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**ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FATHER IMAGE IN DESIRE UNDER THE  
ELMS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Eugene O'Neill is an autobiographic playwright. Many his works show the different sides or periods of his life. The abnormal experiences give him a special point of view to life. Many critics are intended to emphasize his mother's influence on his works because of their complex relationship. The author of this thesis tries to figure out the marks of influence from his father on his creation. By constructing the father image of Cabot in the play *Desire under the Elms*, the influence of O'Neill's father to his writing will be displayed.

**Key Words:** Father Image, Construction, Belonging

**INTRODUCTION**

Eugene O'Neill is well known as America's leading playwright. In his whole life, he wrote more than 50 plays. Because of his excellent works, he won four Pulitzer Prizes and was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1936. He is good at using different techniques to express different themes. As Bigsby said "nothing inhibited him: modern versions of Greek tragedy, the renovation of soliloquy or the mask, the use of film on the stage, plays about miscegenation or incest" (Bigsby 15). He is the founder of American serious drama and the first one who uses the traditional drama writing techniques "realism and naturalism" in American plays creation. He is a master to explore human's complex psychology and unfold the inability of the modern people fighting with the fate. "He cared about the social problems and bothered with the cruelty and the loss of 'belonging' of modern people" (Li, Chang 149).

*Desire under the Elms*, which established his fame as a dramatist of true genius (Ranald 65), was written in 1924 only after his parents and brother died during 1920-1923. Up till now, critics have done many researches about its themes and techniques from different points of view, such as the analysis of the causes of the tragedy, the succession and development to the traditional tragedy, the archetype of the Greek myth and so on. In this thesis, what the author tries to do is to figure out the construction of O'Neill's father's image by the character of Cabot.

**O'Neill's Writing Style**

O'Neill is an autobiographic writer. Nearly all his works present some sides of his own life. For instance, the most typical autobiographic works is the *Long Day's Journey into Night* in his late years. Since 1912 he decided to write plays when he stayed in Gaylord Farm Sanatorium because of tuberculosis, his works are inevitable concerned with his family. "For O'Neill, the play's scope was necessary to dramatize his main interest: the past and its ongoing influence on the present" (Wolff 144). He started his plays writing because of the misery of his family and tried to find the courage to continue life in his plays. Although the factors of autobiography in *Desire under the Elms* are not as much obvious as in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, the shadow of his family is displayed clearly, typically, the love and hate emotion, the relationships among family members, the Oedipus Complex and so on. On concerning the analysis of the characters, many critics are intended to analyze Eben and Abbie, their tragic fate, their great love or their incest. What cannot be ignored in the analysis is the influence of O'Neill's mother on his writing. The author of this thesis holds that O'Neill's father also has a dramatic influence on his creation. Cabot in this play is also a very important character. His success in farm actually brings suffering to his family. He is the most miserable in the end of the play. From him, O'Neill's father's shadow is revealed.

### **The Archetype of the Father Image**

O'Neill's father, James O'Neill, was a successful and charming actor, marrying Ella Quinlan O'Neill at 1877. Ella was born into a middle class family. When she was 14, she was sent to the convent of St. Mary, which provided higher education to the well-off families' daughters. At that time, actors belonged to a comparatively lower social class. After marriage, Ella had to accompany with James from one place to another and live in many anonymous hotels where she could die of isolation and loneliness. She lost the decent way of life in the past. Her former classmates and friends also isolated from her because of her marriage. Shortly after she married James, she found out that everything turned out to be not as romantic as she had thought before. Constant travels of theatrical life made Ella helpless dramatically. What left her is just suffering, suffering and suffering.

If the mother was suffered a lot from the marriage, the sons inevitably experienced this suffering, too. The elder son Jamie was a life failure. He was expelled from schools for many times. He lived without a formal job to serve himself. Except Whisky and prostitutes, he didn't have any other expectation in life. The little son Eugene O'Neill was desolated from family and school from childhood. O'Neill was tormented from the agony of the misunderstanding and contradiction with his parents, brother, wife and children and the hereditary disease, which influences his plays writing style dramatically (Guo 514).

