Conflict and Union in *Desire Under the Elms*

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I. Introduction

The word “Desire” in the title of the play *Desire Under the Elms* by Eugene O’Neill is translated in Japanese as “欲望” or ‘greed’, but given its context the term should be translated as “情念”, meaning ‘sentiments’ or ‘passion’. In terms of analyzing Eugene O’Neill’s works, this thesis is a continuation of my previous paper, “Expressionism and Psychoanalysis of Freud and Jung in *Anna Christie*”¹ — and explores further the influence that Freud and Jung had on O’Neill’s works and specifically psychoanalytical elements that appear in *Desire Under the Elms*, a new feature not seen in the past plays of O’Neill.

*Anna Christie*, written in the same period as *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*, inherits the tradition of “social expressionism” seen in these two plays, and in it the inner human mind is manifested and described in its rich diversity. On the one hand, *Anna Christie* is referred to as “psychological expressionism” as it features introverted German expressionism², while on the other, the influence of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis and Carl Jung’s archetypal psychology is clearly apparent. *Desire Under the Elms*, however, features completely new elements which will be examined here.

Critical studies of this play have been attempted from various

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different angles in the past and it is said that no room exists for further analysis. In this thesis, however, I will re-examine these literary studies as a first step before revealing what I consider to be the unique characteristics of this play from three different angles: 1) the life cycle approach, 2) parent-child relationships, and 3) a shift from Freudian to Jungian psychoanalysis related to the conflicts of old and young and man and woman. Lastly, I will discuss the “integrated unity” of these two theories of psychoanalysis.

The past analytical works on this play can be largely classified into two categories. The first are those studies that base their analysis on the “realism and symbolism” used in Desire Under the Elms during the transitional period to shift from social to psychological expressionism. These studies mainly focus on “who the main character of Desire Under the Elms is,” namely, Cabot, Abbie, or Eben. The center of their argument is to pinpoint which of these characters takes the main role in the play. The second category of studies views and considers the work as no more or less than “Freudian psychoanalysis.”

It is clear that O’Neill applied the methodology of Freud’s psychoanalysis to analyze sexual libido and materialistic greed as well as desire for love. He dramatized such emotional affections of the characters through various settings and stage effects. Freudian theories were well accepted by American culture, more so than in Europe, and Desire Under the Elms is the result of such influence. O’Neill embodied the concept of Freud’s psychoanalysis into the form of a play.

O’Neill, however, did not describe the characters in Desire Under the Elms as he did in Anna Christie even though he described Chris and Burke as exactly as viewed from the Freudian psychoanalysis perspective. Although Cabot and Abbie have, like Chris and Burke, personality elements that are the subjects of Freudian psychoanalysis, other factors that deviate from Freud always accompany the characters. The following lines reflect Abbie’s inner conflict between ego and individual unconscious, which is sexual libido as explained in Freudian psychology.
Abbie

Ye don’t mean that, Eben. Ye may think ye mean it, mebbe, but ye don’t. Ye can’t. It’s agin nature, Eben. Ye been fightin’ yer nature ever since the day I come — tryin’ to tell yerself I hain’t purty t’ ye.

(She laughs a low humid laugh without taking her eyes from his. A pause — her body squirms desirously — she murmurs languorously)

On the contrary, the next lines Abbie speaks show that her egoistic desires link together for further amplification.

Her infatuation with greed combined with her psychic libido energy develops, reflecting the world of Jungian psychoanalysis.

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’ it’s your’n — but it owns ye, too — an’ makes ye grow bigger — like a tree — like them elums —

(She laughs again softly, holding his eyes. He takes a step toward her, compelled against his will.)

Natuer’ll beat ye, Eben. Ye might’s well own up t’ it fust ’s last.

Part Two Scene One

The following lines of Cabot clearly show that his conscious is controlling his personal unconscious. In other words, he has “cultivated the land of pebbles and rocks” to overcome his personal unconscious. This is a Freudian psychoanalytical approach.

Cabot

Listen, Abbie. When I come here fifty odd year ago
— I was jest twenty an’ the strongest an’ hardest ye ever seen — ten times as strong an’ fifty times as hard as Eben. Waal — this place was nothin’ but fields o’ stones. Folks laughed when I tuk it. They couldn’t know what I knewed. When ye kin make corn sprout out o’ stones, God’s livin’ in yew! They wa’n’t strong enuf fur that! They reckoned God was easy. They laughed. They don’t laugh no more. Some died hereabouts. Some went West an’ died. They’re all under ground — fur follerin’ arter an easy God. God hain’t easy.

