



Desire Under the Elms: The Existential Tragedy of Human Passion and Power

^{*1}Geeta Gupta

^{*1}Associate Professor, Hindu Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jind, Haryana, India.

Abstract

Desire Under the Elms is a deeply personal work for Eugene O'Neill, through which he sought to free himself from the burdens of his past. His plays often revolve around his own experiences and struggles, using drama to express and confront pain. For O'Neill, theatre had to address significant social and existential issues; he aimed to explore the roots of human suffering and provide some justification for it. As noted by critic Doris V. Falk, his work suggests that suffering drives human creativity and action, and although fate may shape us, individuals are ultimately responsible for much of their own misery due to pride (Falk 6). Among O'Neill's plays, *Desire Under the Elms* most vividly reveals the Greek Dionysian spirit. It is charged with rebellious energy inspired by Nietzschean philosophy, showcasing O'Neill's ability to overcome personal grief and celebrate life with all its complexities and contradictions. The present paper attempts to explore existential tragedy inherent in lives of main characters of the play.

Keywords: Tragedy, Greek, Loneliness, Alienation, Destiny.

Introduction

Edwin A. Engel describes the play's characters as caught in a conflict between their desires and existential loneliness, reflecting the belief that human beings always feel incomplete, a concept highlighted by Sartre's idea of desire as a "lack of being." (Quoted by Sinari 126) [1]. The Play presents a modern American family that is in turmoil. The family members are living a loveless and alienated life. The central family in the play embodies an unhappy, tense triangle: a tyrannical father, Ephraim Cabot, and his conflicted sons, especially Eben, who resents his father deeply. The mother figure, though absent, influences the emotional dynamics greatly. The brothers resemble beasts, driven by instinct and focused only on fulfilling basic needs, as seen in their brutal behaviour and crude desires. Ephraim, the seventy-five-year-old patriarch, is a harsh, egoistic man representing the oppressive Puritan ethic of New England. He is a stranger even in his own home, ruling his family with an iron fist. His farmhouse feels more like a prison or concentration camp than a home—a place of loneliness, alienation, and despair. Ephraim's sons feel trapped by the unyielding stone walls that surround them and have come to see their lives as wasted under his dominating control. Their relationship is not that of father and sons but more like that of a master to slaves. The sons long for freedom and resent the forced labour and harsh treatment imposed by Ephraim, who symbolizes cold, man-made values that suppress life's natural vitality. His harshness turns the farm's once fertile land into a

place, where life withers under tyranny. Even his return after an absence freezes his sons into fearful silence, illustrating the broken bonds between them.

The Modern Greek Tragedy

The play unfolds a Modern Greek tragedy that ensues due to uncontrollable pursuit of desires and the feeling of revenge. O'Neill presents a world devoid of love and affection. Harsh labour of sons is not blessed with divine shower of familial love. Unlike his brothers who plan to leave, Eben stays to fight for what he believes should be his—the farm that his father took from his mother unjustly. Eben's conflict stems from his refusal to accept his mother's death, blaming Ephraim for it, and this fuels his hatred. Eben's alienation from his father is due to the fact that he never accepts the death of his mother, blaming his father for it. He develops a definite revulsion against him on this account. He thinks that there is nothing of father in him but "I'm Maw Every drop O' blood" [2] (O'Neill 198) But the fact is that he is quite like his father in many things which others can easily notice. Simeon and Peter agree that he is "Like his Paw ... Dead spit 'n' image", [3] (O'Neill 198) Eben's crisis develops from the conflict between these two aspects of his fragmented self the mother in him and the father in him. O'Neill was himself torn between his mother and father and the play has an intensely personal flavour running through it. According to Doris V. Falk, this split in Eben's personality is the cause of the "destructive war within him." [4] (Falk 94) He feels an inner

urge to fight his father. So, while Simeon and Peter decide to leave their father's gruesome authority and go away to the gold fields of California, when he brings Abbie Putnam, his new wife, Eben chooses to stay and wage a lonely war for his rights over the farm and the home. Despite his deep anger, Eben shares some traits with his father, reflecting an internal split between loyalty to his mother and an inevitable likeness to his father.

Ephraim's recent marriage to Abbie, a young and strong-willed woman disrupts the family. She represents desire, ambition, and rebellion, sharply contrasting Ephraim's cold rigidity. Abbie is no submissive wife; she embodies life and passion too powerful to be controlled. Ephraim's marriage with Abbie was doomed to be a failure not only because of his peculiar nature but also because she was so unlike him in many things. He is old, she is young. She symbolizes will which expresses herself as impulse, instinct, striving, craving, yearning. She is a woman with prismatic facets, a woman of beauty, physical and sexual strength. Cabot wanted an insignificant, faceless, subservient companion to his old age but she refuses to be merely a diligent maid she is not dumb and submissive as his two dead wives were. He needed a cow, not a woman whereas she is a woman of "flesh and bone."^[5] (Raghvacharyulu 185) Thus, Abbie who symbolizes "rebellious individuality",^[6] (Raghvacharyulu 185) gives him "the chills"^[7] (O'Neill 206) sometimes.

