

Mother, Lover, or Competitor: The passions of Eben and Abbie in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*

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### 摘要

尤金·歐尼爾是美國第一個也是唯一的一個獲得諾貝爾文學獎的劇作家，而且目前一般認為他仍然是美國最優秀的劇作家。他的母親是一位虔誠的天主教徒，可是因為歐尼爾的出生使她成為無辜的吸毒者。因此歐尼爾一輩子都受到罪惡感的折磨。在《榆樹下的慾望》這部劇作中，歐尼爾可能把這種罪惡感轉化成為農夫角色對於母親以及土地的激情(passion)。劇中伊班(Eben)和艾比(Abbie)的激情和人類基本的慾望—愛和家有關。如果伊班和艾比的慾望無法彼此對應，激情就會摧毀所有的一切。雖然伊班和艾比的慾望表面上看起來僅僅只是佔有農場，他們行為的基本動機是人類對於愛和家隱藏的激情。本研究目的在於分析歐尼爾面對生命的方式，提供刺激讓我們在面對現代生活的時候，重新檢視對於生活激情的認知。

**關鍵詞：**歐尼爾、慾望、激情、愛、家

### Abstract

Eugene O'Neill is the first and only American playwright who wins the Nobel Prize for Literature, and he is still regarded as America's finest. His mother was a devout Catholic, who innocently became a drug addict as a result of his birth. For the reason, the playwright suffered from the sense of guilt for a lifetime. The feelings of guilt may transform into the farmer characters' passion for the love or greed of their mother and land in *Desire under the Elms*. Both Eben and Abbie's passions in the play are related to human's fundamental desire of love and home. When the desires of Eben and Abbie cannot match each other, the passions may destroy both two of them. Although it seems that both Eben and Abbie's desires are trying to possess the farm, the basic motivation of their behavior is the hidden passion for love and home in human beings. This study aims at analyzing O'Neill's way of looking at life to provide a stimulus to reconsider our recognition toward the passion of life in this modern world.

Keywords: O'Neill, desire, passion, love, home

## I. Introduction

Eugene O'Neill has been influenced by his parents in some ways. His father was an Irish-born stage actor named James O'Neill, who illuminates him toward his life of playwriting. His mother never recovered from the death of her second son, Edmund, who had died of measles at the age of two. She later became addicted to morphine as a result of Eugene O'Neill's difficult birth. As a result, O'Neill has a very special love to his mother. Eugene O'Neill can be regarded as the pioneer of the modern American drama. He is a prolific dramatist. His masterpieces include *The Emperor Jones*, *Long Days Journey into Night*, *The Hairy Ape*, and *Desire Under the Elms*, etc. His plays are associated with Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, and Swedish playwright August Strindberg. He belongs to the umbrella of realism. He shows his realistic writing style in his plays. Specifically, his thematic concerns in his drama contain the issues of the realistic life in the modern time. He gradually developed his profound artistic writing, resulting in several genuine masterpieces of the modern theater. In particular, O'Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize for his masterpiece *Desire Under the Elms*. The play deliberately portrays the passion and desire in the material society. This research focuses on the exploration of passion and desire in the relationship among father, mother and son via O'Neill's drama, *Desire Under the Elms*.

## II. Approach

Eugene O'Neill is a very famous realistic dramatist. This research aims to employ the thematic concerns of issues explored and shown in *Desire Under the Elms*. The formalistic approach reveals the drama tense and topic discussion so as to expose O'Neill's artistic playwriting. In particular, the play, a tight and primal blood knot, shows the aching portrait of loneliness and desperation. O'Neill gets to the heart of the readers via the play. He vividly shows the intense greed, lustful natures, man's passion and desire toward uncontrollable fires.

## III. Results and Discussion

In Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, passions have dominated all the characters' fate. David Rogers has pointed out in the introduction of *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*:

In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill's straightforward determinism gave way to a more profound awareness of the hidden and unchartable depths within individual men. Characters are not so much dominated by their social and economic circumstances as they were in *The Hairy Ape* and *Anna Christie*. Instead, their fate is determined by the universal and timeless passions that drive them from within. (28)

The land is the most essential and significant element *Desires Under the Elms*. The land plays the role as an object to the father and sons who intend to grasp after the mother's death. The elms represent the spirit of the mother which is always with the sons, especially Eben Cabot. The eldest brothers, Peter and Simon, leave to seek their fortunes in California. The youngest Eben thinks that he is the only inheritance to the land. Also, he must become the landowner. His greed to the land leads to his later tragic life. The farm becomes isolated. Originally, the landscape of the farm is very beautiful, but man's greed makes the farm not so beautiful. Most important of all, O'Neill employs the symbolic stones around the land to signify the imprisonment of the family. To some extent, the tragedy ending comes from the triangle relationship among father, stepmother and son. The complicated relationship gradually shows the complex revenge plans harbored by Eben.

In this play, passions of Eben Cabot and Abbie Putnam are the most important elements that cause their tragedy, because the complicated relationships between mother and son, lovers, and competitors determine their fates to be destroyed by their passions. The triangle relationship among them reminds me of the Greek mythology which reveals an artistic tense via triangle relationship. In addition, the triangle love affairs must lead to the final tragedy. Eben intends to prove that he can win his inheritance to get his father's land after his mother's death. Travis Bogard has pointed out in *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*:

. . . The typical themes--the yearning for a lost mother, for a home, for identification with a life force to be found in nature, and for the discovery of a god in marriage--are rooted, at last, in a credible fiction and characterizations. (200)

Eben's plans go awry when his father returns with a young bride. He intends to get the land via Abbie. Moreover, he wants to revenge his father because his father betrays his mother's love though his mother was dead. Basically, Eben and Abbie's passions are quite universal. Both Eben and Abbie's passions are related to human's fundamental desire of love and home. When the desires of Eben and Abbie cannot match each other, the passions may destroy both two of them. Although it seems that both Eben and Abbie's desires are trying to possess the farm, the basic motivation of their behavior is the hidden passion for love and home in human beings.

