

Symbolism in O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*

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Symbolism may be defined as the representation of a reality on one level of reference by a corresponding reality on another.

The traditional symbols are not "conventional" but "given" with the ideas to which they correspond. There is, accordingly, a distinction between - le symbolisme qui sait et le symbolisme qui cherche - the former the universal language of tradition, the latter that of the individual and self-expressive poets who are sometimes called Symbolists. Hence also the primary necessity of accuracy in iconography, whether in verbal or visual imagery. It follows that an understanding of what the expressive writing intends to communicate implies not only taking it literally or historically, but also interpreting it "hermeneutically".

Though words can be used irrationally for merely aesthetic and for non-artistic purposes, they are by first intention signs or symbols of specific referents. However, in an analysis of meaning it is important to distinguish between the literal and the categorical or historical significance of words and the allegorical meaning that inheres in their primary referents. Although words are signs of things, they can also be symbols of what these things in themselves imply. Thus, we all know what is meant when we are ordered, "Raise your hand", but when Dante writes, "And therefore doth the scripture condescend to your capacity, assigning hand and foot to God..." (Paradiso, IV, 43), we perceive that in certain contexts "hand" means "power". Language is thus not merely indicative, but also expressive, as St. Bonaventura says, "it never expresses except by means of a likeness". (De red artium and theol).¹

Within his plays O'Neill has made use of a certain number of key symbols to express his themes. In *Desire under the Elms* the symbols could be divided into four distinct groups, these connected to the farm itself, these connected to motherhood, organic and nature symbols, and the elms which, in a way, embody them all.

"In the context of the play's realistic action the elms are not symbols in any discrete or absolute sense. Their meaning, is reached only as the characters become aware of their presence, and as the elms, in consequence become part of the action. When,

for example, Ephraim Cabot associates the evil he feels in the house with something dropping from the trees, their significance is made clear and psychologically plausible, their symbolism an element of the play's core".²

As the key symbol of the play, the elms stand for maternity, sexuality, and life force. The quality of maternity in the play is generally sinister and oppressive, and the trees are symbolic of natural fertility and the mystery of a flourishing New England farm. This is very well illustrated in O'Neill's first description of the elms.

Two enormous elms are on each side of the house; They bend their trailing branches down 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.³

The exterior of the farm is always visible and so is the interior of the house - four rooms - which are simultaneously displayed. Throughout the play the action takes place alternately in the interior and exterior. We are conscious both of the domestic lives of the characters, and of the farm which is the framework for their lives and a consuming object of their desires. The notion of a frame is visually represented by the overhanging trees.⁴

But it is not merely nature and a particular stony farmland that is thus symbolized. The maternal trees represent also the secret dominance of the female in the action - the second dead wife of Ephraim Cabot, worked to death by her husband, who still exerts a powerful influence over the life of her son, Eben.

Eben's memory of his mother causes him to express anger and frustration with his life and environment including blaming his brothers for their failure to help her or take moral responsibility for what happened to her. By turning continually to thoughts of his mother he finds a way to rebel against the life he is forced to live, retreating from the hardness of farm life to a warmer and more gratifying commitment.

Although dead, Eben's mother is present throughout the play. This can be clearly seen from the following examples:

Peter. She was good even t'him
Eben. An' fur thanks he killed her.

Simeon. No one never kills nobody.
It's allus somethin. That's the murderer
Eben. Didn't he slave Maw t'death (p.11)?
.....

Eben. Why didn't ye never stand between him'n'my Maw
when he was slavin' her to her grave - t'pay her
back fur the kindness she done t'yew (p.12)?

or

Eben. They was chores t'do, wa'n't they?
It was on'y arter she died I come to think o'it.
Me cookin' - doin' her work... She still comes back
- stands by the stove thar in the evenin' -
she can't find it natural sleepin' and restin'
in peace. She can't git used t'bein' free -
even in her grave.

Simeon. She never complained none.

Eben. She'd got too tired. She'd got too used t'beein'
tired... I'll see t'it my Maw gits some rest
an' sleep in her grave (p.13).

or

Eben. ... Didn't ye feel her passin' -
going back to her grave?

