

The Motive of Intrusion in Eugene O'Neill's "Desire Under the Elms"

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Abstract: An incredible interest is noticed during the last century, in modern drama, in the use of intrusion. Many modern playwrights have used intrusion and the motive that initiates it as an element to present powerful family issues and significant triangular conflicts that frustrate modern society and its individuals. The object of this paper is to explore how intrusion is used by Eugene O'Neill in his "Desire Under the Elms" to account for and more profoundly explain the actions and behaviors of the intruder and intruded characters in this astonishing play. The desire to possess is what turns these characters into victimizers and victims of their own faults and actions, thus at the same time suffering the consequences of their intrusion in the other characters' lives. Furthermore, this study is an attempt to determine the nature, function, extent, and meaning of intrusion as it is found in this modern Nobel writer.

Keywords: motive of intrusion, intruder, intruded, modern drama

1. Introduction

Modern drama has made an extensive use of the element of intrusion and it is favored by modern playwrights because it is a convenient and powerful tool in their hands to present conflicts and concerns, as well as the reasons that cause certain behaviors and dramatic action in different modern plays which have made a break from the traditional ones.

Eugene O'Neill is considered by many as the father of modern American drama and he himself has made a notable and significant use of such element in some of his plays. However, this paper's concern is to focus and analyze the why and how intrusion serves as an instiller of dramatic action. Because intrusion works as a system wherein the intruder and the characters intruded confront and come into conflict with each other, at the moment one individual intrudes upon another, a relationship is established. In such a relationship, characters are brought together and are established, at the same time, as individuals of dramatic and social significance. Thus, the meaning of the existence of the intruder and the intruded is absolutely a matter of their relation to each other. The intruder is one who appears from an external situation and stumbles into the life of someone else. The intruder is usually alienated, isolated, estranged and frustrated. He or she is an outsider, a lonely soul, a defeated, harmed or victimized individual or an outcast, a wanderer, who longs for company, communication, love and identification, and struggles desperately to fit into a situation where he or she does not belong or has been rejected. In most cases, the intruder's arrival is unexpected and, therefore, it creates immediate dramatic tension and brings the characters who are involved in the event of intrusion into direct conflicts. Nevertheless, the intruder can be, in the beginning, an expected visitor or also a family member can intrude upon the other members. What matters structurally is not whether such people structurally belong to the family, but whether their coming to and remaining in the family leads to conflicts, collision, and the readjustment of personal relationship.

On the other hand, the character intruded on may be an individual or a group of characters, existing in a comparatively peaceful, stable or stagnant situation; therefore, they are by nature inactive and passive. They tend to take cold and menacing reality for granted, because their personal needs and desires are subdued or numbed.

In terms of the consequences of the intrusion, there are no fixed patterns. Either the intruder or the character intruded on can be the victim or the victimizer. Victimization is prevalent in intrusion, since the majority of the characters intruded on are victimized and in *Desire Under the Elms*, Ephraim Cabot is perhaps the most tragic. At the end of the play, he is mercilessly deprived of his most important spiritual supporters: his patriarchal authority and vanity of possession." He is left as "the victim of wrongdoing.... injured and affronted" to bear his own lonesomeness (Orr 185). The conclusion of the play is also the most ironical. He is a victim of his own design.

Eben is fatalistically involved in the affair with his intruder, his stepmother Abbie. The seemingly fruitful union between him and the intruder becomes the cause of their own destruction. Although the patriarch is not triumphant at all Eben, because of his desire, cannot escape the father's domination and the punishment for his guilt which causes his eventual downfall. What has happened to the intruders and the intruded on indicates the disintegration of the modern family. The intrusion is important to the changes the family experiences, for it enables us to view the family as a point of the confrontation between hope and disappointment.

