

THE FEMALE IMAGE IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S *DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS* AND *A MOON FOR THE MISBEGOTTEN*

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ABSTRACT

The following article analyzes the female role in two plays written by the well-known American playwright Eugene O'Neill. These works are *Desire Under the Elms* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. Then, the characters of Abbie Putnam and Josie Hogan respectively are studied under a feminist scope that exhibits the lack of female identity, a recurrent trait of O'Neill's plays.

Eugene O'Neill won public recognition with a work of strong naturalistic tendency called *Desire Under the Elms* which brought this American playwright his third Pulitzer Prize. The setting of the play is a farm in New England in 1850. The action begins when Ephraim Cabot, age 75, has left the farm to look for a new wife. His three sons—Simeon and Peter by his first wife, Eben by his second—wish for their father's death so as to possess the farm. Mainly Eben, who is full of hatred, wants to possess it since he sees the land as his own mother's exclusive possession. When the sons learn about their father's third marriage, Eben buys his brother's respective parts of the property, and the older two leave for the gold-fields of California. Ephraim arrives with Abbie Putnam, a sensual woman of 35. She, too, is ambitious and "wishes to establish good relations with Eben, for she wants to dominate the household and not risk losing the farm when Ephraim dies."¹ Almost immediately, however, a strong physical attraction between Abbie and Eben becomes apparent. It is not long before they become lovers. From their union, a son is born whose paternity is given to Ephraim. Abbie and Eben's physical attraction has, by this time, however, turned into real love, but when Ephraim tells Eben that Abbie wanted a child to gain the inheritance of the farm, Eben refuses to believe any longer that Abbie really loves him, and she, in pathetic desperation, kills the child to prove her real love. At the end of the play, since Eben has recognized his guilt in the murder, the two lovers are arrested by the sheriff.

Many critics have analyzed this play, and in virtually all of the criticism, the image of Abbie Putnam is condemned, devalued, and destroyed. Some of the critics even try to ignore Abbie's importance in the play altogether by focusing on the male characters. For example, John Raleigh states that "In *Desire Under the Elms*, there is once more the Bible-quoting,

tyrannical father and the rebellious sons. Added is the picture of volcanic passions and lusts and insensate greed, precariously controlled at best, and in the action of the play, an infanticide."² Abbie's very presence must be deduced from the words 'lusts' and 'passions' since she is not even mentioned in the description. Other critics admit Abbie's importance in the play but devalue her image. For instance, Travis Bogard says that "Each situation centers on the coming of a woman with 'dubious' antecedents to a farm where she becomes the wife of an aging farmer."³ For Percy Hammond, Abbie Putnam is "an old New Englander, a combination of hot blood, and cold heart [and who] casting her inscrutable eyes on Eben's pleasing person, she devises a means to be happy though married."⁴ In other words, she is a monster nourished by selfishness and insensitivity. For William Meredith Dawson, "Abbie lives for physical gratification, [and]. . . In her relationship to Eben there is only a seeking of sensual gratification."⁵ For Dawson, she is unable to embody a noble feeling such as love, so he adds that "Abbie's *hatred* of Ephraim and her *lust* for Eben drive her to the *destruction* of the child." (1970: 155, italics mine). According to Dawson, she is the embodiment of evil as well as a destroyer of men since "Abbie will stop at nothing to satisfy her own desires. Lying, adultery, infanticide—these are the main stations of the will to power which motivate her. The men are pawns in her life to be used to her own advantage." (1970: 81).

Chester Long also sees Abbie as an evil force since, for him, "Abbie makes the first move, rushes into Eben's room and begins kissing him. He flings her away angrily, fighting his attraction, remembering how she has replaced his mother. Abbie insists Eben will give into his desire, because she is stronger than he."⁶ Abbie is both powerful and destructive since, as Clifford Leech says, she is "her step-son's *seducer* and the *murderess* of her child." (1963: 48, italics mine). Yet Abbie Putnam is not really so powerful. As Trudy Drucker explains, "O'Neill's most tragic woman are those for whom sexual passion has become a disease from which no recovery is possible."⁷ Abbie certainly fits this description. While the action of the play revolves entirely around her, Abbie Putnam proves to be just another figure without a real identity, another female caricature defined by men.