Cabot. Who?

Eben. Maw. She kin rest now an' sleep content.
She's quits with ye. (p.50).

Later after Eben realizes that Abbie's initial motives for participating in sexual relations were to get pregnant in order to secure her inheritance of the farm he - in all his hatred - calls down his mother again: "but I'll get my vengeance too. I'll pray Maw t'come back t'help me - t'put her cuss on yew an'him (p.61).

Abbie soon recognizes Eben's desire for a mother so she consciously works to replace the dead mother in his affections. She hides all her lust in order to look as much as possible to a new mother, and in this way she tries to approach him.

Abbie. Tell me about your Maw, Eben.

Eben. She was kind. She was good.

Abbie. I'll be kind and good t'ye.

Eben. Sometimes she used to sing fur me.

Abbie. I'll sing fur yew.

Eben. This was her hum. This was her farm.

Abbie. This is my hum. This is my farm (p.46).
or

Abbie. Don't cry Eben. I'll take yer Maw's place. I'll be everythin' she was t'ye. Let me kiss ye, Eben. Don't be afeered. I'll kiss ye pure, Eben - same's if I was a Maw t'ye - an' ye kin kiss me back's if yew was my son - my boy - saying' good-night t'me.

... Don't leave me, Eben.

can't ye see it hain't enuf-lovin'ye like a Maw- can't ye see it's got to be that an' more - much more - a hundred times more - fur me t'be happy-fur yew t'be happy (p.47)?

In addition to fulfilling the mother's role she's also his lover.

Abbie. I love ye, Eben. God knows I love ye.

Eben. An'I love ye, Abbie. - now I kin say it.

I been dyin' fur want o'yew - every hour since ye come. I love ye. (p.43).

Although their relationship is illicite, Barrett H. Clark has observed that "of'sin' they have no conciousness; victims of puritanical repressions, of unrestrained passion and of the mighty current of life, they have fashioned their romance apart from the sordidness of their surroundings".⁵

Abbie. Ye can't. It's agin nature Eben.

Ye been fightin'yer nature ever since the day I come - tryin' t'tell yerself I hain't purty t'ye... Nature'll beat ye, Eben (p.33).

Through Abbie, Eben achieves an intoxicant rapture born of a desire that transcends walls of stones, and their relationship is strengthened by a vitalizing energy which seems to come from nature itself. O' Neill has his character express this graphically, before they verbalize their feelings.

"In the next room Eben gets up and paces up and down distractedly. Abbie hears him... Their hot glances seem to meet through the wall. Unconsciously he stretches out his arms for her and she half rises. (p.40)."

It seems that O'Neill has given these two characters an extra sensory perception. For them there seems to be no boundaries either physical, like walls, or moral - like pre-established standards. They are madly driven towards each other, unable to cope with that strong sexual desire. However, it is good to point out that although

physically attracted to each other from the very beginning of the play, this sexual desire tends primarily to be a barrier between them. Eben refused Abbie's presence since she symbolized for him nothing more than a usurper - the one who came to take his dead mother's place.

- Abbie. Be you Eben? I'm Abbie - (She laughs) I mean, I'm your new Maw.
- Abbie. I don't want t'pretend palyin' Maw t'ye, Eben. Ye're too big an'too strong fur that. I want t'be friens with ye.
- Eben. (They stare again, Eben obscurely moved, physically attracted to her) yew kin go to the devil.
- Abbie. I'd feel that same at any stranger comin' t'take my Maw's place. Yew must've cared a lot for yewr Maw, didn't ye? My Maw died afore I'd growned. But yew won't hate me long, Eben. I'm not the wuse in the world - an' yew an' me've got a in common (pp. 29-30).

