

Ephraim Cabot's Puritanism as the Root of His Family Tragedy

HUANG Li-hua

Guangdong Peizheng College; Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

On the surface, *Desire Under the Elms* is a tragedy of the Cabot family which borrows its plot from the ancient Greek tragedy and legend *Hippolytus* and *Medea* by Euripides and the Greek myth *Oedipus* by Sophocles, about lust, incest, Oedipus complex and infanticide, etc. enriched and elevated, however the root of all the tragedies in the family lies in Ephraim Cabot's Puritanism.

Keywords: Eugene O'Neill, *Desire Under the Elms*, Ephraim Cabot, puritanism, family tragedy

Introduction

Desire Under the Elms published in 1924 is one of the best-known plays by Eugene O'Neill, one of the greatest American playwrights and a restless and bold experimentalist in drama who won unprecedentedly four Pulitzer Prizes as well as a Nobel Prize for literature in 1936. *Desire Under the Elms* which was set on a New England farm in the middle of the 19th century is mainly about the family conflicts of the Cabots. Ephraim Cabot who is 75 years old and the patriarch of the family lives and works together with his three sons: Simeon and Peter from his first marriage, and Eben from his second. What the three sons have in common is a resentment of their father, longing for his death and a desire to possess his farm. However, when after two months' absence riding off in search of God's message, the old Cabot returns unexpectedly with his 35-year old new bride, Abbie Putnam. Simeon and Peter sell their shares of the farm to Eben in exchange for the money they need to head West to seek gold in California. It is Eben, the youngest son who remains on the farm, which he believes his father has married his mother for and which he believes rightfully is his now, to face his father's new wife, his young stepmother, and also his new competitor for the inheritance of the farm.

Nevertheless, the competition takes a sharp turn when Abbie succeeds in seducing Eben, and they fall in love seemingly, however, in reality, each of them has their own wishful thinking: Eben takes his relationship with Abbie as his mother's revenge against his father; while Abbie only wants to have a baby by Eben which she can pass off as Ephraim's to cheat him out of the farm. Then a baby boy is born. Everyone in the neighborhood knows clearly it's Eben's child except Ephraim who is still kept in the dark, believing it is God's blessings that has brought him an heir. When the party celebrating the birth of the baby is going on in the house, Cabot meets Eben outside of the house and reveals Abbie's initial intent to Eben, that is, she needs a son to get the farm and turn Eben out on the road. Despite Abbie's explanation and protest, Eben remains convinced of her betrayal and wishes their son dead. Enraged and grieved, Eben rejects Abbie and tells her he's leaving for California. In order

HUANG Li-hua, lecturer of School of Foreign Languages, Guangdong Peizheng College; visiting scholar in Guangdong, University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China.

to prove her devotion and true love for him and keep him with her, Abbie murders the infant which she thinks is an obstacle between herself and Eben who, frustrated and desperate turns Abbie over to the sheriff, but it is not long before he realizes that he himself too, is really in love with Abbie, hence he confesses his complicity and accepts the blame and punishment from the law.

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Ephraim Cabot as a Typical Puritan

American Puritanism refers to the beliefs and practices of those Puritans who came to America out of various reasons. Being a group of seriously religious people, they had a strong sense of mission and very idealistic, believing that the Church should be restored to the "purity" of the first-century Church as established by Jesus Christ Himself and thinking that they were God's chosen people sent to the wilderness restore the lost paradise and build the wilderness into a new Garden of Eden. To them religion was a matter of primary importance and they made it their chief business to see that man lived and thought and acted in a way which tended to the glory of God. On the other hand, they were very practical people as well, for the struggle of survival in the New World had taught them to work hard for profits and material success, which they believed was a sign of God's benevolence. American Puritans accepted Calvinism as their theological foundation, the doctrine of John Calvin the great French theologian who then lived in Geneva. Horton and Edwards (1974) summarized Calvinism in *Backgrounds of American Literary Thought* into "Five Points": total depravity, unconditioned election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the Saints (pp. 24-25). In other words, Calvinism is a doctrine of original sin and total depravity (as a result of Adam and Eve's eating the forbidden fruit, all humanity is completely wicked), predestination (as God is all-powerful and asserts His influence in every event of human life, human fate is predetermined by God), and limited atonement (or salvation of a selected few) through a special infusion of grace from God. They also pointed out that based on a literal interpretation of the Story of Creation and the Fall of Adam as related in the Bible, Calvinism has "two major premises of God's omnipotence and man's depravity" (p. 25). The standard of their conduct is the Bible, which is the law and the direct word of God and which reveals his will with regard to his creature, Man (pp. 19-20).