(He shakes his head slowly.)

However, in his next lines, he mentions, “God’s in the stones!” which signifies that psychic libido resides in the stone. This clearly represents Jungian concepts.

An’ I growed hard. ... God’s hard, not easy! God’s in the stones! Build my church on a rock — out o’ stones an’ I’ll be in them! That’s what He meant t’ Peter!

Part Two Scene Two

As for Eben, the relationship with Abbie demonstrates Oedipus Complex put forward by Freud, as I will explain in detail later, although the author does not allow Eben to end up simply with Oedipus Complex. The following lines signify Eben’s Oedipus Complex.

Eben

I meant — I hain’t his’n — I hain’t like him — he hain’t me!

Eben

I’m Maw — every drop o’ blood!

Part One Scene Two
Eben’s next lines, however, reveal the influence of collective unconscious, as conceived in depth by Jung. The implication is that the Freudian psychoanalysis approach alone is not sufficient for a satisfactory analysis of the work. Indeed, the work’s complexity is created by bringing in Jungian concepts.

Abbie

Vengeance o’ God on the hull o’ us! What d’we give a durn? I love ye, Eben! God knows I love ye!

Eben

An’ I love yew, Abbie! — now I kin say it! I been dyin’ fur want o’ ye — every hour since ye come! I love ye!

Part Two Scene Three

Consequently, the influence of Jungian psychology in Desire Under the Elms is considerable relative to that of Freudian psychology.

The influence of Jungian psychoanalysis on the play had been studied and written about by many scholars. However, none of these studies clarified the impact of the Jungian concept of “collective unconscious” and “archetype” by actually revealing their existence in the play. Most of the papers mainly focus on conflicts between the characters, emphasizing the contrasts between old and young, man and woman, extroverted and introverted personalities, formalism seen in Puritanism and naturalism, and father and mother, rather than analyzing the Jungian approach by defining “collective unconscious” and “archetype” through the embodiments found in the play. From the “Dark Mother” of the “Elms”, however, all of these conflicting elements merely reflect the contrasts between the desires under the elms, as evident from the stage directions.

Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption.
Love and hatred, materialistic greed and other conflicts do not just signify desire, but they all evolve into a passion and are integrated and fused into one single element. In addition to analyzing each psychological concept of Jung and Freud separately as they appear in the work, an analysis of the integration of these two different approaches is required to understand the core feature of *Desire Under the Elms*.

The chart below serves to briefly summarize the above mentioned factors.

![Diagram](image_url)

II. Implications of three cycles in *Desire Under the Elms*

The influence of Jungian life cycle\(^{(10)}\) on the play is more powerful than Freud's psychosexual development\(^{(11)}\). Consequently, the storyline of *Desire Under the Elms* is based on the human life cycle of each character in combination with the seasonal cycle of nature, as well as the daily cycle. These cycles of life, season and day are all integrated into one “organic cycle,” which is an essential element of the play. All of these cycles are intelligently incorporated into each of the three parts of the play, the first of O'Neill's works to systematically expand the theories of Jungian psychology. This psychology is clearly represented by the character Cabot, who hands down to his three sons, Simeon, Peter and Eben, the story of
his 50-year life cycle lived at the farm surrounded by the “trees of elms” near the house, where he has lived since he was 20 years old (excluding his years traveling in the west). His stories are also passed down in detail to his first and second wives, and especially to his third wife, Abbie.

In the 1850’s, the era in which the story is set, American culture resembled that of England. When viewed from the perspective of the Irish, the “patriarchal family style” was the main cultural stream, where the model family was an elderly-centered family or one having “Old Wise Man” which symbolizes “knowledge, matured thinking, insights, wisdom, intelligence and intuition.” Jung designates the archetypal male at one end of the life cycle as “Old Wise Man,” as compared to the face of a hero or father earlier in the archetypal life cycle. The 1920’s was a turning point for United States to rise above England and become the most influential economic and political nation in the world. An acceleration of growth resulted in dramatic advancement of heavy industry, and the impact of these developments produced a power shift in the basic archetypal life cycle from the old to the young generation. These changes seen in 1920’s, however, were rooted in the Gold Rush in the 1880’s. This is clearly portrayed in *Desire Under the Elms*. Not only does the play concern the life cycle of Cabot, but also the life cycles of Simeon and Peter in which the impact of the Gold Rush made them move west, the life cycle of Eben who stayed under the elms and the difficult life cycle of Abbie, Cabot’s third wife; all are interwoven intelligently into the complex story.

