



Conflict, Repression and Sexuality in O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*

Bimal Kishore Shrivastwa, Department of English, Tribhuvan University,
Biratnagar, Nepal

This paper aims to explore conflict, repression, and sexuality in the relationships among the chief characters in Eugene O'Neill's play, *Desire Under the Elms*: the father, Ephraim, his new wife, Abbie, and the son of Ephraim, Eben. The conflicts of desires such as material greed, hunger for money and property are focused with libido energy at a center of the avarice. As a theoretical tool, the research paper owes a lot to Freudian psychoanalytic study on human instinct, repression, psycho-sexual and incestuous feelings in order to explore what impels Abbie to become sexually indulged with her step son, Eben. The research finding is that it is the Oedipus complex of Eben for Abbie that drags him to become obsessive about her, and, at the same time, it is the Phaedra complex of the mother, Abbie, for her stepson that forces her to kill her own son so that she can regain her love for Eben. The impulses of love, hatred, lust, and greed, as displayed in the play, force human beings to make love ignoring the social taboos. This brief investigation is expected to acquaint the reader with O'Neill as a modern distinct dramatist who delineated the psychological patterns of the human behavior in his dramas skillfully.

Keywords: *Disposition; incest; Oedipus complex; sexuality.*

INTRODUCTION

The paper is concerned to make a survey of repressive sexuality and conflicting psychic impulses in Eugene O'Neill's play, *Desire Under the Elms*. When people are haunted by the instincts of lust and love, the conflicts are likely to arise in their mind and force them to make relations with relatives disregarding the taboos (Thorslev, 1965). O'Neill's treatment of human sexuality is an illustration of his dramatizing extremes of emotive, repressive, and psychic patterns in human conduct. O'Neill's constant experimentation with stagecraft and acting gave American plays a new vitality and originality (Manheim, 1998; Varro, 2009). The

recipient of Nobel Prize for literature in 1936, O'Neill introduced psychological realism in his plays (Porter, 2006; Raleigh, 1967). O'Neill, renowned as the father of American drama, spotlighted the troubled family, writing first families in crises and later depicting them over many generations (Porter, 2006). O'Neill's private struggle seemed to aid him in creating such dramatic works for the stage as *Desire Under the Elms*, published in 1924, and *Strange Interlude*, published in 1928. O'Neill uses the moral and physical entanglements similar to Greek drama to express the complexities of family life in *Desire Under the Elms* (Shaugnessy, 1996). The play, *Desire Under the Elms*, also referred to as *DEU* here, scandalized some early audiences for its treatment of infanticide, alcoholism, vengeance, incest, and fateful retribution (Ranald, 1984). *Desire Under the Elms* is set in a farmhouse in New England in 1850. Eben Cabot, a young and handsome man lives there with Simeon and Peter, his two half-brothers. Eben resents his father, Ephraim, thinking that he was responsible for the death of his mother. Ephraim comes back home with a new wife, Abbie, who is a thirty-five years old passionate woman.

Family sexuality is marked in *Desire Under the Elms* when Abbie and Eben begin to court, and Abbie gives birth to a son of Eben. She conceals the truth to Ephraim to gain his land. When she finds Eben getting detached from her, she murders her son to be close to him (Alexander, 1992). Eben calls for a sheriff to arrest her. But realizing his love and passion for her, he confesses that he murdered the son. *Desire Under the Elms* was inspired by plot elements and characters from the Euripides play, *Hippolytus*. In it, Phaedra, Theseus' wife, attempts to seduce his son, Hippolytus. After Hippolytus threatens to reveal her unfaithfulness, Phaedra commits suicide. Theseus finds a letter that accuses Hippolytus of raping Phaedra. Enraged Theseus curses his son with banishment or death. After Hippolytus dies, Artemis arrives to reveal the truth to Theseus. Raleigh (1967) saw strong parallels between *Hippolytus* and *Desire Under the Elms*. The characters Eben, Abbie, and Ephraim roughly correspond to Hippolytus, Phaedra and Theseus respectively. Both plays are driven by a love triangle between a father, a son, and a stepmother; and the tragedy arises from misguided actions by the stepmother. It is interesting to note how O'Neill skillfully blends naturalism, expressionism, stream of consciousness, and psychoanalysis to deal with sexuality in this short play. The research questions the paper seeks to address are: Why do Abbie and her stepson court in a private room? What are the impacts of family dynamics and Oedipus complex issues in his play? The complex psychic dynamics, found in the relationships of mother and son, tend to elaborate on the complexities of family life.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper applies a discursive, qualitative approach to the text from a theoretical modality based on psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud. The paper makes a close reading and textual analysis of the primary resource, that is, the text, *Desire Under the Elms* by Eugene O'Neill. Belsey (2005) believes that textual interpretation is based on the pure reading that

involves “extra-textual knowledge” (p. 160). Besides this, secondary sources such as the reviews on the text written on journals, websites, and other resources are also studied to find the research gap.

