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A Psychological Re-visioning of O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*

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Abstract

Desire Under the Elms reveals the influence of a number of psycho-analytical theories of Freud, Jung and other contemporary psychologists. One such theory is Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. It is thorough study of the damaging influences of a mother's love upon the life of the son. Mother-fixation is one of its themes. As a matter of fact, the term Oedipus has been borrowed from the classical story of King Oedipus of Thebes and Jocasta, who unknowingly married his own mother, and had children by her. The present play by O'Neill depicts the harmful effects of Oedipus complex or mother fixation. It is mother-image which comes in the way of harmonious relationships in the Cabot-household and wrecks the family. Mother-love becomes an obsession with Eben and comes in the way of his establishing satisfactory sex-relationship. To a very large extent, the damaging influence of the mother-fixation is responsible for the tragic end of Eben and Abbie.

Keywords- *Psycho-analytical, Freud, Jung, Oedipus complex, Mother-fixation, Obsession*

As a matter of fact, the damaging influence of mother-fixation or excessive love for the parent of the opposite sex is clearly visible in the life and character of Eben in *Desire Under the Elms*. Eben's mother is dead, but he cannot forget her. The mother image is consequently present before his mind's eye. He desires to possess the farm for he knows that it lawfully belonged to his mother, and after her death it should belong to him as he is her heir. He thinks that his father stole it from her, and consequently, he hates his father. He is of the view that his father over-worked his mother and thus killed her by inches. He wants to take revenge upon his father for all the wrongs he did to his mother. He feels that his mother's spirit is ever restless, ever hovering round the house, ever watching are avenged. He is, therefore, hostile to his father and in the very beginning of the play we find him praying for his death. It is to

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spite him that he visits Minnie and thus possesses his woman. It is also for this reason he steals the 600 pounds so carefully concealed by him, and with the amount purchases the shares in the farm, of his two elder brothers. Thus mother-fixation spoils his relations with his father. He fails to achieve satisfactory and harmonious relationship with his parent of the opposite-sex.

As a matter of fact, a number of desires arise in Cabot's house. The first one with which we become familiar is the desire of Simeon and Peter to rush to California. The reason is that they seem to have an intense longing to gain more and more money which is next to impossible if they stay in the village. That is why they want to move to "the golden fields of California". To quote the dialogue of Peter, "If we plowed in California, they'd be lumps o' gold in the furrow"¹

Apart from this, the desire of Eben to have his clutches over the whole property is also worth considering. Naturally, he abominates his father more than anything in the world as he regards him to be the murderer of his mother. From this context, he regards his own self to be the real heir of the farm house. Amazingly, he can go to any extent in order to fulfill such a desire. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that whenever, Eben is emotionally hurt, he very much needs to have a kind of physical relaxation and perhaps the same is the reason behind Eben's frequent visits to Minnie. Even more surprisingly, Abbie avails herself of the same flaw of Eben. Some of the lines of Eben are worth quoting, "Ah-eh! By God A'mighty she is purty, an' I don't give a damn how many sins she's sinned afore Minnie or who she's sinned'em with, myi sin's as purty as anyone on'em"²

After the arrival of Ephraim Cabot and the bride to the house, we get acquainted with the extraordinary sense of alienation which Ephraim suffers from. As a result, he expresses his intense desire to beget a son at an old age of 75 years and even more surprisingly we are not able to understand whether such a desire of Ephraim gets completed or not. Besides this, the most important aspect of the play is surely the controversial relationship between Eben and Abbie. It seems through the description of O'Neill that a bond of telepathy connection has been established between them since the very moment, Abbie steps into the house. Abbie's desire to get her physical thirst contented by Eben also gets completed and Abbie proves to be successful in seducing Eben. A few lines of Abbie where she tries her level best to outrage Eben, need to be quoted, "Don't be afeered! I'll kiss ye pure, Eben same's if I was a maw t'ye – an'ye kin kiss back's if ye was my son – my boy sayin' good night t'me! Kiss me Eben"³

As a matter of fact, it can be said without the fear of contradiction that it is the character of Abbie that centralizes the attentions of the readers and the spectators alike. O'Neill seems to tinge her character with various glowing colours. The meaning of the statement is that her temperament and moods go on changing continuously according to

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various conditions and it can undoubtedly be commented that she should be kept under the category of individual characters. We meet Abbie in the Act I Scene IV of the present play when she steps into Cabot's house as the third wife of Ephraim. It is as clear as crystal that from the very outset, she suffers from an extraordinary sense of possessiveness. Surely, to take the whole Cabot's property into her grip may be described as the real aim of Abbie behind getting herself married to such an old and hard-hearted man like Ephraim. Her sense of possessiveness naturally gets confirmed through the first dialogue of Abbie when she looks at Cabot's house, "It's purty – purty I can't be'lieve it's r'ally mine!!"⁴