In the play notes of *Desire Under the Elms*, the court theatre provides some background information about New England in 1850 which was characterized by its harsh surroundings and stern Puritan beliefs. The Puritans believed that God did not exist for man, but man for the sake of God, and that the world existed to serve the glorification of God and for that purpose alone. Therefore, labor in the service of impersonal social usefulness promoted the glory of God and hence was willed by him. From the stage directions, we know that the story in *Desire Under the Elms* happened in 1850 during the period of primitive accumulation of capital and Ephraim Cabot is one of the typical puritanical farmers. As a pious puritan, Ephraim Cabot is both idealistic and practical who believes firmly in the existence of God and in his own set of value which puts great emphasis on hard work. As Fred Mednick (1985) points out "Since it was difficult to determine who was saved and who was not, puritans thought that the materially advantageous were saved. The drive for money and the acquisition of wealth through

work may not be a step toward salvation but perhaps a sign that one was saved" (pp. 7-8). Ephraim Cabot's work ethic which is grimly irrational is to work hard for profits and material success in an effort to own a place in the Heaven. Moreover, he has a strong sense of mission, and he identifies himself with God in the Old Testament who is hard, lonesome and not easy. He claims proudly that "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!" (p. 739). That's why he has to work hard to make crops grow out of rocks, and the fertile land toiled out of rocks and the territory enclosed with stone walls is his palace and his life, so he cannot bear it that his farm will be owned by others, including his own sons. If possible, he would like to burn it when God's call does come one day. Lastly, he not only sees to it that he himself acts strictly to his own principles but also forces his wives and sons to resist the law of nature, and managed to earn their property in the very harsh natural environment. So his way to material success is painful and rocky and it also costs him a lot: his two wives are slaved to their early graves, and his sons resent him and hate him.

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Ephraim is very stern and imperative and he puts the whole family under the control of his will power. He is also rough and demanding on people, He despises both his family and his folks who in his opinion are too soft and who think God's easy. So the old Cabot finds it difficult and incapable to communicate and merge with them. He feels "They's no rest livin' with folks" (p. 746). In the party celebrating the birth of the baby, he is rather rude to them and addresses them as "goats", "hens", "hogs" and "sickly generation". They resent him but they dare not express it openly because they are in too much awe of him (p. 744). They gloat over his being fooled by his family.

His first two wives are both good women who work hard, to be exact, so hard that they exhaust themselves to death, but he thinks they neither understand him nor know his religious faith, which makes him feel lonesome all the time. Simeon and Peter curse and resent their father for his hardness, his greediness and his selfishness and so on, but they also admire, fear and sometimes even defend him. When Eben prays his father's dead, they blame him like this: "Ye'd oughtn't t' aid that, Eben." "Twa'n't righteous." "He's our Paw" (p. 725). And when Eben accuses him of having killed his mother, they reply that: "No one never kills nobody. It's allus somethin'. That's the murderer." "He's slaved himself t' death. He's slaved Sim 'n' me 'n' yew t' death—only none o' us hain't died—yit." "It's somethin'—drivin' him—t' drive us!" (p. 725). But they don't know what something really is. Actually it is Ephraim's fanatical Puritan belief, or the God in his heart which gives him infinite strength and energy to toil on the farm and definite hardness and toughness for him to challenge and conquer the harsh natural environment, and it is also why they are so positive about him sometimes.

However, the old Cabot is also a hypocrite, a skinflint or miser and a blood-sucker in the eyes of Simeon and Peter. As is well known, asceticism is a very important doctrine of the Old Testament tenet and of Puritanism, and sexual immorality is obviously against the law of God, but Ephraim once went whoring and even shared the same prostitute with them and also Eben later. Again when one spring, he feels

I been hearin' the hens cluckin' an' the roosters crowin' all the durn day. I been listenin' t' the cows lowin' an' everythin' else kickin' up till I can't stand it no more. It's spring and I'm fellin' damned [...] damned like an old bare hickory tree fit on'y fur burnin' [...] An' now I'm ridin' out t' learn God's message t' me in the spring, like the prophets done. [...] (p. 726)

And two months later, he brought home with himself a woman pretty but full of "gross sensuality". It shows somehow that maybe spring is his "estrous period" when he is eaten up with lust, but ironically he claims his seeking comfort outside as "God's message". Simeon teased later: "I'll bet right then an' thar he knew plumb well he was goin whorin' the stinkin' old hypocrite!" (p. 729).

