

When Queer Becomes Quintessential: Eros Under The Elms In Desire Under The Elms

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Abstract:

This paper argues that O'Neill has presented the character of Eben as a slave of Eros. By reemploying the myth of Hippolyta and Medea, O'Neill has exemplified this term in the context of New England of 1850's where females are marginalized and patriarchy is celebrated. By using Judith Butler's concept of "Performativity" this paper aims to build upon her contention that "the body is not "sexed" in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an "idea" of natural or essential sex. The body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations. Sexuality is a historically specific organization of power, discourse, bodies, and affectivity" (Butler 125). This research contends that to gain the ownership of the farm, Abbie subverts her gender's social role as she surrenders her body to her step son and quintessentially becomes a queer character with respect to the puritanical episteme.

Key words: Eros; Desire; Gender; Social role; Queer; Puritanical episteme

Introduction:

Eros is not a new phenomenon rather it has its roots in classical Greek tradition. By focusing on this Greek concept this paper argues that O'Neill has presented the character of Eben as a slave of Eros. By reemploying the myth of Hippolyta and Medea, O'Neill has exemplified this term in the context of New England of 1850's where females are marginalized and patriarchy is celebrated. This research contends that to gain the ownership of the farm, Abbie subverts her gender's social role as she surrenders her body to her step son and quintessentially becomes a queer character with respect to the puritanical episteme.

Eros in Greek tradition is considered the first of all gods. Robert Graves in his book *The Greek Myths* talks about the birth of Eros. He says “Eros hatched from the world-egg, was the first of gods since, without him, none of the rest could have been born” (Graves 58). Eros in abstract terms is considered a passion, a force which drives the sexual appetite. “Eros is the force in the universe that seeks union, not through domination, will or control, but through connection or relation. One should keep in mind, however, that connections and relationships can be either positive or negative, for conflict is also a connection” (Odajnyk 22).

By using the term positive and negative relations Odajnyk refers to heterosexual and homosexual relations respectively since Eros is a relation between humans of either sex as Hunter says “For the Greeks the quality of Eros was considered to be a normal aspect of relationships between any two people, whether they be members of the same sex or members of the opposite sex. They did not conclude, however, that explicit sexual behavior was always the best or the highest expression of this force in their lives” (Hunter 177). Although “Within the dominion of Eros sex is compulsory” (Watson 190). However, for Greeks Eros is not only sexual but also have some celestial quality. “The meaning of Eros, however, is a little broader than sexual, as is suggested by the fact that Eros was a divine being, the son of Aphrodite” (Hunter 176).

Literature Review

Eros leads to the study of eroticism and “Dionysus is the patron god of eroticism” (Pons 26). Rist explains the connection of divinity and Eros in these words “God is Eros and the cause of Eros in all other things. This Eros in the other things is the mark of their dependence on God and their need of him. Eros is a unity force throughout the cosmos and that unity is God himself” (Rist 243). Since man is created in the image of God thus man is bound to Eros “In Dionysius the center of all things is God and man’s Eros is a feeble imitation of God’s” (Rist 243). In the domain of philosophy “Eros is the primordial attraction of the actual by the ideal [...] Eros is desire” (Demos 340). Eros is a desire in which man tries to make himself a whole. In the process of Eros “man is basically concerned with reaching out beyond himself, be it toward a meaning he wants to fulfill, or toward another human being he wants to lovingly encounter” (Frankl 9).

Puritan episteme is against the concept of Eros. Puritans considers Eros as a disease that can contaminate their pure society. Hunter argues “Victorian and Puritan thinking tended to deny the validity of the connection between Eros and pleasure. According to this way of thinking, if one enjoyed any aspect of life that derived from Eros one would have to pay dearly for such a transgression in the next life” (179). Puritans cannot deny the connection between Eros and pleasure “they could only claim that such a connection was intrinsically sinful and to be avoided at all costs” (Hunter 179).

