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On the context of a play by O' Neill

---- Selim Al deen

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In 1925, Eugene o' Neill wrote in a letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn that he always prefers to portray human life through characterization. I want to show the superhuman invisible forces acting upon human life-like fate, god, the present built upon the organic past-one which is infinitely known to us as mysterious and debatable forces of superhuman existence. We are relentlessly engaged in a glorious self-destructive struggle to reveal ourselves beyond these forces.

According to O' Neill a person faces his life in two contrary states of pride and degradation. This confrontation might sometimes occur in a rejection of his immediate surroundings. Every human consciousness is the product of mutual collisions. As creative beings humans are not bound to a fixed moral code. O' Neill calls this 'necessary and painful' in short. It is because in reality this is inevitable- and the task of the superhuman frenzy that is acting upon- is to destroy us. Human life just completes this corrosion.

O' Neill's such view of life is not a product of or originated from the western philosophical heritage. O' Neill is saturated with and acts as a worthy heir of archaic beliefs in this regard. That is why we see that his renowned heroes and heroines are somehow related to Prometheus, Tamburlaine, Macbeth, Satan, Adam or Faust. But what are moral values? – the differences in its implementation are clearly visible. In this regard the evidence of O' Neill's awareness can be found in another part of the aforementioned letter- where he speaks about reevaluation and adoption of new symbols in drama. Basically the importance of the role of Freudian analysis in modern life consciousness is an undeniable truth. Freudian philosophy and its artistic explanation led to an analysis of many characters in a new light. His philosophy was really surprising. As a result of which literary figures, inspired by



Freudian philosophy, began to think about life in a new light. This is equally acceptable in O'Neill's case. But luckily it did not occupy O'Neill's consciousness as a unitary method of perception. In matters where O'Neill doubted Freud's theory he tends towards theorists like Jung who were against Freud's theory based entirely upon sexuality.

This discussion on O' Neill's letter about the play *Desire under the Elms* and his perceptions might be justified. The play was composed in the year 1924. The letter to Hobson Quinn was written one year later. In this play O' Neill seems to recover from the irony, bitterness and dilemma that his artistic self faced while writing the dramatized version of the story *The Hairy Ape* (1921) and the play *Emperor Jones* (composed after 1921).

Here the playwright is not haunted by self criticism. He is much more stable. It seems that O' Neill wants to speak something about life. Basically *Desire under the Elms* is a milestone of the change in O' Neill's career as a playwright.

The plot of the play is centered on a farm in New England. The characters are limited – old Cabot in his eighties- his second wife-son Eben and his newlywed wife Abbie.

In the aforementioned letter O' Neill clearly mentions that the inborn ancestral characteristic of a person determines his fate through the present. Eben is the product of such clinical thoughts of O' Neill. In this regard it seems that O' Neill goes a step ahead of Freud- because here O' Neill synthesizes character tendency as an inborn quality. This is because we find a synthesis of his father's machinery instinct and cruelty and his mother's forgiveness, generosity and love in the character of Eben. As a result Eben is injured in an apparent conflict within himself.

Eben believes that the characteristics of his dead mother work continuously in every drop of his blood. He thinks that her unjust death keeps her unsatisfied even in the grave. That is why he is cruel towards his father. Basically it is possible to make a scientific and psychological analysis of Eben's character at this point. In reality Eben too is cruel like his father in matters of self interest. When he suspects that Abbie is actually aiming at usurping his property, he attacks and injures her. The actions of Eben portray that a restless adolescent



is working within him. Until a certain point his love was inconstant and riddled with suspicion. For Abbie their love was one sided and at one point it was only a means of physical pleasure. But ultimately their love succeeds through Abbie's killing of her own child.

The character Eben is throughout lonely. This loneliness is felt in his sudden realization of deep love. He realizes his future after informing the Sheriff about the child's murder in a fit of emotion. He realizes that the person who has been unjustly injured by him again and again is the one whom he loves deeply. But at that time his treasure of love is already in chains. At the end one factor that evolves above all in Eben's character is his devotion to love.