From the very beginning of O'Neill's play, there is the female image in the form of two enormous elms provided with a "sinister maternity" that are compared with "exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its [the house's] roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles."⁸ This image sets the tone of the play, one of sadness and pain and suspect for women. The usual awe of maternity is transformed into something "sinister." The image of motherhood, then, is divested. Tears are present since suffering seems to be synonymous with womanhood according to the male chauvinistic mentality which stipulates that men do not cry. Following O'Neill's description, there is the kitchen that, although neat and in order, presents the atmosphere of "a men's camp kitchen rather than that of a home" (*DUE*, 140), since there is no woman in the house. The female kingdom is the kitchen and without a female around, such a place does not look as it should.

Eben Cabot not only looks like his mother, but he himself claims to be hers in "every drop o' blood," not for his great love toward her, but because he is her only heir. The mother is seen, then, as a source of investment not only by Eben but Ephraim who treated her as a slave. Her value as an investment could not, however, free her from a subordinate female role since according to Eben, "She can't git used t' bein free-even in her grave" (*DUE*, 143).

One of the female images in O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* is Minnie, the scarlet woman whose profession is "the one most often represented for women in O'Neill's plays."⁹ Women are never seen as intellectual companions but as sexual objects. Minnie, for instance, provides escape for the Cabots. Minnie is "purty" because she is useful, because she is "soft" and wa'm," because she smells "like a plowed field," and mainly, because she has always been a male possession, "She may've been his'n-an' your'n too—but she's mine now" (*DUE*, 148) as Eben expresses.

With Abbie, the main female character, the vision of women as objects is supported. Eben disrespectfully says that his Paw "got himself hitched to a female 'bout thirty-five" (*DUE*, 146). And Simeon devalues her image hoping that she will be a "she-devil." Abbie belongs to Ephraim. She is his and is "purty" like the land. This comparison of land to woman is often repeated. Women in the play lack female identity; they are something to be owned, fought over and plowed. Abbie Putnam is buxom, full of vitality, "Her round face is pretty but 'marred' in its rather gross sensuality" (*DUE*, 155). Besides, Abbie experiences the desire for possession as the men have toward the land. But the men want to possess the land to increase their male domain, while Abbie wants the land to have something which is hers since her own identity has been taken from her. Cabot treats her as an object saying that "A hum' got t' hev a woman," but her answer is that "A woman's got t' hev a hum," (*DUE*, 156)—for the home is the limited kingdom of womanhood.

When the children have defects in O'Neill's plays, they belong to their mothers. In this play, for example, Eben Cabot is a "dumb fool," "soft and simple" because of his "Maw." Stupidity and the female condition seem almost synonymous. Besides, if one takes into account Abbie's idea that "Nature'll beat ye" (*DUE*, 164) and Cabot's comment of "[being] on'y a woman" (*DUE*, 169), one sees that a woman must not only be the possession of a man but also his source of offspring to be worthy as Cabot affirms,

Abbie: I'm yewr wife.

Cabot: That hain't me. A son
is me-my blood-mine.
(*DUE*, 169).

The image of women as male possessions is clearly stated by Cabot when he talks about his wives, "I 'tuk' a wife. She bore Simeon an' Peter. She was a good woman [since] she wuked hard" (*DUE*, 172). But such a wife was not perfect since Cabot says, "We was married twenty years. She never knowed me . . . I was allus lonesome" (*DUE*, 173). Knowledge is denied to women. Ephraim even says to Abbie, "Ye don't know nothi'-nor never will" (*DUE*, 173). Thus, Cabot prefers to talk to the cows since "They [the cows] know. They know the farm and [him]" (*DUE*, 174).