Abbie is the most complex character in the play, not only because of the several roles she plays but also on account of her strong determination to get what she wants. As Clifford Leech says in his book O'Neill, "Ephraim's third wife, Abbie, is strong enough to destroy Ephraim an Eben and the child that is born to Eben and herself. In this respect Desire under the Elms has a kind of generalizing quality that O'Neill had cultivated in the expressionist plays, and this is reinforced by the echoes of the Hippolytus, the Oedipus Rex and the Medea. Abbie is her step-son's seducer and the murderess of her child; Eben's love for Abbie is in part a love for the mother whose place she has taken".⁶

Throughout the play Abbie is so linked to the farm that they are almost one. Tension in the play revolves around the struggle for the farm.

- Eben. An'bought yew - like a harlot. An'the price he's payin'ye - this farm - was my Maw's, damn ye. - an' mine now.
- Abbie. Ywr'n? We'll see' bout that !
Waal - What if I did need a hum? What else'd I marry an old man like him fur?...
This be my farm - this be my hum... (p.30).

Barrett H. Clark in his book Eugene O'Neill - The Man and his Plays, sees the characters of Desire under the Elms as being a

group of peasants, tenacious in their passion for land, justifying their hardness by their fear of their wrath of God, eager for power, seeking for beauty of a kind and for sexual gratification, cruel and greedy. 7

- Abbie. T'see that Min, I s'pose?...
- Eben. Mebbe - but she's better'n yew...
- Eben. She didn't go sneakin' and stealin' what's mine
- Abbie. Ywr'n? Yew mean - my farm?
- Eben. I mean the farm yew sold yerself fur like any other old whore - my farm.
- Abbie. Ye'll never live t'see the day when even a stinkin' weed on it'll belong t'ye (p.34).

Like his brothers, Eben at first seeks satisfaction in a materialistic world. Yet as the play develops it is clear that his hatred for father and his legalistic claims of ownership are only signals of a truer desire to rediscover, through identification with the land, the security his dead mother's love brought him. He has filled the void her death created with vicious hatred, but for all that his quest is positive and at heart selfless. He desires not to possess but to be possessed by the force he knew in her love and which he associates with the "purty" land.

Believing that the farm belongs rightfully to him, Eben looks upon his new stepmother as a designing and dangerous interloper and hates her with all his power. But Abbie, on the other hand, is both clever and sexually attractive, and to keep the farm in her possession - the reason she married such an old man - she promises to give him a child.

- Abbie. ... I want a son now.
- Cabot. It'd be the blessin'o'God, Abbie.
- ... They haint't nothin' I wouldn't do fur yew then, Abbie, ye'd hev on't'ask it - anythin'ye'd a mind t'.
- Abbie. Would ye will the farm t'me an'it...?
- Cabot. I'd do anythin'ye asked, I tell ye. I swear it (p.38-39).

There is a constant strife between Eben and his father because the latter has usurped what Eben regards as his own - the mother and the land. Cabot would rather destroy the farm than give it to Eben.

- Abbie. So ye're plannin' t'leave the farm t'Eben, air ye?...

Cabot. ... I'd see it afire and watch it burn - this house an'every ear of corn an'every tree down t'the last blade o'hay. I'd sit an'know it was all a-dyin'with me an'no one else'd ever own what was mine, what I'd made out o'nothin'with my own sweat' n'blood.

'Cepting the cows. Them I'd turn free (p. 36).

Cabot's reaction to Eben's claims to the farm is one of complete despise and scorn.

Cabot. ... Yewr farm. God A'mighty'If ye wa'n't a born donkey ye'd know ye'll never own a stick nor stone on it - specially now arter him bein'born. It's his'n, tell ye-his'n arter I die.... Waal , it'll be her'n too. Abbie's - ye won't git'round her - she knows yer tricks - she'll too much fur ye - she wants the farm her'n - she was afeered o'ye - ... And she says, I want Eben cut off so this farm'll be mine when ye die. An'that's what's happened, hain't it? And the farm's her'n. An' the dust o' the road - that's your'n (p.p.58-59).

In the midst of this struggle for the farm we have the two brothers - Simeon and Peter - trying to free themselves from the land. Their final success in breaking lose is symbolized by their tearing the gate off the hinges and taking it with with them. Keeping their universal significance, the gates stand for an obstacle, and once open they would mean not only freedom but the passing to a different world, to a new kind of life. In Desire under the Elms it is Simeon who "digs down a wall", tearing the gate off hinges, abolishing "shet gates, an' open gates, an' all gates, by thunder".

