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PORTRAYAL OF CHARACTERS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN EUGENE O'NEILL'S *DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS* AND SAM SHEPARD'S *BURIED CHILD*

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to study both these American dramas, their similarities and contradictions based on the anomalous and erratic behavior especially in the rural families. This paper intends to scrutinize the unusual and abnormal interaction among the family members. Fate plays an important role as it affects the family as observed in both of the works of these American dramatists Eugene O'Neill and Sam Shepard. A glimpse into their lives shows that their works have been equally affected. O'Neill's characters live alternating lives and some link has been busted between all these characters themselves, which includes the past both mythical and historical. America is shown to be deracinated and these so called myths have been developed into fantasies and dreams. The families depicted in the plays of Shepard usually deal with the themes of hereditary, escalating disintegration and the alienation of the American family. Shepard's plays also include culture other than the family factor. The character of the father figure in both these plays and their personalities help one in understanding and comparing both these dramas. Parallels have been drawn between these dramas and Greek Mythology.

**Keywords:** Family, myth, character, America

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It is to be noted that Eugene O'Neill is known to the Master and Sam Shepard is called his Double. The twentieth century American drama is known to be the "puzzling American century". The American stage is a mirror of the nation's own obsessions and faults. America is known to be a nation of immigrants who are confused about their traditions. They had tried to seek new ways to express the old values and had grappled with the new upheavals in society and hence had struggled to change with times that were constantly shifting and moving quickly. Families have their own patterns of relating to each other. Family dynamics are influenced by things such as the structure of the family which includes the number of children and adults, their personalities and their relationships. Family culture is known to be a set of beliefs about how things should be.

All these beliefs form family values like attitudes to education and employment. These also include the importance that is placed on family loyalty and defending one another and the amount of time the family members are expected to spend together. Both the plays *Desire Under the Elms* and *Buried Child* highlight the dynamics of the family in the modern era. In both the plays O' Neill and Shepard portray the family strife, adultery and murder. The parallels between both the writers are just recently being discovered in the American Drama. These playwrights have staged masculinity through their shared interest in the family drama. This has been reflected through symbolic representations in the plays which included setting, theme, cultural myths and the various forms of deviance.

Shepard does not have unity in his works, severing the connection between the individuals once established through the shared beliefs and values. His characters live discontinuous lives and some connection has been broken between themselves and the past both mythical and historical. America seems to be uprooted and myths have been developed into fantasies. The families dealt in Shepard plays deal with themes of hereditary and the increasing fragmentation and alienation of the American family. Shepard not only talks about the family itself, but points to the culture also. O' Neill was known to be the most active playwright of the first half of the twentieth century. After many years of experimentation with Expressionism and Freudianism, he eventually returned to a close and recurring sensible mode in an attempt to exorcise the ghosts of his family's past. Shepard's story may not be same but somewhat similar.

From his early plays O'Neill was chiefly concerned with portraying how fate influences the character. Usually the father figure treats the son with affection and selfishness. Hence the sons are seen as victims of oppression and their response to this oppression is bitterness. *Desire Under the Elms* is about a widower Ephraim who returns with a new wife, the beautiful Abbie. However Abbie enters into an adulterous affair with her stepson Eben. She bears his child and in order to prove his love for him, she smothers the baby. An enraged and distraught Eben turns Abbie over to the Sheriff and also confesses as being the accomplice in committing the infanticide. The whole family is inundated by family dysfunction and greed. The play shows how Eben is terrorized by a puritanical father and how he exacts revenge on his father Ephraim through a quasi-incestuous relationship with his father's wife.

*Buried Child* takes a macabre look at one American Midwestern family that hides a dark secret. Vince, the grandson, brings home his girlfriend Shelley, to meet his family. At first she seems to be charmed by the 'normal' looking farm house but later she confronts the crazy family-his ranting, alcoholic grandfather Dodge, ignorant Halie and their two sons Tilden and Bradley. Oddly no one seems to recognize Vince at first and treat him like a prowler in the family but eventually they accept him as a part of their dysfunctional family. Gradually the dark secret about the family comes clear, what is actually a result of an incestuous relationship between a son and a mother.

