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Transformation of the Self in *Desire under the Elms*

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Abstract: As a masterpiece of Eugene O'Neill, *Desire under the Elms* challenges the limitation of time and interpretation. Employing Charles Taylor's theories of ethics, the author explores the moral state of the main characters in the play. Though deeply influenced by the dominant culture of utilitarianism, Eben and Abbie can't find happiness in pure material possession and physical pleasure. In their competition for wealth, they come to recognize a more enduring power that may bring purgation to greediness and spiritual fulfilment, that is, the good originated from Christianity. Inspired by the power of this good – the other-regarding love, both Eben and Abbie give up selfishness and material desire and gradually achieve a self transformation. The changes that occur on the two characters reveal one of O'Neill's major concerns in his dramatic creation: the moral confusion of modern man in America.

Key words: Eugene O'Neill; ethics; the good; utilitarianism

As a masterpiece of Eugene O'Neill, *Desire under the Elms* provides a picture of the modern self inhabiting in a society dominated by instrumental capitalism. The Cabot farm is rendered as a world cold and sterile where everyone lives for one's self and in defense of the other selves. Family intimacy and mutual concern for each other are absent among the Cabot's. Ephraim Cabot makes his wives and his sons slaves to the farm. As a result he receives no affection from his family. So he feels lonely and cold. In the evening coldness and loneliness drives him to sleep with the cows instead of his wife. Simeon and Peter feel their lives have been spent on building stone walls for their father to imprison them. Eben feels double hatred to his father for "murdering" his mother with hard work and for stealing the farm from his mother. In his relation with his two brothers, Eben only cares for how to obtain their shares of the inheritance of the farm.

What O'Neill deals with in *Elms* is a problem encountered by the modern self after the loss of religion. The Judeo-Christian tradition used to serve as the spiritual support for people. It allows room for different high values and spiritual pursuit. In an age of disenchantment, man is gradually cut off from this divine power. The development of science propels the society to lean on instrumentalism. In the capitalist society, especially in America, the utilitarianism takes the form of egoistic material possession. This is the culture that O'Neill abhors and criticizes in many occasions. In an age dominated by utilitarianism can man retain moral integrity? Is the good of Christianity really dead with the death of the god? Can man live with utilitarianism as the sole purpose of life? The answers have to be retrieved from the text.

Charles Taylor has discussed the consequences of the extreme instrumentalism in his *Sources of the Self*. He points out that "a utilitarian value outlook is entrenched in the institutions of a commercial,

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capitalist, and finally a bureaucratic mode of existence, tends to empty life of its richness, depth, or meaning,” and “nothing is left which give life a deep and powerful sense of purpose. (SS 500) In this case there will be no room for heroism, or aristocratic virtues, or high purpose in life, or things worthy dying for. (SS 500) A purely instrumental stance that only concerns the utilitarian sides and material aspect of things will consequently lead to the suppression of the spiritual side and ultraistic aspect of human vision, while for human beings these represent indispensable part of intrinsic value. (SS 500)

Human life empty of its richness, depth and meaning is reflected in the Cabots family. Being occupied with egoistic possessiveness, the Cabots live on nourishment of desires. Ephraim Cabot is indulgent in his insatiable desire for land and wealth. The two elder brothers Simeon and Peter dream of gold in California. Eben is obsessed with his desire to regain his mother’s farm and to avenge his father who has worked his mother to death. Abbie marries the old Cabot out of her desire for a home. In the meantime, all of them share a desire for warmth and sexuality. This desire finds expression in the Cabot men’s relationship with Minnie, the Scarlet woman in the village, and in the incest relationship between Eben and his stepmother Abbie. The elder son Simeon claims that “we air his [Cabot’s] heirs in everythin!” Being kept from the high values and high purpose of life, and being possessed by insatiate desires, the Cabots lead a life that degenerates into that of the animals. O’Neill emphasizes the animal-state of life through the language of the characters.