Martin Esslin, in his remarks on the dramatic concern with family relations, pays special attention to the troubled parent-child relationship:

American dramatic writing seemed to be mainly concerned with family relations: the parents suffering bitter disappointment at their children turning out differently from what they had expected; or conversely the sons' – and daughters' – cruel disenchantment with their parents when they revealed themselves to be less wonderful than they had made their children believe; the parents' inability to let go of their children; the children's difficulties in freeing themselves of that bond; or the tragedy of lack of communication between parents and children with the younger generation realizing that they had never really talked to their parents. (23)

The second type of frustration is the difficulty to hold the family together as a complete social unit, as in *Desire Under the Elms* where two wives have been worked to death, the family is rendered extremely fragile and subjected as victim to the intrusion by the third wife, who is herself victimized in the structurally broken and mentally afflicted Cabot family.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, the intruder, Abbie Putnam, brings about an absolutely chaotic and tragic conclusion. In this play, the intruder and the intruded are destroyed dreamers. There is no more idealistic celebration of what Frederic Carpenter calls "the beauty and impossibility of the romantic dream" (Romantic Tragedy 251). Instead, O'Neill focused on the exploration of the frustrating elements of reality, and dramatized the intruder and the intruded as "finders" who search for identity in themselves and their interrelationships. According to Falk, the intruder, Abbie, and the intruded on, Eben, "find their integration in sacrifice," and reality has found through the lovers "its paradoxical destructive-affirmative expression; in their death they have found life" (99). It is a tough life and the search for it costs highly.

The motive of intrusion in *Desire Under the Elms* is handled with admirable coherence and stability, and consistently develops toward a tragic collision that crushes the lovers but, at the same time, "transfixes, ennobles, and saves them" (Floyd 284). The victimization of the intruder and the intruded on is shocking, but the human qualities the play chooses to praise makes life worthy of the struggle for both Abbie and Eben.

2. The motive

O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* is his successful attempt at a play which deals with the tragic fate of both the intruder and the intruded. Intrusion occurs within a family where as William states "the isolated persons clash and destroy each other, not simply because their particular relationships are wrong, but because life as such is inevitably against them" (William 116).

The first part of the play focuses upon the preparation of the background for the intrusion. The first act of the play successfully creates the dramatic tension in a family which is hopelessly disintegrating both spiritually and structurally. It is a house of males where the absence of a mother figure leaves a crucial blank and makes the family especially vulnerable when it is subject to an intrusion. Although the father, Ephraim Cabot, and his three sons Simeon, Peter and Eben are linked by family ties, they are more strangers or enemies who are hostile to each other than members of the same family. It is one of the best beginnings in modern drama in terms of direct and swift establishment of dramatic tension. With rapid development, the play successfully increases dramatic tension by focusing upon a family which is fragile and broken, since it has no common spiritual principle. Old Ephraim, the patriarch of the family desires to "escape from his tragic sense of aloneness" by possessing the farm he has made out of impossible land, since human love fails him from each of his wives and his sons. Eben, the youngest son, remains in a struggle for the possession of what he thinks was his mother's. He renounces the patrimony of his father, a tough rival, who is old but obstinate and unyielding. Such is the family. Although, according to Downer, all its members are threatened by "the feeling of instability or insecurity" (Downer 471), yet they continue to struggle to realize their desire to possess because they, as human beings, have no control of the desire but, on the contrary, are swayed by it.

Seeing no hope in their struggle for property at home, tired of the hard labor and torturous domestic conflicts, and hating to be "slaves t' stone walls", the older brothers run away to try their fortune in California with the money Eben stole from Ephraim to pay his brothers their share of the farm, hoping that they can find gold and freedom. At the end of Part One, the characters of the play are cleanly simplified. Only the father, Ephraim Cabot, and the youngest son, Eben, remain at the center of the arena. Thus the play obtains an unusually concentrated focus on the Ephraim-Eben opposition.