Critics have referred to one of O'Neill's major themes as the Judas-Complex,¹⁰ the act of betrayal. Abbie betrays her husband by making love to his son. Although both lovers desire each other, O'Neill makes Abbie take the initiative. It is she who goes to Eben's bedroom and who "covers his mouth with kisses" (*DUE*, 174). But Eben, the male chauvinist, does not want to admit his desire. Thus, he resists at the beginning but, finally answers her kisses for, after all,

he is a "man." But in order to make love to him, Abbie has to adopt his mother's identity. As Leonard Chadbrowe declares, "in the scene where she [Abbie] seduces Eben, she takes the place of his mother at which point the incestuous longing for the depths overwhelms him."¹¹ Thus, Abbie never has a true self. She is the farm, the elms, and finally Eben's mother, but never herself. Although her own sexual drive as well as her interest in inheriting the farm motivate Abbie to seduce Eben, she ultimately falls in love with him. However, many critics deny that she is capable of sincere love. They stress her lust and ambition and forget Eben's lust and his own feelings of revenge.

In addition, the Cabots are unfair to Abbie. For example, Cabot worries when Abbie is pale, not because he is worried about her, but because she is the source of his offspring. And luckily Abbie gives birth to a son since a daughter would have been a great disappointment for Cabot. Furthermore, Eben does not trust Abbie and doubts Abbie's love, and, in a cowardly attitude, he says he will leave her after telling the truth about their affair. Eben insults Abbie calling her "a damn trickin whore." He hates the baby and clamors for his death when he says, "I wish he [the baby] never was born! I wish he'd die this minit!" (*DUE*, 194). He refuses to pay attention to Abbie's explanations, and he feels betrayed. Hence, the Judas-complex emerges again, except that O'Neill's version makes Judas out to be a woman.

The killing of the baby is one of the main weapons used by the critics to find fault with Abbie. The grotesque image of the mother murdering her baby provides Abbie with another self. Nevertheless, she is not the monster that William Dawson describes but rather a woman with little choice. Bereft of Eben's love which she has come to value over all else, she is shocked, and momentarily goes out of her mind; she feels lost and alone. Abbie believes that she has only one means for proving her deep love for Eben, even though this recourse runs counter to all her maternal feelings. The conflict drives her mad. Before knowing about the murder, Eben tells Abbie, "Ye look mad" (*DUE*, 196). Then, when Eben believes she has killed his father she says, "no" in hysterical "laughter," a sign of her temporary insanity, and pathetically answers, "I oughter killed him [Ephraim] instead. Why didn't ye tell me?" (*DUE*, 197). Even at this point, Abbie relies totally on what men tell her. Eben's reproach is the height of hypocrisy. He is furious because the baby was "his," not because of the baby himself. Like the farm, he sees the baby as another of his possessions. And since Abbie has robbed both, he goes to look for the sheriff for she is not only a murderer but also a "thief." Cabot has the same idea of looking for the sheriff, and he is glad because the baby was not "his": "If he [the baby] was Eben's. I be glad he air gone!" (*DUE*, 266). None of them cares about the baby; it is their male pride that makes them react, and then the Cabots desert Abbie.

Leonard Chadbrowe says ironically, "The death of their child brings about the death of the child in him [Eben], and he is psychologically reborn out of the womb . . . In realizing and accepting his share of the guilt Eben frees himself." (1976: 133). Thus, with Eben's admission, O'Neill makes Eben heroic to the reader and diminishes Abbie's suffering, desolation and abandonment. The critical debate over the tragic hero in the play center on Cabot or Eben, Abbie, of course, is not even a candidate. Yet, she is the only one who realizes her mistake, who understands, in the midst of her confusion and grief, what has gone wrong and who can, therefore, be termed tragic. Abbie is not the pathetic figure of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, who dies without having realized his mistake in life. Abbie understands her error and accepts her

fault as well as her punishment. Eben just follows her example at the end, and Cabot leaves since he "got t' round up the stock" (*DUE*, 205). The men have not learned anything about themselves as Abbie has; yet the critics laud Ephraim's stoicism and celebrate Eben's maturity. Abbie Putnam receives only blame. She is a scapegoat for both the male characters and the critics. Abbie Putnam is lost and desolate and suffers not only from the egotistic and unfair attitude of the male environment that surrounds her, but from the deficiencies in her own self image since she is not provided with a real identity.