The desires that energize the Cabot are self-oriented, arising out of self-satisfaction either physically, materially or psychologically. Such desires have substantiated the self in the play and function to make the characters appear to be inner-driven. At the beginning of the play, the three brothers all perceive the presence of a driving desire in their lives. First, they identify this force as the cause that motivates their father’s cruel enslavement of the whole family. Simeon says: “It’s somethin’ – drivin’ him – t’ drive us!” (I.ii, 323) In his statement Cabot is perceived to be in a state of behaving involuntarily, which constructs a threat to the brothers because such a state may end up with lose of self-control. They fear an impending destruction to all of them. For this reason Peter accuses his father: “He’s slaved himself t’ death. He’s slaved Sim ‘n’ me’n’yew t’ death.” Secondly, the desire is conceived as a driving force by the three brothers themselves. They not only act as if being driven but also are conscious that they are manipulated by the driving force. The driving force is expressed in their insatiable desire for land and gold. Eben asks his brothers: “What’s drvin’ yew to Californi-a?” (I.ii, 323) Simeon and Peter reply “gold.” The choice of word indicates their recognition of their passive state in confronting the driving desire. The protagonist Eben also conceives himself as a driven animal. When Eben hears his father has married again, he goes to Minnie in madness:

I begun t’ beller like a calf an’cuss at the same time, I was so durn mad – an’ she got sacred – an’ I jest grabbed holt an’ tuk her! Yes, siree! I tuk her. She may’ve been his’n – an’ your’n, too – but she’s mine now! (I.iii, 328)

Eben’s mad behavior is aroused by his desire for the farm. The father’s marriage means the farm may be left to the new mother’s hand. Unable to take back the farm, he takes possession of his father’s woman as a scapegoat. When he describes his act of taking Minnie he is conscious of his state of being like a “calf” – an animal acts upon impulse rather than reason. The driven state of the self foreshows a tragic ending of the Cabot family. As Floyd elaborates, “The Cabots are consumed by a powerful, obsessive greed that causes them to exploit each other and the land. Insensate greed and lust are the vices that, to O’Neill, demoralize these puritans and ultimately cause their down fall.” (*A New Assessment*, 275)

When material possession and egoistic satisfaction becomes the sole aim of life, man becomes an inner-driven animal that acts irrationally. Obviously O’Neill conceives the gold warship, an extreme form of utilitarianism, as a dehumanizing force that hampers the exercise of human agency. This is the reason he writes severe criticism of the American culture:

America, instead of being the most successful country in the world, is the greatest failure. It’s the greatest failure because it was given everything, more than other country...Its main idea is that everlasting game of trying to possess your own soul by the possession of something outside it. (Sheaffer, *Son and Artist* 577)

“The soul” has been recognized as the distinction between man and animal. It is another term for human agency, or for the spiritual quality of man. What O’Neill observes in his country is the fact that the extreme form of instrumentalism and utilitarianism deprives the other values from people, especially in the spiritual dimension. O’Neill sees people who are fully occupied with material possessiveness as men without souls because their souls are taken by insatiable desires for possession.

The utilitarian egoism in the play is rendered as pervasive and suppressive. Nevertheless, within human nature there is something that can’t be suppressed or uprooted. Modern men are not descendants of a single moral good. Taylor has strongly argued that modern identity constitutes different goods springing from the three moral sources. Thus “in each person’s life there is always a multiplicity of goods to be recognized, acted upon and pursued. These goods are not only plural in the numerical sense but they are plural in an ontological sense; they are of qualitatively different types from one another and, because of this, cannot always be harmoniously combined, rank-ordered or reduced to some more ultimate or foundational good.” (Ruth 12) Such diverse goods can also be identified in the play, especially in the two protagonists.

Like Robert in *Horizon*, Eben is ignorant of his belonging. In the eyes of his brothers, he is the “spittin’ image” of his father. But he knows that he is different. Material possession can’t bring him happiness. Eben identifies himself as totally an heir of his mother – “I’m Maw– every drop o’ blood!” (I.ii, 322). This affinity between Eben and his mother is also recognized by the old Cabot who despises him as “soft-headed, like his Maw.” Critics have noticed the special quality that Eben bears which sets him apart from other Cabots. Bogard observes that Eben is in search of his identity urged by his need to belong.

He seeks the same identification with nature and moves listlessly in alien places, in the kitchen, the world of women where he can sink no roots. His desire brings him into inevitable conflict with more hardened souls whose needs are less because they are aware of less. (*Contour in Time* 209).

Eben’s frustration about his identity originates from his double inheritance of his parents. While Eben is shaped by the utilitarian egoism of his father, he also carries the influence of his mother. Eben’s mother is depicted as a woman of loving nature, “kind to everyone.” In her silence and endurance she devotes her life to the whole family and passes away in exhaustion. Her death symbolizes the absence of ultraistic love and benevolence. But her influence is still present at the farm, as the play shows, either in the form of the image of the protective elms, or as an invisible ghost in the room. Eben’s identification with his mother unwittingly reveals his longing and affirmation of a selfless love. But this truth about the self is hidden from Eben himself. He will not see the truth about himself until the blind is taken away with the help of Abbie.

