THE AMBIVALENCE OF LOVE AND HATE IN DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL APPROACH

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ÖZET

Bu çalışma modern trajedi yazarlarından biri olan Eugene O'Neill'in Desire Under the Elms adlı oyununda sevgi ve nefret arasındaki ikilemi psikolojik ve mitolojik açıdan incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. O'Neill oyununu yazarken dönemin diğer yazarları gibi mitolojik bir yöntem kullanmıştır. Modern bir trajedi yaratırken, klasik Yunan trajedilerinden faydalanmıştır. Oyun incelenirken psikolojik ve arketipsel analizden faydalanılarak, karakterlerin bilinçaltı dünyaları derinlemesine analiz edilmektedir. Ayrıca bu çalışma O'Neill'in hangi klasik Yunan trajedilerinden nasıl ve ne ölçüde faydalandığını incelemeyi de amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Arketip, Trajedi, Psikoloji, Mitoloji.

ABSTRACT

The present analysis is intended to shed some light on the psychological and mythological aspects of the ambivalence of love and hate in Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms. The study is confined to the psychological, mythological and classical traits represented in the play. The introduction part revolves mainly around the general background information about the psychological and mythological approaches O'Neill is assumed to have used. This brief investigation is hoped to familiarise the reader with Eugene O'Neill as a modern dramatist who makes use of the classical patterns of tragedy.

Keywords: Archetype, Tragedy, Psychology, and Mythology.

Introduction

The first decade of the twentieth century saw several crucial developments in the field of ideas. Scientific explanations became more subtle and harder for the layman to understand. Put in the most simplified and general terms, it can be said that the world of the twentieth century was felt to be much more complex than the world as it had been known before, and especially more complex than the orderly world that had been presented to the reader in Victorian literature. Modern art is that in which the artist reflects an awareness of an unprecedented modern situation in form and content. The principle of reality is peculiarly difficult to grasp, and realism is not an adequate approach to it. The twentieth-century artist is concerned chiefly with intensifying aspects of reality; and because he has rejected so many traditional values, he has to recreate for himself what his predecessors could take for granted. When society is reduced to chaos, new systems must be developed, and the artist's quest is to discover and develop fresh material. The artist's concern has shifted to technique, to a stress on how to say things rather than only on what to say. His work has necessarily involved new methods and organization.

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The unconsciousness of the modern artist has been directed by the influence of the psychological investigation, revealing the complexity of the human personality, and of philosophical inquiry. The external realities are no longer paramount. The inner flux is emphasized through several psychological devices. The revolution in depth psychology that began in the late nineteenth century has affected both the interpretation and creation of literary works. The relationship between psychoanalysis and literary criticism spans much of the twentieth century. The movement from the outer sphere to the inner world of man, from the physically oriented view to the spiritual factors emphasizing the human unconscious found their best expressions in the works of Freud and Jung, who are clearly the most influential figures in the development of the modern psychoanalytical myth criticism. Emotional states, dreams and fantasy brought myth to the forefront, since they are the result of imagination and analogous to myths. The interpretation of dreams and the analyses of fantasies led the leading psychoanalysists to the depths and hidden layers of the psyche.

In the twentieth-century, writers look back toward the classical world with its ideal of harmonious perfection and its simple elemental aesthetic delights. They feel that somewhere along the line of man's development order has gone out of the world. As a result "Myth has spread from the confines of anthropology to the ultimate circle of the verbal universe." (Thompson, 1967, 13) Writers have begun to use the mythical method instead of the narrative method. In 1923 T. S. Eliot issued his famous call for a "mythical method" in "Ulysses, Order and Myth": "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemproneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him…. It is a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." (Eliot, 1923, 485)

Mythological and Psychological criticism which are both concerned with the motives underlying human behaviour assume that psychic processes of one generation continue in the next. Both deal with the inheritance of psychic dispositions which are transferred from one generation to another. The relationship of literary art to some very deep chord in human nature is the scope of psychological and mythological criticism. They seek out the underlying elements that inform certain literary works.

The coincidence of love and hate towards the same object is one of the many elements which appears in different literary works which belong to different periods. According to Freud, "we know nothing about the origin of this ambivalence. It may be assumed to be a fundamental phenomenon of our emotional life. …That ambivalence, originally foreign to our emotional life, was acquired by mankind from the father complex, where psychological investigation of the individual to-day still reveals the strongest expression of it." (Freud, 1960, 202) Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms reflects certain facets of the ambivalence of love and hate described by Freud. O'Neill is concerned with the theme of rebellion, with a hostile treatment of the father

figure. Rebellion is in essence a rejection of parental and especially paternal authority.