Theoretical Framework

Psychoanalytic theory is the theory of personality development originated from Sigmund Freud in the late 19th century. Psychological criticism is concerned with analyzing the “psychic predisposition of human-beings transferred from one generation to another” (Tyson, 2006, p. 14). According to Freud (1913), personality is composed of three psychic instincts: id, ego and superego. Freudian psychoanalysis is based on the “interaction of unconsciousness, sub-consciousness, and consciousness and the repression of the sexual instincts” (Tyson, 2006, p. 15). The id acts in accordance with the pleasure principle, that it avoids pain and seeks pleasure. The ego works to balance both the id and the superego. The word, Oedipus is derived from Sophocles play, *Oedipus Rex*, based on Greek mythology of the prince of Thebes, Oedipus who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother, Jacosta. Oedipus went through the trauma of incest. Therefore, Oedipus complex often results in trauma. According to Freud (1913), “Ambivalence, originally, foreign to our emotional life, was acquired by mankind from the father complex where psychological investigation of the individual today still reveals the strongest expression of it” (p. 202). The Freudian ambivalence refers to the repressive sexuality for more people. It is significant to note that “oedipal attachments, sibling rivalry, and the like are considered developmental stages” (Tyson, 2006, p. 14). McLeod (2018) elaborates further that the Oedipus complex is a repressed desire of a son towards his mother that leads to the rivalry with the father. The Phaedra complex is used to refer to “the non-pathological stepparent-stepchild attraction” (Messer, 1969, p. 213). And Phaedra complex may be used to cover different degrees of attachment, including domineering but asexual mother’s love for her step son (“Phaedra complex”, 2008). Maddock (1989) analyses a model of family sexuality and marks that unhealthy and tensed patterns of sex relations in families breed bad culture.

The psychological approaches, psychosexual discourse highlighted above are the key theoretical tools used by the researcher to understand what impels a motherly figure, like Abbie, to make physical relationship with her stepson and its impact on the family and society in *Desire Under the Elms* by Eugene O’Neill.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A number of reviews as well as the criticisms on Eugene O’Neill and his play, *Desire Under the Elms*, justify the surge of popularity of the play and the playwright. A cluster of critics has reviewed on the theme and characterization of the play. It must be noted that the deepest emotional drive in O’ Neill’s play is usually based on father-son, father- daughter and mother-son relationship (Bloom, 2007; Porter, 2006). O’Neill adapts ancient Greek myths for

his story in the play, *Desire Under the Elms*. Therefore, the play has some elements of classical tragedy, namely Seneca's *Phaedra*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and Euripides' *Medea* (Shaughnessy, 1996). O'Neill's characters span a variety of social and ethnic ranks, sailors, prostitutes, farmers, Negroes, and people of different religions (Alexander, 1992; Murphy, 1987). O'Neill's plays involve characters who inhabit the fringe of society, engaged in disapproved behavior, where they struggle to mention their hopes and aspirations but ultimately slide into disillusionment (Hays, 1990; Raleigh, 1967). Eben, the protagonist of the play, suffers from inner tension due to the death of his mother. Eben anticipates that his mother was killed by his father, Ephraim Cabot. O'Neill sketches Ephraim Cabot as a person who is indifferent to his wife and family (Porter, 2006; Thorslev, 1965). Ephraim's first two wives, as Simeon and Peter report, were exploited with work overload. Therefore, Eben claims that his second mother died of the workloads of Ephraim's households. The analysis of the characters hints at the tensed relationship of the father and son.

There are some critics who have analyzed the form, content and style of the play. *Desire Under the Elms* is a depiction of local color, a powerful expression in naturalistic mode, and a great modernist experiment (Varro, 2009). Floyd (1985) marks varied forms in O'Neill's plays: "The plays such as *Emperor Jones* and *Desire Under the Elms* contain eight and eleven scenes respectively" (p. 47). Furthermore, there is quite a variation in the presentation of scenes with the acts of the play. Only a few plays are well divided into equal number of scenes; most reveal an irregular division of scenes within the acts. Some plays contain prologues and epilogues, others contain only epilogues. The setting of *Desire Under the Elms* also offers the audience a great variety. His setting presents the land in different forms, the sea in different moods, the forest and jungle from different perspectives (Murphy, 1987).