In 1943, O'Neill finished *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, one of his last plays. It is the story of Jamie Tyrone and Josie Hogan, the daughter of a Connecticut farmer. Josie, who is five feet eleven inches tall and weighs 180 pounds, is a virgin who pretends to be promiscuous. She is in love with Tyrone, the alcoholic landlord of her father. Mike, Josie's father, knowing her daughter's feelings, makes up a plan to bring them together. He tells Josie that Jim Tyrone wants to sell the farm to their hostile neighbor, and that if she sleeps with Jim, they could force him to marry her, and hence, to secure their land. Tyrone comes late to Josie's invitation but instead of having sexual intercourse, he confesses to Josie his sufferings and guilty feelings related to his mother's death. Josie, like Abbie, adopts a maternal role and provides him with comfort and support. Finally, Jamie leaves at dawn, and Josie wishes him peace and forgiveness.

According to Mary McCarthy, "*A Moon for the Misbegotten* is *Desire Under the Elms* grown old and hoarse and randy [since] there is the familiar triad of greed, land, and sexual repression."¹² Clifford Leech sees *A Moon for the Misbegotten* as the continuation of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, considered to be O'Neill's masterpiece, since the figure of Jamie Tyrone is reintroduced eleven years later. (1963: 111). But if the female role is analyzed from a feminist perspective, *A Moon for the Misbegotten* is not only related to the two plays mentioned above, but to all of O'Neill's works.

According to Trudy Drucker, "The All-Loving Mother and the Gold-Hearted Whore" are the favorite female stereotypes of Eugene O'Neill. (1982: 7). In *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, Josie Hogan could be considered, then, O'Neill's "total woman" since she represents both. As Mary McCarthy says, on one side "She [Josie] is a gigantic woman . . . known throughout the neighborhood for her Herculean sexual prowess" (1961: 210), and on the other hand, she is actually "a virgin with a strong maternal heart." (1961: 210). Although Clifford Leech affirms that Josie is "alive" and that "the strangeness of her conduct and the broadness of much of the action in which she is involved do not prevent that," (1963: 112) one wonders about Josie's identity. Is she, unconsciously, a whore with inhibitions or a puritan with strong sexual drives? Drucker says that this ambiguity is not the result of "poetic mysticism but psychological myopia." (1982: 8). Thus, in order to clarify her female identity, Josie Hogan requires further analysis from a feminist view.

O'Neill's play begins with the description of Josie Hogan. She is an oversized woman of 28 who is "more powerful than any but an exceptionally strong man," (Drucker 1982: 8) and "able to do the manual labor of two ordinary men."¹³ But despite this superior strength, "there is no mannish quality about her" (*MFM*, 790). According to O'Neill, "She [Josie] is all woman [for] . . . there is a note of beauty in her face" (*MFM*, 790), this touch of beauty from which her superior strength and her unattractive oversized body, which Josie herself is ashamed of, detract.

According to Phil Hogan, Josie's brother, Josie is like her father and consequently, the only person able to handle him. But it is her father who has controlled Josie's life. Josie is the main worker on the farm, and the one in charge of household chores as well. Because of her superior strength, she not only takes on male jobs, but the typical female chores, too. Phil's solution for Josie's situation is that she must get married and have a home—her proper role in a male oriented society. But Josie answers that she "wouldn't marry the best man on earth and be tied down to him alone" (*MFM*, 791). Phil believes she cannot get "the best man on earth" because of her moral degradation. Thus, her only option is the alcoholic James Tyrone whom she can catch by tricks alone.

Mike Hogan likes Phil's idea for trapping James, for, according to Hogan, Josie's options for getting someone better are few due to her size which he compares to an "overgrown cow." Hogan does not like his sons because they are like their "mother," and in a way he likes Josie because she is like "him," although, sometimes, he sees Josie as "God's curse" upon him; "There is no liberty in [his] own home" (*MFM*, 794) because Josie is always there. Josie's response is to reaffirm her female domestic role: "That's luck—or there wouldn't be any home" (*MFM*, 794). Thus, to secure the farm, Josie must trick Jamie Tyrone into marriage for "that's every woman's scheme since the world was created" (*MFM*, 795). In other words, marriage is seen as a woman's trick to trap a man and limit his freedom.

