

## Relocating the Resort: Eugene O' Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*

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In this nightmarish age of broken values, of breaking off man from all the sources of vitality has gradually made him down and broken which finally lead to the loss of faith of finding a peaceful harmony in this world. This has made him disintegrated and distaste from the world around him. Further, the duress of the system and convention of the society have pressure him to live an alienated life resulting in tension which has threaten his identity as an individual human. This fact of the desperation latent in modern life is, in fact, make conscious by certain dramatists. These dramatists have come to realize that man must develop a consolidated ethics of valves that may give solidarity to his free will and help him settle within human personality. They try to analyze the gloomy realm of human psyche and to introduce an affirming faith- a resort in this vex era.

Among the modern dramatist who gives a vivid commentary to this feature of the age is Eugene O' Neill. His play is not an exploration for certainties; rather seems to persistently seeking for truth. Therefore, rather than giving solution, he highlighted options so that the audience may have a momentary glimpse of the truth that exist concealed. Finally, this short glimpse will compel man to find a resort to re-energized and replenish his life.

Such a vision of the human situation finds its mature and culminating expression in O' Neill's play *Desire Under the Elms*. This play is of three hours of eloquent agony in which hell is emptied and all devils let loose upon a New England farm. Its distresses span from lusty affair to homicide with all sins like drinking, brawling, vengeance and incest. It is 1850 on a New England farm, old Ephraim Cabot, as stony as his hostile acres, is bringing a bride, his third. Two sons by his first wife, foreseeing their disinheritance,

start for the gold fields of California, leaving Eben, their handsome step brother and son of the second wife to face their new mother.

Their mother is a young blood with cold heart and wild eyes which cast an enchanting spell on Eben. She schemes for a plan to allure and to captivate Eben so that she may have a settled life with no threat. This is all because she knows that the only resistance between her and her objective to inherit the farm and assets of Cabot will be Eben.

Aided by her step son's hatred for his grim father, she seduces the boy, as a consequence of that misbehaviour has a child by him. Later in the play, when life as Mr. O'Neill sees it comes to grip with life, she murders the baby, thinking to please the irresolute Eben. That action at first horrifies him, and he gives her up to the law. But at the end Eben returns to the kisses of her thin, red lips and goes to the gallows with her.

O'Neill's hope of finding for the lost faith in human relationships never materialized. He died in the belief that human spirit will perhaps find a resting place. From time to time its clutches at an illusion that provides a temporary stay against confusion, but gradually all illusions turn out to be pipe-dreams. Still it is the illusion that sustains life, it is the resort- a short stay that energized life. This was the final conclusion he arrived at in his elaborately patterned play *Desire Under the Elms*.

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O'Neill tries to probe the inner conflict of the soul to find a way out from its own cage and trace a resort in his play *Desire Under the Elms* (1924). The play presents an extraordinary emotional intensity of the struggle of the soul in guise of the father-son conflict and mother fixation theme with the incest action. O'Neill expressed symbolically the idea of this conflict with incest tragedy. The dictum of this tragedy lies in the desire of the soul to conquer and to escape. These desires form the perspective of searching for a resort by the characters.

Ephraim Cabot who was a stony hearted old timer who owned an old farm from his second wife and Abbie Putnam, a young warm blooded beautiful enchantress who wants to possess whatever Ephraim own and Young Eben, the handsome and graceful yet rebellious son of Ephraim Cabot by his second wife are the main characters that entwined in a tragic

tangled in this play of O'Neill's. When Old Cabot returns with his third wife, the young Abbie, to the resentment and anger of his three sons, the first two older sons Simeon and Peter retaliates violently. Peter picks up a stone to hurl at the Old Cabot's house and Simeon threatens his dominating father to rape his new wife. It is actually the exploding virtue of the hostile alienation buried inside them. The sense of alienation is characteristically of modern man's. By bringing

the third wife, the sons feel that their father has usurped their rightful heir to the property.

