

**DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS AS A CELEBRATION OF LIFE:  
A VIEW IN THE LIGHT OF NIETZSCHE'S THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Eugene O'Neill manifests, particularly in his early plays, a Nietzschean theory of tragedy. In *Desire under the Elms*, a work of deep telluric content, old man Cabot, the same as Dionysus, defies time and becomes, like time, eternal. In this sense, *Desire under the Elms* is a celebration of life, a resounding "Yes!" to destiny and to a rebirth born of failure and self-destruction. Myth and reality lose themselves in a labyrinth of symbolism to engender celebration and ritual. Finally, in this play O'Neill conveys a bizarre message of redemption which is perceptible only through Nietzschean esthetics, never through a conventional view of morality.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche holds that there exists an intimate relation between the Greek hero and Dionysus. The Greek hero represents one of the faces of the God, the tragic chorus being the representation of Dionysus' sufferings and dismemberment<sup>1</sup>. The core of Greek tragedy celebrates the indestructibility of life through the mutilation of Dionysus, whose constant annihilation and rebirth become the highest symbol of the affirmation of life.

Eugene O'Neill committed himself to portray life in the Nietzschean sense through his theater. Leonard Charbrowe claims that it was primarily through Nietzsche that O'Neill came "to understand the theater as ideally a place of religious experience, a temple where rituals were enacted celebrating the mystery of human life"<sup>2</sup>. In *Desire under the Elms* this celebration takes place especially through the symbolic meaning that O'Neill gives to the farm, the old man, and the little boy killed by his mother. The dramatic implications of these elements in the development of the tragedy constitute the ritualistic value of *Desire under the Elms* as a celebration of life.

The myth of Dionysus represents life as a cyclical repetition of everything. Dionysus' birth and rebirth implies a deep regeneration of the world and a protection of it from evil and its consequent "agonies of individuation" (TBT, p.1001). The eternal recurrence of life leads the empirical world -the world of illusion- to its primordial unity and harmony with Original Being, by means of its irremediable destruction. In Nietzsche's words: "In the annihilation of appearance, even the most beautiful, the Di-

onysian plenitude reaches its zenith"<sup>3</sup>. Tragedy represents this mystery: in it appearances undergo annihilation and there is a bursting out of the Dionysian plenitude of life. In the heroes' most horrible deeds, as well as in their most mystified attitudes toward existence, the eternal play of life through death and creation through destruction is expressed. This involvement of death with life and life with death is "the substance and interpretation of life"<sup>4</sup> that O'Neill expresses in *Desire under the Elms*.

The setting in *Desire under the Elms* is telluric and it functions almost as a protagonist. The action and the characters develop from the function of the earth upon them. On the surface, the central conflict appears as the fight between the father, his sons and his wife for possession of the land. This situation takes deep root in terms of the symbolism of the farm and the human struggle to possess it. Possession of the farm, as Cabot thinks, is possession of wisdom. The farm means life, the Dionysian reality, knowledge of which causes either man's fall into nihilism or his joyous YES to existence. Overcoming the absurdity of life becomes man's highest hope and his means to self-affirmation. Human beings can only achieve this victory by means of illusions, and in this illusion lies the interplay of Dionysus and Apollo. *Desire under the Elms* describes this vital process through the action of the farm in the characters.

The central hero in *Desire under the Elms*, Ephraim Cabot, is one of the principal means O'Neill uses to convey the idea of celebration. Nietzsche considers the tragic hero a man capable of assuming life, whatever it is, with an affirming

attitude. He says: "The tragic man affirms even the harshest sufferings, because he is strong, rich, and capable of exalting existence" <sup>5</sup>. This mystic oneness represented by Cabot and the farm is the first image that suggests the presence of Dionysus in the play. The "magic" of life is accentuated by means of the old man's attitude toward "nature's call". His son, Simeon, describes Cabot's departure in an illustrative way:

I remember it right well. I was finishin' plowin', it was spring an' May an sunset, an' gold in the West, an' he druv off into it. I yells "What ye goin', Paw?" an' he hauls up by the stone wall a jiffy. His old snake's eyes was glitterin' in the sun like he'd been drinkin' a jugful... and he says, lookin' kinder queer an' sick: 'been hearin' the hens clutchin' an' the roosters crowin' all the dum day. I been listenin' t' the cows lowin' an' everythin' else kickin' up till can't stand it no more. It's sprin' an' I feelin' damned," he says. "Damned like an old bare hickory tree fit on' y fur burnin'", he says. An' then I calc'late I must 've looked a mite hopeful, fur he adds real spry and vicious: "But don't get no fool idea I'm dead. I've swom t' live a hundred an' I'll do it, if on'y t' spite yer s'infal greed! An' now I'm ridin' out t' learn God's message t' me in the spring, like the profets done..." "An' he druv off singin' a hymn. I thought he was drunk" <sup>6</sup>.

