

Characterization in Eugene O'Neil 's " Desire Under The Elms"

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ABSTRACT

This study is distinctively restricted to the analysis of the important characters in Eugene O'Neill' " Desire Under the Elms". Characterization as a literary term is the process by which the writer reveals the personality of a character and the writer makes the characters seem real to their readers. The writer can reveal the character by telling us directly what the character is like : sneaky or generous and by describing how the character looks and dresses. The writer also reveals the characters by telling us how the character speaks and by exposing the character's private thoughts and feelings. The study aims to analyze the characters in this play by revealing the character's effect on other people – showing how other characters feel or behave towards the characters.. It is divided into eight sections, each analyzing a topic. Finally , the study has reached some conclusions that verify the hypothesis of the study.

Key Words : Eugene O' Neill, Characterization, Setting, Characters and Play.

1.INTRODUCTION

American literature refers to literary texts written in English and produced in what is now the United States of America. That means it is different from English literature and any other literature in the world. American literature, in its early emergence , dealt mainly with religious disputes, later on, politics, society, racism and other subjects became its main sources, and , over time, it involved dissimilar subjects about the new current issues, where were discussed in different forms of literary works. Such literary works had been distinctly shaped in particular ways by the literary movements, which came from Europe. O'Neill is one of the most important writers and dramatists in American literature.

1.1. Life of O'Neill

He was one of the influential playwrights in American literature. He had achieved a great participation in literature through his wonderful plays that deal with more issues and different themes and real characters. he depends on an essential and significant technique in writing his plays that have excellent actions with specific issues focusing on the American society as the relationship between the father and the mother, the struggle between the father and the son. Sins and crimes that can be shown and

explained in his plays as Desire under the Elms.

1.2. Plot : Desire Under The Elms

Desire under the Elms (1924) deals with the tragedy of a New England farmer of the 1850's, Ephraim Cabot, who is unable to communicate either with his wives or his sons. His belief of a "Hard God" and his fierce possessiveness of a rocky farm prevent him from achieving a harmonious relationship with the members of his family. In order to escape the tyrannical eyes of their father, Simeon and Peter, the first two sons of his first wife, leave the house after selling their shares to Eben, their half brother. In the meantime Ephraim marries for the third time, at the age of seventy six, Abbie Putnam, a young and voluptuous widow of thirty five. His step son Eben is filled with resentment because he will be disinherited from the farm which belonged to his deceased mother. As Ephraim is impotent due to his old age, Abbie starts seducing young Eben in order to have a child by him so that she might claim Ephraim's farm. Finally, she becomes the mother of a son, whom Ephraim believes as his own. Having come to know that he is the instrument of his own disinheritance, Eben becomes furious at Abbie. She, while seducing him really falls in love with him, and to prove his fidelity, kills the new born baby. After realizing that he is also responsible for the

crime committed by her, both he and Abbie surrender themselves to the law, leaving the old Cabot sitting lonely on the best farm of the country.

1.3. Characterization

Characterization is the act describing the character or qualities of someone or something. It is the way a writer makes a person in a story or a play show seem like a real person. (Merriam Webster's Learner Dictionary, 1962). It can also be defined as the representation of persons in narrative and dramatic works. This may include direct methods like the attribution of qualities in description or commentary, and indirect methods inviting readers to infer qualities from character's actions, speech, or appearance. In the full-length play, a character may remain essentially stable or unchanged in outlook and disposition, from the beginning to the end of a work as the character of Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610-11). Sometimes, the character of the full-length play is a complex one as the character of Hamlet who plays different roles in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1602) as the lover, the avenger, the student, etc. (Chris Baldick, 2008)

The technique of characterization of the one-act play requires rapidity and flexibility. Rapidity means that the dramatist must characterize quickly, leaving no line of dialogue without dramatic contribution to the main method of portraying characters. Flexibility indicates the sudden shift of the character's behavior and response towards other characters without presenting a long exposition to introduce or motivate this changeability. Philip Wayne emphasizes this view. He says, "in the one-act play there is not even time for evolution of the characters' motives."

The characters must stand there, recognizable from a minimum of deft strokes, and not complicated even in finality". (Philip Wayne, 1967).

1.4. Characterization in *Desire under The Elms*

The characters in the play, *Desire under the Elms* are limited in number. There is old Ephraim Cabot, the father, his three sons Simeon, Peter and Eben and finally Ephraim's third wife Abbie. The two elder sons Simeon and Peter are just common place louts, who have been made to over-work by their father, who hate him for this reason, and who go out of the play by the end of Part I, jeering at and cursing their father.

1.4.1. Ephraim Cabot

The personality of old Cabot has been graphically sketched by the dramatist. Cabot is seventy-five, tall and

gaunt, with great, wiry, concentrated power, but stoop-shouldered from toil. His face is hard as if it were hewn out of a boulder, yet there is weakness in it, a petty pride in its own narrow strength. His eyes are small, close together, and extremely short sighted. He is dressed in his dismal black Sunday suit.