As the leader of a family, James O'Neill failed to be a good husband and a good father although he was comparatively successful in his career as a prominent actor. But his success in career was just on some point, in order to earn money, he only played a famous role, thus lost the chances to create bigger success. When Ella gave birth to Eugene O'Neill, he asked a quack doctor to cure his wife to save money, which caused Ella's addiction to morphine at last. When O'Neill was suffered from tuberculosis, again in order to save money, he tried to send him into a cheap sanatorium. He thus was blamed by wife and sons. At last he brought suffering to his family as well as himself.

As a matter of fact, Eugene O'Neill had worshiped his father. As Black said, "Until adolescence, Eugene had worshipped his father as a hero[...]then for many years Eugene seemed nearly as often to hate his father as to love him" (Black 4). O'Neill never judged people just from one point. In his family, there is love, understanding, tolerance as well as the jealousy, blame and hate. He tried to reveal this hate with his usual courage and acridness, but not cover the hate or lighten the intensity of hate with love (Kuang 238), as shown in *Desire under the Elms*.

It can be concluded that O'Neill's father did some "success" in his career, but his family life turned to be failed. He didn't afford an ordinary life to his family. What left in his family are wife's disappointment, sons' terrible childhood and other sufferings.

As demonstrated in *Desire under the Elms*, Cabot was comparatively succeeded in his career while led a very terrible family life. Here O'Neill constructed a father image based on his own experience.

### **The Embodiment of Father Image: Cabot**

This play mainly talks about the life of one family. The direct characters are Cabot, his wife Abbie, and his three sons Eben, Simon and Peter. All these five characters strive for the farm estate, which shows the love and hate to each other. During the course of revelation, the image of father represented by Cabot is displayed little by little.

#### ***"Prominent" Business***

Cabot works very hard. He builds up the farm from nothing, where stones are atop on the ground and stones atop on stones. After Cabot with his sons gave his strength and his years to this land, the farm became a fertile estate. Cabot change things from impossible to possible. On concerning his business, he can be said successful. When Cabot appeared on stage for the first time, O'Neill gave a detailed description to him, which shows his toughness and strength.

His eyes are small, close together, and extremely near-sighted, blinking continually in the effort to focus on objects, their stare having a straining, in growing quality (O'Neill 14).

PART IISCENE two shows how Cabot constructs the farm. Cabot said,

He had a long way to manage successfully the affairs of his farm, which was a place with nothing but fields of stones. At that time, when he took the fields, some folks laughed him. But he had the firm belief that he can make corn sprout out of stones. The results turned out that he is right. "Some died hereabouts. Some went west and died. They're all underground" (O'Neill 24), while he became harder and harder during the period of running his farm.

No matter how nice the farm is, in this play it really becomes the original resource of all tragedy. When it became to be fertile, everyone in the play tries to occupy the farm. Based on this farm, the desire for material interests and lust was in growth. On the point of the business itself, it's out of doubt that Cabot can be said as successful. The same as James O'Neill, his "prominent" success in his actor profession brought the suffering to all his family members; Cabot's success in the farm exactly caused the hate, blame and misery to his family, too.

#### ***"Terrible" Family Life***

The striving for material intensifies the relationship between family members. Nearly all people focus on the estate, the kinship buries in the struggle for property (Wang 100). Although Cabot's business can be said as a success to a certain degree if just concerning the business itself, his family life can never be said as successful. As the head of a family, he should give a happy life to his members, but it turned out to be just opposite. The relationship between father and son, husband and wife, are very terrible.