Cabot's transformation is so evident that Simeon can perceive it although he cannot explain it. The old man is able to understand the language of the animals and has become transfigured into a human being almost unknown to his sons. His transformation is the consequence of nature's work expressed in him. He can no longer talk the language of the other men and is, as Nietzsche describes this state, "about to take a dancing flight into the air". Nietzsche adds: "Just as the animals now talk, just as the earth yields milk and honey, so from him emanate supernatural sounds. He feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted, in ecstasy, like to the gods whom he saw walking about in his dreams. He is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art" (TBT, p. 956). Nature's intoxicating effect is evident in Cabot's Dionysian transfiguration. This euphoria, caused by "nature's call", is the announcement of the approach of Dionysus. Cabot becomes like the prophet of God. His joy and sense of oneness is the expression of an intimate unity with

the depths of life. Nietzsche expresses this communion between man and Dionysus as the one established between creature and creator: "The noblest clay, the most costly marble, man, is here kneaded and cut, and to the sound of the chisel strokes of the Dionysian world artist rings out the cry of the Eleusinian mysteries: Do ye bow in the dust, O millions? Do you divine the presence of your creator, O world?" (TBT, p.956).

The allusion to the cyclical process of life is depicted especially by means of symbols. When Cabot returns to the farm with Abbie, a new cycle begins. The woman symbolizes the antagonistic element in terms of life's ritual. She represents Cabot's possibility to be perpetuated through a real son of the farm, considering his own words: "Me an' the farm has got t' beget a son" (p.247). Her presence also emphasizes the mystery of life that O'Neill conveys in a triad: the old man, as the human element, the woman, as an indirect symbol of Demeter, the goddess of the earth and mother of Dionysus, and the child born from Abbie, as Dionysus himself. It is important to keep in mind the deep meaning of the child's sacrifice in terms of the death of Eben's childish nature, and his consequent rebirth to a new life as a man. Of all the symbolic allusions to the celebration of life, the little boy, as the embodiment of Dionysus, is the most significant. It involves both a thematic unity, based on the occasional meaning of celebration given to the period between his birth and his death, and a structural unity, providing the idea of the "son of earth" implicit throughout the play. When Cabot leaves the farm in search of a wife, at the beginning of the story, the theme of the "son of the farm" moves beneath. This idea is repeated cyclically: by the middle of the story, Cabot says: "What son o' mine 'll keep on here t' the farm -when the Lord does call me?" (DUE, p.246). Once Eben's and Abbie's son is born, a new cycle begins that culminates when the little child dies, and the lovers leave the farm. Cabot's *return* to the farm at the end of the play suggests the beginning of a new cycle after the child's death.

The symbol of "the son of the farm" accentuates the triumph of life over death. The little boy is not Cabot's son, but Ephraim considers him as such. When he finds out the truth, Cabot exclaims: "If he was Eben's, I be glad he air gone!" (DUE, p.266). Afterwards, Ephraim utters a sentence that becomes like a magic formula: "He'd ought to be my son" (DUE, p.267). His words exorcize the controlling power of death. Ephraim accepts the child as his son, and in so doing, the farm also accepts him. The return

of the child to the earth after his death must be understood in this sense. Finally, the farm *does* have its son. This image is emphasized by Abbie's and Eben's "expulsion". They are rejected by the farm because of their incapability to understand its meaning. This expulsion must be interpreted in terms of tragic wisdom. The lovers do not achieve a real understanding of 'nature's call', as Cabot does, and therefore they seem to be rejected by the farm. They are obliged to die in a place alien to their telluric natures: prison. Herein lies their punishment. At the end, Cabot recovers his wisdom as a sign of return to life. His final going to the barn has this sense. The rebirth of Dionysus is suggested in the implicit return of everything to the Primordial Oneness of Nature.

Another interesting passage of celebratory meaning is the scene of the dance at Cabot's house. When the little child is born, Cabot invites his neighbors to a party. The connotations of this scene within the Dionysian festivals are evident. There is laughter, music, wine, and dance. Cabot looks transformed, once more. At a given moment, Cabot addresses his guests as "a flock o' goats" (p.256), which reminds us of the chorus of Dionysus' Dithyrambs. Ephraim incites the others to dance and drink; finally, he himself begins to perform an authentically Dionysian dance in which he makes an indirect allusion to eternal life: "See that", he says, "Seventy-six, if I'm a day! ... I'd invite ye t' dance on my hundreth birthday on'y ye'll be dead by then" (DUE, p.257). His very dance so furiously interpreted becomes a defiance against time. O'Neill describes it as follows: "He starts to dance, which he does well and with tremendous vigor. Then he begins to improvise, cuts incredible grotesque capers, leaping up and cracking his heels together, prancing around in a circle with body bent in an Indian war dance, then suddenly straightening up and kicking as high as he can with both legs. He is like a monkey on a string. And all the while he intersperses his antics with shouts and decisive comments" (DUE, p.257). Of Cabot's dance, it may be repeated the philosopher's words about Zorba's dance, in *Zorba the Greek*: "Watching Zorba dance, I understood for the first time the fantastic effort of man to overcome his weight. I admired Zorba's endurance, his agility and proud bearing. His clever and impetuous steps were writing on the sand the demoniac history of mankind" <sup>7</sup>. Pedro Reyes Zambrano explains the importance of laughter, dancing and playing in the Dionysian transmutation, as Zarathustra understands it: "Laughter as an affirmation of life", says Reyes Sambrano, "playing as an affirmation of necessity, and dancing as an affirmation of becom-