According to Clifford Leech (1963), "Ephraim is a monster of egoism, of possessiveness. He is a cheap-jack's version of the 'God of the Old Testament', whom he quotes so often. The play is his tragedy as much as it is the lovers."

The play concentrates on the actions and interactions of Ephraim, Abbie and Eben, and the evolution of their respective characters as a result of such interactions. Eben and Abbie, both change and grow as a result of their love relationship, which sends them to the gallows, but which also ennoble and exalts them. They are rounded, three dimensional figures, which linger on in the memory. Old Cabot, on the other hand, remains very much the same, hard, lonesome, rocky, unyielding figure that he was in the beginning, though he too for a moment evinces a desire to free himself from the tyranny of his strong farm. The spirit of Eben's deam 'maw' may be accounted the sixth character of the play, a character not visible to the eye, but one whose presence and influence are felt throughout the play.

In "Desire under the Elms", Ephraim, the father was the embodiment of harsh paternity, a religious fanatic and full of sexual prowess. He was invincible and indestructible, part Jehovah, part satyr. He was on good terms with all the creatures of his farm, except his sons. This was alienation at its best.

1.4.2. Abbie Putnam

Abbie Putnam, the third wife of Ephraim Cabot is thirty five years old, buxom and full of vitality. Her round face is pretty, but marred by its rather gross sensuality. There is strength and obstinacy in her jaw, a hard determination in her eyes and about her whole personality, the same unsettled, untamed, desperate quality which is so apparent in Eben.

According to Clifford Leech, "The most striking quality in the character of Abbie lies in the complexity of her inner life in the three-stranded web of desire that seizes her. She was to establish good relations with Eben, for she wants to dominate the household and not to risk losing the farm when Ephraim dies. But soon she has a

further motive for attempting to cure Eben of his resentment that she has taken his mother's place.

1.4.3. Eben Cabot

Eben Cabot is a young man of twenty-five, tall and sinewy. His face is well formed, good looking, but its expression is resentful and defensive. His defiant dark eyes remind one of a wild animal in captivity. Each day is a cage in which he finds himself trapped, but inwardly un-subdued. There is a fierce repressed vitality about him. He has black hair, moustache and a thin curly trace of a beard. He dresses in rough farm clothes. He thinks that he takes after his dead mother, that he is every inch of her. But his brothers Simeon and Peter are of the view that he is the spitting image of his father that he is ruthless and relentless like him, and therefore they think, "Dog will eat dog", they will destroy each other. Old Cabot thinks that he is "soft", stupid, like his mother, but there is ample evidence in the play to show that he is sufficiently shrewd to hold his own.

Ephraim will leave the farm to her, only if she gives him a son. She is determined to have a son and Eben must be its father. But the pursuit of Eben that she engages in is not simply caused by her desire for security. She has strong sexual feelings and young Eben arouses those feelings in her. She is also ten years older than Eben, she has taken his mother's place in the house. There is in her attitude to him a manifestation of the maternal element in her which was thwarted when her child died. (Keith, 1934)

His young wife Abbie was the personification of fecundity and of tender, sinister maternity. Eben, the youngest son was the victim of maternal deprivation and of the father, who scorned his weakness. By winning Abbie, the son triumphed at last over the father and gained a mother. Unrepentant, except for the crime of

infanticide, son and mother-mistress paused, as they were being led off to jail at the end of the play, to kiss, to reaffirm their love, to admire the sunrise, to look up "raptly in attitudes aloof and devout."

Eben and especially Simeon and Peter look like oxen, eat, work and behave like a team of oxen, and feel tied up to the other animals of the farm by bonds of brotherhood. "...the cows knows us... and the bosses, an pigs, an chickens... they know us like brothers, and likes us." They obey their instincts blindly and think only of drinking, eating and fornicating. Their lust is quite literally as is shown in Eben's account of his visit to Min, "I begun to beller like a calf an' cuss at the same time... an' she got scared, an' I just grabbed holt an' tuk her."

These inarticulate animal-like creatures differ from their dumb brothers in only one respect, but it is hardly an improvement. They are possessed with the mania of owning things, whether gold or land. They all crave for money or title deeds. They have only one redeeming feature – an embryonic sense of beauty which makes them claim "purity" in a rather monotonous manner, whenever they notice the beauty of their surroundings. The only exception is the Sheriff, who at the end of the play passes very matter-of-fact and anti-climatic comments on the saleable value of the farm while Eben and Abbie admire the beauty of the sunrise.

CONCLUSION

Characterization as a dramatic element gives a simple and comprehensive understanding for the readers because this dramatic element is very important and significant. This study shows this element clearly and properly to help the readers in understanding how the characters think, behave and mediate. So the hypothesis of this study is accepted.

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