O'Neill's principal detractors find his style crude, his language clumsy, and proposing that his plays need editing. His language is communicative to a wide audience because he uses a folk idioms and dialects which are commonly understood (Bloom, 2007). The way O'Neill uses spellings and apostrophes is so marvelous. O'Neill is an extraordinary artist renowned for revising the unhappy ending to capture the tragic spirit of the characters (Alexander, 1992). Evaluating the dramatic technique of O'Neill, Conn (1989) notes that unlike Shakespeare who used asides and soliloquies, O'Neill sought others methods, like masks, to reveal the psycho. Ephraim Cabot in *Desire Under the Elms*, Abraham Mannon in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and James Tyrone in a *Long Day's Journey into Nights* are possessive fathers sketched by O'Neill.

Thus, the reviews on the text, *Desire Under the Elms*, by so many critics signify that they have noticed the problems of conflict faced by Eben and Abbie in the play. But the critics have not explored the issue from Freudian psychoanalysis. Hence, here lies the research gap. Therefore, this article attempts to address the research gap by surveying the issues of sexuality, Oedipus complex, and conflicting desires in the play.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The experimental play, *Desire Under the Elms*, reflects O'Neill's own family conflicts and repression. O'Neill anatomizes people's psychic dispositions and their emotional stimulus. The incestuous bond between mother and son, the material greed for the land and property, and the tensed dispute between father and son in the Cabot family are some of the intricate psychic patterns incorporated in the play, *Desire Under the Elms*, mostly referred to as *DUE* in the paper. The play is set in a farmhouse in New England in the mid-century when the Americans practiced an authoritative, atrocious patriarchy with the materialistic vein. Adultery, incest, infanticide, trauma and other psychic predispositions that went on in American or Cabot family are suggested through the setting of the play. A major concern with O'Neill is obsessive love. Love is that which drives a person without reason and beyond conscience; love that does not heal but smother and destroys (Milan, et al, 2017). O'Neill attempted to justify that there are many mysterious and unexplored layers of personality that are needed to unmask.

Sexuality in O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*

In O'Neill's play, *Desire Under the Elms*, the repression leading to martial sexuality is hardly invigorating and ever orgasmic, despite the fact that O'Neill's another play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, dramatizes the positive and healthy sexual bond between the spouses. Martial sexuality in *Desire Under the Elms* is marred by the failure of the female partner to provide sexual stimulation/erotic interests though it is essential for sustaining the marital relation and happiness in that relation. Freud (1913) analyses sexuality and regards the imbalance of id and ego leads one to suffer mentally and psychologically. Ephraim Cabot's marriage with young and sensuous Abbie (his third wife) creates discord in the family, accentuates father-son rivalry, creates incestuous relation between Eben and Abbie that ends in total chaos in the family involving infanticide, and imprisonment.

The marriage lacks the mutuality of feelings of the partners. The unhealthy sexual activities in familial context are caused by of sexual neglect or virtual ignorance of family member's sexuality (Westen, 1999). Cabot brings Abbie to accomplish his sexual gratification, but Abbie looks upon old Cabot as a means of possessing his farm when he dies. Abbie has no conjugal love for Cabot; and the sexual and erotic stimulation is absent in them. Maddock (1989) regards that sexual pattern among family members create "a network of shared meanings, which, in turn, serve as a basis for further behavioral sequences between members, creating new meanings upon which additional behavior is based" (p. 132). But this does not occur in the drama, *Desire Under the Elms*. In fact, the slightest physical contact between them causes Abbie to feel disgust, and makes her "Shrink from his touch" (*DUE*, p. 252). Cabot marries Abbie to get rid of his growing loneliness in the old age; but her arrival generates the discord because Peter and Simons (son from Cabot's first wife) decide to leave the farm and settle somewhere in California (Bloom, 2007). The first symptom of marital

sexual discord is marked when Abbie shows her disinterest in sharing bed and bedroom with old Cabot. Eben straightforwardly asks, “This here’s a nice bed room, Ephraim. It’s a real nice bed. Is it my room, Ephraim (*DUE*, p. 224)? Abbie’s instinct for Eben forces her to get distracted from her husband.

Eben has been carrying with him the eternal image of his mother in the unconscious. The urges that are not accomplished in reality lay repressed in the unconscious (Freud, 1913). Since Eben’s mother’s image is unconscious, it is unconsciously projected upon Abbie. Abbie has double roles in the play, both the role of a mother and a lover. The double role of Abbie is marked when Abbie and Eben enter the tomb-like room which has not been opened since Eben’s mother’s death:

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

Abbie: (Puttin’ one arm over his shoulder.) I’ll be kind an’ good t’ ye!

Eben: Sometimes she used t’ sing fur me.