Let us move on to consider the other life cycle changes in the work. The seasonal changes of New England landscape decorate the play in a natural way. The seasonal colors of summer and spring are effectively but quietly inserted into the play between each part, as shown in the stage directions.

**Exterior of the Farmhouse.** It is sunset of a day at the beginning of summer in the year 1850. There is no wind and everything is still. The sky above the roof is suffused with deep colors, the green of the elms glows,
but the house is in shadow, seeming pale and washed out by contrast,

Part One Scene One

A night in late spring the following year. The kitchen and the two bedrooms upstairs are shown. The two bedrooms are dimly lighted by a tallow candle in each. Eben is sitting on the side of the bed in his room, his chin propped on his fists, his face a study of the struggle he is making to understand his conflicting emotions. The noisy laughter and music from below where a kitchen dance is in progress annoy and distract him. He scowls at the floor.

Part Three Scene One

The third cycle, the day’s cycle, starts from the evening, continues to midnight and ends at dawn. The cycle of a day is set between each part of the play also, making the story unique in that the story’s daily cycle starts with sunset and nighttime and ends at sunrise in all the three parts.

The originality of Desire Under the Elms is born from the three cycles folded and interwoven into the story. The human life cycle, seasonal cycle and daily cycle become alive in the drama when they are all directed towards the core factor of time which is “Now.” In other words, “Now” symbolizes the destination of the past while at the same time it is the starting point for the “future.” The gravity of this synchronicity is emphasized as the integral part of the story. “Now” defined in the context of this play is not the time resulting from the past, seen by Americans as cause and effect. It is a result of the emphasis placed on the relationship that exists between the synchronous elements in a time sequence that centers on “Now.” The gravity of this synchronicity signifies that the play evolved from the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis to the archetype psychology of Jung.
III. Method of reconstitution in *Desire Under the Elms*

In my earlier thesis, “Three Aspects of Anna Christie,” I clarified the transitional progression from social expressionism to psychological expressionism. The characteristics of each of the three aspects of expressionism and Freud and Jung’s psychoanalytic approaches were pointed out. These three aspects of Anna Christie are passed on in *Desire Under the Elms* and can be seen in various parts of the play.

A striking factor in *Desire Under the Elms* is that new aspects are apparent in the play. One of these is the embodiment of Freudian psychology in the life of the character Simeon.

*Simeon*

*Lust — that’s what’s growin’ in ye!*

*Eben*

*That’s more to it! That grows on it!\*  
*It’ll bust soon! I’ll go smash my fist in her face!*

*Part One Scene Two*

The next lines that Eben speaks are based on the “paternal principle” (Stone Wall).

*Eben*

*An’ makin’ walls — stone atop o’ stone — makin’\*  
*walls till yer heart’s a stone ye heft up out o’ the way\*  
*o’ growth onto a stone wall t’ wall in yer heart!*

*Part One Scene Two*

“Message...in the spring” of the next lines, “I’m ridin’ out t’learn God’s message t’me in the spring like the prophets done,” can be interpreted as “I’m going out to hear the voice of Great Father”, representing the “paternal principle.”
Simeon (imitating his father’s voice)
“I’m ridin’ out t’ learn God’s message t’ me in the spring like the prophets done,” he says. I’ll bet right then an’there he knew plumb well he was goin’ whorin’, the stinkin’ old hypocrite!

Part One Scene Three

The other new attribute apparent in the play is the combination of influential aspects of Freudian and Jungian psychology found in the words of the characters, as the following lines show.

Abbie
If cussin’ me does ye good, cuss all ye’ve a mind t’. I’m all prepared t’ have ye agin me — at first. I don’t blame ye nuther. I’d feel the same at any stranger comin’ t’ take my Maw’s place.

(He shudders. She is watching him carefully.)
Yew must’ve cared a lot fur yewr Maw, didn’t ye? My Maw died afore I’d grewed. I don’t remember her none.

(a pause)
But yew won’t hate me long, Eben. 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.