Puritans’ chief object is to build a society which is devoid of sinfulness. For this purpose they try to eradicate all those things which could lead to the ways of evil even in the least possible way. Puritans asserted that “human beings were created by God in the very image of God in a state of innocence but that in Adam and Eve the fell from this state into sin and so

were cut off, estranged with enmity with God their creator and with their fellow human beings. Puritans believed that only God could bridge that gulf” (Brauer 43).

Puritans do not believe in absolute freedom. They believe in limitations and restrictions that could bind man to contribute to the common good. “Puritan moralists consistently argued that religious and economic individualism never should be reduced to a self-interest that excluded the common good, and focused the better part of their writings on defining the moral limits of self-interest” (Frey 1573). They want to establish a community that is based on the principle of divinity “Among the fundamentals of Puritan jurisprudence were the integrated and determined use of legal and ecclesiastical institutions to foster a godly community, the importance of the Bible as a touchstone for the legitimacy of rules, and a constitutional order restricting colony-wide voting and political office to regenerate members of covenanted churches” (Ross 228). Ruland also suggests that puritan imagination draws “on the encompassing sense of allegory and typology, the Bible and high notions of transcendental and providential” (18).

Whether it is under the spell of Eros or not, within in the puritanical episteme the act of sex without wedlock is prohibited. Inside a conjugal relation Eros is considered a unified force but outside the wedlock it is seen as a sinful desire and thus a threat to the puritanical episteme. “The value of sexual fidelity between marriage partners recognized that it is the power of Eros that binds the family into a cohesive unit. Sexual activity outside the marriage was seen as a major threat” (Hunter 182).

But in a society where patriarchy is celebrated and women are marginalized, surrendering one’s body out of the wedlock becomes essential. In the powerlessness of women their body plays an important role. “The identification of women with their physical bodies is the root cause of their oppression in a patriarchal culture and society” (Mathur 54). Women are treated like slaves because of their gender. Women does not report against this cruelty because they are dependent figures as Johnson Says “Patriarchal terrorism, a product of patriarchal traditions of men’s right to control "their" women, is a form of terroristic control of wives by their husbands that involves the systematic use of not only violence, but economic subordination, threats, isolation, and other control tactics” (Johnson 284).

Gender and its relation with power is a social and cultural discourse which is shaped on the binary of man and woman. Each gender considers the other gender as his or her “other” but the “irony is men do not face the full brunt of otherness because they remain central in the world of resource, distribution and control” (Duerst-Lahti 14). Dominance is relatively relational to power relations, Duerst-Lahti further argues that “gender relations are relations of dominance [...] and can be more accurately named gender power relations” (19). Their rights have been relinquished either by the higher classes or by the state itself as Anne McClintock argues that “no state has allowed a large proportion of its women equal access to the rights and resources of the Nation” (10).

Women are always renounced. Connell theorizes this renunciation as part of maintain hegemonic masculinity “the tactics of maintenance through the exclusion of women” (844).

Michel Foucault categorizes this type of power as power of sovereignty in which “there is always the need for a certain supplement or threat of violence, which is there behind the relation of sovereignty and which sustains it and ensures that it holds” (43). This power discourse leads to public and private acts of violence. Connell has made a link of these aggressive designs with hegemonic masculinity. He says “regarding cost and consequences, research in criminology showed how particular patterns of aggression were linked with hegemonic masculinity, not as a mechanical effect but through the pursuit of hegemony” (834).

Women are victim of brutal practices of violence. “Their subordinate position is manifested in male violence against women, sexual exploitation, humiliation that erodes all human dignity and a very acute experience of vulnerability” (Das 208). Women are denied their individual choices. This holds true in the choice of their life partners too as Mathur argues “Women are denied rights over their own body and sexuality. They do not have control and autonomy over their sexuality and cannot decide freely on matters related to their sexuality” (59).

The relationship between sexuality and gender can be examined by linking domesticity with femininity. For instance in the orient women play a chief role in the domain of domesticity. They are bound within the four walls of the house, they have to cook food, tend the children and satisfying the needs of their husbands as Shamita Das Gupta says “The most important factor in these women's lives seemed to be childhood indoctrination into the ideals of “good” wife and mother” (238). but apart from the facade of the house domestic space deals with relations which shapes the idea of home as Bachelard says “Ideas of home are contingent on place and time, reflect religious and cultural practices, and are modulated by economic and social factors; they shape kinship structures and gender roles” (17).