Eben and Abbie start their relation as two egoists who try to take advantage of each other. As Doris Falk analyses, Eben “is drawn to Abbie not by love, but by lust, greed, and the desire for revenge.” (96) In a similar way, Abbie’s interest in Eben originates from lust and her plot of stealing the farm with a baby. Nevertheless as the two fell in love, the egoistic motivation is transformed into a new feeling. In confronting with Abbie, Eben finds himself involved in unwitting changes. This change is indebted to their communication through the medium of language. Taylor sees our moral sense originates from our dialogues with other interlocutors. He clarifies the relationship between language and the self as follows:

One cannot be a self on one’s own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who are essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who were crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding – (SS 36)

Through language, the other interlocutor, including the past and the present, may have influenced and will continue to shape my identity. If we take Eben’s mother as one that had passed ultraistic love to Eben in the past, then Abbie becomes the present interlocutor to continue affecting Eben. When Abbie recounts her unfortunate past experiences, Eben is touched. He has to fight “against his growing attraction and sympathy” to her. This action exposes his controversial emotions for Abbie. Although she

is still a rival for him, his antipathy is giving away to a sympathy and attraction. Language has the magic to evoke some feelings hidden within us, and this feeling in turn reveals to us our moral stand. Long has noted the growth of Abbie and Eben. He sees that “a change is wrought slowly in their passion of desire which changes completely into the passion of love” (113). Eben’s sympathy betrays his suppressed potential for love. When Abbie asks him to be friend with her, he becomes “hypnotized” in spite of himself. The parlor scene in which Abbie unites with Eben illustrates how language dissolves the hard shell of possessive antipathy and releases the self that longs for love and being loved. It is noteworthy that in Abbie’s effort to convince Eben of her sincere love, the image of mother plays a crucial role. At first, Eben has contempt for Abbie and tries to resist her temptation. Changes occur when Abbie assumes the role of mother to convince Eben that she will love Eben in place of his mother.

Abbie. Tell me about yer Maw, Eben.

Eben. They hain’t nothin’ much. She was kind. She was good.

Abbie. [putting one arm over his shoulder. He does not seem to notice – passionately] I’ll be kind an’ good t’ ye!

Eben. Sometimes she used t’ sing fur me.

Abbie. I’ll sing fur ye! (II.iv, 355)

In this dialogue, Abbie keeps persuading Eben to take her as his mother. Abbie has perceived Eben’s starvation for love, his need to give love and to be loved. She is trying to make herself a love-giver and a love object for Eben. To love and to be loved is hinted as human nature in the play. That accounts for Abbie’s reminding of Eben – “‘Nature’ll beat ye, Eben.” What Abbie does is trying to evoke the suppressed nature of Eben to surrender himself to love.

Meanwhile, when Abbie identifies herself as Eben’s mother, she also reveals that to love and to be loved is part of her nature since the mother’s love represents the most unselfish and pure human emotion. Therefore, through the image of mother, O’Neill infuses the play with a moral power in opposition with the utilitarianism, that is, the Christian value of other-regarding love and self-sacrifice. In contrast with the utilitarian egoistic force which is represented as the stone-cold father Ephraim, the moral power of other-regarding love is associated with the warmth of mother and the vitality of nature (human nature).

An incongruity in their relationship occurs in this parlor episode, which becomes the source of their unfortunate misunderstanding. When Abbie identifies herself with Eben’s mother, with her promises of love and devotion, her nature of love and sacrifice is fully awakened and she is truly transformed into a woman who has escaped from egotism. In “Self-Interpreting Animal,” Taylor notes:

To say that man is a self-interpreting animal is not just to say that he has some compulsive tendency to form reflexive views of himself, but rather that as he is, he is always partly constituted by self-interpretation...” (*Human Agency* 72)

And he also notes “our self- (mis)understanding shape what we feel.” (*Human Agency* 65) Articulation of the self brings changes of self-interpretation and thus transforms the self. Abbie’s self-interpretation guides her to embrace a new self, a woman capable of love and sacrifice. But in the part of Eben, he is still imprisoned in his egoistic cage. Failing to perceive Abbie’s sincerity and his own need to love and to be love, he rationalizes his relationship with Abbie as a retribution on Cabot – springing from the will of his mother. For him making love with Abbie is merely an act of revenge. Eben’s failure in recognizing Abbie’s love and his love for Abbie becomes the cause of their tragedy.

