

***Symbolism of Earth as a an Element of
Nature in Desire Under the Elms
by Eugene O'Neil***

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Abstract:

The Connection between the human being and nature is not a mere physical link, but spiritual, moral and sensory. This connection culminates when the two sides interact to express a positive or negative reaction until one of them reflects what is going on in the other and is influenced by it genuinely. In his play *Desire Under the Elms*, Eugene O'Neill clearly shows how the elements of nature influence humans because the latter have to be influenced by one of the four elements constituting nature: air, water, earth, and fire. Each element of these has its impact on the individual's personality and leads to the formation of his identity, which, in turn, interact with other characters and he/she does what he/she does and reflects whatever feelings he feels.

The sum of these actions and feelings results in certain events and sensations which will be exploited by playwright to formulate a dramatic performance to the reader who sees part of his life is being performed, which is reflected in the other figures. He realizes that his character from within the figures contained in the theatrical work and so incredible work and believes in what he brought for as long as the narrative is realistically reasonable and comprehensive for the mind and the feelings rest assured.

Key Words :Four Temperaments, Ecocrticism, Eco.

رمزية الأرض كعنصر من عناصر الطبيعة في مسرحية يوجين أونيل (رغبة تحت شجرة الدردار)

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المستخلص:

إن ارتباط الإنسان بالطبيعة ليس ارتباطاً "جسدياً" فحسب بل هو ارتباطاً روحاني ومعنوي وحسي يبلغ ذروته حين يتفاعل الطرفان تفاعلاً ايجابياً أو سلبياً حتى يعكس احدهما ما يدور في الآخر ويتأثر به بشكل حقيقي . في مسرحيته (رغبة تحت شجرة الدردار) يوضح يوجين أونيل جلياً " كيف تؤثر عناصر الطبيعة في الإنسان حيث انه لا بد أن يتأثر الإنسان بأحد العناصر الأربعة المكونة للطبيعة وهي الهواء والماء والتراب والنار ولكل عنصر تأثير في الإنسان يؤدي إلى تكوين شخصيته التي بدورها تتفاعل مع الشخصيات الأخرى فتفعل ما تفعل وتعكس ما تعكس من مشاعر.

يكون مجموع هذه الأعمال والمشاعر أحداثاً وأحاسيس يستغلها المؤلف المسرحي ليصوغ للقارئ عملاً درامياً يرى فيه القارئ جزءاً "من حياته وتتجسد الأجزاء الأخرى منها في شخصيات وأعمال درامية مختلفة فيدرك أن شخصيته من ضمن الشخصيات الواردة في العمل المسرحي وبذلك يصدق العمل ويؤمن بما جاء فيه طالما أن السرد واقعي معقول يتقبله العقل وتطمئن له المشاعر .

Symbolism of Earth as an Element of Nature in *Desire Under The Elms* By Eugene O'Neil

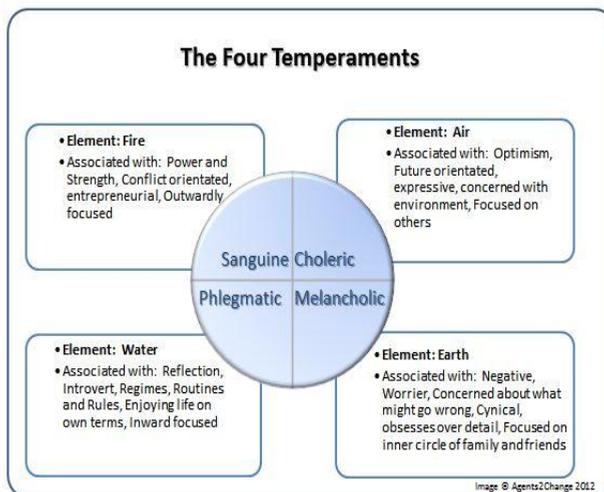
Man cannot be separated from his surroundings as each of them needs the other to shape its identity and practice the authority it enjoys having. The identity identification is not the only thing that matters in the relationship between man and nature because man needs to express his feelings, desires, and the necessity to be with someone or something as a company. However, the relationship between man and nature cannot be positive all the time . Each of them has its way to behave and react to other one's behavior and desires .

The present study discusses the ecocritical analysis of O'Neil's play *Desire Under The Elms* to demonstrate that nature plays a role in the formation of the characters' mentalities and behaviors . Each Character is affected by certain natural element that shapes its

personality and humour which then drives the character to act and behave in a certain way in accordance with the situation and environment he /she is in . *Desire Under The Elms* is chosen because of its richness with ecological implications that the playwright provided it with . Moreover, it can add more to the already existing data about ecocriticism and ecocritical studies conducted about the connection between nature and man .

