LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Shackled but not Shattered: Ephraim Cabot in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*

Dr. Diwakar Thomas

Associate Professor, Department of English, Kongunadu Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

Desire Under The Elms (1924) is one of O'Neill's seminal plays. Queried in 1925 about the themes of the play, O'Neill called it a tragedy of the possessive (Floyd 155). The plot juxtaposed with the Biblical themes and paralleled with the Greek tragedy, has acquired a new meaning and added new directions to the play. The play is essentially a story of solitude, physical solitude, the solitude of the land, of men's dreams, of love, of life. Ephraim Cabot, the 75 year old protagonist, appears only near the end of scene four, yet he dominates the action.

Keywords

Ephraim Cabot; Solitude; *Desire Under The Elms;* Eugene O'Neill.

◆

Desire Under the Elms (1924) is one of O'Neill's seminal plays. Queried in 1925 about the themes of the play, O'Neill called it a tragedy of the possessive

(Floyd 155). The plot juxtaposed with the Biblical themes and paralleled with the Greek tragedy, has acquired a new meaning and added new directions to the play. The play "is essentially a story of solitude, physical solitude, the solitude of the land, of men's dreams, of love, of life" (Young). The God behind the existence created on this New England farm is a harsh God, who is alone and is not understood.

The play is divided into three parts and there are four scenes in Part I. This neatly structured play leads to Cabot farmhouse in New England, in the year 1850. Ephraim Cabot, the 75 year old protagonist, appears only near the end of scene four, yet he dominates the action. The older sons Simeon and Peter are longing to escape as their tyrannical father has forced them to work in the stony farm. The sons have decided not to obey their father, who had left the farm two months before. They made up their minds to leave for California in search of gold. But Eben, the son of Ephraim's second wife, has a different plan. His strategy is to stay back as he "longs to take revenge for his Mother's exhaustion and death" (Leech 48). All three sons hate and wish Ephraim dead. Eben believes the farm to be rightly his, because it was his mother's before him. His father, in his eyes, is a robber, fit only to be hated and cheated at every turn. (Skinner 148).

Eben goes brutally to Min, a notorious woman in the village. It is revenge as well as lust that triggered him, because he has heard that his father had sampled this woman too. "An' Paw kin tell yew somethin' too! He was fust!" (*DUE* 144). Eben is desperate to get possession of the farm, to which his mother's family had a claim. When the news is brought that Ephraim has married again and that he and his new wife will arrive soon, Eben persuades his half-brothers to sign a paper, relinquishing to him their eventual shares in the farm. He pays them for this with three hundred dollars belonging to Ephraim. In Eben's mind the money was the result of his mother's slavery and death – it belongs to his mother and to him!

Ephraim's arrival with Abbie, his third wife, fails to evoke any enthusiastic response from Simeon, Peter and Eben. Abbie is described as thirty- five, buxom, full of vitality. The sons show no eagerness to receive their "new maw". Simeon and Peter, the "loutish sons of the soil" (Falk 94) threaten to burn the farm and "rape year new woman" (*DUE* 157). They jokingly ask Ephraim to lodge her in the pen meant for the sows. They call him an "old skinflint" and "bloodsucker" (*DUE* 158). Ephraim feels that they have gone mad in his absence and threatens to have them chained up in a lunatic asylum. The "Bible-quoting, tyrannical father" (Raleigh 31) curses them for misbehaving with him in such an outrageous manner.

Eben is still undecided about the type of attitude he should follow toward Abbie. He is in the kitchen when she enters unnoticed and her eyes take him in penetratingly with a calculating appraisal of his strength against hers. She offers her friendship, speaking in her most seductive tones and tries to win his sympathy. She tells him the past story of her own "hard life" - her first marriage to a drunkard, the death of her little child followed by the death of her husband and her economic distress.

But Eben, though "physically attracted to her" is 'psychologically trapped by an all-powerful mother-complex" (Asselineau 61), does not want to accept Abbie as his "new Maw". He blurts out that she is a devil. But Abbie ignoring this insult, walks up to him slowly with a coarse expression of desire in her face and body says: "An upstairs- that be my bedroom- an' my bed"! (*DUE* 161).But the terribly confused Eben ejaculates furiously:" No, ye durned old witch! I hate ye!" (*DUE*161) and rushes out of the door.

