

Research Paper

Use of Symbolism in Desire Under the Elms

Dr. Beena A. Mahida

Incharge Principal
Anand Arts College*Abstract:*

Eugene O'Neil was a famous American dramatist. He was born on 16th October 1888. He is not only an outstanding dramatist of America but also of the world in the 20th Century. He shows in his plays man battling with harsh environment and with his own inner passions, instincts, and intuitions. Desire Under the Elms is his first great tragedy which shows the tragic possibilities of man's involvement with the mother image. It is highly inspired by the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. The play deals with adultery, insanity and possessiveness which is presented by applying symbolic techniques by O'Neil. The play is divided into three parts, each part having four scenes. The time is the year 1850 and the setting is a New England farm and the farm house, "Cabot Farm House." The dramatist has made the use of symbolism in the play it is evident from the setting of the play itself. The house is in good condition, "but in need of paint." There are two enormous Elms trees on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof of the house which again is very symbolic as it suggests to protect the house. These two Elms also symbolize mother image whose presence is felt throughout the play.

O'Neil was as an experimental writer. He always sought new techniques of expression and communication. He began as a realist but soon he fused realism with symbolic and suggestive modes. The title Desire Under the Elms is suggestive and symbolic as well as very apt. the title of the play symbolizes that the persons who seek shelter under the 'Elms' have several desires within. The character in the play desire some person, thing or place. The three sons of Ephraim Cabot desire certain things in life. The father has made them to do over work on the stony farm who believes and worship in 'Hard God.' The two elder sons Simon and Peter are fed up by their father's hard nature and they feel they are lonely men, living in an isolated land. They are dreaming about the gold field of California when they hear the news of Ephraim's marriage they decided to leave the house in order to search a new life where they can be free from the hard principles of their father.

Eben, the youngest son desires to possess the farm as he believes that the farm belongs to his dead mother and his father had stolen it from her. His desire is a type of unconscious revenge upon his father's tyranny. It is to get the farm he steals the money of his father and gives it to his brothers as they are ready to leave their claim on the farm.

He makes love to his step-mother just to take revenge so that his mother's soul can take rest. Therefore, as his name signifies 'Store of Hopes', he hopes to possess the farm. He is hopeful that his mission of revenge would be completed and the soul of his mother souls rest in peace. So when he makes love to Abbie in the parlour it is not an act of love but an act of revenge. When the son is born due their union he thinks that his revenge is over.

Abbie, the young wife of Old Ephraim Cabot has also some desires. Her desires include security and hope. She had an insecure life by now and so she has the utmost desire of being secured and therefore she marries Old Cabot. She wants to belong. She wants to identify herself with the farm of Cabot. This sense of belongingness leads her to establish an ill-leagal relationship with her step-son Eben. What she needs is an heir of her own through whom she can assert her authority over the farm and so for that she decides to use

Eben as an instrument.

Gradually Eben is trapped by her sensuality as his longing for the lost mother's urge finds a ray of hope in Abbie. His search for the lost maternity compels him to be a victim of Abbie's lust and purpose. But n that process she desperately falls in love with Eben and her 'desire' for him overpowers her 'desire' for the owner of the farm.

In order to possess him she murders their child and feels glad to face gallows along with him. Ephraim Cabot 'desires' the love and company of human being through out his life. He worked hard, but suffers in loneliness in search of human understanding.

He fails to establish any harmonious relationship with others accept the rocks and stones. He is haunted by the sense of loneliness and insecurity. He is worried about the future of his hard earned farm. His sense of loneliness increases when Simeon and Peter leave him helplessly. He 'desires' for the right heir for his possession and this increases insecurity within him. It is 'desire' for company that compels him to visit Minnie, the prostitute and to marry Abbie.

Yet he feels lonely and chill at home. So he sleeps in barn as he finds warmth with the cows. He says:

"I kin talk t' the cows. They know the farm an' me. They will give me peace."

So the word 'Desire' in the title is highly symbolic and suggestive of the theme of the play. The desire to possess rouse out the feeling of insecurity, helplessness or instability.

As Clifford Leech says:

"Their desire for possession of land, of home, of body- go along profounder, rarely recognized desire for companionable warmth- which at a time Abbie and Eben find in each other, which Ephraim has known only with his farm animals."

The other word 'Elms' in the title is also suggestive and symbolic. It plays a vital role in the setting of the play. The setting not only evokes the nature of stony farm, but it also symbolizes the dominance of female characters represented by the Elms tree in the play. In the light of psychoanalysis it may be explained as the symbol of maternal spirit.

The secret dominance of female in the action is shown by

Eben's dead mother and Abbie. The dead wife of Cabot who is powerful in the life of her son Eben and Abbie, the third wife of Cabot are dominant enough to destroy Ephraim, Eben and the child. It interprets Eben's case as a struggle between two masks- the proud paternal and the submissive maternal.

At the end, the Elms still stop in their maternal embrace of the farm. Thus it symbolizes the mother-image whose presence is felt throughout the play.

As R.F. Whitman states:

“There are for instance the two Elms broadly over the house like nemesis. It seems apparent that these are intended to suggest the spirit of Eben's mother, once filled with a love of life and beauty but which had been beaten down and destroyed by Ephraim's materialistic possessiveness and which only finds fulfillment with the consummation of her sons love for Abbie.”

Thus the title play is highly symbolic as it symbolizes the characters and the theme of the play.

References:

1. O'Neil, Eugene. Desire Under the Elms, Surjeet Publication.