After the confirmation of such a possessiveness of Abbie, her extreme lust for physical satisfaction also gets affirmed when in her most seductive tones, she speaks to Eben in the same scene, "if cussin' me does ye good, cust all ye've a mind t'. I'm all prepared t' have ye agin me – at fust. I don't blame ye nuther. I'd feel the same at any stranger comin' t' take my Maw's place"⁵

The same excessive desire of Abbie for lust also gets confirmed in the following scenes. Although, Eben does not get entrapped within the hypnotic range of Abbie at the outset but subsequently, Abbie succeeds in her aims and the same results in the emergence of the Oedipus complex within the play. Moreover, Abbie also seems to be a kind of a lady for whom the world has not been lenient. The reason is that the marriage with Ephraim Cabot was the second one for Abbie. As a matter of fact, before the wedding, she got herself married to a person who turned out to be a drunkard and passed away. Unfortunately, on account of starvation and the lack of proper care, the baby also died. After such an unbearable event, Abbie, surprisingly, thrilled with joy. The reason is that she thought to have an element of freedom and in order to satisfy her thirst of possessiveness; she once again married to a person who is surely Ephraim. To quote a few lines which give a clear expression of the past life of Abbie:

Then I married an' he turned out a drunken spreer an' so he had to wuk fur others an' me too agen in other folks' hums, an' the baby died, an' my husband got sick an' died too an' I was glad sayin' now I'm free fur once, on'y I diskivered right away all I was free fur was t' wuk agen in other folks' hums, doin' other folk' wuk till I'd most give up hope o'ever doin' my own wuk in my own hum an'then your Paw come. ⁶

It is surely a matter of surprise that in the Act III of the drama, Abbie's sense of lust for Eben seems to be converted into sanctity of love. The same is the reason as to why she murders the newly born son of Eben. Amazingly, just in order to prove her purity and intensity of love for Eben, she strangulates her baby. The same idea gets confirmed in the following dialogue, "I done it, Eben ! I told ye I'd do it! I've proved I love ye – better'n everythin' – so's ye can't never doubt me no more."⁷

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It is in the same context that Alan Lewis raises in *American Plays and Contemporary Playwrights of the Theatre*. To quote a few lines in this connection to have a better understanding:

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.⁸

Now, to talk of Eben, he seems to suffer from the sense of extraordinary sense of abomination against his father, the reason is that he regards Ephraim to be the real murderer of his mother. Moreover, from the perspective of Eben, it is Ephraim who has stolen the farm house of his mother. It is because of these reasons that Eben also suffers from an extraordinary sense of possessiveness towards the farm house. Besides this he wants to take the revenge from his father for whatever crimes he has committed. So strong is the impact of such an abomination upon Eben that he goes to the extent of commenting the following dialogue, "An' sonner' later, I'll meddle. I'll say the thin's I did not say then t' him! I'll yell 'em at the top o' my lungs. I'll see t' it my Maw gits some rest an' sleep in her grave!"⁹

One of the most important characteristics of Eben is extraordinary and peculiar psychological state. During the course of the drama, he seems to suffer from neurotics and sometimes, his neurotic nature seems to develop into psycho-neurotics. Apart from this, there is also a frequent impact of various other psychological dilemmas upon him like the phobia and mania. Such an unbalanced psychological state of Eben gets confirmed through his controversial relationship with Abbie. The moment Abbie steps into Cabot's family, she has an eye upon the physical solidarity and attractiveness of Eben who always tries to resist from these seductive and sexual drives of Abbie but unfortunately, falls a victim to the same. Thus it gets confirmed that whenever Eben is emotionally hurt, he needs a kind of physical relation. Surely the same is the reason behind his frequent visits to Minnie at the outset. What Floyd says seems true in this regard, "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"¹⁰

True, it is that Eben's infatuation towards Abbie which should be described as the most important aspect of the play. Abbie is easily able to win over Eben because unlike Eben, she is a cunning and practical kind of a lady and it would not be wrong to describe Eben as "*a dumb fool like his Maw*". Eben suffers from the misconception that his union with Abbie would be like his revenge from his father and the same is the reason behind the emergence of the Oedipus complex in the play. To quote a few lines to have a clear conception, "I see it! I see why. It's her vengeance on him. So's she kin rest quiet in her grave!"¹¹