Ephraim is also a greedy miser and blood-sucker. The crops grow well on his farm which was once covered with numerous stones owing considerably to Peter and Simeon's help. They once expressed that "We've worked. Give our strength. Give our years. Plowed 'em under in the ground, —rottin'—makin' soil for his crops[...]" (p. 724), and they also addressed to the farm: "—Ye've thirty year o' me buried in ye—spread out over ye—blood an' bone an' sweat—rotted away—fertilizin' ye—richin' year soul—prime manure[...]" (p. 730). As a result, "their shoulders stoop a bit from years of farm work" and they are "earth-stained" all over that "they smell of earth" (p. 724). But they get nothing in return from their greedy and mean father for their years of pains and toils except the slim hope and also the only of getting their shares of the farm to start their new life after the death of their father. They find themselves fenced and trapped in the stone walls they have made like a caged animal waiting vainly for nothing but despair and death, as the tyrannical and selfish Cabot would leave his farm to no one including his sons who he despises as soft and dumb fools, and wishes that his property could vanish with him at his death. It is the cruel oppression from their father, the brutal repression of his Puritanism and the ruthless poverty in his hands that that enflamed their strong desire for the inheritance of the farm and for gold in the West. They cannot help thinking of Gold and thinking of their dream almost all the time. They see it in the sky and even in the hair of Jenn, Simeon's woman, who died 18 years ago: "She'd hair long's a hoss's tail—and yaller like gold!" (p. 724).

When they learn that their father is going to marry again, they know it well that everything will go to the new bride and they find it no good staying on the farm any longer. After years of hard work they feel strongly attached to the farm. They know everything well on the farm including the cows, horses, pigs chickens, etc. which know them and like them equally well. They finally take the plunge and sell their shares of the farm to Eben to "Let dog eat dog". They've been slaves to the stone walls and also to their father for all the past years and now they are heading West where they will be no slave to anybody or anything. They've got their freedom as well as the opportunity to realize their dreams: to go to California to seek their own fortune. They do no harm to the farm or take revenge on their father except that they take the gate of the farm which they think will let them sail free down some river (p. 731). Here symbolically, they also tear the gate of the cage and prison that has trapped them for so many years and open it to freedom, happiness and also a new life. Nevertheless, the merciless and heartless old Cabot is so furious about Simeon and Peter who disobeys God's will to earn easy and "sinful" gold in West—the same weakness and temptation he once gave in to, which he still feels ashamed of—that he calls his God to smite the undutiful sons with his worst curse. Eben retorted that "Yew 'n' yewr God! Allus cussin' folks—allus naggin' 'em [...] Naggin' His sheep t' sin!" (p. 734).

Guided by the call of God, Cabot brings home his third wife, Abbie, who is young, pretty, sexy, "buxom" and "full of vitality" and whom he is really attracted to. He adores and is much influenced by the vitality and energy on her. His marrying her also reveals his panic about his short time to live, and he regards it as a way to lengthen his life and to prove the remaining vigor on him. According to Walter Dallas, the Freedom Theatre's Artistic Director, Ephraim is looking for a soul mate, someone who really could get to know him, while Abbie

seems to really understand him. On the other hand, Abbie is a beautiful woman and she seems to match his energy and determination. She not only stirred Ephraim's desire, he thought that he had found a soul mate in her. It is in front of Abbie that for the first time, this old man who is as hard as a rock opens up his heart, and reveals earnestly his life and even his weakness. It is also before her that he sometimes becomes very vulnerable and somewhat and somehow soft-hearted.

The hard, grim expression of his face has changed. He seems in some queer way softened, mellowed. His eyes have taken on a strange, incongruous dreamy quality. Yet there is no hint of physical weakness about him—rather he looks more robust and younger. (p. 736)

He is getting to feel resigned to Eben, learns to bear his softness and he would take to him if he's not such a dumb fool. He even has a mind to leave the farm to him (p. 736). It is not difficult to get the hint that Ephraim's hardness and his toughness is only a necessary cover for his vulnerable and miserable lonely inner world. However, as he is rather self-centered and near-sighted, he only concerns about himself, his own benefits and his religious belief. He seldom cares about what others think or what is happening around him. He is never inclined to make his way to understand the others, either. He is well aware that all his sons covet his farm, hate him and expect his death. And his family is already full of fierce hostility and sharp crisis before his new marriage, yet he does nothing to make up for it. All that he does is to go out and find someone else to comfort him in his loneliness and agedness, which will surely hot all things up, and put his family under heavy siege by clashes and conflicts and to make it disintegrating.