Part One Scene Four

The core factor for the analysis of this play, which is evident in the following lines, is that Simeon and Peter as well as Cabot who appears in Part One and Abbie who appears in Part Two all demonstrate typical Freudian constructs. The conflicts of desires such as material greed, hunger for money and property are focused with libido energy at a center of the avarice.

Abbie (with a cool laugh of confidence)
Yewr’n? We’ll see ’bout that!
(then strongly)
Waal — what if I did need a hum? What else’d I marry an old man like him fur?

Part One Scene Four

Abbie (\textit{walks up to him — a queer coarse expression of desire in her face and body — slowly})

An’ upstairs — that be my bedroom — an’ my bed!

(\textit{He stares into her eyes, terribly confused and torn. She adds softly})

I hain’t bad nor mean — ’ceptin’ fur an enemy — but I got t’ fight fur what’s due me out o’ life, if I ever ’spect t’ git it.

(\textit{then putting her hand on his arm — seductively})

Let’s yew’ n’ me be frens, Eben.

Part One Scene Four

As seen in the following lines, however, the shadow under the elms, which symbolizes the maternal archetype as the “Great Mother” or “Dark Mother”, heavily burdens Eben. The memories of his mother continue to occupy his mind and ignite the fire of vengeance towards his father as an enemy. His emotions evolving from his Oedipus Complex which is Anima Complex serve to target his revenge, which springs from a hatred towards Cabot who caused his mother to suffer and die.

Eben

No, I’m fightin’ him — fightin’ yew — fightin’ fur Maw’s rights t’ her hum!

(\textit{This breaks her spell for him. He glowers at her.})

An’ I’m onto ye. Ye hain’t foolin’ me a mite. Ye’re aimin’ t’ swaller up everythin’ an’ make it your’n. Waal, you’ll find I’m a heap sight bigger hunk nor yew kin chew! (\textit{He turns from her with a sneer.})

Part Two Scene One
The appearance of Abbie, his father’s third wife, intensified his feelings towards Cabot. The implications of this pattern of his behavioral pattern the methodology of Freudian psychoanalysis. The next dialogue between Abbie and Eben, however, clearly demonstrates the shift of weight onto Jungian psychology from that of Freud’s.

Abbie
She knows I love ye!

Eben  *(his face suddenly lighting up with a fierce, triumphant grin)*
I see it! I sees why. It’s her vengeance on him — so’s she kin rest quiet in her grave!

Part Two Scene Three

Not only Eben’s Oedipus Complex but the shadow of his mother in him meant that Eben used Abbie (who represents his “sister-wife-mother”) to avenge his father as seen in the above lines.

Furthermore, an element unseen in O’Neill’s previous works is introduced in the play. It is the consolidation of expressionism and Freudian psychoanalysis, or put another way, the integration of social and psychological expressionism.

The characteristic predominant in the play is that psychological expressionism representing Freudian theory and “Jung’s archetype psychology=psychoanalytical approach” are knitted into the web of the story.

IV. Conflicts between old and young, man and woman, parents and children and their Union seen in *Desire Under the Elms*

The play takes place in New England in the 1850s, as explained in section II of this paper, where the Cabot family confronts conflicts between parents and children, old and young and men and women in the cycle of life, seasons and days.
In Part One of the play, Simeon’s and Peter’s escape to the west in the Gold Rush signifies resistance and repression as explained by Freud, the representations of their feelings against their father Cabot.

**Simeon**

*I rec’lect — now an’ agin. Makes it lonesome. She’d hair long’s a hoss’ tail — an’ yaller like gold!*

**Peter**

*Waal — She’s gone.*

*<em>this with indifferent finality — then after a pause</em>*

*They’s gold in the West, Sim.*

**Part One Scene One**

The affection that Cabot’s third and youngest son, Eben, holds towards his mother and hatred towards his father for the way he treats his mother are skillfully and cleverly described as the Oedipus Complex expounded by Freud.