In the meantime, old Ephraim takes a sudden liking towards Eben. Abbie, who is "wicked" and "has a possessive greed for Ephraim's land" (Collin 231) begins to be frightened. What if Ephraim, who feels he is getting old and should decide to leave the farm to Eben instead of to her? When Abbie asks harshly what he would do with her, Ephraim replies rather smiling queerly, "ye'd be

turned free, too" (*DUE* 168). This scene leads to her discovery that what Eparaim most desires in the world is another son and that if she can fulfil this desire, he will give her anything she asks, even the farm.

Ephraim, moved by his desire for Abbie, falls into a typical modified monologue. The essence of his statement is that a little less than fifty years before he has grown hard in the service of a hard god. "God", he says, "hain't easy" (*DUE* 172). He tells Abbie of a time when despairing of so many stones, he gave up the farm and journeyed west. At the end of the monologue, Ephraim realizes that Abbie has not understood him. In disgust he leaves her and stumbles through the night to join the cows in the barn, "Whar it's restful whar it's warm" (*DUE* 174) and as he rounds the corner of the house. He stretches up his arms into the night and cries out to a God he understands (Bogard 219): "God Almighty, call from the dark!" (*DUE* 174).

Abbie, who has fallen in love with Eben succeeds in seducing him and "they become lovers" (Leech 50). Upon consummation of their love, the ghost of Eben's dead mother will be set at rest. After the event the room in which it took place, formerly that of Eben's mother, loses its oppressive, tomb-like atmosphere.

It is from the union of Abbie and Eben a son is born and Epharaim arranges a fine party to celebrate the new arrival. At the party, Ephraim, the supposed father, proud of his achievement acts the role of the satyr, drinking and bragging of his sexual prowess, but his neighbours mock him to his face. While the neighbours are dancing in the kitchen, Eben and Abbie are seen kissing in the bedroom in the presence of their child.

In an interval from the dancing, outside the house, Ephraim and Eben meet. Epharim gets "excited, a cruel, triumphant grin comes to his lips' (*DUE* 190). At first he gloats over the new born child, and then tells Eben that Abbie always despised him, and wanted to have a son only to make sure that she and not Eben would have the farm. Petrified with grief and anger Eben cries madly:

"I'll murder her!" (*DUE* 191). He is furious and in his rage, he attacks his father and the two men struggle until Abbie rushes out to separate them.

After Epharim's departure, Eben accuses Abbie of using him merely to father a child. He refuses to believe her wild protests that she really loves him now, and all that she once said was simply in resentment when he hated and ignored her. Abbie clings to him and passionately asks whether he would forgive her if she could prove that she had not schemed against him. To prove her love for Eben, she kills her new-born son! "The young couple", observes Bigsby, "having found in one another some purposes in life, are now to be separated for life" (Bigsby 64).

Abbie comes to Eben to tell him what she has done. At first he thinks she has killed his father but when he comes to know the truth, a new rage sweeps over him. "I kin see why ye done it!" he screams, "cause ye wanted to steal agen – steal the last thin' ye'd left me- my part of him-… ye killed him fur being mine!"(*DUE* 198). He runs off to the Sheriff to denounce her.

Gaining the desired inner strength, Abbie meets Ephraim and informs that she hates him and adds that she has killed the child to prove her love for Eben. She confesses that it was Eben's son. But Ephraim endures the humiliation of Abbie's betrayal and tells himself, "I got t' be –like a stone a rock O' jedgement! (*DUE* 201). In his desolation he threatens to set fire to the house and barn: Momentarily, he considers going to California to join Simeon and Peter, taking with him his hoarded savings. But he discovers that Eben had stolen his money and realizes that his easy plan to escape fails.

Eben enters, "sobbing brokenly" *(DUE* 202). He falls on his knees before Abbie and begs her to forgive him. When he suggests that they run away together before the Sheriff comes, Abbie states calmly: "I got't take my punishment-t' pay for my sin" (*DUE* 203). But it is the sin of murder and not her incestuous love for Eben that she means. Eben realizes that he too is guilty and decides to take the punishment. When the Sheriff comes to take away Abbie, Eben "gives himself up

as a partner in the crime- his one and only act of true manliness" (Skinner 154). Even old Ephraim gives him one look of grudging admiration: "purty good -fur yew!"(*DUE* 205) he exclaims.