Although old Ephraim Cabot who himself believes to conquer and hold the fate of all the characters dominates the entire play. But it is Eben, the young son who symbolizes the yearning of youth to build their own empire wheels and steers the play till the end. He firmly believes that the death of his mother at young age is all due to cruelty and mistreatment by his father. In his heart, Eben always despised his father and it is seen in his silent resistance against his father's domination. So when Eben acts savagely to the village prostitute, it is because he heard that she was once his father's courtesan. To feed his ego he boasts about it to his brothers. The wound and hatred for his father arises out of his belief that his father wrongly acts and mistreats his mother and this psychic trauma motivates his entire actions and deed. Whatever Eben acts or does, it is always his silent retaliation of his alienated feeling towards his father. So unconsciously the tired psyche of Eben seeks to take a break and wanted to rest for a while.

When Ephraim Cabot who is then seventy-five years brings home the young bride, Abbie, she provides Eben with his opportunity of revenge, for she is attracted by his youth and vitality and knows that he will inherit the farm. Their infatuation is at first a desire and need, but with time it transcends into hatred and conspiracy for vengeance of the predominant psychic conflict. The catastrophe precipitates when Eben accuses Abbie of using him merely to father a child and she kills the baby as kind of catharsis in order to prove him wrong. Eben acknowledges his complicity in Abbie's deed and voluntarily goes with her to prison. Here, the morbid philosophy of Abbie in admitting the sin shows the acute sense of tragic alienation pervades in her own self. First she falls for Old Ephraim only to retain a place to call her own. But she finally tangles to Eben to subside a certain conflict in her mind and soul. This conflict is what is wanted in her. Thus

the sense of tiredness and a need of a resort intertwined in this play very distinctively with the father-son conflict and symbiotic incest theme.

Simoeon and Peter resent old Cabot, too, but for a different reason. He uses them like he owns them, caged their lives and makes them toil from morn till night with no appreciation and remuneration in exchange. When they see their father bringing home a new wife destroying their dream of inheriting the farm, they depart for gold rush in California. They barter their share of farm to Eben with Old Cabot's hidden stock of gold which Eben reveals to them. The two older sons search for gold in California is parallel to seeking for a place to relieve and stretch their tiresome limbs.

When Ephraim marries young Abbie, Eben reacts furiously to her as he feels that she is an intruder to occupy his mother's place. But then Abbie's raw beauty and youthful carving enchants Eben and he succumbs to her fatal attraction. This attraction is the same frenzied feeling he has for the other women of the village which his father had affair previously. This is the inherit quality from his father that whatever his father own should later on possess by the son. This play is now a triumvirate conflict of authoritarian domination by the father, the rebellion and the resistance against the father by son, and the craving to possess the properties by the new wife, Abbie. But deep inside the cause of the conflicts is an unconscious yearning to pause a moment to breath freely. This is the dictum of the conflict- the quest for the resort.

Here it is worth noting out at this juncture the unique approach of O'Neill in his presentation of the theme. He doesn't glamorize it. Rather he barbarously describes the raw passion pervaded- may it be lust, pride or possessiveness. Though O'Neill incalculates certain motivations to the characters to illustrate their alienated and rebellious actions, they are not motivated to idealize or glamorize the weakness they have.

From the moment Abbie comes to the farm, she controls and secures the whole of the farm with all the assets and individuals who reside there. Eben is, now in her eye, the main objective to acquire her desire. So with soft tongue and alluring agility, Abbie wins Eben's sympathy by telling her desperate past life and conquers his affection by alluring with her youthful passionate appeals.

In the meanwhile, the Old Cabot changes his outlook towards Eben as his young son is then mild, soft and courtesy. He begins to treat Eben with tolerance and affection and this frightened Abbie. She is worried at the thought that Ephraim Cabot who is now old may decide to leave his properties to Eben instead of her. But when she taunts him with the idea Cabot's own petty pride swell up. He says that in his dying hour he will set fire to everything he has and watch every of what is called his burn down to ashes. No one would take whatever is his for they are all acquired by him with his sweat. Then he further adds that he will set free all the cattle. At this juncture when Abbie asks him scornfully what he'll do with her, he replies with a weird smile that she'll also be set free. In this manner Old Cabot continues to talk sarcastically. And finally at one point Abbie comes to realize what Old Cabot actually wanted. His desire is to have a son and if Abbie is able to bear him a son, he'll give anything she asks, even the farm. In this instance, Abbie's aim is to have a baby for the old man. After knowing the Old Cabot's desire, the determination of Abbie to love Eben and to make love with him increasing for it is the sole means to achieve her possessive end. At the persuasion of Abbie, Eben makes love to her in the room where his mother was placed before the burial. He thinks it is kind of revenge upon his father who often humiliates him as powerless and vigourless. Thus rebellious feeling towards his father and Abbie leads him to a false road.

