

*Classical, Biblical, and Shakespearean Intertextuality
in Eugene O'Neill's Desire under the Elms*

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Abstract

This paper explores Classical, Biblical, and Shakespearean intertextuality in Eugene O'Neill's tragedy, *Desire under the Elms* (1924). The play is adapted from Classical plays and Greek mythology with reference to Oedipus, Phaedra, Medea, etc. It also alludes to the Bible through the names of its characters and biblical terms in their speeches. Moreover, several characters in the play share characteristics with those in Shakespeare's plays, such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. As such, the play develops its tragic styles and multiple connotations through intertextual connections with sources or analogues found in writings of these three literary traditions. By drawing on the theories proposed by Linda Hutcheon and other critics concerning intertextuality, adaptation, parody, and theatrical illusion, this paper examines how O'Neill increases dramatic tension in *Desire under the Elms* by focusing on the intertextual parallels in the play that result in new hybrid signification.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Eugene O'Neill, *Desire under the Elms*, Linda Hutcheon, intertextuality

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Introduction

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon observes that transcultural adaptations often mean changes in racial and gender politics. Sometimes adapters purge an earlier text of elements that their particular cultures in time or place might find different or controversial; at other times, the adaptation "de-represses" an earlier adapted text's politics. Even within a single culture, the changes can be so great that they can in fact be considered transcultural, on a micro-rather than macro level. In the same society, political issues can change with time (Hutcheon 147). For example, in the early 20th century, women endeavored to fight for equal civil rights for women, and characterization of women in the theatre reflected different perspectives concerning women and their rights. In *Desire under the Elms*, similarly, the role of Abbie could be ambivalently interpreted as a *femme fatale* or a respectable woman in search of her own rights. Linda Hutcheon's concepts pertaining to transcultural adaptations facilitate understanding of O'Neill's utilization of different literary traditions to construct his intricate implications in the play.

I. The Classical Allusions

After the premiere of *Desire under the Elms*, the cast was convicted for the "morbid, lewd and obscene" performance (Winther 326). Yet, in fact, the play dramatizes the theme of incest in Greek dramas and mythology about Phaedra or Oedipus. Eileen Herrmann-Miller observes that contemporary audiences might obtain tragic tones that associate O'Neill more to the grandeur of ancient tragedy than to the 1920-1940s (70). With his use of ancient allusions O'Neill transcends Ibsenian realism. O'Neill's emphasis on the protagonists' tragic flaws connects them with the tragic figures of the Greek theatre and their emotional realm, linking his play to the Classical dramatization of man's self-destructive struggle with Fate. *Desire under the Elms* becomes a combination of realism and expressionism, containing expressionistic scenes. The non-realistic elements of tragic experience overshadow the realistic vernacular language, and highlight the enigmatic scenario on the stage. Moreover, Classical choral elements abound in *Desire under the Elms*, especially in the person of the neighbors, providing a sense of ritual to evoke the tragic terror.

Oedipus

Eben demonstrates an Oedipus complex through his conflict with his father. Sigmund Freud based his theory of the “Oedipus Complex” on the Greek mythology concerning King Oedipus, denoting the notions of a child’s unconscious desire to sexually possess his mother, and kill his father. In *Desire under the Elms*, Eben believes that his whole personality derives from his mother, and nothing from his father Cabot: “I meant—I hain’t his’n—I hain’t like him—he hain’t me!”. Although his mother has been dead for years, he keeps mentioning her as if she still lives in the house, and cries out “Maw! Where air yew? (Mom, where are you?)” whenever he encounters difficulties. Eben blames his father for enslaving his mother to death, and when Abbie is pregnant, he hates his father Cabot for assuming the baby as his own. The spirit of Eben’s dead mother lives symbolically through his stepmother Abbie, who Eben falls in love with. Also, O’Neill’s descriptions of the tragic flaws of Eben and Abbie are similar to those of Oedipus as a tragic protagonist: Abbie’s “whole personality the same unsettled, untamed, desperate quality which is so apparent in Eben.”