Then Josie Hogan feels she is betraying her beloved, and she devalues her own image saying, "I know, I'm an ugly overgrown lump of a woman, and the men that want me are no better than stupid bulls" (*MFM*, 796). But since Hogan wants to maintain the farm by using Josie's love, he states that Jim, the unsuccessful alcoholic, "is the light of [her] eyes" (*MFM* 797). Like Cabot, Hogan is clearly more concerned with his land than with his woman [in Hogan's case, his own daughter].

Jim, the friend of tarts, calls Josie the "Virgin Queen." Josie complains that such a title will ruin her reputation since she feels ashamed of her virginity. She adopts the image of "the slut" for she thinks the best blessing for a woman is to have sex with a man. And, since she sees herself as totally unattractive, she wants to make believe that many men have made love to her to improve her self-image. Josie defines herself, then, as an object of sexual pleasure. Conveniently, Jim likes voluptuous women with big breasts, and Josie fulfills both requirements.

In Act Two, Josie is all dressed up for a date with Jim. But Josie Hogan, like many women, has been stood up; "There is an expression on her face we have not seen before, a look of sadness, and loneliness and humiliation" (*MFM*, 804). Hogan arrives from the inn with a secret that he apparently does not want to share with his daughter since "There is no use telling the truth to a bad tempered *woman* in love" (*MFM*, 806; italics mine). Hogan begins to speak in riddles, and it is Josie herself who devalues the female image saying, "Will you stop bathering like an old woman and tell me plainly what he [Jim]'s done" (*MFM*, 807). Thus, through his characters, O'Neill has given the reader two clues to understand women. First, they are not able to think if they are angry or in love. Second, if they are old, they speak nonsense—two stereotypical notions of women in a male-oriented society. But what are the effects of anger, love, and old age on men? Are they not the same?

In O'Neill's plays women cannot control themselves, but men can. In *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, for example, Hogan is "one of those [just men in O'Neill's works] who can drink

an enormous amount . . . [and] at the same time are able to pull themselves together when they wish" (MFM, 805). So, although drunk, Hogan is able to make up a plan to deceive Josie, the "poor innocent virgin." Thus, Hogan tells Josie that Jim wants to sell the farm, which is a lie, and that he is in love with her. But Josie cannot believe the second part, for she considers herself ugly and unable to inspire love. So she says, "Love me? You're making it up" (MFM, 808). And Hogan reaffirming her own lack of self-esteem answers, "I'm not, I know it sounds crazy but . . ." (MFM, 808). Of course, if a woman is seen only as a sexual object, and she is overweight, it sounds "crazy" that a man can love her. But in Josie's case, the situation is even more pathetic since Jim is not looking for Josie, the woman, but like Eben Cabot, Jim is looking for a surrogate mother, "I remember [Jim says] . . . I had some nutty idea I'd get in bed with you—just to lie my head on your breast" (MFM, 811). Jim Tyrone rejects Josie's love because, as Doris Nelson says, Jim needs "to purge himself and to keep his mother's memory pure. Josie plays [only] the role of confessor . . . as Jim Tyrone brings his world of troubles to her." (1983: 4).

Like many of O'Neill's female characters, Josie Hogan defines herself in terms of men, "I'm my father's daughter. I've a strong head" she says (MFM, 813). Tyrone sees Josie as something "healthy and clean and fine and warm and strong" (MFM, 813). For her father, Josie is useful as a farm worker and as the Queen of the kitchen. [Besides, Hogan has only contributed to Josie's fake image of rudeness and promiscuity]. In such an environment, Josie has to be rude and aggressive. Then, she talks and acts like a man. The only true part of her being is seen when she confesses to Jim that she is, in fact, a virgin; then she cries. But after such a revelation, Jim fails her by treating Josie like a whore saying, "Sure thing, kiddo. What the hell else do you suppose I came for? . . . You're the goods, kid. I've wanted you all along," (MFM, 817). Besides, Jim does not want Josie; he wants his mother. So it is ironic when Jim tells Josie, "Just be yourself" (MFM, 812). Josie can be her father's image with rude manners and dirty language; she can be the *femme fatale* of the village, the proud slut; but Josie Hogan cannot be herself because she has never had her own identity.