The only unrestrained and free character in the play is Abbie- Eben's step mother and lover. Abbie's love is for feeling of the self. Actually all love tends towards the necessity of feeling the self. This feeling of the self is a continual process for Abbie throughout the plot of the play. This factor mingled with Abbie's desire for having a child portray a wonderful revelation of her love. Cabot is Abbie's second husband. Before their marriage the only son from her first husband died. The analysis of Abbie's entire life shows that the uncertainties of her past life inspire her to obtain pleasure in the present. Abbie haunted by her extreme sexual craving recognizes the person within Eben. As a result the more Eben hates her she loves him with deeper interest.

In Abbie's life love is more close to her than anything else- the reason of which has been said before. Through truth and falsehood she wants to achieve her most dear thing through extreme means. In one scene we see that out of passion Abbie's sexual desire mingled with love seeks for a kiss. The moment Eben is willing her motherly love gives way to sexual craving. Abbie's pride overpowers Eben without his conscious knowledge. Apparently Abbie seems to be a quite intelligent person. In a dialogue she weakens Eben psychologically by saying that, "this is against your nature Eben, you are struggling against your nature from the day I arrived here- you can never win against nature Eben-accept your defeat without delay."



Abbie's entire endeavour appears to be a challenge against Cabot's demonic farm. Like an unstoppable flood, this character seems to sweep away all mechanical factors in her way. For the sake of love she strangles the throat of the most precious possession of her life and says to Eben, "what I have done is only for you- so that we can be happy together again."

In this character O' Neill casts off his clinical approach- in the matter of love his goal can best be expressed by that universal comment- love is the sole passion of the human race. That is why even after killing her own child she can boldly declare that she has no apology for that sin. Old Cabot says, "they think god to be as soft as clay who can be easily found. If you can grow crops from rocks then only I shall agree god is within you. The almighty is not easily attained- he is like stone. He says- build my prayer hall with stones on a hill, I will live there."

It might be suspected that these are the sayings of a religious preacher. But it is not so. This character has no connection with the contemporary religious beliefs- Cabot's god is cast out of reality- because that is created by the identity and consciousness of Ephraim Cabot himself. So Cabot's experiencing of god is similar event to facing our own identity. Cabot's god is rigid like a stone- who has to be given many things. This giving is probably another name for the fertility of the soil. Cabot has sold his youth and feelings at the price of his sweat for increasing the fertility of the land of his stony farm. He feels that his son, wife and himself exists only to increase the fertility of his farm.

Cabot's god is made of out of his total experience. The pride of daily life which is directing Cabot's life is hard owned experience. That is why his god is highly mechanical - whose movement is like mathematics. Here there is no communication of one person with another. Cabot's moral values are his god. But this feeling of Cabot can't be ignored- he is well acquainted with the harsh realities of survival. There is no place of love for Cabot- but surprisingly he sheds tears at the killing of her own child by Abbie, not out of moral affection but because he thinks the child born of his son as his own. Cabot feels that this child bears his characteristics- this consciousness of Cabot as a father is remarkable.

Cabot is methodical like his own god-what is not mine can't belong to others- he



bears such a mentality. He says, “I swore in the name of god that I would take everything with me if I could or burn everything, if possible, at the moment of my death. I would watch the last bunch of hay to burn before my eyes if I knew that everything was destroyed along with my death.”

There is no restriction in putting Cabot’s character to a symbolic status. Although we do not have any evidence of O’Neill’s view in this regard the above discussion about Cabot’s words bear the proof and it appears that Cabot’s god is a symbol of the uncompromising ancient earth.

It is undeniable that that this play too, to a certain extent, bears the hopelessness in *The Hairy Ape* and *Emperor Jones*. But from these two plays, *Desire under the Elms* differ in the sense that here the creative mind does not completely accept the nihilistic situation. The love between step-mother Abbie and son Eben remains fixed to universal morality at the end- love succeeds indirectly at last. Undeniably it has to be obtained by offering the most extreme price.

Great expressions from multi directions are found in this play. In spite of this the name of this play has not found a place in Mrs. Olivia Cullis’s list of O’Neill’s world famous plays. But it is seen that this play was written at a point when O’Neill arrived at a final decision on life- therefore this play must have been given a place as a milestone in O’Neill’s career as a playwright.

[Written before the Liberation war (1971) of Bangladesh]