Both the plays have overtones of the Oedipal Complex. Offspring's view themselves as failures, exploited and isolated and controlled by elements outside themselves and destined to live out a "curse" passed on by the former generations. Both the playwrights seem to be concerned only with the struggle between father and son and the plays under focus here attempt to show the son's struggle to extricate himself both physically and psycho-spiritually from his father or father-surrogate. If the Oedipal Complex in O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* conception and depiction is informed by a classically and literally oriented perspective. Shepard, on the other hand uses the oedipal impulse as a primitive and mythic imagist. In his earlier plays the son finds himself at odds with the father, but is able to extricate himself, if only temporarily. Later on, the son must come face to face with the father and this presents the final and the most challenging trial. The son sooner or later realizes that the two of them cannot exist simultaneously.

Looking at both the father figures and their personalities help the reader in understanding and comparing both these dramas. Ephraim Cabot seems to be a self reliant person who is cut off from humanity. According to David W. Sievers in *Freud on Broadway: A History of Psychoanalysis and The American Drama*, "O' Neill creates prototype of the primal father, hard, all powerful and ruthless."(113) His harsh behavior leads to a wall between himself and his sons. There is a shortage of unity or community of freedom. Nothing else seems to be there except greed and autocratic power. Ephraim is a character who in spite of living with his family seems to be living all alone in his own world. God for him is in the nature and the stones around him. The

stones around him are not a sign of walls but they are a sign of his dominating nature. Ephraim Cabot is described as hard as stone:

CABOT: When I came here fifty odd year ago- I was just twenty an'  
the strongest and the hardest ye evr seen- ten times as strong  
as fifty times as hard as Eben. Waal-this place was nothing  
but field's o stones. Folks laughed when I tuk it. They couldn't  
know wat I knowed. (45)

He is a man who likes this isolation and has little emotion or no real emotion. In his past life he has been hard on his two wives and his children (who have now abandoned him). He does not share an emotional bond with his sons; instead he has a mechanical relationship with them. He dominates his sons with a patriarchal authority by making them work on the farm in exchange of food and shelter. His family is tormented by him in a sadistic way.

In *Buried Child*, as the actors arrive on the stage, Dodge appears to be man in his late seventies. He is old and beaten and his pious backbone is crushed. His physical health seems to be worsening and this seems to be the reason behind his isolation from his family. He wears torn clothes that are covered by a brown blanket. His appearance is skinny and sickly looking. Occasionally he drinks from the bottle of whiskey which he usually hides under his pillow. The domestic setting in the play seems to be refuge for a nihilist who does not enjoy anything other than his bottle of whiskey. John Clum in his work *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* remarks that, "Dodge is the embodiment of nihilism, never leaving the ratty sofa to which he seems physically attached." (180) Halie communicates to her husband from the second floor, "Are you going out today." (67) The answer to this question is a nihilistic reply, "I rarely go out in the bright sunshine, why would I go out in this?" (67) It's obvious that such an answer would receive a bitter ending.

Halie and Abbie both are an important part of the conflict in these dramas and their breaking of the social norms are the backbone of the plots of both these plays. A glance at their personalities is an essential part for this paper. Barret H. Clark in *Eugene O' Neill: The Man and His Plays* asserts that, "the unity of the play lies rather in the character Abbie." (152) Abbie is the main character who has committed the murder, and is responsible for moving passion inside Eben. Also Abbie's own passion for Eben is the main reason behind the crime committed by her. Though her behavior towards Eben is hostile in the beginning, she eventually sacrifices her own child in order to prove her love for him. On the whole, O'Neill has uncovered the feminist standpoint through the character of Abbie, however she demonstrates her love to Eben through an extreme way by murdering the infant. Therefore, her passion for Eben eventually leads to a horrendous crime. Barret H. Clark further states that:

In arousing the repressed passion of Eben she has forgotten, or perhaps never known, that the sex instinct cannot easily be controlled; she has depended on her own craftiness to see her machinations through in cold blood to the end. Then suddenly she finds herself caught in her own trap. (152)

Similar to Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, *Desire Under the Elms* has explored the consequences of the changing social principles. Abbie has displayed the possible consequences of a woman who breaks the defined social principles by trying hard to control the people around her especially the men.

Halie is a character whose main domain is upstairs in the house. She plays a great role in nagging and complaining and at the same time she does not expect a serious response. Her every reaction to Dodge is a negative one, like provoking him to take his pills forcefully. Dodge tries his best to avoid her, "Don't come down!" (64) Both Dodge and Halie keep up a correspondence through a long distance. They avoid eye contact, which further lessens the direct contact between them. The conversation between them seems to be completely strained; leaving out two or three topics, hence not making any sense. It is understood that they want to hide the mutual secret as they are scared of it.

In the play *Buried Child*, Halie lights up to be a strong personality. She is aware of the fact that she has brought upon a curse on her own family and comprehends that it is her duty to control and decay everything around her. This is the reason why she identifies Vince; he belongs to a reasonable past and has chances of restoring the wreck left behind. When Dodge discloses to Shelley, Halie orders him to be quiet: "Dodge, if you

tell this thing- if you tell this, you'll be dead to me. You'll be just as good as dead."(123) But this warning has no affect on Dodge and does not even discourage him from revealing the whole story. Halie's reaction seems to be immature: "I am not listening to this! I don't have to listen to this!"(123), she moves upstairs avoiding the topic. She is a scared of the fact that Dodge will confess about the crime committed in the family and pretends it to be a lie, as she beseeches the useless Father Dewis, who is the so called messenger of God on the earth, to make right the family's situation. Halie is unable to receive the salvation so she retreats to her safe haven that is upstairs, crying.

Halie is reunited with Tilden and her dead baby at the end of the play. But this get together does not help in the continuity to the dynasty. Shepard's confesses in an interview with Stephanie Cohen that he is not a doomsday person or does not believe in the end of the world, but a reader can foresee a family's cursed future in the play. Richard Gilman, in the introduction to *Shepard's Seven Plays* puts forward, ". . . there is no past to propel the future."(xxvi) It is apparent that the past, in this family, drives a sick present, which further cannot lead to a healthy and happy future. Halie plays extremes for getting a baby in this world that is the result of incest. She suffers greatly for wrapping up this crime committed in the family. A reader does not feel compassion for her, rather feels hatred for her.

One may consider both Eben and Tilden the third important characters in both these plays. While both of them are younger, they are completely exploited by the women characters in the respective plays. Their backgrounds and characters also warrant a study. Eben in *Desire Under the Elms* is like Robert in *Horizon* who is ignorant of his belonging. In the eyes of his brothers, he is considered as the "spittin image" of his father. However he is conscious of the fact that he is different. Eben is a person who cannot be happy with the maternal possession. He sees himself as the inheritor of his mother: I'm Maw- every drop o' blood! (10) This resemblance between Eben and his mother is identified by Ephraim who despises him as "soft-headed, like his Maw."(11) Critics have discovered that this is the particular feature that Eben bears that keeps him apart from the other family members. Bogard in *Contours of Time* has noticed that Eben is in search for his identity promoted by his necessity to fit in:

He seeks the same identification with nature and moves listlessly in alien places, in the kitchen, the world of women where he can sink no roots. His desire brings him into inevitable conflict with more hardened souls whose needs are less because they are aware of less. (209)

His aggravation for self takes place from the dual inheritance of his parents. Ephraim utilitarian egotism helps in twisting and molding Eben. The influence of his mother is also carried by him. His mother is portrayed as a woman with a very loving and affectionate nature. She suffered every pain quietly and dedicated herself to her family completely. Her death was due to fatigue caused by overwork. Her death symbolized kindness and ultraistic love. Her presence is felt even after her death. Eben's recognition with his mother exposes his yearning and assertion of selfless love for her.