It is in such a circumstance that O'Neill's female intruder, Abbie Putnam, is involved. The newly wedded young wife of Ephraim is realistic instead of supernatural and mystical. Second, she is a victimizer and a victim instead of a savior or redeemer. Finally, she is punished for her sin by her destruction, but meanwhile the lustful lover is transmuted into a passionate fighter for human dignity through her own efforts instead of a third force.

Abbie is a realistic creation—plain, practical, and close to earth. She is from a realistically identifiable background, her credibility as a realistic character is unquestionable. Judging by her frustrated family background, her desire for property is not greed, but part of her self-righteous struggle to improve her economic situation.

In order to better understand her motive for intrusion we should note what she tells Eben, at the beginning of her intrusion upon the Cabots, and in the plainest language, about her exploitation and frustration:

My Maw died afore I'd growed. I don't remember her none. I'm not the wust in the world- an' yew an' me've got a lot in common. I kin tell that by lookin' at ye. Waal – I've had a hard life, too – oceans o'trouble an' nothin' but wuk fur reward. I was a orphan early an' had t' wuk for others in other folks' hums. Then I married an' he turned out a drunken spreer an' so he had to wuk for others an' me too agen in other folks' hums, an' the baby died, an' my husband got sick an' died too.... (21-22)

She relates her struggle for identification to practical and realistic petty, material achievements. To have a home of her own means personal dignity as well as security and stability: "an' I was glad sayin' no I'm free fur once, on'y I diskivered right away all I was free fur was t' wuk agen in other folks' hums, doin' other folks' wuk till I'd most give up hope o'ever doin' my own wuk in my own hum..." (22). It is justifiable for her to desire the basic comforts of a home.

Her marriage to an old man like Ephraim Cabot is because "a woman's got to hev a hum" (18). When, for the first time, she confronts Eben, who challenges her triumph in having a home of her own, she argues most candidly: "Waal – what if I did need a hum? What else'd I marry an old man like him fur?" (22).

Abbie's practical considerations in her struggle for the basic necessities of survival cannot be denounced as animal desires. What she seeks is what Winfield Parks calls "serenity and order", and the "sense of belonging in a mysteriously alien universe" (104). In other words, when she intrudes upon the Cabots as an outsider, she is not a destructive intruder but a plain country woman who is fighting for survival.

Nevertheless, the tragedy of Abbie lies in the fact that has no fixed value by which she can avoid the overwhelming force of destruction, a combination of her most basic human desires – "greed, ambition, power and carnal love." In Sophus Keith Winter's words, she "never finds a principle by which she can reconcile her practice with a fixed standard of conduct" (329). As the result of the absence of a principle, Abbie is transformed by the situation into a blind victimizer, preying upon everyone in the family as part of the game of her desire. At the same time, she is also a victim to her own blind impetus.

As in many O'Neill's dramas, the plot involves a triangular relationship. Each of the three characters can claim to be the major character in a sense, and the focus is shifting all the time from the study of one character to another. On the contrary, in *Desire Under the Elms*, the intruder, Abbie, remains all the time right at the center of the triangle, and at the same time both of the two characters intruded on, Ephraim and Eben, are closely related to her in their entangled struggle. Therefore, all the characters, the intruder and the intruded, who are caught, to use Winfield Park's term, by the "web of circumstances" (106) are closely examined under the well-directed focus of the interrelationship between them. Ironically, each of them feels triumphant in fighting against the external odds at certain moments, but eventually turns out to be a victim.

3. Intruder and intruded characters

Ephraim Cabot, who initiates Abbie's intrusion by marrying her, is the first to be victimized. He is 'hard, and lonesome and old,' and is a "self-centered, loveless man who has projected his own personality into that of his God, a tyrannic, ascetic, restrictive embodiment of Puritanism" (Falk 94-95). Before Abbie's intrusion starts the undermining of his patriarchal position, he has been himself the victimizer of two wives. The second wife, Eben's mother, gentle, sensitive, over-worked, and love-starved, is a more fully presented pathetic victim, who loses both her land and her life. Ironically, Ephraim Cabot is now turned into a victim himself, and partially by his own hand. If the victimization of the first two wives was presented as part of the dramatic activities, Ephraim Cabot could not have aroused the least bit of sympathy when the young wife and his son join forces with each other to usurp him.