Freud sketches a picture of the earliest social grouping in which a dominant primal father excluded the sons from sexual access to the females in the group, developing what he calls "the Darwinian concept of the primal horde." (Freud, 1960, 182) According to him, the rebellion against authority goes back to primitive tribes. The nucleus of it is found in the 'primal horde'. The concept that Freud called the "primal horde", by which he means a social group, is the first beginnings of religion, of moral restrictions and of social organization. In this earlier social group, a dominant primal father banned his sons from having sexual intercourse with the family females. The sons who were frustrated killed their father and ate his body in the hope of attaining his powers. As stated by Freud, "this totem feast, which is perhaps mankind's first celebration, would be the repetition and commemoration of this memorable, criminal act with which so many things began, social organization, moral restrictions and religion." (Freud, 1960, 183) Religion is based on this primal sin, produced by patricide – the sense of universal guilt for killing the father, who is the prototype for God. According to Freud:

> All later religions prove to be attempts to solve the same problem, varying only in accordance with the stage of culture in which they are attempted and according to the paths which they take; they are all, however, reactions aiming at the same great event with which culture began and which ever since has not let mankind come to rest. (Freud, 1960, 187)

The prohibition of incest and patricide is of great importance in the formation of personality. Freud concluded that "the beginnings of religion, ethics, society and art meet in the Oedipus complex." (Freud, 1960, 202)-the boy's unconscious rivalry with his father for the love of his mother. In O'Neill's play, Desire Under the Elms, the central character, Eben, suffers from Freud's Oedipus complex. It derives from Eben's unconscious rivalry with his father for the love of his step-mother, Abbie. Ephraim and his son, Eben, strive for Abbie. In The Ego and the Id, Freud describes the complex as follows:

> The boy deals with his father by identifying himself with him. For a time these two relationships proceed side by side, until the boy's sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense and his father is perceived as an obstacle to them; from this the Oedipus complex originates. His identification with his father then takes on a hostile colouring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place with his mother. Henceforward his relation to his father is ambivalent; it seems as if the ambivalence inherent in the identification from the beginning had become manifest. An ambivalent attitude to his father and an object-object relation of a solely affectionate kind to his mother make up the content of the simple positive Oedipus complex in a boy. (Freud, 1962, 21-22)

Eugene O'Neill adopts the ancient 'Oedipus myth' to structure his play, Desire Under the Elms. It is the tragedy of desire as it appears in the play, human desire. The principal subject of the play is Cabot's son, Eben. The desire

of the mother is essentially manifested in an idealized and exalted mother. The dependence of Eben's desire on his mother is the permanent dimension of Eben's drama. Eben is plunged into anguish at the thought of his mother being replaced in his father's affections by someone else, Abbie. His devotion to his mother makes him so jealous for her affection that he finds it difficult enough to share this even with his father and cannot endure her replacement of it with still another woman, Abbie. Eben, in years gone by, 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. He clearly declares: "I pray he's died." (O'Neill, 1957, 357) When his brothers, Simon and Peter, tell him that he is their father, Eben responds: "Not mine!…I meant – I hain't – I hain't like him – he hain't me!" (O'Neill, 1957, 358) He thinks that he is his mother's heir: "I be thankful t' ye. I'm her – her heir." (O'Neill, 1957, 358) Eben's grudge against his father grows in him day by day: "I'm gettin' stronger. I kin feel it growin' in me – growin' an' growin' – till it'll bust out - !" (O'Neill, 1957, 360) As pointed out by James A. Robinson, in Desire Under the Elms, Ephraim (the name of an old Testament patriarch) is an energetic archetype of God-like paternal authority, and Eben represents the active Oedipal (or perhaps Promethean) rebellion against it. (in Maufort, 1989, 154)

The play describes the powerful effect of a strong father on his son. Ephraim Cabot, who is the primal father, oppresses the whole family. He is cruel, harsh and unable to relate to his sons. Ephraim is as hard as a stone. His symbol in the play is the stones:

> When I come here fifty odd year ago – I was jest twenty an' the strongest an' hardest ye evr seen – ten times as strong an' fifty times as hard as Eben. Waal – this place was nothin' but fields o' stones. Folks laughed when I tuk it. They couldn't know what I knowed. When ye kin make corn sprout out o'stones, God's livin' in yew! They wa'n't strong enuf fur that! They reckoned God was easy. They laughed. They don't laugh no more. Some died hereabouts. Some went West an'died. They're all under ground – fur follerin! Arter an easy God. God hain't easy. …An! I growed hard. Folks kept allus sayin' he's a hard man like 'twas sinful t' be hard, so's at last …they was so many stones. …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! Stones. …I lived with the boys. They hated me' cause I was hard. I hated them' cause they was soft. They coveted the farm without knowin' what it meant. It made me bitter 'n wormwood. (O'Neill, 1957, 380)