Finally within a year Abbie has a baby by Eben. Once again to the shock of Eben, he realizes that Old Cabot dominates above him. Ephraim has proudly announced to their neighbours that he has a son by Abbie. This show-off of his manliness and vigour enrages Eben. Eben cannot bear to keep on standing and watch what really his, being snatched by his dominating father. He is enraged that all his life, whatever he achieved, it is his father who gets the acknowledgement and applause first. Eben receives the lethal blow when his old father boasted to every one of his prowess and strength as he believes he himself to his fatherhood. Moreover he gloats over his junior and taunts that Abbie wanted a son by him so that she could snatch the farm from Eben. He further adds that Abbie always hated him. This enrages Eben and he attacks his father. Father and son begin to struggle until Abbie finally separates them. Later when Old Cabot leaves, Eben furiously hurls out his anger to Abbie telling all he had heard

from his father. Even when Abbie pleads that it is all set up and lies and she still really loves him and have the baby for him. But still Eben does not agree to believe her.

The tragedy sweeps on. Abbie has no other way except to show Eben she really loves him. And to prove it she kills the baby. Then she approaches Eben and tells him what she has done. Eben at this instance thinks that she has killed his father. But when he realizes that it is the new born that she has killed. He is stunned and shocked. He yells to her that she has killed what is his. To Eben he feels that fate has destroyed whatever is called his own. Likewise the baby which is his very own is destroyed and dead. He is now all frustrated and furious. He swears to

Abbie and tells she will pay for it. Afterward Abbie had confessed what she had done to the Old

Cabot. And Eben, who a little earlier seem to despise Abbie, return to her for he really loves

Abbie. He suggests that the two of them should run away but Abbie turns down Eben's plea to runaway together with a calm statement that she got to take the punishment and pay for her sin. Thus when the lawmen came Eben also gives himself as an accomplish to the crime. In this instance Eben shows his matured manhood by standing for his beloved. In this way, O'Neill using the incest symbol of old mythology and tragedy tries to describe the first battle of youth against the ties of nemesis in his *Desire Under the Elms* which showcase both traditional and tragic touch for a sublime dramatic virtue. Eben and Abbie reconcile themselves to their destiny with dignity. They accept their flaw in searching for an everlasting consolation in life. Thus

O'Neill very artistically manages to highlight the need for a short stay resort at interval in certain juncture of life to breathe freely.

Further while probing the essence of O'Neill's desire, it has been observed that a complete and everlasting cure for the ailments of man's psyche and desire is an illusion. O'Neill never exalted material possession as offering mankind the need to accept life on naturalistic terms, though O'Neill's haunted heroes cannot abandon the quest for meaning. Not only the Cabots, Abbie Putnam too, is filled with this urgent craving to relate themselves to a harmonic meaning of universe, but this yearning is

not to be found except for a short stay resort where they can enjoy life for a short while.

Thus Nature refuses to merge with man for he had driven out the paradise of innocence by the sharpened sword of human desire. He is at war with himself, the biological pitted against the human, the instinctual against the spiritual. But O'Neill's play shows that man can never be resigned to an atom. It deepens the tragic issue that his belief to escape in an atom is a mere illusion showing his alienation towards the force outside. Further, the failure to give man a consolation to his suffering initiates the need of a resort from time to time. Thus tragedy is compulsory in his characters. It simply confirms the existential „truth” of the short stay comfort-

the resort for there is no final solution for the riddle of life.

Thus it may be postulated that O'Neill's deep insight of the need for a resort- a temporary stay where man can forget the confusion and conflict in his psyche for a while to re-energize and to boost the mood to sustain life with meaning.

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