Reading O'Neil from this 'ecocritical angle gives satisfactory answers to the following questions :Can O'Neil 's plays be interpreted to be ecocentric ?Why does Nature affect the individual's community ? What is the influence of Nature on man's psychology and conduct? Nature is not only a scenery employed by the playwright to stand for the background of the thematic events and to be the character 's romantic surrounding . It has an ecocritical function to conduct when humans are concerned.

Being that said , it is necessary to refer to the Four Temperaments that control man's mentality and behavior. It is, according to Hippocrates that there are four temperaments :choleric, sanguine, melancholic and phlegmatic. According to his theory, a person's temperament depended on the moods (fluids) of their body : blood, black bile,yellow bile and blood .¹ Studying the personality of each character ecocritically helps the reader to find another way to understand more about the ecological sensibility that is pursued by the playwright .



In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neil shows the widower Ephraim Cabot the old man who loves his New England farm, but with a greedy passion. This greed was not with this man only but with his family that is made up of three sons: Eben, the youngest, Simon and Peter. Eben's mother was the owner of a large part of the farm, and he feels that it is his legal right to be the sole heir of the farm and she died of hard work. He manages to steal some money from his father to give to his brothers Simon and Peter to buy their share in the farm. Simeon and Peter use the money to travel to California to find look for gold. It is the greed that controls these people's minds and directs their feelings. Another person in this family shows her greed when having an affair with Eben, and that is Abbie, Ephraim's new wife. She had a son by Eben but she could convince her husband that this baby is his own just to secure the farm for herself and for her child. However, she killed the baby fearing that it would destroy her relationship with Eben whom she loved. Being a killer, she was turned in to the sheriff by Eben. Feeling unable to leave her in this problem, Eben decided to confess that he had a part in the crime.

All these behaviors were practiced in the farm that was the center of the events of the play, thus it is possible for this paper to study the play from the angle of Ecocriticism which is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment".² According to Lawrence Buell, It means the environmentally oriented study of literature and critical practice". These behaviors were affected by the physical nature they lived in: the farm which is needed just to understand why and how it could impact the individuals resident there. The most famous parts of nature are the two elms which O'Neil describes in his stage direction writing:

Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its

roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles .³

The significant phrase " Sinister Maternity " refers to Eben's dead mother and one of the two elms refers to this mother while the second elm hints to the force of life that impacts its people . Judith Plant wrote "

Women have long been associated with nature - metaphorically, as in 'mother Earth', for instance. Our language says it all: a 'virgin' forest is one awaiting exploitation, as yet untouched by man. In society too, women have been associated with physical side of life. Our role has always been 'closer to nature', our natural work centered around human physical requirements: eating, sex, cleaning, the care of children and sick people. We have taken care of day-to-day life so that men have been able to go 'out into the world', to create and enact methods of exploiting nature, including other human beings. Then to return to a home-life which waits in readiness. (A man's home is his castle.⁴)

The Elms can also be seen as life force. Judith Crews wrote :

Trees and forests, probably because of their great size and sometimes longevity, vividly affected the imagination of preliterate societies. They were alive like human beings and animals, but did not move from place to place; like mountains and stones they seemed immobile, but at the same time could change and sway. Dense forests may have seemed mysterious. Even lone trees, particularly in a barren spot, may have appeared miraculous if they provided food for a starving wanderer. ... Their shadows provided cover, camouflage and hiding places for persons on either side of the law. Over time, forests and individual species of trees have come to represent different concepts in the imaginations of populations living in various geographical locations. Whether trees were numerous or scarce in a given locality

influenced how they were perceived and dealt with in legends, mythologies and cultures⁵.

The life force and the "female " existence represented by the Elms are combined by O'Neil to reflect the influence of Eben's dead mother and life force on Eben's mentality and behavior. He is powerful but greedy in dealing with his father , brothers, and Abbie. He practiced greediness in hating his father and stealing the latter's money, and having an illegal affair with his father's new wife. The elms stood as a symbol of the dead mother's anguish which influenced her son's life and destiny. In this way nature affected Eben's mentality and drew the line of life he has to follow .