Research Methodology:

This qualitative research encompasses a systematic division. The whole research is divided in five parts which are introduction, literature review, research methodology, data analysis and conclusion respectively. The tools for the research are both print and web sources and the analysis is done in the light of previous studies on the topic as well as in the light of primary text *Desire Under the Elms* by Eugene O'Neill. By using interpretive approach this research aims to build upon Judith Butler's concept of “Performativity” and her contention that “the body is not “sexed” in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an “idea” of natural or essential sex. The body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations. Sexuality is a historically specific organization of power, discourse, bodies, and affectivity” (Butler 125). This research contends that to gain the ownership of the farm, Abbie subverts her gender's social role as she surrenders her body to her step son and quintessentially becomes a queer character with respect to the puritanical episteme.

Discussion:

When the play begins, the stage setting itself tells about that uncanny power that broods over the house. Two elms on each side of the house serves as the guardian of that force “Two

enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. [...] there is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing jealous absorption. [...] they are like exhausted women resting their sagging breast and hands and hair on its roof” (2). Their association with sinister maternity could be a reference to Aphrodite whose son was Eros. “He was Aphrodite’s son by Hermes, or by Ares, or by her own father Zeus” (Graves 58). This reference serves as an allegory to Eben and his mother since her mother’s presence is inscrutable “The dead mother, in memory at least, possesses everyone beneath the elms; she is the something that all are aware of but cannot see or articulate. The enigmatic something that defines the unseen force in these people’s lives transforms itself into an ambiguity of desires and needs” (Narey 52). Though dead but Eben’s mother is a dominant character throughout the play *Cumhur Yilmaz Madran* asserts, “Throughout the play, we feel the dominance of Eben’s mother, although she is not seen on the stage” (453-54).

Eben is a slave of Eros. Hunter defines Eros as a psychic energy “Eros is more or less amorphous psychic energy that manifests itself in all stages of development, from the desire of the infant for the breast to the desire of mature individuals for genital sexual relation” (Hunter 176). His appearance discloses his animal grace that represses this force “his defiant, dark eyes remind one of a wild animal’s captivity. Each day is a cage in which he finds himself trapped but inwardly unsubdued. There is a fierce repressed vitality about him” (4). This repressed vitality made him a slave of Eros and full of lust. Simeon says “lust—that’s what growin’ in ye” (12). When his eyes meet at first with Abbie “he leaps to his feet, glowering at her speechlessly”(28). Even Abbie suggests to him that he cannot fight against his nature. Eros is with in his nature “ye can’t beat Nature” (33).

The wall scene is the perfect example of his Erotic desire “Eben stops and stares. Their hot glances seem to meet through the wall. Unconsciously he stretches out his arms for her and she half rises” (39). After kissing Abbie he pants like an animal. This is the moment when he crosses the border between himself and the animal inside him and truly follows himself. The self which Derrida describe as “I am”. He says “when I say ‘Je suis’ (I am) if I am to follow this suite then, I move from "the ends of man," that is the confines of man, to "the crossing of borders" between man and animal. Crossing borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal-to the animal in itself” (Derrida 372). When he made Abbie “burning with desire” (43) he seems to be Dionysius of *The Bacchae* who treats females as erotic objects. Pentheus’ boldly explains that in the trance the “women go creeping off this way and that to lonely places and give themselves to lecherous men” (Euripides 198). Moreover, Pentheus claims that Dionysius’ “face flushed with wine, His eyes lit with the charm of Aphrodite” and he “entices young girls with his Bacchic mysteries, spends days and night consorting with them” (Euripides 199). Like Dionysius, Eben uses Abbie as an object of his erotic desires.

Martin says in his article “The empirical evidence suggests that growing up in an abusive home environment can critically jeopardize the developmental progress and personal ability of children” (Martin 7). It is the rigid environment of Cabot’s house that made Eben a slave of Eros as he says “makin’ stone walls fur him to fence us in!” when he says to Simeon that he prays his father may die, Simeon replies “he’s our Paw”(7). Eben violently says “not mine” (7).