The sons never called the father as "father" but "old man", "old skinflint", "old blood sucker". Sons cursed father to death, so did the father. Simeon said "he'll die soon [...] he's dead now.[...] We got t' wait--till he's underground" (O'Neill 3). Eben even at the beginning prayed the death for his father. What they want to do to his father is to skulp him, burn his barn, kill the stock and rape his new woman! (O'Neill 15) What the father did is to pray to Lord God, "smite the undutiful sons with Thy west cuss!" (O'Neill 18) What kind of father and sons are they?

The father seems always very domineering and even too domineering to his sons. The text shows this point in many places. Eben said to his two brothers "Ye're scared o' him. He's stronger--inside—than both o' ye put together!" (O'Neill 6) On the father's side, he never regarded his boys as real men. He said Eben "will never be more'n half a man" (O'Neill 18). From his description it is astonished the comparison between father's dominance and sons' weakness. "When I come here fifty years ago--I was jest twenty an' the strongest an' hardest ye ever seen--ten times as strong an' fifty times as hard as Eben." (O'Neill 24)

This conflict is very obvious in the scene of the confrontation between Cabot and Eben. "The old man's concentrated strength is too much for Eben.. Till now in the play, the fact that the father really is too dominant and the son is too weak is revealed.

While Cabot shows his foresight and strength in business, he finally turns out to be very miserable. He cannot find out his place in the world. As many characters seek their "belonging" in O'Neill's plays, Cabot also is seeking his "belonging" in the world. A strong physique accompanies with a weak soul.

### ***"Lost" Himelf***

In the play, Cabot said again and again about his strength and his desire for living a hundred years, which exactly shows his fear to be getting old.

I'm gittin' old, Abbie.I'mgittin' ripe on the bough. (O'Neill 21)

In the fact, he is more than 70 years old, he is so much afraid that he cannot be as strong as before. The lapsing of time and the fact of getting old make him more afraid of loneliness. All his life, he is looking for the one who can understand him, but he failed. " (shaking his head ) No. I calc'late 'twan't t' be. All the time I kept gittin' lonesomer." (O'Neill 25) His first wife married him twenty years, but she never knew him. She helped but she never knew what she was helping (O'Neill 25). His second wife, she never knew him, either. It was lonesome 'n hell with her for him. Then the third wife, she directly betrayed him, what's worse, his rival is his own son. Although he has three sons, they hated him.

He frequently feels the coldness in the house, although he is the owner of it.

It's allus lonesome cold in the house--even when it's bilin' hot outside. (O'Neill 21)

It's cold in this house. It's oneasy. (O'Neill 25)

Even the music can't drive it out--somethin' They's no peace in houses, they's no rest livin' with folks. Somethin's always livin' with ye...I'll go t' the barn an' rest a spell. (O'Neill 35)

When he found the incest between his son and his wife, he lost his place totally. What he can do is just to stay with the animals; he can feel some warmth on this way. He becomes more and more lonely:

I felt they was somethin' onnateral--somewhars--the house got so lonesome--an' cold--drivin' me downt' the barn--t' the beasts o' the field. (O'Neill 42-43)

God A'mighty, I belonesomer'n ever! (O'Neill 43)

It's a-goin' t' be lonesomer now than ever it war afore--an' I'm gittin' old, Lord--ripe on the bough. (O'Neill 45)

The lost of himself may pay the price for the misery he brought to others. As James O'Neill, he made others suffering and let himself suffered at the same time.

## CONCLUSION

Cabot's fate turns out to be very miserable. In the end of the play, he actually becomes the only lonely one. His two elder sons had gone to California, the younger son and his young wife were prisoned. He thinks only himself is right and a real man. He looks down upon those around him. The comparative success in farm just causes the dramatic failure in his family. On this point, the shadow of James O'Neill's is presented. James had won the fame as an actor, but the success in his acting brought the suffering life to his wife and sons. By comparing the life of James and Cabot, the readers can see the similarities between them. It is concluded that the construction to the father image of Cabot in *Desire under the Elms* was influenced by James—the father of writer.

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