ing, and the being of becoming"<sup>8</sup>. Ephraim affirms necessity and becoming in that he laughs and dances. Zarathustra says to the higher men: "Lift up your hearts, my brethen, high, higher! And do not forget your legs, ye good dancers, and better still, if you stand upon your heads!"

In his laughing and dancing Ephraim Cabot expresses the vitality of his reaction to life.

Abbie is a puzzling character in *Desire under the Elms* because of her multiple and contradictory symbolism. She represents life and death. As a woman and potential mother, Abbie is a Demeter-figure, a goddess of fertility and life. As a human being, she stands for an implicit symbol of death: her evil deeds suggest this. As a symbol of life, Abbie participates in nature's celebration and intoxicating effects. This is clearly expressed throughout part two of the play, in which her predicament shows the uncontrollable working of nature within her: "Hain't the sun strong and hot? Ye kin feel it burnin' into the earth -Nature- makin' things grow-into somethin' else- till ye're jined with it- an' it's your'n -but it owns ye, too- an' makes ye grow bigger- like a tree- like them elums-... Nature 'll bit ye, Eben" (DUE, p.242-43). Sexual union, the most authentic manifestation of the presence of Dionysus, is clearly expressed in Abbie's words. Sex symbolizes the mystery of life. Nietzsche explains the importance of sex and its procreative essence as the highest way the Greeks had to represent the triumph of life over death: "What did the Greeks affirm by means of these mysteries? *Eternal life*, the eternal recurrence of life;... The triumphal affirmation of life upon death and change..." This explains that sex is the venerable symbol *par excellence* for the Greeks, the authentic deep sense of all ancient religion... Pain sanctifies itself through the teaching of mystery... the birth-pains must also exist for the will to live to affirm itself eternally... Dionysus means all that. Thanks to him, the deepest instinct of life, the future life, the eternal life, is translated into a religious mode -the very way of life, procreation, is the sacred way"<sup>9</sup>.

Contrasted with the old man's, Abbie's arrival at the farm provokes an effect of death against life. Cabot returns with an intimate hope that the farm have its son. This hope represents his own immortality and affirmation: "A son is me -my blood- mine... even though I be six foot under" (DUE, p. 246). Abbie, instead, can only see in the farm the realization of her dreams of material possession: "I'd most give up hope o' ever doin' my own wuk in my own hum, an' then your Paw come" (DUE, p.240). Both antagonistic positions parallel the interplay of death

and life. Significantly, Abbie acquires a dual symbolism, because after all, she is the only person who can give the son to the farm, which, in a way, she finally does.

The sacrifice of the child carries the deepest ritualistic meaning in *Desire under the Elms*. It represents the return of Dionysus, the triumph of life. The child's return to the earth, the depths of life, provokes Abbie's and Eben's capability to emerge from conflict and the depths of death. Only through the death of the child can they achieve a certain rebirth. At the end of the story, the lovers acquire an attitude of exaltation that suggests this rebirth: "They both stand for a moment looking up raptly in attitudes strangely aloof and devout" (DUE, p.269).

This provocative imagery reminds us of Nietzsche's considerations that death and life are not opposites, but the two faces of one coin. His description illustrates the Dionysian-Apollonian play in the mystery of life. He says: "Let's avoid saying that death is the opposite of life. Life is but a variety of death, and a very strange variety"<sup>10</sup>. This is another way of saying that life and death are parts of the whole. In a certain way, in *Desire under the Elms*, the death of the child becomes a symbol. Egil Törnqvist says that the action of Dionysus in *Lazarus Laughed* applies to *Desire under the Elms*: the death of the child becomes an "initiatory death"<sup>11</sup>, of the kind Mircea Eliade describes. "It does not mean an end, but a beginning: A condition *sine qua non* of a transition to another mode of being, a trial indispensable to regeneration; that is, to the beginning of a new life"<sup>12</sup>.