As Abbie is so obstinate, strong-willed, possessive, calculating and domineering a character who having experienced a hard life before, hates working for others in their homes, and she would like to do the work in her own house (p. 733) that she will stop at nothing to achieve her goal, the first step of which is of course marrying old Cabot, who is old enough to be her father, or even grandfather. She doesn't like him at all, not to say love him and she's sick of the sight of him. She even doesn't like him to touch her. Ephraim knows clearly about her intent, but regarding her as a rare gift from his God, he simply pays no special attention to it. He makes no attempt to make his family united and harmonious. Instead, he often estranges and alienates them, for instance, he reveals the adversaries' motives to one another, which leads to deepened misunderstanding and hatred which is likely to bring destructive and tragic consequences to the family as there can be no calm, rational discussions or communications between them. Maybe he finds it great fun to watch them fighting for the ownership of the farm just like a group of dogs fighting over a bone. Nevertheless, things don't always happen as what he has expected. He may feel painful when he finds that he is not getting through to her; his "soul mate" who he so deeply desires. He can only seek consolation from the cows in the barn, talking to them and sleeping with them. Compared to human beings, he understands these animals more and better, and vice versa. After Abbie succeeds in seducing Eben and gives birth to a baby boy, all the folks have a clear mind that: "What's happened in this house is plain as the nose on yer face!" (p. 746), however, old Cabot is still rather complacent at his strength and his vigor due to which he thinks has brought him the new son and grateful to God's blessings. Even Abbie's telling him about Eben's lust for her doesn't set them on their guard. He senses something but he cannot tell what it is, even his God doesn't inform him.

Ephraim Cabot is also responsible for Eben's Oedipus complex which caused the incestuous relationship with his stepmother and later the tragedy of the murder of their son. Oedipus complex is a Freudian term originating from a Greek tragedy, in which King Oedipus unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. It is now used in Freudian theory to refer to a child's becoming a rival for the affection of the parent of the opposite sex, for example, a boy who wants to win her mother for himself, may tend to be hostile to his father, want to get rid of him or even want to kill him. Eben's Oedipus complex with his mother is brought into full expression only after his mother's death, when he begins to do her work, begins to know her and suffer her suffering. He sometimes sees his mother rise out of her grave to help with the chores. He thinks that she is too used to be busy and not used to be free, so she still can't sleep well in her grave. Eben has a strong belief that it is his father who has stolen the farm from his mother's and who has overworked her to death. He makes it his mission to see to it that his mother can rest and sleep in peace in her grave. Therefore, all that he has to do is to take revenge on his father and take possession of the farm. He also holds something against his half-brothers. He dislikes them who he thinks don't live up to his mother's kindness to them by not doing something to prevent her from being slaved to death by their father. When they explain that they are busy with the farm work and have no time to meddle, he blames them bitterly and ironically: "An' makin' walls—stone atop o' stone—makin' walls till yer heart's a stone ye heft up out o' the way o' growth onto a stone wall t' wall in yer heart!" (p. 726). But when they praise her as a good woman and a good stepmother, Eben is so moved that he even makes a bow to each of them, and he openly claims himself to be her heir, in doing so he is actually makes himself the "spokesman" for his mother. However, when they say that he is "like his Paw," "Dead spit an' image!" (p. 727). He protests violently and insists that "I hain't like him—he hain't me! I'm Maw—every drop o' blood!" (p. 725).

He tried every means and in every aspect to beat his father, always asking his deceased mother for guidance and swearing vengeance. When his brothers tell him that their father has once possessed Min, a village prostitute, who Eben himself visits when he is in need of sex, he is very angry declaring "I'll go smash my fist in her face!" (p. 727). The next day, he claims "defiantly" and "proudly" that: "She may've been his'n—an' yourn', too—but she's mine now!" (p. 728). In sleeping with Min, he takes revenge on his father who has betrayed his mother, and makes what his father's his own, on the other hand, He also has the Oedipus conflicts on Min, who is much older than him, warm and soft just like his mother, on whom he can detect some maternal love. He steals his father's hidden money which he gets from his mother's farm and hides from her with the help of his mother's ghost. Then by buying out his two brothers, he kills two birds with one stone: on one hand, he beats his father; on the other, he gets rid of his competitors for the inheritance of the farm. There! He makes the farm again his mother's and actually his own. And now he is the sole owner of the farm. However, he would never believe it that his trouble has just begun. Just as he is ecstatic about his success, his father brings Abbie, his new step-mother and also his tough opponent home, whose purpose of the marriage is too manifest, that is to possess the farm. Eben has rather complicated and conflicting sentiments towards Abbie. He hates her but at the same time can't resist her physical attraction, what's more, when she tries to pretend mother to him, he also can't resist the maternal love on her. Thus his Oedipus complex is transferred onto Abbie. Finally, they fell into an incestuous relationship, which Eben takes as his mother's will to be a revenge on his father. To Eben, possessing Abbie means possessing the farm again, so he feels the farm is his again, and his mother goes back to her grave in peace. He tells his father both he and his mother are quit with him.