On the other hand Tilden in *Buried Child* is, "All-American . . . Fullback. Or quarterback. I forgot which."(72) Except that the incestuous act took place which was further followed by the murderous act, and then Tilden went to Mexico to start afresh. It is unclear in the play when he went off course. It's mentioned in the play that he spent some time in the jail due to some trouble he got into. He returns to his family twenty years later with a detached attitude. He sounds mentally unstable. He is a man in his late forties and Shepard describes him as "something about him is profoundly burned and displaced." (69) His dialogues are singular, simple and detached from reality like, "Backyard's full of carrots. Corn, Potatoes."(93) When he is asked whether he is Vince's father, he responds: "All kinds of vegetables. You like vegetables?"(93) The bad experience he had in New Mexico has taught him the significance of communicating with people around him, he asserts: "You gotta talk or you'll die" (78), yet he is scared, lonely and cut off from the society. John Clum in *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* describes him as a character, "who expresses positive human attributes like love or loyalty" (181) He has the habit of bringing armloads of vegetables that he claims he has harvested from the fields outside. His parents on the other hand claim that the field outside have not been harvested for many years. His capability of harvesting crops from uncultivated fields symbolize that he is still fertile, but this fertility leads to nowhere. He cannot identify his own son Vince, which is a sign of him being cursed. He does

not acknowledge any relationship with his family, which is a similar trait like his father Dodge. Being the eldest son of the family, Tilden makes no effort to assert his patriarchal power.

He is different from the other characters like Vince and Bradley. He is submissive, yielding and yet feels lost in his own world that is cursed. He cannot hide his obsession with Vince's girlfriend Shelley yet he tries hard to avoid contact with others. He stares at her in an unrelenting way as she moves her hands and arms in a confident way as if he were hypnotized. He dumps the carrots in her arms when she holds them out. David J. DeRose in his work *Sam Shepard* observes that, "As do the corn husks in Act one, the carrots assume an unvoiced significance as Shelley cradles them in her arms, like an infant, and refuses to let Vince take them away from her." (104) The body language plays a vital role in this family. Tilden is not considered to be talkative as he is unable to express his emotions clearly. But the experience of holding a baby is clearly rooted in his mind. As he watches Shelley, he is transported into the past, which has been suppressed for twenty years. Tilden is a partner in crime by keeping this murder as a secret, but he is also the cause of the curse. Hence he is both, a victim and the victimizer.

There are parallels between these Dramas and Greek Mythology. Against the thought process of the modern day critics, Eugene O'Neill did not mind incorporating Greek myths of incest and infanticide. C. Pickering in the *Works of Eugene O'Neill* believes that, "the young dramatist had no inhibitions about incorporating Greek and Shakespearean dramatic techniques into his contemporary framework. Most modern writers would have balked at the Greek themes of incest and infanticide, but not O' Neill. He was familiar with the *Hippolytus* and *Medea* of Euripides and saw no reason why *Medea* of Euripides should not be translated to the American stage." (125) Aphrodite, the goddess of love avenges Hippolytus, the son of Theseus, King of Athens by motivating Phaedra, his stepmother to fall in love with him. In the end Phaedra hangs herself and Theseus curses his son to exile and death. In Euripides *Medea*, Jason devises a plan to ditch Medea to marry another woman. Medea in order to avenge him decides to kill his children hence leaving him with no heir.

