
Love and Revenge of Eben in *Desire under the Elms*: a Psychoanalytic Reading

This paper draws on the story of Eben Cabot's love and revenge from a well-known American play, *Desire under the Elms* with a critique from the Freudian psychological interpretation of love and of revenge drive. The essay brings out the traumatic manifestation of vengeance and horror when Eben's love for his mother turns him into an avenger for taking a revenge on his father, Ephraim Cabot. As Eben thinks his mother is killed by his father, he gives his father a severe penalty by removing him with disowning his two elder brothers. In addition, he succeeds wooing her newly married step-mother, Abbie Putnam; and manages to sleep with her. After she gives birth to a baby, she herself smothers it only for Eben. When Abbie leaves the Cabot House and rushes with Eben, Eben's father feels utterly disgraced while Eben feels he avenges finally.

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born on 16 th October 1888 in a hotel room in Broadway in New York. He wrote many famous plays such as *Strange Interlude*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Long Voyage Home*, *In the Zone*, and, *Desire under the Elms*. He has been the first American naturalist who, in his plays, manifested different modern ideas, and focused on a very particular kind of literary strategy. In addition, he portrayed very complex psychological human life in his literary works, such as, love, double game, conflict and revenge. These portrayals have been relevant in his presentation of symbolic figures, masks, delineation of inner tension, complexity, fragmented personalities and scenic effects. In this way, the readers can explore a psychologically disturbing world in its fullest. Literally, he went beyond the romantic theatrical display of the bohemian life of the American materialistic society, and rather portrayed a tragic reality in which his characters have been seen suffering from a sort of inner conflict, and mental dissatisfaction. John Gassner suggests that "his plays embodied the ideas and conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century, assimilated its advances in dramatic art and theatrical technique, and expressed its uneasy aspirations toward tragic insights and dramatic vision" (Gassner 6). O'Neill's play, *Desire under the Elms* is seen to manifest the psychologically intensive and conflicting nature of Eben Cabot. He is the protagonist of the play, who impersonates an intensive feeling of inner tension regarding the death of his mother, whom he supposes to be killed by Ephraim Cabot, his father. Literally, O'Neil sketches of Ephraim Cabot being a person indifferent to his wife, and family that eventually creates a disintegration among him, and his wives. He also has problems with his sons for they, as he thinks, are soft in their treatment to people. Primarily, Eben, the youngest son, is found to be in conflict with his father that brings an ultimate failure in their relationship to each other. Out of an emotional deficiency, Ephraim's first two wives, as it can be reported from Simeon, Peter, and Eben's conversation, were deprived of his husband's love, and care. They were exploited, physically crushed, and left to a neglected life. Therefore, as arguments took place among the brothers, the mothers' deaths were caused by the workloads of Ephraim's household, which let grow anger in their sons' minds for their father. Specially, through the portrayal of Eben's hatred, the relationship crisis between the father, and sons come highlighted.

As the novel's title implies, though absent, silent, and indifferent to the traumatic exposure of Ephraim's betrayal, the mothers – even they are dead- have still a very strong influence on the household, and on their children. O'Neil's remarkable use of symbolism delineates how two enormous elm branches symbolizing the sagging breasts of Eben's mother, tired, and get

mingled with the house. It is like those two branches are regretting to Eben about his father's maltreatment to her, and cherish a desire for his punishment. Her presence is felt throughout the Cabot house by Eben, such as, in it's kitchen, parlor, and different other corners. In this way, O'Neil's sketch of Elms' branches in the play bears a significant symbol of women's influences on the house. Slowly, thinking about mother's unselfish love to his father, and of his father's lovelessness, Eben turns him to an avenger, and vows to take his revenge on his father. The playwright precisely concentrates on Eben's psychological development, and, thus depicts how he is torn between the feeling of love and of revenge. This is why the essay will be discussed from a psychoanalytical perspective, analyzing how Eben Cabot receives a traumatic shock at the loss of his mother, and plans to take revenge on his father. In fact, the psychoanalytic reading shall portray Eben's feeling of love toward his mother, and the feeling of revenge toward his father.

A Psychoanalytic Reading of Eben Cabot's Drives

Desire under the Elms can be analyzed as a criminal case study in which Eben Cabot, a man of twenty five, investigates the cause of the death of his mother, and resolves to punish the wrongdoer. As far as the theory of psychoanalysis is concerned, Eben manifests psychologically two different types of emotional drives in his nature - the love drive and the revenge or death drive. From Sigmund Freud's psychological interpretation, it can be understood that Eben's feeling of love and of revenge can be argued to represent two types of instinctual drives, which finally contribute to the formation of his mind. Moreover, Freud furthers this idea of the drives in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, where he claims:

On the basis of theoretical considerations underpinned by biology, we posited a death drive charged with the task of causing animate organisms to revert to an inanimate state, whereas Eros pursues the goal of maximizing the complexity of life- thereby of course preserving it- by an ever more catholic combination of the particles into which living matter had been fragmented. (130)

Eben's love drive can be explained as the internal formation of his mind; an abstract feeling, which naturally pours from the heart, but it is blended with the revenge drive, and becomes 'a special organ', as Freud thinks. Freud observes that "how drives of the two types connect, combine and blend with each other remains entirely unimaginable – but that such a thing happens, routinely and on a verge scale, is a postulate crucial to our whole framework of ideas" (Freud 131).