Eugene O'Neill looked for an explanation of life in his drama. His goal was to leave behind those false melodramatic characters so prevalent in the plays before his work and create beings instilled with life. His many works testify to the range of experimentation and the different stages and influences through which he put his writing from romanticism to realism, to symbolism, to expressionism, to naturalism, from the Greeks, to the theories of Freud, and Jung. The inexhaustible searcher for new forms and techniques, however, always portrayed the same basic vision—life as an endless struggle. His characters are conflictive individuals who suffer from traumas, doubts, and anxieties—individuals who are always fighting, entangled, and trapped. For many critics, O'Neill's main achievement was the understanding of the human soul, derived from his great insight into human nature as well as his concern for men in a generic way. But, after analyzing some of his female characters, we see that his achievement was partial since he was unable to provide his women with identities of their own.

These female characters represent how O'Neill perceives the relationship between the sexes. For him, womanhood is associated with weakness and disease. Women are never intellectual companions but objects of sexual pleasure. Women are valuable if they are male possessions, and marriage, then, is the greatest female blessing but the ultimate male trap. Furthermore, women are betrayers and prostitutes, in short, unworthy of male sympathy.

The traits of his female figures from his earliest to his latest plays do not change significantly. Abbie Putnam's lack of identity cannot be attributed to O'Neill's interest in naturalism or his personal problems at the time. Nor can Josie Hogan's lack of identity be explained by the play's theme, the disillusion and hopelessness of a sickening society. O'Neill's female characters lack identity because this is the way Eugene O'Neill and his society see and portray women. So Abbie Putnam, the sensual female, and Josie Hogan, the frustrated virgin, run parallel. Despite their obvious differences, they are victims of sexual stereotyping; both reflect the patriarchal culture of which O'Neill is part. Thus, Abbie and Josie do not exist as individuals. They do not have separate identities. They are trapped in a male world which defines, determines, and judges their behavior, their actions, and their lives.

Notes

1. Clifford Leech, *Eugene O'Neill* (New York: Grove Press, 1963) 49.
2. John Henry Raleigh, *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967) 31.
3. Travis Bogard, Countour in Time: *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) 201.
4. Percy Hammond, "Desire Under the Elms" in *O'Neill and His Plays*, ed. Oscar Cargill (New York: New York University Press, 1961) 170.
5. William M. Dawson, *The Female Characters of August Strindberg, Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams* Diss. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1970) 155.
6. Chester Long, *The Role of Nemesis in the Structure of Selected Plays by Eugene O'Neill* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1968) 101.
7. Trudy Drucker, "Sexuality as Destiny: The Shadowy Lives of O'Neill's Women" in *Eugene O'Neill Newsletter* 6.2 (1982): 9.
8. The Modern Literary, ed. *Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1954) 136. Future references to this play will be abbreviated as follows: *DUE* with its respective page number.
9. Doris Nelson, "O'Neill's Women" *Eugene O'Neill Newsletter* 6.2 (1982): 4.
10. Timo Tiusanem, *O'Neill's Scenic Images* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968) 156.
11. Leonard Chadbrowe, *Ritual and Pathos: The Theater of O'Neill* London: Associated University Press, Inc., 1976) 131.
12. Mary McCarthy, "A Moon for the Misbegotten," in *O'Neill and His Plays*, ed. Oscar Cargill (New York: New York University Press, 1961) 209.
13. Carl Klaus, ed. *Stages of Drama* (Illinois: Scott Foresman and Company, 1981) 790. Future references to this play will be abbreviated as follows: *MFM* with its respective page number.

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