Ephraim is fond of hardness and isolation. Eben and the others hate Ephraim, and there is no emotional bond between them. Ephraim Cabot and his sons do not have a meaningful relationship. The only bond between Ephraim and his older sons Simeon and Peter is mechanical. Ephraim provides them room and food, and in return he makes them work in the farm. He is such kind of man who takes great pleasure from the sufferings of the people around him. He has the paternal authority over his sons. Ephraim torments his sons. The sons are resentful because of the way in which their father drives

them. Simon expresses his feelings in the following words: "Here – it's 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 walls fur him to fence us in!" (O'Neill, 1957, 356) The father Ephraim has many wives. His first wife is the mother of Peter and Simeon, the second, the mother of Eben and the new bride Abbie. Ephraim makes his second wife, Eben's mother, work to death:

> EBEN (fiercely): An' fur thanks he killed her!
>
> SIMEON (after a pause): No one never kills nobody. It's allus somethin'. That'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 hain't died-yit.
>
> SIMEON: It's somethýn'-drivin' him -t' drive us! (O'Neill, 1957, 358)

O'Neill makes use of the mother archetype to probe into Eben's personality. Eben's internal conflict is not to be missed, for it goes to the psychological core of O'Neill's play. The exploration of Eben's personality must be based on his relationship with his mother. The main source of Eben's tragedy must be sought in his psychological quest for a mother figure. In the person of the protagonist, Eben, the play exemplifies an inner conflict between emotional demands for a woman and inner subjectivity. O'Neill explores the dilemma in Eben's character. The origin of Eben's problem goes back to his early childhood. Eben's quest is only a reflection of the need for an emotional bond. Eben's mother always plays an active part in Eben's quest although she does not exist physically. She does not appear in the play. Eben narrates his infantile remembrances about his mother and father, his fondness for his mother and his hatred for his father to his brothers at the beginning of the play. Eben discovers that his father and his mother do not love each other. Eben's abhorrence of his father leads him to seek for emotional satisfaction of his feelings in his step-mother, 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 step-mother. Eben's hard and isolated self is the result of a lack of a strong father's love. Abbie, who is the figure of the mother archetype, forms the foundation of the mother-complex. Typical effects of the mother-complex on the son, according to Jung:

> are homosexuality and Don Juanism, and sometimes also impotence. In homosexuality, the son's entire heterosexuality is tied to the mother in an unconscious form; in Don Juanism, he unconsciously seeks his mother in every woman he meets. …Because of the difference in sex, a son's mother-complex does not appear in pure form. This is the reason why in every masculine mother-complex, side by side with the mother archetype, a significant role is played by the image of the man's sexual counterpart, the anima. (Jung, 1959, 85)

One of the tragic elements O'Neill used in Desire Under the Elms is the haunting past. The past in the play determines and controls the tragic action. In the play the past controls the present and creates the 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 in the figure of mother represents the dominance of mother over the play. In Jungian psychology, the tree has maternal significance. It is the symbol of the mother archetype. It is closely associated with "the origin in the sense of the mother. It represents the source of life, of that magical life force." (Jung, 1956, 258) The maternal significance of the trees in the garden of the Cabot farmhouse is made explicit in their bending over the house like a mother who is embracing her child. They protect and shelter the house with their long branches. The stage direction opens the play:

> Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. 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 (O'Neill, 1957, 354).

The elm trees in the garden of the Cabot farmhouse, first of all, symbolize the primordial past, and they are at the same time a link between the present and the past. They are also the symbols of youthful energy and rejuvenation. Jung explains the meaning of the tree symbol: "Taken on average, the commonest associations to its meaning are growth, life, unfolding of form, in a physical and spiritual sense, development, growth from below upwards and from above downwards, the maternal aspect (protection, shade, shelter, nourishing fruits, sources of life, solidity, permanence, firm-rootedness, but also being "rooted to the spot") old age, personality, and finally death and rebirth." (Jung, 1959, 272)

The unification of the house and the trees like a man and a woman is the symbol of the connection of the opposites. One of the main reasons for this is that the tree and the house have bisexual characters. They lose their feminine and masculine traits. The change in their roles makes them a whole. The feminine quality of the tree and the masculine quality of the house are turned into a whole. Each lies hidden in the other. The image of the whole man finds its concrete form in the unification of the house and the tree. They are the symbol of the hope of connection of the opposites.