Regarding the connection of the drives to each other, Freud suggests in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*: we can hypothesize that as a consequence of the fusion of unicellular elementary organisms into multicellular organisms, the death drive in the individual cell was successfully neutralized, and its destructive impulses diverted to the external world through the mediation of a special organ, to wit the musculature; the death drive accordingly now finds expression- though in all probability only in part- as a destruction drive directed against the external world and other organisms. (131)

Such diverse characteristics - love and revenge- as experienced by Eben can be analyzed in the light of psychoanalytic criticism. As it has been mentioned before, the distinct feelings of love, and of revenge are the two distinct aspects of Eben's psychic life. They signify a dynamic relation with Eben's real life action. Freud distinguishes these drives into sexual drive, or Eros

and the death drive (Freud 130). He argues that sexual drive or Eros signifies a person's technique to gain self-preservation. On the other hand, Erich Fromm's comment on the term self-preservation can also be taken into account along with Freud. Fromm says that, "I have attempted to develop a revised theory of the drives and passions that motivate men's behavior in addition to those that serve his self-preservation" (Fromm 24). From Fromm's words, it is understood that the drives in a man are necessary for self-preservation. Similarly, the death drive, which drives Eben to be an avenger and to punish his father is needed for Eben's self-preservation because as Fromm claims "all of man's passions and cravings, whether normal, neurotic, or psychotic, attempt to solve his immanent dichotomy; and because it is vital for man to find a solution" (Fromm 25). Eben's immanent dichotomy is to appease his dead mother's soul by killing his father, and thus possess the properties his father owns.

In this way, Eben can bring a solution to his problems with his father. Eben does not kill his father at all, but plans to give severe punishment to his father than death. Fromm argues that man's power of thinking gives him a unique kind of strength to have a better solution. Eben thinks that he shall not kill his father. Eben thinks to leave him utterly lonely by taking everything from him. Such temperament of taking revenge can be interpreted to be Eben's inherent biological constitution that produces different solutions such as casting away his father to loneliness, possessing the farm, and his stepmother. As Eben suffers immensely from mental agony, he lets his father suffer more severely, and painfully. Fromm also suggests that "the nature or essence of man, then, as this theory conceives it, consists in nothing but the opposition inherent in man's biological constitution-an opposition that produces different solutions" (Fromm 26).

Therefore, in Eben both the feelings of love, and of revenge are intended to be the solutions of his biological, and mental needs. When the feeling of love he feels for his mother in his heart, it becomes dominant in his actions, and works accordingly, but when the feeling of revenge overcomes him looking at his father, then the feeling of revenge becomes dominant. In fact, Fromm revises Freud's understanding of the subject's drives, and claims that "the classic theory is that Freud tried to understand all human passions as being rooted in physiological or biological needs, and he made ingenuous theoretical constructions in order to uphold this position" (Fromm 28). Fromm believes that "the most powerful human drives are not those aimed at physical survival but those through which man seeks a solution of his existential dichotomy- namely, a goal for his life" (Fromm 28).

The love drive, and the death drive in Eben are the central theme in the play. Although the plot is simple, but the manifestation of Eben's feeling of love for his mother, and feeling of hate or revenge toward his father are intertwined, and become the sole root of Eben's internal conflict in his mind. That is why Eben remains dissatisfied with the life he is living in his house, and shows disobedience to his father. His dissatisfaction with his life, and his father becomes clearly visible in his first appearance in the play. When the reader opens the play, it describes his face being overcome with intense hatred for a person he dislikes. As the play progresses, it is known that he actually shows an active dislike for his father. So, hate draws off the curtain of the play to start, and draws on the curtain to end the play.

To define hatred, Willard Gaylin writes that "Hatred: The condition or state of relations in which one person hates another; the emotion or feeling of hate; active dislike, detestation; enmity, ill-will, malevolence" (Gaylin 21). Eben's love for his dead mother, and his hatred for his father cannot be compared to each other, but are binaries because his love for his mother is meant to

be unification with her while his plan to kill his father signifies segregation from him. But Gaylin defines hatred as “a sustained emotion of rage that occupies an individual through much of his life, allowing him to feel delight in observing or inflicting suffering on the hated one” (Gaylin 34).

In the play, Eben, the hater, inflicts continuous suffering on his father, the hated one. The play reveals Eben’s constant scheme of revenge on his father colored with threats, and fear. It ends with Eben’s feeling of self-preservation, and a solution to his conflict with his father. Eben attempts to leave his father in a world of extreme loneliness to die in it every day. For this, Eben is, at last, identified with the death drive, and finishes his mission, that leads him to what Freud terms ‘self-preservation’ and Fromm calls a ‘solution’. When Eben loses his mother’s affection, and love for his father, his love drive then takes on the death drive to punish his father.