Abbie comes to Ephraim's family with a lacerated personality and a deep feeling of distrust for life from an orphaned childhood and a mismatched marriage with a drunk, who did not live long. Although down and out, she dares to live and consents to marry a man much older than herself so that she can belong and overcome the haunting feeling of deprivation and loneliness. She suppresses her authentic feelings when she marries Ephraim and attempts to calculate her way to success and security in life. But they do not sustain each other mutually for long. Ephraim's third marriage boomerangs on him. Abbie keeps her identity as a wife but does not act as one. This makes her inauthentic in her relation with him. He brings a wife to keep him company but she deceives him, their marriage celebrates its demise the moment Abbie sees Eben. Clifford Leech puts it rightly when he observes that "Abbie marries Ephraim for security. Loves Eben for sex."^[8] (Leech 50)

Abbie begins with a calculated role playing but finds it difficult to sustain and is "caught in her own trap".^[9] (Clark 99) her love for Eben at first is commercial, possessive, manipulatory and exploitative. She is all body and no soul. In order to get a strong foot-hold in the farm house, she devises a cunning plan to beget an heir to Ephraim through Eben so that she can be sure of a permanent home. In this, she becomes a picture of sex and greed. She represents irrational demonic forces at work in man. At first Eben fights her overbearing presence tooth and nail. He thinks that she has come to usurp his mother's farm and home. But she wins him through the clever manipulation of his emotions by offering him the affection of a mother and the love of a beloved. Eben gives in because it ends his search for his long-lost mother and also because he sees in it a chance to take revenge on his father by becoming a rival to him. His split personality helps Abbie to water down his stiffness and opposition to her. But life does not leave them at this only. The new relationship gives them a taste of what love can do and leads to the discovery of their mutuality and complications. Abbie creates seismic upheavals all around. She becomes a disorientating and polarizing force between Ephraim and Eben. Since her

marriage with Ephraim has been only a marriage of convenience, she feels no commitment towards him and since she cannot have a pivotal relationship with Ephraim, she looks for one with Eben.

Her presence causes tension, driving a wedge between father and son. Abbie's does not and cannot conform to the role of a meek, obedient wife. Instead, she boldly pursues her own desires, especially her intense and complicated relationship with Eben. Initially, her love for Eben is driven by manipulation and self-interest; she hopes to secure a future by bearing Ephraim's heir through Eben. Eben is initially hostile to Abbie, but her blend of affection and sexual allure softens his resistance. Their relationship becomes a complex mix of revenge, desire, and yearning for a lost mother's love. However, their passion also brings suffering and moral conflict, especially when Abbie bears a son. Eben and Abbie experience existential tension when a son is born to Abbie. Eben's being is over whelmed by "conflicting emotions"^[10] (O'Neill 216) and becomes unusually quiet and pensive.

His gain in love results in his loss of innocence and the child, whom he cannot call his own, gives him a feeling of guilt and dumb pain. His remorse deepens when Ephraim sows the seeds of suspicion in his mind that Abbie had only used him as a tool to get a son to become the owner of the farm and the home. His hatred returns with a redoubled force. Abbie pleads against this mis notion and when he is not placated, she decides to kill the child who had alienated him from her. She violates motherhood by killing her son. Her predicament confronts her with two difficult choices -she is compelled to choose between Eben or her son in one case and between Eben and her husband in the other. Her dilemma is that her win leads to her defeat. In her case, her marriage and motherhood become negative experiences and result in her fragmentation. When motives are frustrated by counteracting circumstances, despair sets in. Her desire for home, security and love leave her bereft of everything. After the murder of her child and loss of Eben's love, she is engulfed by despair.

Death of his child infuses Eben's being with a radical emotion of care. In a flash of inner freedom, he realizes that this world is his world and he is responsible for it. He becomes a picture of existential anxiety, guilt and will to power when decides to own up his role in the murder of his child. He makes a conscious choice to abandon all the tricks and says no to the life of inauthenticity by going jail with Abbie. His decision to own up his responsibility is a leap of his subjectivity, a realization of his freedom, absolutely and comprehensively. His choice of imprisonment or death with Abbie is an existential choice and by speaking his truth to the world, he defines his authentic self at last.

Conclusion

Desire Under the Elms is a tragedy shaped by harsh natural and social forces beyond the characters' control. Ephraim, though tyrannical and selfish, is also a man devoted to what he believes is right, embodying a strict, unforgiving God-like authority. He remains immovable and unrepentant even at the play's end. In contrast, Abbie and Eben break free from the suffocating world of the farmhouse and its Puritan values, though their path is marked by suffering and destruction. Their love is both their curse and their redemption, showing that human relationships, despite being sources of pain and alienation, hold the potential for meaning and salvation. The play reflects O'Neill's view of human existence as tragic, marked by loneliness and conflict, yet also characterized by moments of free will and hope. While the harshness of life

often crushes human spirit, it is through confronting this suffering and embracing authentic love and responsibility that individuals find redemption.

References

1. Clark, Barret H. *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays*. Dover, 1967.
2. Engel, Edwin A. "Ideas in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill." John Gassner, editor. *A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice Hall, 1964.
3. Falk, Doris V. *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension*. Rutgers University Press, 1958.
4. Leech, Clifford. *O'Neill*. Oliver & Boyd, 1963.
5. O'Neill, Eugene. *Desire Under the Elms*. Carbonate & Edwardsville, 1965.
6. Raghavacharayulu, D.V.K. *Eugene O'Neill: A Study*. Popular Prakashan, 1965.
7. Sinari, Ramakant. *Reason in Existentialism*. Popular Prakaman, 1969.
8. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Pocket Books, 1966.