Abbie: I’ll sing fur ye! (*DUE*, p. 384)

Abbie forgets about the limitations of her maternal love for Eben because her love seems to be carnal one. Obviously, Abbie displays the predisposition of Phaedra complex. The Phaedra complex suggests “the non-pathological stepparent-stepchild attraction” (Messer, 1969, p. 213). The Oedipus complex of Eben and the Phaedra complex of Abbie make them consume their passion in a lusty and incestuous manner:

Abbie: (Both her overwhelming desire for him, there is a sincere maternal love in her manner and voice – a horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love). Don’t cry Eben! I’ll take yer Maw’s place! I’ll be everything she was t’ ye! Let kiss te pure, Eben – same’s if I was a maw t’ ye- an’ ye kiss me back as if yew was my son –my son –say’s good night t’ me! Kiss me, Eben.

She kisses him lustfully again and again and he flings his arms about her and returns her kisses. (*DUE*, p. 385)

The lust in Eben stems from his love for his mother in the unconscious. In Freudian psychoanalysis, unconscious is delineated as the instincts repressed because they are not fulfilled in reality (Westen, 1999). The incestuous bond between mother-son is signified by the setting. The farmhouse, where the play is set, is constructed at immovable walls so that the audience can see the action in the individual rooms, as well as outside the farmhouse, simultaneously. This feature of the set contributes to the realism and enables O’Neill to present evocative visual juxtapositions, thus adding to the unrealistic, poetic, and even mythic quality of the drama (Floyd, 1985). For example, in Part 3, Scene 1, downstairs in the kitchen, the townspeople celebrate with Cabot the birth of the baby he believes to be his son, while Eben sits brooding in his bedroom upstairs, and the baby lies silently in the cradle in

the other upstairs bedroom. Later in the scene, as Shaughnessy (1996) observes, Eben and Abbie meet in the bedroom where the baby is, and they embrace while standing over the cradle. The audience observes family sexuality grooming at this time in the house. This device inevitably reminds the audience of the deception being perpetrated on Cabot, the love that binds Abbie to Eben, the distance that lies between both of them and Cabot, and especially the important sense of irony that underlies the action of the drama.

O'Neill makes use of incest motif in *Desire Under the Elms* following the Oedipal myth based on Sophocles' great play, *Oedipus Rex*. The relationship between Eben and Abbie is messed up because of the unacceptable family sexuality. Problems arise in the post-marital conditions that involve persistent lack of erotic interest in the partner give rise to subversive adulterous and incestuous relation in the family (Millan et al., 2017). From the incestuous relationship between Abbie and Eben a son is born who will later be murdered by his own mother. This incident is based on the Greek myth of Medea dramatized by Euripides in his play, *Medea*, Jason plans to abandon Medea and marry a new wife. Medea decides to kill Jason's his children in order to leave Jason heirless and to regain his love.

Family sexuality leads to tragedy because of the sin committed by the family members involved. One of the great sins in the Greek tragedy is to kill someone of your own blood (Frendo, 2019). The Phaedra complex of Abbie impels her to commit a sin in *Desire Under the Elms*. Abbie, at first, plots to secure her position by bearing a son for Cabot so that he can be assured of his dynasty. She talks to him saying "mebbe the lord'll give us a son" (*DUE*, p. 378). But Abbie is so cunning because she knows that the new son of Abbie and Eben will disinherit Eben. Eben's child is born to Abbie, and Ephraim thinks it is his child although his neighbors know the reality about the son. Ephraim reveals Eben about Abbie's earlier agreement to have a son. Ephraim says, "I wants Eben cut off so's this farm'll be mine when ye die!" (*DUE*, p. 393). The sexual instinct makes Eben so confused that he doesn't know what to do. Eben says, "I wish he never was born! I wish he'd die this minit. I wish I'd never sot eyes on him! It's him yew havin' him-a purpose t' steal-That's changed everythin'" (*DEU*, p. 395). Eben's wish is analogous to the curse of Theseus on Hippolytus in *Phaedra*. The family sexuality blinds the members involved it (Teranova, 2018). Like Medea, Abbie becomes so blinded in her love for Eben that she murders her own child; she kills what she loves. Shaughnessy (1996) judged that a mother suffocating her own baby surly constitutes an unnatural act. In Abbie, we may be reminded of the daunting will of a Medea or Lady Macbeth.

Thus, Eben and Abbie become simply the victims of their lust. The family sexuality dooms many people: Cabot, Abbie, Eben, and their son. In the end, Abbie accepts her guilt: "I' got t' take my punishment – t' pay for my sin" (*DEU*, p. 402). Eben equally realizes his passion, sexuality for Abbie and his guilt behind the doom. The end of *Desire Under the Elms* suggests the concept of guilt and atonement. Eben and Abbie have to take the ultimate

responsibility for their sinful acts. The case of Eben and Abbie symbolizes the disturbances experienced by all the family members when they are obsessed with perverted family sexuality.