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Now, mention can be made to the character of Ephraim Cabot who is one of the most dominating characters in the play. He is aged seventy-five, tall and gaunt, with great, wiry, concentrated power, but stoop shouldered from toil. His eyes are small, close together and extremely near sighted, blinking continually in the effort to focus on objects. Occasionally, he wears his dismal black Sunday suit. Mr. Cabot is a domineering father. His sons are initially afraid of him, but later they revolt one by one. First, Simeon and Peter insult him badly for bringing a new bride home; they do not attend to the field work when they are asked for it. Then Eben takes away his woman from him as a measure of revenge for exploiting his mother to death. Though after the departure of Simeon and Peter for California, Mr. Cabot grows soft and sympathetic towards Eben, but the latter never forgives him. Mr. Cabot is firm that the fields will go to Eben if Abbie fails to produce a son for him. Mention can be made to what Dorris 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.¹²

Evidently, Mr. Cabot is a lustful man who weds thrice in his life. His first wife was the mother Simeon and Peter; his second wife was the mother Eben, and his third wife was the hapless Abbie. It is the third marriage for which he has lied, saying to his sons, "I'm riding out t' learn God's message t' me in the spring like the prophets done".¹³

It is this that had turned their sons rebellious towards him. Clearly, the sons are not entirely to blame; they are of marriageable age and yet the father never thinks of their marriage but of his own. The result is not a happy one because the new woman totally deceives and deserts him for having another man of a very young age (Eben). She even prefers love to home and hearth, and goes to the jail for its sake.

Mr. Cabot is a hard working, robust person whose philosophy of life has been 'toil and trouble'. This philosophy he tries to impress upon his sons too. When he was twenty, he was "the strongest an' hardest" man. We learn much about his nature when we take into account the following speech of Mr. Cabot:

Wall – this place was noth' but fields o' stones. Folks laughed, when I tuk it. They couldn't know what I knowed., when ye kin make corn sprout out o' stones, God's livin' in yew. They wa'n't strong enuf fur that! They reckoned God was easy. They laughed. They don't laugh more. Some died hereabouts. Some went west an' died. They're all under ground – fur follorin' arter an easy God. God hain't easy.¹⁴

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Thus, we see that Mr. Cabot attached the air of sanctity and divinity to his own ideas. It is by now, quite clear that Mr. Cabot is religious and God- fearing. He makes repeated references to God and His order. His only weakness is the weakness for ‘woman and wine’; otherwise he is a careful father and watchful husband.

Mr. Cabot is also unkind and unsympathetic towards his third wife, Abbie, whose emotional and physical needs he fails to understand. He is content to watch Eben and Abbie going to the jail on the charge of murdering the new-born son, and utters aloud, Take ‘em both’.¹⁵

It is necessary to point out what Olivia Coolidge has said in this connection:

The theme of *Desire Under the Elms*, involving incest, was controversial. Abbie Putnam has married Ephraim Cabot to get home and is determined to possess his farm after his death. Equally insistent is Eben. Ephraim’s grown son, who regards the inheritance as his right. Abbie persuades the doting Ephraim to leave the farm to her child if she shall have one. Then she casts her eye on Eben to provide the baby which Ephraim is too old to hive her. At this moment calculation breaks down. The young man and the young woman are drawn to each other with a force which neither can withstand. When the child is born and the truth comes out, the angry Ephraim disillusiones his son about Abbie. But she by now is ready to prove by desperate means that she truly loves Eben. If the child-heir is to come between them, she will kill it. She does, and Eben, appalled but convinced, takes his stand by her to claim a share in her guilt. They are arrested together.¹⁶

In the conclusion of this discussion it can be said without the fear of contradiction that we really feel at this juncture that Eben’s mother really has her revenge when Eben and Abbie are taken away by the Sheriff, and Old Cabot is left alone of the farm, ‘more lonesome’ than ever before. True, it is this damaging influence of the mother-fixation which is responsible for the tragic end of Eben and Abbie.

End Notes

1. O’Neill, Eugene. *Desire Under the Elms*. New York; Random House, 1995. p. 5
2. Ibid. p. 11
3. Ibid. p. 43
4. Ibid. p. 21
5. Ibid. p. 25
6. Ibid. p. 26
7. Ibid. p. 60

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8. Lewis, Alan. *American Plays and Contemporary Playwrights of the Theatre*. London: Crown Publishers, 1970. p.22.
9. O'Neill, Eugene. *Desire Under the Elms*. New York; Random House, 1995. p. 9.
10. Floyd. *A New Testament*. p.272.
11. O'Neill, Eugene. *Desire Under the Elms*. New York: Random House, 1995. p.43.
12. V. Falk, Dorris. *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959. p.95.
13. O'Neill, Eugene. *Desire Under the Elms*. New York; Random House, 1995. p.10
14. Ibid. p37.
15. Ibid. p.68.
16. Ibid. p.142.

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