Eben’s Loss of Love and the Motive of Revenge

O’Neil describes Eben being trapped in two emotional drives - love and revenge- because he is repeatedly failing to decide to take revenge on his father. O’Neill has discussed what is happening inside his mind. In particular, from his appearance in the opening scene of the play, the audience realizes that he has been suffering from a valuable loss for a long period of time, and is found confining himself to distance that discloses relationships have met disintegrations.

This looks explicit in O’Neil’s depiction of Eben showing “His face is well-formed, good-looking, but its expression is resentful and defensive. His defiant, dark eyes remind one of a wild animal’s in captivity” and “he spites on the ground with intense disgust, turns and goes back into the house” (O’Neill 7). In the quotation, his resentfulness reminds the reader of the Freudian analysis of the psychic process of the sexual, and the destruction or death drives. Generally, the feeling of revenge in a person takes place when another person does wrong to him. Similarly, Eben experiences this feeling of revenge because he feels that his father does wrong to him distancing from his beloved mother by enslaving her to death.

As a consequence, Eben is filled with an impulse of hatred toward his father. Freud considers such impulse of hate as an opposite substitute to love. He reasons that “we might reasonably substitute the polarity of love and hate for the antithesis constituted by the two types of drives” (Freud 132). He adds that “whereas of course we have no problem showing how Eros is represented, it comes as quite a relief that we are now able to identify the destruction drive- which takes its lead from hate- as representing the highly elusive death drive” (Freud 132).

Eben’s intense anger- as it is perceived at the beginning of the play - reflects on the Freudian notion of the death drive. Soon - as the play proceeds on - this Freudian notion of the death drive becomes incredibly stronger in Eben. Eben’s confidence to brand his father, the sole murderer to his mother, becomes evident in his asking to his brothers, “didn’t he slave Maw t’ death?” (O’Neill 11).

This question further introduces us with his father being a complete alien to them, and, at the same time opening the very regretful side of the familial bonds falling apart at that time in America. Fake beliefs, run for for success, and abuses on failing actually mark a tremendous impact on the families, and their relations breaking into pieces. Ephraim’s pride on his success, and his so-called distance with his sons make a prime example. However, Eben’s deep love for his mother is clearly perceived in his asking to his brother about his mother, and that ultimately

paves the way to avenge his mother. Thus, the seed of the father-son conflict begins to bloom in the play. Eben plans to take away the house from his father at first, which he thinks shall be the starting step to his taking of revenge. He starts planning how he shall own his father's farmhouse, and, ultimately, finds a path to inflict on his father a worthy punishment. Eben realizes that, the way his father has separated him from his mother, he will also distance his father from the farm, which is the only loveliest possession, where he has spent fifty years of his life. It is true that the farm is very close a possession to his father that he himself confesses to his newly married wife, Abbie Putnam: "ye kin read the years of my life in them walls" and adds that "it was all mine! When I thought o' that I didn't feel lonesome" (O'Neill 41). To put an end to his mission, Eben very knavishly structures his plan. He experiences a change of drive in him, that is to say, the drive of vengeance overcomes him. From the Freudian perspective "the transformation [from love to vengeance] is brought about through a reactive displacement of cathexis, whereby energy is withdrawn from the erotic impulse [for his mother], and added to the hostile one [against his father]" (Freud 134). The loss of love that he received from his mother can be argued to have caused a neurotic disorder to his mind. He tells that he has still contacts with her, who communicates, helps him doing household chores. He claims to his brothers that he can see, and talk to her. In fact, he fantasizes about his dead mother's being still alive, which gives a sign of fantasizing under neurosis. From the Freudian interpretation, his neurotic fantasy can be confirmed in his proclamation to his brothers that "me cookin'-doin' her work-that made me know her, suffer her sufferin'-she'd come back t' help-come back t' bile potatoes" (O'Neill 13).

In addition, in the Freudian scholarship of neurosis, Eben looks becoming a neurotic patient, who recalls his relationship with his dead mother, who he considers to be his self-preservative one. Even after her death, he keeps his mother alive in his neurotic fantasy. Freud observes that "in the conflict which creates the neurosis, what are at stake are either solely libidinal interests or libidinal interests in intimate connections with self-preservative ones" (Freud 422). He adds that "in a greater number of cases the neurosis is more autonomous and more independent of the interest of self-preservation and self-maintenance" (Freud 422).

Moreover, Eben's neurotic condition can also remarkably be observed in his hallucinations when he says that "she still comes back-stands by the stove thar in the evenin'-she can't find nateral sleepin' an' restin' in peace. She can't git used t' bein free-even in her grave" (O'Neill 13). In this respect, his experiencing of neurotic behavior can be compared to demonic neurosis according to Freud's interpretation of psychoanalysis. Freud, in *Art and Literature*, shares one of his experiences he earned while giving the medical treatment to a patient called Christoph Haizmann, who was a painter, and had a demonological illness (Freud 421).