Oedipus Complex in Desire Under the Elms:

One cause of the conflict marked in the family of Eben in O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* is the repressed Oedipus complex. The central character, Eben, suffers from Oedipus complex. Shrivastwa (2022) believes that Oedipus complex is a symptom of unhealthy sexual relationship between the son and mother caused by the son's enmity against his father. Eben's Oedipus complex is generated by his enmity against with his father and his passionate love for his stepmother, Abbie in his unconscious. Freud (1913) explains that when "the boy's sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense, his father is perceived as an obstacle to them. From this, the Oedipus complex originates" (pp. 21-22). O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* is concerned with the subject of rebellion, with a hostile treatment of the father figure. Rebellion is in essence a rejection of parental and especially paternal authority (Frendo, 2019). Eben rejects his father's authority by choosing to make love with his stepmother.

O'Neill adopts of the Greek model of incest to project the idea that modern men's tragedy is generated by such incestuous relations. O'Neill's story in *Desire Under the Elms* is analogous to the mythic account of Seneca's *Phaedra* (Porter, 2006). In *Phaedra*, the protagonist, Phaedra, falls in love with her stepson, Hippolytus who is the son of Theseus. When Hippolytus rejects her love, Phaedra accuses Hippolytus of having attempted to rape her and takes revenge. Hippolytus' father, Theseus, curses his son to die. The concept of the Phaedra complex, an incestuous relation between a mother and her stepson, is generated from this myth.

The family relationship, portrayed in Seneca's *Phaedra*, is fabricated in *Desire Under the Elms* to suggest us about the Oedipus complex and Phaedra complex. Like Theseus, Ephraim Cabot brings a third wife, Abbie, at seventy-six to his farm. Like Phaedra, Abbie is intensely attracted to her stepson, Eben. Abbie makes incestuous relationship with Eben. This is the impact of the Phaedra complex. The victim of Phaedra complex becomes so much obsessed that he may commit a severe crime (Messer, 1969; Shrivastwa, 2022). Eben, like Hippolytus, rejects Abbie at first. If Phaedra is unsuccessful and commits suicide, Abbie is successful in passion for the stepson. Then Eben, unlike Hippolytus, enjoys the affair. Ephraim, like Theseus, has many wives. In *Phaedra*, Theseus curses his wife for victimizing Hippolytus in her sexual passion. But in *Desire Under the Elms*, Eben's curse befalls upon his child because the son is killed by Abbie. This shows how the Oedipus complex and Phaedra complex have had terrible impact on the family and society for centuries.

The incest of the characters makes the play a tragedy. Incest refers to the sexual activity between family members or close relatives (Millan et al., 2017). We can mark sins committed

by Ephraim in the play. Greek tragedy involves a sin committed by the leading character as his hamartia (Frendo, 2019). Because of the obsessive Oedipus complex, Eben is in a continual antagonism against his father, and he insists that the farm is his. Ephraim is guilty of doing something wrong to his wife. Eben becomes sinful because of the presence of his mother. Mother lurks over Eben so mysteriously like a curse and it forces him to accomplish his passionate sexual desires with Eben. From Eben's actions, it can be generalized that Oedipus complex makes one commit sexual and ethical crimes.

The principal subject of the play is Cabot's son, Eben whose actions are influenced by the Oedipus complex. In the Oedipus complex, the desire of the mother is essentially manifested in an idealized and exalted mother (Freud, 1913). Eben is traumatized at absence of his mother, but finds her presence in Abbie. Eben's devotion to his mother makes him so jealous for her affection that he finds it difficult enough to share this even with his father. Eben, as a child, resents having shared his mother's affection even with his own father, and regards him as a rival and wishes him out of his way. Eben clearly declares: "I pray he's died" (*DUE*, p. 357). Denial and affirmation of the truth are the rigorous tenets of Oedipus complex (McLeod, 2018). The brothers, Simon and Peter, tell Eben that Cabot is their father. But Eben responds: "Not mine! ...I mean I ain't. I ain't like him – he hain't me" (*DUE*, p. 358). He thinks that he is his mother's heir: "I'm her- her heir" (*DUE*, p. 358). This is how O'Neill outlines the impact of Oedipus complex.

If Eben represents the active Oedipal in his rebellion against his father, Ephraim the name of an Old Testament patriarch, is an energetic archetype of God-like paternal authority (Manheim, 1998). The rivalry between the father and son is caused by the father's controlling desires in *Desire Under the Elms*. Oedipus complex is an outcome of the tendency of the father to manipulate son from loving mother (Tyson, 2006). Ephraim Cabot, like primal father, attempts to manipulate the whole family. His sons abhor him for his harsh nature. Ephraim is symbolized as the stones in the play. These lines of Ephraim justify this: "When I come here fifty odd years ago – I was jest twenty an 'the strongest an' hardest ye evr seen –ten times as strong an' fifty times as hard Eben. Waal – this place was nothing but field o' stones" (*DUE*, p. 380). The father figure, Ephraim is associated with hardness and isolation.