Cabot is a representative of a Puritan England of 1850's who believes in a "hard God" (40). Narey describes the character of Cabot in these words "Cabot is stamped in the mold of the insular puritan. An Ahab come ashore on the American coast, driven by an Old Testament God who is jealous, exacting, and ever-present.[...] The God of Cabot is not the god of the women on the farm; and a contrast of spirit, much like a Dionysian/Apollonian dichotomy" (51). In this world of Apollonian propriety, to be a salve of Eros becomes queer since puritans cannot allow such space for a man. It is against the question of their morality. "Puritan moralists recognized self-interest as a fundamental problem of human nature, and sought in a variety of ways to point individualistic values toward the common good" (Frey 1579).

According to Richard Ruland "the puritan imagination was the central to the nature of American writing" (9). O'Neill being an American playwright is conscious of this puritanical episteme but in the reemployment of Greek myth in his drama he provides his character with such room where they find their individual self. He does reemploy the myth of Hippolyta which "follows the same triangular conflict and revolves around an incestuous crisis between mother and son, not a blood relationship, but one provoked, in both instances, by the father's remarriage" (Narey 49). O'Neill does take some of the plot from Medea as well though the major source for *Desire Under the Elms* is the myth of Hippolyta. Medea's act of infanticide is replicated in the play within the context of New England of 1850's where status of women is equal to nothing.

Females are ultimately dependent on the male members of their family. Abbie is no such exception. He tells Eben that she married Cabot just for the sake of farm "waal—what if I need a hum? What else'd I marry an old man like him fur?" (29). She tells Eben about the hardships that being woman she has faced all her life "waal I've had a hard life, too—oceans o' trouble an' nuthin' but wuk fur reward. I was a orphan early an' had t' wuk fur others in other folks' hum. [...] an' the baby died" (28).

Since centuries women have been a subject of marginalization. They have been exploited and manipulated by various means and have been considered as dependent figures and parasites especially from the economic point of view. Home, for them is considered a domestic space which is associated with their maternity as Cabot says "A hum's got to have a woman" (24). Women are often tagged with domesticity of home which also includes domestic abuse. "Domestic violence is not any single behavior but rather a pattern of many physical, sexual, and/or psychological behaviors perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner" (Hornor 206) Eben thinks that his mother has died because of his father's violence as he mentions "why didn' t ye never stand between him 'n' my maw when he was slavin' her to grave" (9). He says to Simeon "and fur thanks he killed her" (8). Domestic violence is a common thing in the third world countries as Sathar says "It is fairly alarming that the majority of women are afraid of their husbands and about one-third have been beaten by husbands. Domestic violence in actual terms affects one-third of women and potential fear of husbands is felt by the majority of women" (Sathar 100). Cabot is a patriarch who maintains his authority against Eben's mother by using power. But after her death she becomes an uncanny spirit whose presence can only be felt as Barlow says "Maw's immaterial form demonstrates her rejection of Ephraim's materialistic nature just as the elms, 'resembling 'exhausted women',

stand in diametric opposition to the stone walls built by the farm's rigid patriarch, Ephraim" (Barlow 169).

When surrendering the female body becomes a cultural practice, women surrender it not only due to fear but also because of awe of cultural norms. Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter* theorized this concept in these words:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death. (Butler 95)

Abbie is repeating the actions of her mother who married a man in order to protect herself. By this act of repetition she enters in the circle of performativity. She is just following the norm of surrendering her body to men for little favors. And if she does not perform this act then she will be alienated because there will be no man to protect her. Abbie's unusual behavior makes her a queer character. Queer is a theoretical term which is used in many contexts. But this research relies on the definition of queer given by OED which defines queer as "strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric; also: of questionable character; suspicious, dubious" (OED). According to Whittington "This definition is the one used least in twenty first-century English" (Whittington 157).