Quite to his surprise and out of his expectation, as a result of their love, a baby is born, which arouses great confusion and contradict in him, as the new-born baby not only makes a new rival for his love for Abbie but also one for the inheritance of the farm, moreover, it also makes what is his father's—both his son and his farm, which he says he doesn't like. Especially when his father reveals Abbie's initial purpose of having a baby, Eben feels deeply betrayed and hurt, so he expresses "torturedly" that "I wish he never was born! I wish he'd die this minit!" (p. 748). But after the baby is really dead, he again is deeply grieved and enraged, however, he doesn't escape leaving his mother's ghost to take the revenge, instead, he chooses to stay and face their future fate together, for which his hard and cruel father even shows some admiration for him. It is Abbie's love that has shaped him into a real man. It is also her love that has dragged him out of his Oedipus complex and his crazy revenge on his father. Although what awaits them ahead may be death or imprisonment, they have obtained true love in life abandoning their desire for land, their lust for sensuality and their desire to possess, and they have released their suppressed passion and sexuality despite an incestuous one, which runs counter to the Puritan morality and is of course a challenge to Ephraim's Puritanism. And at last they surely get their spiritual redemption. The ghost of Eben's mother has returned to her grave since their first love in her bedroom. Simeon and Peter are where they have dreamed to be. While old Cabot, the hard Puritan who seems not to have enough courage to face the reality, struggles in an attempt to burn his palace leaving the fields back to God and to join the "true sons" of his to make fortune. Finding his hidden money gone, he once again interprets it as God's will, as according to Puritan belief, "every happening, however minute, is the direct result of God's working out of his purposes in the world" (Horton & Edwards, 1974, p. 49). So he decides to stay on the farm with his "hard" "lonesome" and "not easy" God, adhering to his Puritanism stubbornly, clinging to his property desperately and living his life solitarily and miserably.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Desire Under the Elms* is a modern tragedy abundant in its ancient Greek tragic sources and rich in its tragic themes, which will inevitably bring about destructive and disastrous consequences, however all these tragedies in the Cabot family boil down to one root, that is the old Cabot's Puritanism.

Although Puritanism with its pioneering spirit and work ethic is of vital importance in the frontier life and during the period of primitive accumulation of capital, with centuries of development, it can never be the same again. Frederick Wilkins (1979) points out that we can capture the changes somewhere in O'Neill's New England plays where "humility had turned to pride [...] love had turned to hate or lust [...] selfless fidelity had turned to fevered, self acquisitiveness [...] cooperation had turned to contentiousness [...] and piety had turned to a morality which was really a prudery stultifying to life and feeling and sensibility [...]" (pp. 239-240). He also argues that "[...] men like Franklin turned the Protestant ethic of work from its original goal, of glorifying God, to a new goal, of increasing man's material prosperity" (p. 240). He holds that "[...] O'Neill's attitudes toward the Puritan heritage in New England—a dying, love-denying, hard and icy heritage" (p. 242). Take Ephraim Cabot for example, "he lacks love, humility, understanding, self-awareness [...] the rocky New England soil has bred a rocky man who created a rocky God and life [...]" (p. 243). At the end of the play, Ephraim Cabot obviously looks on himself as a victim unaware to the end of the great guilt that is his when he is raving with fury about Eben and Abbie's sin and expresses his wishes for them to be punished and hanged as "a warnin't' old fools like me

t'b'ar their lonesomeness alone—an' fur young fools like ye t' hobble their lust" (p. 753). Wilkins (1979) decides that: "As in every O'Neill play in which Puritanism is dominant, the only hope seems to lie in rejecting it. And that hope is dim indeed" (p. 244). In this sense, this play is not only a tragedy as a result of Puritanism, but also a tragedy of Puritanism in America, which lies in its using the stones not to build but to crush, to crush the natural instincts both in themselves and their successors (pp. 243-244).

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