Oedipus complex gets generated in a person when there is no emotional bond between father and son (McLeod, 2018). Eben and others hate Ephraim because there is no emotional bond between them. Ephraim Cabot and his sons do not have a meaningful relationship. Even the bond between Ephraim and his sons, Simeon and Peter, is not so emotional. Ephraim provides them room and food, and in return he makes them work in the farm. Ephraim torments his sons. The sons are resentful to him because their father drives them. Simon expresses his hatred towards his father in the following words: "Here it is stones atop o' the ground – stones atop o'stones – makin' stone walls – year atop o'year-him 'n' yew 'n' me 'n'

then Eben – makin’ stone wall fur him to fence us in!”(DUE, p. 356). This displays that Ephraim attempts to have paternal authority over his sons.

A son suffers from Oedipus complex, mother’s love sickness when his father seems to be indifferent to his son (Terenova, 2018). Ephraim has many wives. His first wife is the mother of Peter and Simeon, the second, the mother of Eben and the third, new bride, Abbie. Eben blames Ephraim for imposing Eben’s mother with heavy load that forces her to die soon. This is why Eben is resentful towards him:

Eben: (fiercely) An fur thanks he killed her!

Simeon: (after a pause) No one killed nobody. It’s allus somethin’. Tha’s the murderer.

Eben: Didn’t he slave Mav t’ death?

Peter: He’s slaved himself t’ death. He’s slaved Sim ‘n’ me ‘n’ yew t’ death-on’y none o’ us haint’t died yit. (DUE, p. 357)

Each of Eben’s internal conflict goes to the psychological core of Oedipus conflict. Psychologists seek to explore the personality of the son based on his relationship with his mother after he is victimized by the Oedipus complex (McLeod, 2018). The main source of Eben’s tragedy must be sought in his psychological quest for a mother figure. The protagonist of the play, Eben, exemplifies an inner conflict between emotional demands for a woman and inner subjectivity. O’Neill explores the dilemma in Eben’s character. Eben’s quest for his mother signifies his desire to have an emotional bond. She does not appear in the play. Eben narrates his infantile remembrances about his mother and father, his fondness for his mother, and his contempt for his father. In Oedipus complex, which occurs at the infantile stage, a boy becomes sexually attached to his mother after being hostile to his father (McLeod, 2018). Eben discovers that his father and his mother do not love each other (Floyd, 1985). Eben’s hatred of his father leads him to seek for emotional satisfaction of his feelings in his stepmother, Abbie. She is the first woman with whom Eben comes into contact; and she has a great role in the development of Eben’s masculinity. Eben unconsciously responds to his stepmother. Because Eben lacks father’s love, he often looks hard and isolated. Abbie, who is the figure of the mother archetype, forms the foundation of the mother-complex on the son.

One of the tragic elements associated to Oedipus complex and used by O’Neill is the haunting past. The psychic trauma results in a person because of the haunting past (Alexander, 2004). The past in *Desire Under the Elms* determines and controls the present and creates the tragic future. Throughout the play, we feel the dominance of Eben’s mother although she is not seen on the stage. At the outset of the play, the existence of the elms is the figure of mother represents the dominance of mother over the play. It represents the primordial force, or “source of life, of the magical life force” (Jung, 1956, p. 258). The trees in Cabot’s farmhouse are bent over the house. This symbolizes the presence of a mother who

is holding her child. This is the root cause of Eben's obsession with his mother, with Oedipus complex. The trees protect and shelter the house with their branches. This is described in the exposition of the play: "Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on their roof" (*DEU*, p. 354). The tree has maternal significance. It is the symbol of the mother archetype. The instinct to possess mother in the unconscious of Eben is further reflected in these lines:

Abbie: Vengeance o' God on the hull o' us! What d'we give a durn? I love ye, Eben!
God knows I love ye!

Eben: An' I love yew, Abbie! —now I kin say it! I been dyin' fur want o' ye — every hour since ye come! I love ye! (*DEU*, p. 353)

Eben keeps on confessing to Abbie that he loves her. The Oedipus complex in Eben has restrained his ego because he often becomes over-flooded by his id. Freud (1913) elaborates that 'id' is the primitive and instinctual part of the mind that contains libidinal drives and hidden memories, while the 'ego' is oriented to reality principle because it checks id and superego.