The same greediness is prevailing in females too .The impact of life force was on Abbie too. She is so selfish in cheating on her husband to satisfy her lust and her greed when thinking of making her child the heir though she killed it and this is another selfish behavior on her side. She stands for the image of an incestuous woman. There was a chance for her to get the property by a legal way when having a baby from her husband but she preferred her stepson to be the father of her baby. However, the elms also witnessed the suffering of another woman, Ephriam's wife who underwent much pain when her husband made her work for long hours and then she died of overwork. In this way the elms witnessed the misery , working for long hours and pain of a virtuous woman and at the same time they witnessed the evils of a lusty greedy woman. The elms are like any mother having good and bad female and male children who behave the way they desire and receive their fair justice at the end .

It is interesting to refer to a certain fact about the elm tree and that is, beside being old in its existence and very firm in the field it grows in , " elm trees have leaves that turn a bright yellow in autumn , and sometimes a yellowish-purple color. The leaves often hide blooms that are still present from late summer. " ⁶ This can refer to the fact that the blooms of compulsion and distaste in the mother's heart have moved with time into her sons hearts so that they hated their father the way she did when she hated him deeply .

The stones, the other natural element in the play, also reflect the characters' mental status, and emotions and passions . The stones are a recurring symbol in the plays of Samuel Becket like *Waiting*

For Godot which stood for loneliness and alienation. Lucky, talking to Vladimir and Estragon expressed his miserable experience he went through , saying :

...In the great cold the great dark the air and the earth abode of stones in the great cold alas alas in the year of their Lord six hundred and something the air the earth the sea the earth abode of stones in the great deeps the great cold on sea on land and in the air I resume for reasons unknown in spite of the tennis the facts are there but time will tell I resume alas alas on on in short in fine on on abode of stones who can doubt it I resume but not so fast I resume the skull fading fading fading ... in spite of the tennis the skull alas the stones Cunard (*mêlée, final vociferations*)...tennis ...the stones ...so calm ...Cunard ...unfinished⁷ .

The stones proved to be a reflection for the silence the characters keep for long hours just to show that silence is a way to express their aimlessness .The stones also stand for hardships of life and non solvable problems that the characters endured silently. They became an example for the hindrances people tried hard to overcome but failed to because these are so fixed and stable .

O'Neil's stones in *Desire Under The Elms* are representatives of Ephraim Cabot and others' way of thinking and behaving . The land of the farm was covered with stones, and Ephraim was obliged to work hard enough to remove them if he wanted to make we of the farm. He did so and used the stones to make walls with them . He thought that this hard painful work is the hard God's plan. He himself was so stiff and hard with no real passions .This cruelty to his wife and children led them to hate him. As for the young men Simon and Peter , the stones stood for their imprisonment in the farm from which they planned to flee to California as a way to gain their lost freedom and to search for more useful stones , Gold.

SIMEON--(*grinning*) I feel like raisin' fun. I feel light in my head an' feet.

PETER--Me, too. I feel like laffin' till I'd split up the middle.

SIMEON--Reckon it's the likker?

PETER--No. My feet feel itchin' t' walk an' walk--an' jump high over thin's--an'. . . .

SIMEON--Dance? (*a pause*)

PETER--(*puzzled*) It's plumb onnateral.

SIMEON--(*a light coming over his face*) I calc'late it's 'cause school's out. It's holiday. Fur once we're free!

PETER--(*dazedly*) Free?

SIMEON--The halter's broke--the harness is busted--the fence bars is down--the stone walls air crumblin' an' tumblin'! We'll be kickin' up an' tearin' away down the road!

PETER--(*drawing a deep breath--oratorically*) Anybody that wants this stinkin' old rock-pile of a farm kin hev it. T'ain't our'n, no sirree!

SIMEON--(*takes the gate off its hinges and puts it under his arm*) We harby 'bolishes shet gates, an' open gates, an' all gates, by thunder!

PETER--We'll take it with us fur luck an' let 'er sail free down some river ⁸.

The irony is that they imagine gold in California being just like the stones in the fields of their father's farm yet this time the stones are more beneficial .

As for Eben, he looks at the stones in a different way .He tackles them from the "hard feeling "point of view. He believes that his father was treating his wife just like a stony hearted man and that caused her death and they also caused Simon and Peter's stiff attitude against their father :

EBEN--Ay-eh. Ther's somethin'. (*suddenly exploding*) Why didn't ye never stand between him 'n' my Maw when he was slavin' her to her grave--t' pay her back fur the kindness she done t' yew? (*There is a long pause. They stare at him in surprise.*)

SIMEON--Waal--the stock'd got t' be watered.

PETER--'R they was woodin' t' do.

SIMEON--'R plowin'.