For Eben, the farm and the house is the symbol of his mother. Eben Claims:

. . . She still comes back--stands by the stove thar in the evenin'--she can't find it nateral sleepin' an' restin' in peace. She can't git used t' bein' free--even in her grave. (678)

Eben is haunted by his lost mother, for he wants the love from his mother. Eben thinks that the farmhouse is his mother's, and he is the one who has right to possess the real estate for he thinks he is his mother's heir. In Scene ii, Part I, Eben reminiscently utters to his half-brothers:

“I’m Maw--every drop o’ blood! . . . I’m her--her heir” (677). When Simeon and Peter are willing to abandon their right to inherit the farmland, Eben utters with excitement: “It’s Maw’s farm agen! It’s my farm! Them’s my cows! I’ll milk my durn fingers off fur cows o’ mine” (681). It seems that Eben is trying to keep his mother’s estate, but in fact he wants love from his mother for the farmland is the symbol of his mother.

There is a conflict between love of the mother and sexual love in Eben. Although Eben thinks that his mother is always on his mind, he finds his passion of sexual love from Abbie. Eben got a kind of Oedipus Complex in his life especially after his mother’s death. He couldn’t bear that his mother’s love, transferred the property after her death, was occupied by his father. Therefore, Eben harbors hatred to his father because his father snatches his mother’s property after his mother’s death. This is why he intends to have baby with Abbie so as to seize his mother’s property from his father. However, through the sexual relationship with Abbie, Eben reveals and discovers his passion and desire to women. In the beginning, it seems that Eben hates Abbie when she comes to the farmhouse, Eben becomes passionate after their sexual intercourse in the living room. From Abbie, Eben finds his hidden passion for women. The next morning after their sexual intercourse, Eben says: “Maw’s gone back t’ her grave. She kin sleep now” (695). At that time, Eben finds comforts from Abbie, because Abbie has become his lover and his mother figure. Although some people may say that Eben’s passion for sexual love has already appeared on the behavior that he goes to Min’s, the behavior is only Eben’s desire to revenge to his father and brothers. Only after Eben’s sexual intercourse with Abbie, his desire has completed. This sense of completeness is not destroyed until he misunderstands Abbie’s love for him is all fake. The misunderstanding leads the tragic murder of the child, because Abbie wants to prove her love for Eben. Arnold Goldman has pointed out:

Abbie murders her and Eben’s child to “prove” her love for him, to prove she did not want a child to steal the farm Eben has so stolidly (and greedily) maintained was his by right. (48)

The tragedy of the child’s death is caused by misunderstanding, and the misunderstanding is caused by the mutual passion of Eben and Abbie. However, passion has destroyed both Eben and Abbie.

In terms of Clark, “[t]he unity of the play lies rather in the character of Abbie” (152). Abbie is the main character who has committed the murder, and she is the one who arouses the passion of Eben. Abbie’s passion for Eben is also one of the reasons that cause this tragedy. Although Abbie feels hostility toward Eben in the beginning, she is willing to sacrifice her own child to prove her love for Eben. Particularly, O’Neill exposes the feminist perspective via Abbie, though she shows her love to Eben through an extreme way by killing their beloved

baby. Accordingly, her sexual passion also leads to the ultimate tragedy in her life. Barrett H. Clark mentions:

In arousing the repressed passion of Eben she has forgotten, or perhaps never known, that the sex instinct cannot easily be controlled; she has depended on her own craftiness to see her machinations through in cold blood to the end. Then suddenly she finds herself caught in her own trap. (152)

The result of Abbie's passion is that she not only destroys both Eben and herself, but their child's life.

In the beginning of the play, there is a description about the kitchen of the farmhouse:

. . . Kitchen utensils hang from nails. Everything is neat and in order but the atmosphere is of a men's camp kitchen rather than that of a home. (677)

The description shows the information that the farmhouse can not offer Eben with the satisfaction of home. Eben finds his own reason to the dissatisfaction, that is, the farmhouse is not possessed all by himself. The farmhouse is robbed by his father. In fact, the real reason is his yearning for home. Similarly, his yearning for home is just like his desire for his mother's whole love. Abbie has the same desire with Eben. When Abbie first time comes to the farmhouse, She says: "Hum! It's purty--purty! I can't b'lieve it's r'ally mine" (683-84). The difference between Eben and Abbie's desire for home is that Abbie is aware of her desire. Abbie says in Scene iv, Part I: "A woman's got t' hev a hum" (684). Besides passion for love, passion for home is one of the reasons that destroys both Eben and Abbie. In the beginning, Eben thinks that Abbie is coming to take his home, and Abbie is afraid that Eben will take away her sweet home, so they feel hostile toward each other. By the end of the play, one of the reasons that Eben misunderstands Abbie is that Eben thinks Abbie's final goal is to possess the farmhouse. Every event links with each other, and the main cause of this tragedy is that Eben and Abbie's passions do not match with each other.

#### IV. Conclusions

Passions have dominated both Eben and Abbie's fate. Passions between them cause their tragedy, because the complicated relationships between mother and son, lovers, and competitors determine their fates to be destroyed by their passions. Both Eben and Abbie's passions are related to human's fundamental desire of love and home. The passions destroy both two of them. In this play, the basic cause of the tragedy is the hidden passion for love and home in human beings. In Eugene O'Neill's point of view, passions are uncontrollable and destructive.

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