Eben is the victim of a sinister maternity. He talks to his mother as if she is not dead. The claims of the past make the play a revenge play. As Normand Berlin remarks, "Eben's mother, like Hamlet's father, seems to be saying throughout: 'Remember me!' Mother hangs over the play and lurks within the play; she acquires a deterministic force as potent as the gods in Greek drama" (Berlin, 1982, 75). A sin has been committed against Eben's mother by Ephraim. Eben is in a continual antagonism against his father, and he insists that the farm is his. Ephraim is guilty of doing something wrong her. Her fiercely maternal presence broods over the play. Eben feels it. The existence of

the mother is sensed most strongly at the moment of Eben's sin. Mother hangs over the play like a curse. The mysterious presence of the mother is best felt in the parlour in which the passionate sexual desires of Eben and Abbie are fulfilled. It is the mother's parlour: When she has died, she is laid there. It is a "*repressed room like a tomb*" (O'Neill, 1957, 382). One of the Abbie's desires is to have that room which is the only part of the house not belonging to her. When she enters the room she is frightened and ready to run away.

Eben carries with him the eternal image of his mother. Since his mother's image is unconscious, it is unconsciously projected upon Abbie. Abbie has double roles in the play as a mother and as a lover. She is the symbol of both maternal and sexual love. When Abbie and Eben enter the tomb-like room which has not been opened since Eben's mother's death, Abbie plays her double roles at the same time:

> EBEN: They hain't nothin' much. She was kind. She was good.
>
> ABBIE: (Puttinrone arm over his shoulder. He does not seem to notice – passionately): I'll be kind an' good t' ye!
>
> EBEN: Sometimes she used t'sing fur me.
>
> ABBIE: I'll sing fur ye! (O'Neill, 1957, 384)

In a very short period of time, Abbie's maternal love for Eben turns into a lusty sexual love. The sexual union of Eben and Abbie takes place in an atmosphere of lust, incest and Oedipal desire:

> ABBIE: (both her arms around him – with wild passion) : I'll sing fur ye! I'll die fur ye! (In spite of 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 evrythin' she was t' ye! Let me kiss ye, Eben! (She pulls his head around...She is tender) Don't be afeered! I'll kiss ye pure, Eben – same's if I was a Maw t' ye – an' ye kiss me back 's if yew was my son – my boy – sayin' good-night t' me! Kiss me, Eben. (They kiss in restrained fashion. Then suddenly wild passion overcomes her. She kissess him lustfully again and again and he flings his arms about her and returns her kisses...) (O'Neill, 1957, 384-385)

Eugene O'Neill makes use of the Greek model of incest to project Eben's unconscious desire for his mother. He makes use of the tragic elements of the Greek tragedy. John Gassner argues that Desire Under the Elms is "true tragedy; the power of the passions, the impressiveness of the characters, the timelessness of the inner struggle between a son and a father ensure tragic elevation" (qtd. in Cubeta, 1962, 205). Normand Berlin remarks that "Desire Under the Elms is surely his first 'Greek' tragedy-not as imitatively Greek as Mourning Becomes Electra, but Greek none the less-going to sources that deal with Greek myths, to the subject matter the Greeks treated, and invoking a determinism that is as potent as that found in Greek drama" (Berlin, 1982, 71). O'Neill adapts ancient Greek myths for his story in the play. Desire Under the Elms has the elements of classical tragedy namely Seneca's Phaedra, Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, and Euripides' Medea.

O'Neill's story in Desire Under the Elms is analogous to the mythic account of Seneca's Phaedra. In Phaedra, a family situation is portrayed: the relationship between stepson and stepmother. Phaedra, the wife of Theseus, falls in love with Hippolystus, Theseus' son by a previous marriage. Hippolystus rejects the passionate love offerings of his stepmother, Phaedra. Phaedra who is rejected by his stepson accuses Hippolystus of having attempted to rape her and takes her revenge. Hippolystus' father, Theseus, curses his son, who is killed when a bull emerges from the sea to frighten the horses of his chariot. (Seneca, 1966, 99-149) In Desire Under the Elms, O'Neill follows this mythic account. The same family relationship is portrayed. Ephraim Cabot (Theseus) at seventy-six brings his third wife, Abbie (Phaedra), to his farm. Abbie is immediately attracted to his stepson, Eben (Hippolystus), and she makes advances toward him. Like Phaedra, Abbie conceals her growing passion for Eben with the mask of scorn. Like Phaedra, she considers her stepson as a rival for the farm and asks the son be banished. Eben, like Hippolystus, rejects Abbie at first. Unlike Phaedra, Abbie is successful in her advances. Then Eben, unlike Hippolystus, enjoys the affair. Ephraim, like Theseus, has many wives. Theseus' curse on Hippolystus in Phaedra becomes Eben's curse on his and Abbie's son. In Desire Under the Elms, the curse comes from the father Eben on his child. At the end of the play Ephraim, like Theseus, remains alone.