PETER--'R hayin'.

SIMEON--'R spreadin' manure.

PETER--'R weedin'.

SIMEON--'R prunin'.

PETER--'R milkin'.

EBEN--(*breaking in harshly*) An' makin' walls--stone atop o' stone--makin' walls till yer heart's a stone ye heft up out o' the way o' growth onto a stone wall t' wall in yer heart!

SIMEON--(*matter-of-factly*) We never had no time t' meddle.

PETER--(*to Eben*) Yew was fifteen afore yer Maw died--an' big fur yer age. Why didn't ye never do nothin'?

EBEN--(*harshly*) They was chores t' do, wa'n't they? (*a pause--then slowly*) It was on'y arter she died I come to think o' it. Me cookin'--doin' her work--that made me know her, suffer her sufferin'--she'd come back t' help--come back t' bile potatoes--come back t' fry bacon--come back t' bake biscuits--come back all cramped up t' shake the fire, an' carry ashes, her eyes weepin' an' bloody with smoke an' cinders same's they used t' be. 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 grave⁹.

It is the hard work that was done by this family members, is the thing that deprived them caring for others and showing each other their real emotions of love and support, or else, why did they lose their first mother? or why could not they stay at the farm to support their old man ? In this way the stones are part of these peoples ' lives and existence and they gave their stiff feature and quality to the individuals living with them .People became hard in their emotions and dry in at their hearts , just like stones .

Now to the bigger picture , the farm itself as a whole .In Desire Under the Elms, the farm is life itself in its opposites : prosperity and adversity , good and bad, love and hate, likeness and dislikeness ,etc., The characters ' lives is dramatized in the farm and each one of them is acting his role and expressing his true, and sometime false, emotions . The farm with all its vividly described details became the house of all the struggling individuals who are trying to go on their ways according to the way they believe to be the correct one thinking that he/she is doing the right thing without caring for each other's emotions and future. People in this farm were influenced by their

surrounding nature which left its thumb print on their existence and well being .

Most of the characters in *Desire Under The Elms* are melancholic. Their personalities are affected by earth. According to Steven Ombercan, people with this kind of temperament are so serious, cautious and sometimes they become suspicious .¹⁰

It is clear that the characters carried the characteristics of melancholic people who are concerned about what might go wrong , and they are unusually obsessed over the details and most of the time focused on the inner cycle of family. They can be preoccupied with the themes of tragedy and cruelty in the world and most importantly they are susceptible to depression and moodiness. Earth played its non -avoidable role in the shaping of the characters in the play. The father , his three sons and Abbie expressed their wrong doings, selfishness, moodiness and suffered depression. They are losers but nature is successful and it will keep so for a long time .

Conclusion

The study proved that the characters in *Desire Under the Elms* are affected by the element of earth as an element of nature. Earth, in its representatives :the stones and the farm shaped the personalities and identities of the father , his sons , the step mother , and even the dead mother and caused them to be melancholic and this characteristic led them to act and behave in a certain manner as it is shown in the pages above . The connection between man and nature is governed by the harmony between them, though this harmony did not prevail in the play due to the melancholic nature those characters suffered. The characters' fate is suitable to their nature and Eugene O'Neil proved that he fully understands the nature of this connection and that his characters were walking their ways to reach the inevitable destiny .

Notes

¹Waldecir Anacleto . *Psychoanalysis and Religion* , (London : The Brothers Press , 2004 .), P. 43 .

²Cheryll Glotfelty. *The Ecocriticism Reader* , (Georgia :University of Georgia Press , 1996.), P. xviii .

- ³Eugenie O'Neil. *Desire Under the Elms*,(California: Nick Hern Books , 1995 .) P. 94 .
- ⁴Judith plant *People and Nature*, (Oxford :Blackwell Publishing, 2006.) ,P. 21.
- ⁵Judith Crews ."Nature In people's Thinking" in *Nature Lives* , edited by Alan Faset , New York : Barnes and Nobel , 2006. P. 37.
- ⁶Almen Creman .*Facts about Trees in the United States* , (New York : Barnes and Nobel , 2009.) ,P. 99.
- ⁷Samuel Beckett. *Waiting For Godot* , (New York : Barnes and Nobel , 2000.) , P. 74.
- ⁸Eugenie O'Neil .*Desire Under the Elms*, P. 119.
- ⁹Eugenie O'Neil. *Desire Under the Elms*, P. 141.
- ¹⁰Steven Ombercan. *To Know yourself* , (London : Kogan press , 2008.) P. 9.

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