At the end, Ephraim stalks grimly toward the barn. He has accepted the tragic fate and its justice. His three wives and three sons, in their own way, have betrayed him. He realizes that he can never free himself from the tract of barren land. The farm is himself and his prison. Now he is left alone, more lonesome than ever before. "In *Desire under the Elms* as in most tragedies", states Peston Fambrough "the innocent suffer with the guilty" (Fambrough 28).

Ephraim, no doubt, dominates the play's entire action. He remains one of O'Neill's most remarkable creations. Of this tall, gaunt and old protagonist, his maker has remarked: "I always have loved Ephraim so much! He's so autobiographical" (Sheaffer 130). O'Neill's "Love" of the old farmer, however, is not shared by commentators of the play. Doris Falk calls Ephraim "a self – centered, loveless man, who has projected his own, a tyrannic, acestic, restrictive embodiment of Puritanism" (Falk 94-95). For Clifford Leech he is 'a monster of egoism, of possessiveness", and a "cheap- jack's version 'of Jehovah" (Leech 51). Peter Hays points out that Ephraim's "use of Biblical language of quotations in debased contexts" indicates that his hard, stony religion is actually a perversion of Christianity (Hays 427).

The world of Ephraim is, indeed, filled with despair, but he conquers his despair by his indomitable will–power and pride. Although beaten and thwarted at every turn, still he did not give up. It is pride that sustains him, it is by pride that he has endured his failures. It has strengthened him in his search for God. In fact, he "remains faithful to the 'hard God'" (Waterstradt 30). In the end, he is left alone in the farm, accepts the heavy burden on his ancient shoulders, regarding it as just and proper. O'Neill wrote in 1917:

> The tragedy of Man is perhaps the only significant thing about him. What I am after is to get an audience leaving the theatre with an

> exultant feeling from seeing somebody on the stage facing life, fighting against the eternal odds, not conquering, but perhapsinevitably being conquered. The individual life is made significant just by the struggle. (Williams 116)

Of course, Epharaim's life is made significant just by that struggle. His struggle against nature, men and God, though momentarily crushes his spirits, he emerges victorious finally as he is hopeful of God's guidance. His confidence in God is revealed as he states: "I kin feel I be in the palm o' His hand, His fingers guidin', me" (*DUE* 205). Ephraim Cabot, though shackled, is not shattered and in fact, grows taller in defeat!

Works Cited

Primary Source:

Krutch, Joseph Wood, *Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neil.* 1941: Rpt. New York: The Modern Library, 1959. Print.

Secondary Sources:

Asselineau, Roger. *Desire Under the Elms: A Phase of Eugene O"Neill's Philosophy." Eugene O'Neill: A Collection of Criticism.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976. Print.

Bigsby C.W.E. *Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, Vol. I. 1900-1940.* Cambridge: CUP, 1982. Print.

Bogard, Travis and William I.Oliver. *Modern Drama: Essays In Criticism.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1965. Print.

Collin, Matthew T. "The Tragic Effect in *Autumn Fire* and *Desire Under the Elms.*" *Modern Drama* (1959): 230-236. Print.

Falk, Doris V. *Eugene O'Neill and The Tragic Tension.* New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958. Print.

Fambrough, Peston. "The Tragic Cosmology of O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms.*" *The Eugen O'Neill News Letter* (1986): 26-31. Print.

Floyd, Virginia. "One Hundred Percent American Tragedy: A Soviet View Eugene

O'Neil." *A World View* (1979): 154-158. Print.

Hays, Peter L. "Biblical Perversions in *Desire Under the Elms*." *Modern Drama* (1969): 425-432. Print.

Leech, Clifford. *O'Neill*. London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966. Print.

Raleigh, John Henry. *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965. Print.

Sheaffer, Louis. *O'Neill: Son and Playwright*. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1968. Print.

Skinner, Richard Dana. *Eugene O'Neill: A Poet's Quest*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964. Print.

Waterstradt, Jean Anne. "Another View of Ephraim Cabot: A Footnote to *Desire Under the Elms*." *The Eugene O'Neill News Letter* (1985): 27-34. Print.

Williams, Raymond. *Modern Tragedy*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1966. Print.

Young, Stark. *Desire Under the Elms: Eugene O'Neill's Latest Play, 1924. New York Times*. Web. 21 Dec. 2014. Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Thomas, Diwakar. "Shackled but not Shattered: Ephraim Cabot in Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms." *Literary Quest* 1.8 (2015): 30-37. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.