The farm not only dominates the scene in a physical sense, but it's also spiritually dominant. One of the central ideas of the play is the response of the characters to the land on which they live. Close to the soil, their identities and destinies are shaped by a force they sense moving in the earth. The influences of the land are shown in may ways including Ephraim's sense of the earth as the source of his salvation, in Eben's feeling of dislocation on the farm, in Abbie's desire to come home. The play focuses on the land both as fertile and sterile, as giving blessings and as demanding cruel service.

Eben has in him "a repressed vitality", an animal - like quality that gives him maturity and manliness. He seeks identification with nature and through him the beauty of the farm is made real and

Abbie is linked with that beauty. She causes Ephraim to become aware of the natural forces that shape his life and enables him to define the nature of hard and easy gods, and to clarify the influences that are concentrated in the sinister elms. It is through Eben's touch of poetry that the farm is transformed.

Eben. It's purty. It's dammed purty.
It's mine. Mine, d'ye hear? Mine (p.17).

Eben's quest for the source of the feminine power in the land sets him apart from his brothers and brings him into fatal opposition with Ephraim and his hard God. For Eben the true, the consummate condition of being is to belong to the land as an unborn child belongs to the womb. Curiously moved by this desire, his view of the land changes and it is no longer stony and unyielding, but warm and filled with life.

Dominant, at the heart of the play are the two powerful forces moving through the land giving it its character: a power that lies in the stones and another which lies in the soil. The former demands the self-denial and the control Ephraim gives it, the later promises peace and fulfillment in return for complete surrender. The characters are aware of them and respond in varying degrees of awareness to the forces that control their lives.

Simeon. We've wuked. Give our strength
Give our years. Plowed'em under in the ground -
rottin' - makin' soil for his crops. Waal -
the farm pays good for here - about (p.8).

and

Eben. An'makin' walls - stone atop o'stone
- makin' walls till your heart's a
stone ye heft up out o' the way o'growth onto
a stone wall t'waal in yer heart (p.13).

More than any other character Ephraim identifies himself with the farm and seeks solace in it and in nature. The life-giving forces of earth are so strong in the characters that Ephraim, when describing Abbie takes comparisons from nature. "Ye belly be likes a heap o'wheat" or puts Abbie and the farm close together "Sometimes ye air the farm and sometimes the farm be yew".

Ephraim is an instrument of evil and destruction of others. He remains a tyrant, utterly self-righteous, who seeks to possess both the farm and the youth of others wholly for himself. He is the

incarnation of ownership - the spokesman of a materialistic society which destroys the souls of other men. Therefore he is hated.

He is the archetypal patriarch, his name meaning "the fruitful" is a source of irony by the end of the play. He is also identified with the God of the Old Testament, whom he quotes so often, both in his harshness and solitude. Nevertheless, the play is his tragedy as much as the lovers. At the end he is quite alone on the farm he has built stone by stone, and O'Neill makes us respect him for all the physical strength and vitality which he retains into his seventy-sixth year. It is on account of this loneliness that he goes so often to the barn and tries to find some peace there, together with the cows which he considers to be his equals.

Abbie. Whar air ye goin?

Down whar it's restful - whar it's warm - down t'the barn. I kin talk t'the cows. They know. They know the farm an'me. They'll give me peace (p.42).

and returning from the barn one morning he declares

Cabot. I rested. I slept good-down with the cows.

They know how t'sleep. They're teachin'me (p.50).

At the end of the play, after his great disappointment he frees the cows as a way to free himself.

I've turned the cows an' other stock loose. I've druv' em into the woods whar they kin be free. By freein'em, I'm freein'myself (p.71).