O'Neill makes use of incest motif by following the Oedipal myth. He puts this belief into practice by going to Sophocles' great play Oedipus *Rex*. Desire Under the Elms contains echoes of Oedipus Rex. Oedipus upon birth is left on a mountain top because his parents have been told by the Oracle that he would some day kill his father and marry his mother. In the story, Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother. Generally speaking, O'Neill adopts the myth of the son against father and the son loving the mother into Desire Under the Elms. As Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman and William Burto pointed out, "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" (Barnet, Berman and Burto, 1957, 352)

Eben's incestuous relationship with Abbie results in the birth of a son which will be murdered by his mother, evoking another Greek myth, that of Medea. In Euripides'Medea, Jason plans to abandon Medea and marry a new. He abandons Medea, and Medea decides to kill his children in order to leave Jason heirless. That is the best punishment for Jason according to Medea. Medea kills the children for the man she has loved. One of the great sins in the Greek tragedy is to kill someone of your own blood. Medea does the killing in full consciousness. She has free will to change the fate of the children, but she chooses to kill them. (Euripides, 1993, 1-47) In Desire Under the Elms, in order to secure herself, Abbie sees that her only real security lies in providing Cabot a son. She suggests to him "mebbe the lord'll give us a son. (O'Neill, 1957, 378) A new son will disinherit Eben, although Eben is his father. Eben's child is born to Abbie, and Ephraim thinks it is his child although his

neighbours know the reality about the son. Ephraim reveals to Eben of Abbie's earlier agreement to have a son and of her desire to turn out Eben: "An' she says, I wants Eben cut off so's this farm'll be mine when ye die!" (O'Neill, 1957, 393). Eben, in a great anger and confusion, rejects Abbie who attempts to express her love for him. However, Eben utters: "I wish he never was born! I wish he'd die this minit1 I wish I'd never sot eyes on him! It's him-yew havin' him-a purpose t' steal-That's changed everythin'!" (O'Neill, 1957, 395) Eben's wish is analogous to Theseus curse on Hippolystus in Phaedra. In order to prove her love for Eben, Abbie murders the child like Medea. She kills what she loves. As Edward L. Shaughnessy expressed, "A mother suffocating her own baby surely constitutes an unnatural act. In Abbie we may be reminded of the daunting will of a Medea or Lady Macbeth" (Shaughnessy, 1996, 98).

Eben and Abbie become simply the victims of their lust. They doom themselves by their incestual sin and suffer the terrible consequence. The end of Desire Under the Elms is in line with the classical tradition going back to ancient Greek tragedy and its concept of guilt and atonement. Eben and Abbie have to take the ultimate responsibility of their sinful acts. Justice is achieved through retribution. Abbie accepts her guilt: "I' got t' take my punishment – t' pay for my sin." (O'Neill, 1957, 402) Eben also sees that he is also as guilty as Abbie in their crime: "I want t' share with ye, Abbie, - prison 'r death 'r hell 'r anythin'!" (O'Neill, 1957, 402) They are reunited in their love with Eben's sharing the quilt. Ephraim is bound to have a complete loneliness. Justice is done. Edward L. Shaughnessy remarks that, "O'Neill gives us a portrait of partners in sin who work out their redemption and who, within a modern context, evoke echoes of classical tragedy. ...O'Neill formed a story in a typical tragic pattern: his characters follow a course of sin and redemption in recognition of error and the assumption of responsibility" (Shaughnessy, 1996, 97).

Conclusion

In Desire Under the Elms, we see the most extensive explorations of O'Neill's view of the ambivalence of love and hate in the father-son battle, the incest theme, the relationship between stepmother and stepson, mother's sacrifice of the child, the use of myth and archetypes adopting the structure of classical tragedies. The revolt of a son against father, the love for mother, the haunting past, and the mother suffocating his child in the classical tragedies make Desire Under the Elms a classical tragedy in a modern sense. O'Neill successfully adopts the classical traits of tragedy portrayed in the Greek tragedy into the modern tragedy.

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