Moreover, the Fiddler in *Desire under the Elms*, in a role similar to that of the Classical chorus, tells Cabot: “Ye’re the spryest seventy-six ever I sees, Ephraim! Now if ye’d on’y good eyesight.” Here the word “eyesight” serves as a metaphor for insight and knowledge, and alludes to the story of Oedipus, in which the protagonist is proud of his own clear vision but has been blind to the truth about his origins and involuntary crimes for many years. He eventually blinds himself when he realizes that his eyesight does not provide him with insight. In contrast, the prophet Tiresias is literally blind but is able to “see” the truth. The Fiddler in O’Neill’s play, however, mocks Cabot for the latter’s failure to perceive, both literally and metaphorically, Eben’s incestuous love affair with Abbie.

Phaedra

O’Neill’s depiction of Abbie’s love affair with Eben alludes to the prototypical incest story of Phaedra as in *Hippolytus* by the Greek playwright Euripides and *Phaedra* by the 17th-century French playwright Racine, but with a twist. In the Greek mythology, Phaedra, the wife of Theseus, falls in love with Hippolytus, Theseus’s son from a previous marriage to Antiope. Phaedra accuses Hippolytus of seducing her, and Theseus prays to Neptune for revenge. Similarly, in *Desire under the Elms* when at first Eben refuses Abbie’s love, Abbie tells Cabot about Eben once trying to rape her: “He was tryin’ t’ make love t’ me” (689). Yet, when Cabot says he will kill Eben, Abbie begs for his forgiveness of Eben, and later Eben falls in love with her.

Medea

The play also alludes to a mythological infanticide story as in Euripides's *Medea*, in which Medea kills her two children by Jason to avenge her husband's betrayal in abandoning Medea for the king's daughter, Glauce. In *Desire under the Elms*, however, to prove her love for Eben, Abbie kills her baby, whose birth was supposed to secure her position on the farm: "I done it, Eben! I told ye I'd do it! I've proved I love ye-better'n everythin'-so's ye can't never doubt me no more!"

II. The Biblical Allusions

Desire under the Elms alludes to a number of terms from the Bible, such as Rose of Sharon, Samson, King Solomon's mines, Ten Commandments, etc. Also, all the major characters of the play bear names taken from the Bible. O'Neill's biblical allusions demonstrate man's failure to achieve Christianity (Törnqvist 41-49).

1. Biblical Names of the Characters

The name "Eben" derives from the Old Testament, meaning "the Stone of Hope": "Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and called the name of it Eben-ezer, saying: 'Hitherto hath the LORD helped us'" (1 Samuel 7:12). "Abbie" is a diminutive for "Abigail," meaning "fountain of joy" in Hebrew, name of the wife of David in the Book of Samuel.

The name "Simeon" comes from the Book of Genesis, in which Simeon is the son of Jacob and Leah, patriarch of the Tribe of Simeon, meaning "he who listens [to the words of God]," but sometimes thought to derive from *sham'in*, meaning "there is sin." The name of Ephraim comes from the second son of Joseph and Asenath in the Book of Genesis, a progenitor of the tribes of Israel.

Peter's name reminds one of St. Peter, as featured in the New Testament Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. The name refers to the cornerstone stone of the church, as stated in Mat 16: 18: "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

These Biblical names unravel puritanical relation to the land and faith in God. Ephraim Cabot believes that “When yew kin make corn sprout out o’ stones, God’s livin’ in yew.” “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’ Peter” (691). In the play, however, O’Neill employs expressionism with indeterminate signification. The imagery of stone, for instance, is used for both positive and negative implications. Peter complains about the callous stone wall: “makin’ stone walls fur him to fence us in! Even a stone wall’t wall in yer heart!” (678). For the brothers, the stone symbolizes the cruelty of the human heart instead of the solidification of their faith.