Abbie's murder of her child shows what does happen in the world, sometimes literally and many, many times figuratively. The act is a ritual of indication and instigation. It shows at the same time that it makes possible what is going to happen to her. She has to act first and then understand her act. In the murder she asserts and overcomes herself. After it, she is transformed by the love she recognizes in herself for Eben. Pitiably as it is from the point of view of the infant, and of society as a whole, from within the chaos of Abbie's developing consciousness, the killing of the child is, at the same time it happens, simply the consequence of conflicting choices. She could have killed the old man, but she did not. She killed something of her own because she felt she had to and through that staggering repudiation she opens the way to a compensatory transformation within herself. She sees that she is not a thing, the owner of things like farms and houses and beds, but a being with freedom and life to be invested with love and veneration. Yet she has to spill and see blood spilled to gain that awareness.

A final aspect of celebratory ritual lies in Cabot's constant goings to the cows. This repetition also reminds us of the rhythmic process of the vital cycle. Cabot goes to the cows whenever he feels "lonesome an' cold" in the house. The image of death in the house is clear, and the old man's return to the cows, to nature, suggests a return to life as well. This image is repeated about four times throughout the play and gives it a cyclical sense. Cabot's life carries this sense of ritual: he got married three times. Each marriage represented a different life, a beginning and an end. Finally, Cabot, is left alone and without the possibility of a son to inherit the farm after his death. His words, articulated at a moment of weakness, acquire a different and deep meaning: "I'll will the fields back t' God, so that nothin' human kin never toch 'em!" (DUE, p.268): his final decision "to round up the stock", implies that at the end, Cabot's faithful friends, the cows, will become the heirs of the farm, as true creatures of nature.

The ritual of celebration in tragedy must be experienced aesthetically. This sensation carries the cathartic effect of the "metaphysical comfort" of Dionysian tragedy, based on the indestructibility of life. Leonard Charbrowe refers to this experience in *The Iceman Cometh* which also fits the cathartic effects that *Desire under the Elms* leaves. He says: "The life of the play can be experienced on some deeper level that leads to an aesthetic justification of despair. Such a justification is the purpose of celebration. Life, whatever it may be like in itself, is renewed by the pleasure of a celebratory experience of it. And a celebratory experience consists of participation in ritual, in a singing and dancing about life which in *The Iceman Cometh* magically involves more life"<sup>13</sup>.

The structural and thematic unity of *Desire under the Elms* lies in its being a representation of the Dionysian ritual. Life remains powerful and indestructible in spite of crimes, horrors and human suffering. The will to power of life comes out in its destructive as well as in its constructive side. It operates in each creature in such different ways, that it leads him to self-affirmation or, on the contrary, to ontological involution. In *Desire under the Elms* these two tendencies of the will appear clearly established in the different responses of the characters to the challenge of life.

The Dionysian mutilation that represents the constant renewal of life is symbolized in the heroes' inner division and in their capacity to overcome internal chaos at the end. This heroic struggle is also visible in nature, so that the elms and the farm carry a deep symbolism in terms of this metaphysical opposition. There is a cosmic feeling at the end of the

story represented by the final answer of the characters to fate. This feelings is cathartic and springs from a balance of Dionysian and Apollinian forces.

The characters' response to life embodies the message of the Dionysian tragedy. They finally achieve a harmonic integration with the whole. In other words, Cabot's sufferings prove to be the only way to self-affirmation, and Eben's and Abbie's acceptance of fate becomes their highest moment of *amor fati*, even when their Yes to life implies a Yes to death as well.

### NOTES

- (1) Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Clifton P. Fadiman in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1954), p.1001. (All further information will be taken from this edition and given in the text).
- (2) Leonard Charbrowe, "Dionysus in *The Iceman Cometh*," *Modern Drama*, Feb., 1962.
- (3) Friedrich Nietzsche, *En Torno a la Voluntad de Poder*, trans., Manuel Carbonell (Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 1973), p.170.
- (4) Quoted in Anthony Caputi, ed. *Modern Drama* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964), p.451.
- (5) Nietzsche, *Poder*, p.177.
- (6) Eugene O'Neill, *Desire Under the Elms*, in *Modern Drama*, ed. Anthony Caputi, p.230. (All further information will be taken from this edition and given in the text).
- (7) Quoted in Reed Merrill, "Zorba The Greek and the Nietzschean Nihilism", *Mosaic* VIII, 2 (1975), pp. 110-15.
- (8) Pedro Reyes Zambrano, "Síntesis Antropológica de Federico Nietzsche", *Universidad de Santo Tomás*, VI (1973), p.323.
- (9) Nietzsche, *Poder*, p.184.
- (10) Nietzsche, *Poder*, p.102.
- (11) Egil Törnqvist, "O'Neill's Lazarus: Dionysus and Christ", *American Literature* 41,4 (1970), p.544.
- (12) Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1960), p.227.
- (13) Charbrowe, p.388.

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\_\_\_\_\_. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Trans. Thomas Common. In *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1954.

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