Abbie is a queer character with regard to the puritanical episteme. She does not follow the rules defined by the Puritanical England. She does not surrender to the puritans as a mode of resistance rather it is the only option left to her. So in her case this queer behavior becomes quintessential. To gain the ownership of the farm, Abbie subverts her gender's social role. She marries Cabot for the farm but when she learns from Eben that legally this farm belongs to him she tries to seduce him for her own gains. Firstly she tries to befriend Eben "I want t' be frens with ye" (28). But Eben does not pay any heed to her tricks she tempts him by getting "dressed in her best" (31). She seduces Eben by referring to his erotic nature. She knows that Eben is a slave of Eros and she uses this strand for her benefit. She says to Eben "ye been fightin' yer nature ever since the day I come—tryin' t' tell yerself I hain't purty t' ye" (32). She further tempts her by her by evoking his erotic nature "hain't the sun strong an' 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' its' your'n—but it owns ye too—an' makes ye grow bigger—like a tree—like them elums" (32). Sawicki explains this concept of female attractiveness in the essay Foucault, Feminism and question of identity, he says "More important, they are tied to a central component of normative feminine identity namely sexual attractiveness" (Sawicki 291). Abbie is fully aware of her sexual attractiveness. She knows that she is fully "ripped on the bough" (34) and she can make Eben attracted towards her.

She indulges Eben in an incestuous relationship not only by tempting him but also by using Oedipal complex as a tool. Butler says in her book *Gender trouble* “Psychoanalysis has also been clear that the incest taboo does not always operate to produce gender and desire in the ways intended” (Butler 104). She further explains that there are certain moments in which “the prohibition against incest is clearly stronger with respect to the opposite-sexed parent [...] and the parent prohibited becomes the figure of identification” (Butler 104). Abbie makes Eben realize that she is now in place of his mother and thus she instigate the idea of Oedipal complex in him. “Don't cry, Eben! I'll take yer Maw's place! I'll be everything' 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--sayin' good-night t' me! Kiss me, Eben” (part 2 scene 3).

Another reason for subverting her social gender role is to get a child from Eben. Since she knows only a child can make her own this farm as Cabot says to her that if she will get him a son then “I'd do anything' ye axed, I tell ye! I swar it! May I be everlastin' damned t' hell if I wouldn't!” (38). She is desperately in need of a man who can protect her. A man who can give her home which will be hers. She refers to the farm and the house as “my farm, my kitchen, my hum, my room” (29). When Cabot says to her that after his death she will be free, she furiously replies “so that's the thanks I git fur marryin' ye—t' have ye change kind to Eben who hates ye an' talk o' turnin' me out in the road” (36).

She has no sign of hope from Cabot because for him she is not his blood but only a woman. She even asks him “why don't you say nothin' 'bout me? Haint' I yer lawful wife? (35). She promises Cabot a son and since he cannot help her in producing one she turns to Eben. She even tells her “I on'y wanted ye fur a purpose o' my own—an' I'll hev ye fur it yet 'cause I'm stronger'n yew be!” (44). When Cabot reveals to Eben that “she says, I want Eben cut off so's this farm'll be mine when ye die!” (59) He accuses Abbie of stealing a son for herself “lyin' yew loved me—jest t' git a son t' steal!” (63).

Abbie in the end kills her baby like Medea but her motif is not revenge like Medea's. She killed her baby because Eben threatens her that he will tell Cabot that this baby is not his father's but his and then nothing will belong to Abbie. “I'll git squar' with the old skunk—an' yew! I'll tell him the truth 'bout the son he's so proud o'! then I'll leave ye here t' pizen each other” (62). She kills the baby to blame him for the murder. But when Eben realizes her trick “the same old sneakin' trick—ye're aimin' t' blame me fur the murder ye done!” (66) she subjugates at this stage and accepts her folly.

Conclusion:

So, O'Neill has presented the character of Eben as a slave of Eros which eventually leads to Oedipal complex and thus make him involve in an incestuous relation. While Abbie on the other hand subverts her gender social role in order to get the ownership of the farm. She surrenders her body to her step son and quintessentially becomes a queer character with respect to the puritanical episteme of the England of 1850's.

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