Eben's libido towards his mother becomes active because his father, Cabot has controlling motives for Eben in his unconscious. This is manifest in these lines: "An' I growed hard. God's hard, not easy! God's in the stones! Build my church on a rock — out o' stones an' I'll be in them! That's what He meant 't" (*DEU*, p. 380). That is why Eben confesses to his mother: "I meant— I hain't his'n — I hain't like him — he hain't me! I'm Maw — every drop o' blood" (*DEU*, p. 381). From such expression we can perceive that Eben had perverted sexual desire for his mother because of his Oedipus complex.

Desire Under the Elms reflects certain facets of the ambivalence of love and hatred caused by the Oedipus complex. According to Freud (1913), "We know nothing about the origin of love and hatred. It may be assumed to be a fundamental phenomenon of our emotional life" (p. 202). The love of Eben becomes sexual as his libido transfers from the anal region to his genitals because of his Oedipus conflict. Love and hatred, materialistic greed and other conflicts do not just signify desire, but they all evolve into a passion and are integrated and fused into one single element (Terenova, 2018). Eben's father, Cabot, stands in the way of his love for Abbie. The boy, therefore, feels aggression and envy towards this rival, Cabot, and also feels that the father will strike back at him. Eben's Oedipus complex as well as the shadow of his mother in him impels Eben to avenge his father. This is expressed through the technique of expressionism. This is how O'Neill is renowned for integrating social and psychological expressionism. Eben's Oedipus complex is manifest when he treats his mother with affection and father with hatred:



Eben: Abbie When I fust come in — in the dark — they seemed somethin' here.

Maw allus loved me.

Abbie: Mebbe it knows I love yew, too. Mebbe that makes it kind t' me.

Eben: I dunno. I should think she'd hate ye.

Abbie: No. I kin feel it don't — not no more. (*DEU*, p. 383)

The environment surrounding the youngest son, Eben, plays a vital role. The shadow under the elms, the symbol of 'Great Mother' and 'Dark Mother', covers the house with a heavy burden. The youngest son is the only man who actually feels this burden, and no other character experiences resistance and repression to such an extreme. This is evident in Eben's affection towards his mother, which in turn results in the retaliation against Cabot, who caused her to suffer and die.

The play reveals Eben's strong need to take revenge against his father. He views the existence of a sister-wife-mother as a rival to his deceased mother in Abbie. Abbie will inherit all the farm property owned by Cabot. This forces Eben to rebel against her. Abbie notices his defiance but, at the same time, she sees the carnal desire in Eben's nature and she cleverly uses his thirst for physical satisfaction to attract him. Thus, the Oedipus complex gets developed from the conflict between the two characters. Replacing the deceased mother, Abbie finally makes love to Eben in the room where his mother's spirit lives on. This dramatic change in events emerges as the substitution effect arising from Oedipus complex towards his birth mother who was replaced by Abbie, his mother's enemy, through the act of sexual intercourse which signifies the positional replacement. This act allows Eben to eradicate the spirit of his mother inside his personal unconscious. From the case of Eben in the play, we can surmise how Oedipus complex ruins the life of all family members.

CONCLUSION

Thus, O'Neill's play, *Desire Under the Elms* addresses such dimensions of human psyche as repression, conflicts, sexuality, and Oedipus complex in. We can mark extensive explorations of O'Neill's view of the ambivalence of love and hatred in the father-son battle, the incest issue, the relationship between stepmother and stepson, mother's sacrifice of the child, the use of myth and archetypes adopting the structure of classical tragedies to note how the psychic impulses of the characters lead them the suffer. The research finding is that *Desire Under the Elms* is a primarily dramatization of unusual relations of the characters with mother, father, son, stepson, and brother clearly a depressive and predominantly oedipal pattern emerges in this play. Eben's admiration of his mother and dependency on her is the projection of his affections towards her in his Oedipus complex. His vengeful feelings towards his father for hurting his mother are represented by the shadow under the elms which is the symbol of 'Dark Mother'. Intense work in this severe environment represents the paternal archetype, where Cabot leads not only the children but his first and second wife to



do unbearable and unendurable labor, especially his second wife who suffered greatly and died in adversity. Cabot's attributes of the paternal archetype induces rebellion in his three sons, and resistance and repression in Eben. Rebellion against his father, in turn, intensifies Eben's affection towards his deceased mother who represents the maternal archetype. Affectionate feeling is expressed in the form of shade under the elms. Under the synchronicity of the life cycle, conflicts between old and young and man and woman storms around in the midst of desires, sexual urges materialistic greed and desire for property. The conflicts are related to Freud's concept of sexual libido and other desires such as Oedipus complex and Phaedra complex. The conflict of sexual urge is represented not only by the incestuous relationship between Eben and Abbie, but by the contemplated murder of their child which results in transforming the sexual urge to true love between them. This is not the conscious control of sexual urge as expounded by Freud. Rather, it resembles the development of sexual intercourse to produce a higher form of spiritual love.