Critics believe that Euripides *Hippolytus* and Jean Racine's *Phaedra* are the principal models of the play. This resemblance is not too accurate for this drama as Phaedra hangs herself and Hippolytus who incites her advances was banished by Theseus and was slaughtered by Poseidon. It's not easy to draw parallels with *Medea* of Euripides as the actions of Medea were essentially based on revenge which led her assassinate Jason, his love Glauke and her two sons. Critics also believe that O'Neill has borrowed a lot from Nietzsche. Nietzsche, the German philosopher was against the 'Slave Morality' and also the values of Christianity. He had put forward the theory of Self and the will to power. The distance between thought and emotion which emphasize the value of emotions in Art and Life form the root of O' Neill's work. O' Neill uses the Nietzsche's approach to philosophy and Conflict of Dionysian versus Apollonian forces to clarify the clash at the farm. To make it easy for the readers to understand this is about the two sons of Zeus, Dionysus and Apollo. Dionysus was the God of Wine who represented dreams and emotions and Apollo was the God of Sun who represented reason and wisdom. O'Neill has presented the conflict between Eben and Ephraim as Dionysus and Apollo forces clashing against each other in the universe. Here the actions of Eben are described as Dionysus that is based on emotions and dreams. But Ephraim's actions cannot be completely described as Apollonian. His second wedding is inconsistent to the Apollonian thought process. The conflict is caused by this marriage which further led to the tragedy in the family. Eben's and Abbie's relationship leads to birth of a son who is killed by Abbie, which reminds the readers of the Oedipal Myth. O'Neill has adopted the myth of the son against the father and the son falling in love with the mother in the play *Desire Under the Elms*. Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman and William Burto in *Eight Great Tragedies* assert that, "O'Neill attempts to turn his tale of adultery and infanticide into something of a modern Oedipus, where strong passions gain a kind of glory. The son rebels against the father and covets the father's wife."

*Buried Child* has hints of Greek Mythology. The myth of fertility is known by Demeter in Greek Mythology. Demeter is known to be the Goddess of grain and fertility. The Greeks played a very important role in the ancient Greek society. Demeter's association with grain also led to a close relationship with human fertility. According to Laurence Coupe in *Myth*, "In ancient legends, the god or the king has to give his life because his business is fertility." (20) The family land in *Buried Child* lacks fertility because of a callous murder. Corn is a symbol of fertility. As in act one, Tilden comes with an armload of corn. He says that he has brought

them from his own farm, but Halie and Dodge believe that he is lying. According to the farm has remained barren for a long time. It is apparent that sometime in the past, the farm had been fertile. Hence, this myth has washed out, and it can also cause for the curse in the family.

If we go and follow this particular essay under the comparative literature, it is highly inadequate as comparison under the above. Comparative literature is an interdisciplinary field whose experts today study literature across nations, languages, periods, genres, other arts and disciplines etc. Today comparative literature is a study of literature without borders. In fact, scholars today might study social status in Russia and compare it with a medieval work of a romantic Chinese novel and further compare it with mythology in an Indian religious epic. Today comparative literature is considered a very complex subject while these are rural dramas based upon shattering the stereotype American Norman Rockwell type of American country life. The language in both the plays is American English and it is opined that they are too similar to be undertaken as a comparative literature. Thus these works of two well known writers with a period span of half a century cannot be studied under comparative literature. It is befitting that they should be actually studied with reference to Greek mythology for example the Oedipus Complex relevant here because of the sexual desire of Eben and Tilden for their mothers and hostility to their fathers.

O'Neill is more of a traditionalist who was influenced by the classics than Shepard. However this does not mean that Shepard was left behind. O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* is referred as a tragedy while Shepard's works are sometimes described as tragicomedies. Though *Buried Child* is structured like a tragedy, Shepard somehow undercuts it with comedy. Both their personal lives and society participated equally in their works. Shepard was known to be less academic than O'Neill. O'Neill had worked in a more classical stratum and the return to his family and realism was also an endeavor to modernize drama as tragic. Both these dramas have explored the pain in the world where the coherent order is very difficult to continue.

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