The use of organic and nature symbols is crucial to convey the physical quality in the play. Simeon and Peter are an organic extension of the earth and soil. On the bare framework of a New England domestic tragedy, O'Neill has grafted a religious symbology, almost an iconography. The Biblical names, while "locally" motivated - a man like Ephraim Cabot could be expected to name his sons after characters in the Bible - seem to dictate at least some of the actions of the characters, and even take on the beginnings of a dialectic.⁸ Thus, Peter - "the rock" - is associated throughout the play with rocks and-stones. "Here, it's stones atop o'the ground - stones atop o'the stones - makin' stone walls - year atop o'the year... And it is Peter who first picks up a rock to cast at this father's house. In revenge on his tyrannical father, Simeon, on the other hand, threatens to rape his new wife.

They are closely connected to the farm and land. "Their clothes, their faces, hands, bare arms and throats are earth-stained. They smell of earth (p.8). Similarly they are linked with the animals.

Peter. Mebbe. The cows knows us

Simeon. An'likes us. They don't know him much.
They knows us like brothers -
an'likes us (p.22).

The imagery of the sun arises in many contexts and develops meanings crucial to the play.

Abbie's desire for Eben is expressed in terms of her response to nature itself in the form of the sun.

Abbie. Hain't the sun strong'n'hot?
Ye kin feel it burnin'into the earth-Nature-makin'
thin's grow - bigger'n bigger- burnin' inside ye
makin'ye want t'grow - into somethin' else - till
ye're jined with it - an' it's your'n - but
it owes ye, too - an' makes ye grow bigger -
like a tree - like them elums (p.60).

The partly ironic phallic image expresses Abbie's langorous response to the sun's heat. Imagery of the sun forms a poetic motif threaded throughout the play. In the opening dialogue, for example , Eben, Simeon, and Peter all respond to the setting sun.

Eben. (gazing up at the sky) Sun's downin'purty.

Simeon and Peter. (together) Ay-eh. They's gold in the West.

Eben. Ay-eh (pointing) yonder atop o'the hill pasture,
ye mean?

Simeon and Peter. (together) In California (p. 9).

For Simeon and Peter the sunset holds a vague promise of riches to be found in the golden West, and a little earlier it has called to Simeon's mind the memory of his dead wife, Jenn, who had hair "long's a hoss - tail - and yaller like gold". It conveys a sense both of loss and promise and emblemizes the source of his restlessness and the end of his quest.

For Eben, the sun is a manifestation of the beauty of the farm. It is the agent of the farm's fertility, but when it disappears he has no need to follow it beyond the hill pastures.

In his last image all the meanings have centered around it, those of nature, of love, of covetousness , are synthetized and restated.

Eben. I love ye, Abbie... suns's a-rizin'
Purty, hain't it.

Abbie. Ay-eh (They both stand for a moment looking up raptly
in attitudes strangely aloop and devout).

Sheriff. (looking around at the farm enviously)

It's a jim-dandy farm, no denyin'. Wishe I owed it (p. 73).

The time in Desire under the Elms is spring, season of awakening and season of ritual. It is the spring which has sent Ephraim out "t'learn god's message t'me in the spring like the prophet's done". It is a spring so compelling in its beauty and life that even Simeon and Peter are moved to utter, from their animal existence, "Purty". The play will end in late spring a year later.

But it is not only during spring that there is a search in the play; motherhood and the quest for mother is an ever present psychological theme.

Through an identification with the land Eben tries to regain the security the love of his dead mother brought him. His quest for the source of feminine power in the land sets him apart from his brothers and brings him into fatal opposition with Ephraim and his hard God.

Eben is so devoted to the memory of his mother that he keeps her parlor as a kind of sanctuary. It is dark and sealed away, inhabited only by his mother's ghost. But Abbie with her cunning slowly breaks Eben's resistance, and they become lovers in the parlor.

Abbie. They's one room hain't mine yet, it's a-goin't'be tonight.

I'm a-going down and light up. Won't ye comin' courtin' me in the best parlor, Mister Cabot?

Eben. Don't ye dare. It hain't been opened since Maw died an'was laid out thar. Don't ye...

Abbie. I'll expect ye afore long, Eben (p.44).

Abbie asserts that his mother blesses their union and, in this setting, Eben thinks of and sorrows for his mother, while Abbie identifies herself with the dead woman and loves Eben both as a mother and as a lover.