The relationship between Abbie and Eben is perhaps the most passionate and the most shocking relationship in modern drama between an intruder and a character intruded on. It is the core of the element of intrusion in the play and remains directly in focus throughout the play.

Like a haunted animal, Eben, has been suspicious of Abbie's motive of love. He is aware of his status at home and his disadvantage in fighting his father, the tough rival, whose position has been recently reinforced by marrying a young woman who is full of productive vigor and desire for property. He hates her, scorns her, and calls her a whore. However, he drops his defense at the moment when he is possessed by Abbie's assumed maternal love and his mother's spirit of vengeance. After the parlor love scene, he feels he has completed a conquest so that his mother can go back to her

grave and sleep in satisfaction. Obviously their souls are struggling separately for different reasons, even though their bodies unite.

Abbie is tortured by the difficulty of finding a way to transcend her purely physical relationship with Eben so that they can both be identified as true lovers. But she is caught in circumstances so complicated and compels that there can be no way to communicate with Eben without misunderstanding. On the other hand, Eben cannot free himself from the complex of "lust, greed, and the desire for revenge" (Falk 96). What frustrates the intruder and the intruded is the lack of communication, which, as George Lukacs describes in his article "The Sociology of Modern Drama," means that "men become simply incapable of expressing the truly essential in them and that truly directs their actions; even should they in rare moments find words to fit the inexpressible, these words will at any rate go unheard past the spirits of others, or reach them with meaning transformed" (163). In Abbie's attempt to communicate, "what is said becomes ever more peripheral to what is not expressible" (Lukacs 163). The murder of the baby is her desperate last resort; she hopes that the killing will then convey to Eben her sincere, physical, psychological, sexual, and emotional love for him, in a voice louder and more convincing than her own verbal explanation.

When Eben returns to Abbie for her forgiveness and to surrender himself to the sheriff, "walking hand in hand with Abbie at the gate, "modern drama is provided with the best illustration of O'Neill's statement that "In all my plays sin is punished and redemption takes place" (qtd. in Floyd 285). When both Abbie and Eben are brought away for the punishment of their sin, Ephraim seems to have become a "mythical, immortal giant" who arouses sympathy. It is cruel not to save him, but in refusing to save him with cheap redemption, O'Neill lets us see his particular stress on the personal weakness of those strive for wealth and desire and the consequence of such a strife.

In contrast to Abbie and Eben who eventually gain the vision of their integration and the impossibility of them to win it without their own destruction, Ephraim is the only one to live on, but "within the eternal illusion which is living death – the illusion represented by the farm, the mask of his fatal pride" (Falk 99). Here lies the irony of the conclusion of the play: the "finders" of truth have to be victimized, while those who fail to gain the vision survive the destructive reality.

The ending of the play focuses on the transformation of the intruder, Abbie, and the character intruded on, Eben, symbolized by the door. After Eben and Abbie have kissed each other to reassure their mutual love, "they go out the door in the rear" which is symbolic of the threshold. Across this threshold, there are two worlds. Both the intruder and the intruded are to leave behind their haunted past in the old world and step into a new world where they are transformed, ennobled, and redeemed so that they are able to find their identity. The price is high, yet the vision they have gained is not what a happy ending can provide.

4. Conclusion

Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), with its use of intrusion and its motive to account for its dramatic action, made a monumental contribution to American modern drama. By finding a motive, he was able to instill and at the same time explain the struggle of the hero and the heroine for the realization of their desires and liberation from their frustrations. Throughout the play he is able to stress the characters' spiritual sickness in pursuit of material satisfaction and that their tragic fates are decided by their internal causes and not by supernatural elements.

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