabot dreams of getting a son from her. She becomes aware of the legal rights. She asks him that if she will give him a son, will he allot the house and the farm to her. Cabot easily agrees to comply with her desire. Thus legal sex in the form of marriage acts as a means of fortification of their legal rights of property for the father and the mother, it becomes a symptom of the loss of property for the third son. It means that Eben will get no share from property.

The security, which Eben is trying to find in Abbie's love, is not enough to compensate for the loss of the material gain. He accuses her of treachery and tells her that it is one of her wicked designs to inherit the farm. He alleges that Abbie has purposely duped him. All forces her to choose between him and her son. However, Abbie who has realized by now that human relationship is much more important and valuable than any other material gain, does not want to lose Eben at any cost, and murders the babe. Only then, Eben realizes that she comes to him truly.

After her action, Eben runs through the jungle to bring the Sheriff. Ephraim gets the news that Abbie has killed the child and he requests to the sheriff that announce the capital punishment to Eben and Abbie, because Abbie killed the child for the sake of her affair with Eben. Eben also confesses his crime. They are arrested at last and their conversation before arrest:

ABBIE. Wait (Turns to Eben) I love ye, Eben.

EBEN. I love ye, Abbie. (They kiss. The three men grin and shuffle embarrassedly. Eben takes Abbie's hand. They go out the door in rear, the men following, and come from the house, walking hand in hand to the gate. Eben stops there and points to the sunrise sky) Sun's a-rizin'. Purty, hain't it?

ABBIE. Ay-eh. (They both stand for a moment looking up raptly in attitudes strangely aloof and devout). (*The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* 269)

From Abbie's action, it is clear that she truly loves Eben and raises her voice against feudalism that women can also take their own decisions. She boldly announces that she only loves Eben not Mr. Cabot. She is the symbol of awareness and freedom. She does not hesitate from any man.

The play, *Desire Under the Elms*, starts with a significant word 'Desire' and ends with a significant word 'Elms'. In the play, Abbie cunningly desires to have an illegitimate son by Eben, her stepson. She wants to acquire the whole property of Mr. Cabot under the legal name of impotent Ephraim Cabot. As Raghavacharyulu says in *Eugene O'Neill*, "All the conflicts in the play arise from the self-centred, exploitative desires of the ambushing each other in a game of cunning derring-do" (55).

The word 'Desire' also symbolizes Eben's equally passionate longing to become the sole owner of the farm, because it belongs to his mother. Mr. Cabot desires to have mental support

and biological satisfaction from his third young wife, Abbie. He also desires to have his control over the family and the farm. Finally, Desire suggests Simeon and Peter are longing to have the whole property. They desire to become rich by making a quest for gold, as they aspire to leave for California. In fact, it denotes the longing of Simeon and Peter of getting rid of the restrictions imposed upon them by their cruel father.

The word 'elms' is also very significant. It also means maternal love. The two elm trees are seen at the beginning of the play. They are bending over the house like the sagging breasts of a woman; it means that the house is under the power of a mother. Perhaps, it means that the farm and the house belong to the mother of Eben. He always wants to take revenge for the death of his mother. There is also second meaning of 'elm' is 'mammoth', which means 'money'. In the play, it shows that all the characters are fighting for farm and money. They are exploiting their relationship of blood for the reason of property.

O'Neill shows the materialistic life of people who are spiritually dead, in *Desire Under the Elms*. This play also represents the materialism of modern man by regarding the conflict among the characters to possess the farm: the conflict between father and sons. O'Neill searched for a faith and the meaning of life, which is very dim, unclear and vague in this capitalistic society. Alan Lewis says in *American Plays and Contemporary Playwrights of the Theatre*:

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. (22)

The Cabots, in *Desire Under the Elms*, are literally imprisoned and trapped, in one way or another, on their rocky, impoverished New England farm. Their complex family relationships reveal the puritan legacy, which replaces 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 wives and sons as a master (capitalistic). All 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 characterizes by hatred, envy, and materialistic interest. Eben's prohibited relationship with his stepmother is a kind of revenge upon his father and an attempt to escape from the family limits to go to their freedom, like Simeon and Peter who fled to California for gold. However, their escape leads them to loss, alienation, and self-destruction. In his quest for spiritual and moral values, O'Neill tried to discover the roots and sense of belonging to the American family, and then to found 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, love, lack of mutuality, fulfillment and above all, brutality.

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