2. Ambivalent use of Biblical terms

Desire under the Elms employs Biblical terms to demonstrate the ambivalence of human concepts concerning notions of wealth or beauty. In Part 1, Simeon uses “Solomon’s mines” to describe the gold in the west of America. For Simeon and Peter, the gold mines of California, like “Solomon’s mines” will give them wealth as well as freedom (676). On the other hand, Cabot mentions the Puritan belief that God only bless hard-working people and that making money by easy ways is a sin: “Lust for gold, for the sinful, easy gold of California! It’s made you mad!” In the Bible, King Solomon was credited as the builder of the First Temple in Jerusalem for solidifying David’s empire. The Bible portrays him as great in wisdom, wealth, and power. Yet later his sin, including idolatry and turning away from Yahweh, leads to the kingdom being torn in two during the reign of his son Rehoboam. O’Neill’s ambiguous use of “Solomon’s mines” results in the complexity of the notions of wealth and desire in the play.

In Part II, Scene i, Cabot praises Abbie: “Yew air my Rose o’ Sharon!” (679), which turns out to be a dramatic irony, as Abbie later commits adultery and incest. In the Bible, the flower is used to describe the humble quality of the young women in the Song of Songs, in which a young woman refers to herself as a Rose of Sharon or a Lily of the Valley (Solomon 2:1; Isa 1:18). As both flowers were commonly found in Israel at the time, she is in fact calling herself “ordinary” or “common.” Yet, the term has been altered to describe the beauty of women, while O’Neill uses it to construct a sense of sarcasm. Abbie wants to work for her own home, and therefore she marries old Cabot in anticipation of inheritance. For Eben, however, her behavior is the same as that of a prostitute: “I mean the farm you sold yourself for like any other old whore.” After falling in love with Eben, Abbie is jealous about Eben visiting the village whore, and complains to Cabot: “Where is he going? To see that whore, Min! I tried to stop him, disgracing you and me—on Sabbath, too!” Earlier Peter calls Min “the Scarlet woman” (679). Yet, Eben defends Minnie’s conduct: “By God A'mighty she's purty, an' I don't give a damn how many sins she's sinned afore mine or who she's sinned 'em with, my sin's as purty as any one on 'em!” His notion is similar to the Biblical saying: “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”

Eben wishes himself to become stronger than his father, but physically he fails to defeat Cabot. His brother Peter mocks him: “An’ yew--- be yew Samson” (678). In Judge 13-16, Samson, meaning “man of the sun,” possessed extraordinary physical strength, as God granted him supernatural strength to combat his enemies and perform heroic feats such as wrestling a lion, slaying an entire army with only the jawbone of an ass, and destroying a pagan temple. Eben prayed that Cabot had died, even though he ironically tells his brothers to “Honor thy father” (676). This commandment is the fourth of the Ten Commandments in the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Decalogue, a set of biblical laws relating to ethics and worship.

III. The Shakespearean Allusions

1. The Ghosts in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*

The stage direction at the very beginning of *Desire under the Elms* describes the stage setting with two enormous elms are on each side of the Cabot farmhouse:

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

The imagery of the elms insinuates the role of women in the play, especially of Eben's mother. Indeed, Eben frequently speaks of his mother as if she still stays around in the house. The ghost of Eben's mother is similar to the ghost of Hamlet's father, none of whom appears, but has a great impact on the protagonist. Moreover, Abbie's personality, as represented in the first part of the play, is similar to that of Lady Macbeth, who endeavors to satisfy her desire in a world dominated by men. Exploring the propositions of the unseen and unheard characters in O'Neill's plays, Robert Byrd observes that O'Neill introduces unseen characters to inspire audience reactions and to examine limitations of perspectives, thus establishing a connection between the characters and audiences through psychological activities (20-27).

Conclusion

Eugene O'Neill explores biblical, classical, and Shakespearean references to construct the synopsis of *Desire under the Elms*, but frequently changes them to enhance the multiplicity of significations of the play.

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