Acknowledgements

The researcher acknowledges his gratefulness towards the Research Management Cell at Post Graduate Campus, Tribhuvan University, Biratnagar, Nepal, for providing valuable guidelines during the preparation of the paper. The researcher has no conflict of interest to disclose. The researcher received no funds for the preparation of the paper.



REFERENCES

- Alexander, D. (1992). *Eugene O'Neill's creative struggle: The decisive decade, 1924–1933*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Alexander, J. (2004). Towards a theory of cultural trauma. In Alexander et al. (Eds.), *Cultural trauma and collective identity* (pp. 134-137). University of California Press.
- Belsey, C. (2005). Textual analysis as a research method. In G. Gabriele (Ed.), *Research methods for English studies* (pp. 29-34). Edinburgh University Press.
- Bloom, F. S. (2007). *Student companion to Eugene O'Neill*. Green Wood Publishing Group.
- Conn, J, P. (1989). *Literature in America, an illustrated history*. Cambridge University Press.
- Floyd, V. (1985). *The plays of Eugene O'Neill: A new assessment*. Ungar.
- Frendo, M. (2019). Ancient Greek tragedy as performance: The literature- performance problematic. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 35, 19-32. DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X18000581.
- Freud, S. (1913). *Interpretation of dreams* (A.A. Brill, Trans.). Modern Library. (Original work published 1989)
- Hays, P. (1990). Child murder and incest in American drama. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 36(4), 434–448.
- Heiman, J. (2001). Sexual desire in human relationships. In W. Everaerd, E. Laan & S. Both (Eds.), *Sexual appetite, desire and motivation: Energetics of the sexual system* (pp. 117-118). Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.
- Jung, C. G. (1956). *Symbols of transformation*. Princeton University Press.
- Kuvalanka K. A., Weiner, J. L., & Russell, S. T. (2013). Sexuality in families: The (re-) creation of sexual culture. *Handbook of marriage and the family*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-3987-5_19
- Lande, D. G. (1989, June,). Incest: Its causes and repercussions. *Postgrad Med.*, 85(8), 81. DOI: [10.1080/00325481.1989.11700738](https://doi.org/10.1080/00325481.1989.11700738)
- Maddock, W. M. (1983). *Human sexuality and the family*. Haworth Press.
- Manheim, M. (1998). *The Cambridge companion to Eugene O'Neill*. Cambridge University Press.
- McLeod, S. (2018). Oedipal complex. *Simple Psychology* <https://www.simplypsychology.org/oedipal-complex.html>
- Messer, A. (1969). The Phaedra complex. *ArchGen Psychiatry*, 21(2), 213-8. DOI:10.1001/archpsyc.1969.01740200085012
- Millan, A. R., Cruz, J. B., & Reyes, C. A. (2017, September). Incest victims: A case study. *International Journal of Advance Research*, 5, 572-573. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/5361>
- Murphy, B. (1987). *American realism and American drama, 1880–1940*. Cambridge University Press.
- O'Neill, E. (1959). *Desire under the elms and the hairy ape*. Random House.
- Osho (2003). *From sex to super consciousness*. Full Circle.
- Phaedra complex (2008). *A dictionary of psychology*. Oxford University Press.



- Porter, L. (2006). Musical and literary allusions in O'Neill's final plays. *The Eugene O'Neill Review*, 28, 131–146. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29784807>
- Raleigh, J. H. (1967). Eugene O'Neill. *The English Journal*, 56(3), 367–475. <https://doi.org/10.2307/811573>
- Ranald, M. L. (1984). *The Eugene O'Neill companion*. Greenwood Press.
- Shaugnessy, E. L. (1996). *Down the night and down the days: Eugene O'Neill's Catholic sensibility*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Shrivastwa, B. K. (2022). Phaedra complex and Oedipus complex in Upadhyay's the city son. *PalArch's Journal of Archeology Egyptology*, 18(18), 767-778. <https://archives.palarch.nl/index.php/jae/article/view/10593>
- Terenova (2018, June 24). What are some causes of incest? <https://www.quora.com/What-are-some-causes-for-incest>
- Thorslev, P. (1965). Incest as romantic symbol. *Comparative literature Studies*, 2(1), 41-58. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40245694>
- Tyson, L. (2006). Psychoanalytic criticism. *Critical theory today*. Routledge.
- Varro, G. (2009). Gendering the mind: Eugene O'Neill's desire under the elms and Sam Shepard's a lie of the mind. *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 15(1), 61–77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41274456>
- Westen, D. (1999). The scientific status of unconscious processes: Is Freud really dead? *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 47(4), 1061-1106. [DOI:10.1177/000306519904700404](https://doi.org/10.1177/000306519904700404)