Abbie. When I fust come in - in the dark - they seemed somethin' here.

Eben. Maw

Abbie. ... Now - since yew come - seems like it's growin' soft'n' kind t'me.

Eben. Maw allus loved me

Abbie. Mebbe it knows I love yew, too.

Mebbe that makes it kind t'me.

Eben. ...Hate ye furt stealin' her place - here is her hum settin' in the parlor whar she was laid (p.46).

To Eben, the prostitute Min, whom he visits is a kind of incestuous revenge on his father for Cabot has also had sexual relations with Min. To Eben she is warm and soft "like the summer night". Min stands not only for lust, but also for the figure of the mother Eben misses so badly. There is a strange mixture of sexual desire and search for maternal love in Eben's relationship with her.

Simeon. What was ye all night?

Eben. Up t'Min's ... Then I got t'the village and heard the news (Cabot's marriage) an' I got madder'n hell and run all the way t'Min's not knowin' what I'd do - waal - when I seen her, I didn't hit her nuther - I begun t'beller like a calf and cuss at the same time, I was so durn mad - an'she got scared - and I just grabbed holt an' tuk her (p.18).

Eben acts the way she does with him probably because of that Eben sees her not only as a sexual object, but respects her as a human being.

But it is in Abbie that Eben finds a fuller fulfillment than in Min. Abbie's complex character and her double function of lover and mother is suddenly resolved into that of a woman who loves Eben. Perhaps O'Neill intended to keep the maternal element in this love strongly evident for Abbie must give her grown-up son anything he wants, even his own child's death.

As for the killing of the child Clifford Leech observes that we may hesitate over this fact, despite the admiration that the general conduct of the action arouses for it gives rather the effect of a knot being untied so that secrecy may be banished and comfort may go.⁹

As Eben and Abbie mature, their relationship takes precedence over all other interests. Thus, in the end, they give up all their selfishness and become unselfish - giving lovers.

Frederic Carpenter comments on the plot of the play as related to Greek Mythology. "The plot of *Desire* also re-enacts many of the tragic incidents of the old Greek myths. As in Oedipus the son fights the father and commits adultery (technically incest) with the mother (in this case a step-mother). As in *Medea* the wife kills her child in order (partly) to gain revenge on the husband. But the plot of *Desire* changes the pattern of the old Greek tragedies so radically that it creates an essentially new myth. Because the mother is now a third wife, and therefore a young step-mother to the mature son, the love of the two becomes wholly natural (though technically incestuous). And because the step-mother kills her infant because of a deluded (but

genuine) love for the step-son, the cold violence of Medea's hatred is transformed into a warm love. The plot of Desire creates a modern myth with new relationships. It suggests a new interpretation of the tragedy".¹⁰

In this analysis there was an attempt to demonstrate that symbolism in Desire under the Elms served O'Neill's purposes of conveying or reinforcing social and psychological themes. The typical themes - the yearning for a lost mother, for a home, for identification with a life force to be found in nature - are rooted in credible fiction and characterizations, as well as in effective use of symbols. Exterior and interior actions are brought to the surface and symbolism is not merely self-assertive experimentation but is integrated into the overall play's theme, and adds to the realism of the play opening it to broader perspectives.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Joseph T. Shipley , Dictionary of World Literary Terms
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2. Travis Bogard, Contour in Time - the plays of Eugene O'Neill
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 264.
3. Eugene O'Neill, Two Plays - Desire under the Elms and the Hairy Ape (Toronto, Canada: Random House of Canada Limited, 1967), p. 6.
4. Clifford Leech, O'Neill (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc. 1963), p.41.
5. Barrett H. Clark, Eugene O'Neill - The Man and his Plays,
(New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1947), p.p. 98-99.
6. Leech , p.48.
7. Clark, p.97.
8. John Gassner, "Myth and Tragic Structure in Desire under the Elms", O'Neill A Collection of Critical Essays,
(New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1964),p.p.57-58.
9. Leech , p.52.
10. Frederic J. Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill, (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p.106.



Richard II, artist unknown
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