Since Eben has not forsaken his desire for possession, in his relationship with Abbie, his feeling is ambiguous. His love for her grows gradually. But he can’t give himself completely to his love. Abbie remains a potential threat to his property. This contradictory emotions and uncertainty of his moral stand makes him an easy prey to Ephraim’s teasing. Thus when the old Cabot reveals that Abbie has intended to take possession of the farm with her new-born son, Eben relapses to his old self who perceives everything from an utilitarian and egoist point of view. Thinking that he has been deceived by Abbie and been used as an instrument for her theft of the farm, Eben utters his condemnation of Abbie and her baby, saying that he wishes the baby has never been born. Eben’s distrust eventually leads to Abbie’s

infanticide as a proof of her pure love.

The power that alters Eben comes from Abbie's unreserved love for him. In loving and being loved, she totally gives up selfishness and possessiveness. Abbie has found an integral selfhood. Her behavior in the last scene indicates her endorsement of Christian values. In the last act, although she is facing death or imprisonment due to her infanticide, she is still preoccupied with Eben. Even when Eben goes to fetch the Sheriff, she calls after him: "I love ye, Eben! I love ye! I don't care what ye do – if ye'll on'y love me agen!" (II.iv.371) Abbie's escape from a utilitarian egoist to an ultraist enables her to understand Eben's betrayal of her to the police. As Cabot degrades Eben's betrayal of Abbie, she defends him: "They's more to it nor yew know, makes him tell." Abbie is not only capable of understanding Eben but also willing to forgive Eben. Renouncing all her greediness and possessiveness, Abbie finds content and happiness in loving and forgiveness. Her selfless devotion and loving spirit eventually brings Eben to an epiphany self-recognition. In his essay "Romantic Elements in Early O'Neill," Frank R. Cunningham remarks: "Eben's growth toward selflessness and altruism through his relationship with Abbie represents the Romantic tenet of a boy's mythic initiation into manhood.It is true that Eben and Abbie transcend their entrapments in self and time to attain a transfiguration..." (70)

The last scene ends with Eben running back to Abbie fully recognizing his true love for her. At this moment he has been transformed by love in terms of his moral stand. If in the past he is occupied by all kinds of egoistic concerns such as property and desires, now he begins to see what is the most valuable thing for him to pursue. He has found a new self. Realizing that Abbie has murdered the baby to keep his love, he asks Abbie to forgive him and offers to share the sin with her. The dialogue before the arrestment reveals the change that has taken place with Eben.

I got t' pay fur my part o' the sin! An' I'd suffer wuss leavin' ye, goin'
West. Thinkin' o' ye day an' night, bein' out when yew was in – (lowering his voice) 'R bein' alive
when yew was dead. (a pause) I wan t' share with ye, Abbie – prison 'r death 'r hell 'r anythin'! (He
look into her eyes and forces a trembling smile.) If I'm sharin' with ye, I won't feel lonesome,
leastways. (III.iv, 375)

In contrast with the previous scenes when Eben frequently employs the pronoun of "mine" to defend his property, it's notable that "you" takes up a prominent position in Eben's remarks. Having "you" in his concern signifies Eben has escaped from his egoistic self, gaining an altruistic point of view. His sense of self now is not isolated, rather it is connected with another self – Abbie. Charles Taylor has emphasized the importance of commitment to the sense of identity. He says: "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which pride the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose" (SS 27). Through his moral commitment to Abbie Robert finally come to realize what is the most valuable thing for him. His language reveals that he has found happiness and peace in other-regarding love. He claims that in sharing sin and death with Abbie, he won't feel lonesome. Long has recognized the religious element in Eben's transformation. He says: "Eben's strength is the strength of love, and his righteousness is tempered by grace in the final state of his development as a character." (114) Abbie's choosing to pay for her crime and Eben's choosing to share her sin indicates the restoration of the power of soul. Critics see them as characters that "command sympathy not because they are victims of forces they cannot control, but because they are capable of choice and responsibility." (*Contour in Time* 209)

If in *Beyond the Horizon*, O'Neill's emphasis of the Christian other-regarding value of sacrifice is still ambiguous and uncertain, then in *Desire under the Elms* the value of Christianity is more explicitly highlighted as a life-affirmative force that may offer an alternative cure for the suffocating utilitarian egotism. It is hinted as a value that may bring integral selfhood to the modern man. This message is embodied in the final scene when Eben and Abbie walk hand in hand to receive their punishment in the rising sun – a scene suggestive of physical suffering for spiritual salvation.

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