**Abbie**

*When I fust come in — in the dark — they seemed somethin’ here.*

**Eben**

*Maw. .... Maw allus loved me.*

**Abbie**

*Mebbe it knows I love yew, too. Mebbe that makes it kind t’ me.*

**Eben**

*I dunno. I should think she’d hate ye.*

**Abbie**

*No. I kin feel it don’t — not no more.*
Eben

Hate ye fur stealin’ her place — here in her hum — settin’ in her parlor whar she was laid —

Part Two Scene Three

The environment surrounding the youngest son, Eben, plays a vital role. The shadow under the elms, the symbol of “Great Mother” and “Dark Mother,” covers the house with a heavy burden. The youngest son is the only man who actually feels this burden, and no other character experiences “Freudian resistance and repression” to such an extreme. His emotion surpasses the Freudian concept to reach the Jungian concepts of “Great Mother and “Dark Mother.” This is evident in his affection towards his mother, which in turn results in the retaliation against Cabot, who caused her to suffer and die. The play reveals his strong need to take revenge against his father.

In Part Two, Cabot’s third wife appears, resembling the “sister-wife-mother.” The two other brothers have already fled to California, creating a triangular relationship between Cabot, Eben and Abbie. Eben views the existence of a “sister-wife-mother” as a rival to his deceased mother. Knowing that Abbie will inherit all the farm property owned by Cabot triggers Eben’s rebellion and resistance against her. Abbie notices his defiance but, at the same time, she sees the carnal desire in Eben’s nature and she cleverly uses his thirst for physical satisfaction to attract him. The conflict between the two characters develops new type of Oedipus Complex from their relationship.

Replacing the deceased mother, who represents the archetypal “Great Mother” and “Dark Mother”, Abbie finally makes love to Eben in the room where his mother’s spirit lives on. This dramatic change in events emerges as the substitution effect arising from Oedipus Complex towards his birth mother who was replaced by Abbie, his mother’s enemy, through the act of sexual intercourse which signifies the positional replacement. This act allows Eben to eradicate the spirit of his mother inside his “personal unconscious”, as explained by Freud. The maternal archetype, “Great
Mother” and “Dark Mother”, emerged in Abbie as the “sister-wife-mother” which led Eben to start the affair. The act of sexual intercourse develops into an incestuous relationship and as a result, Abbie delivers a child. A paradox is created when the child is acknowledged as Cabot’s baby.

This tragic event is comically described in Part Three when Cabot celebrates the birth with other people in the village, drinking and enjoying the party. The participants are all aware of the event and consider the paradox comical. The only person who is not aware of it is Cabot himself. Happiness resides in an individual who does not know the truth. This generates deep animosity in Eben who suffers in spiritual pain and agony, avoiding attending the celebrations. Cabot tells his son that Abbie just used him to fulfill her greed. Eben believes his father and interrogates Abbie. As a sexual paradox, Abbie who bases her motivation on the desire for a home, property and sex, suddenly changes her attitude. She realizes the necessity of true love. Moved by Eben’s careless words, “we can be lovers again if we didn’t have the child,” she plans to kill her baby.

The news enrages Eben and prompts him to report the matter to the sheriff. At the same time, Abbie tells Cabot that she has had an affair with his son and that the baby is not his. This brings the tension in the parent-child relationship to its peak. This extreme paradox resulting from an individual’s sexual libido and ego as described in Freudian psychoanalysis is dramatized clearly in this play. *Desire Under the Elms* does not end simply with the tragic conclusion, however. O’Neill takes the story further. When the sheriff arrives, Eben recognizes that he committed the same sin as Abbie. His sexual urge is transformed into a higher state of spiritual love. Cabot respects his son for this, and the conflict that existed between them is dissolved and a harmonious relationship restored. Cabot decides to abandon the social status he has accumulated, represented by the stone wall, the symbol of the “paternal archetype.” This leads him to burn down his farm and house and release the cows into the forest. This signifies that he has reached a higher state of spiritual inspiration.
Conclusion

The theme of *Desire Under the Elms* clearly demonstrates the ambivalence (e.g. “Great Mother” and “Dark Mother”) of the maternal archetype symbolized by the shadows under the elms. At times, “Great Mother” manifests as brightness and at other times as darkness and shadows. This is evident in the lines cited in this thesis. Eben’s admiration of his mother and dependency on her is the projection of his affections towards her, she who resembles the “Great Mother”. His vengeful feelings towards his father for hurting his mother are represented by the shadow under the elms which is the symbol of “Dark Mother”. This vacillation between “Great Mother” and “Dark Mother” either lights up the symbolic shade under the elms or projects a shadow.

O’Neill symbolizes the paternal archetype as the “stone wall”, which plays opposite the maternal archetype of Jungian psychoanalysis in the play. The “stone wall” is the result of Cabot’s 50 years’ of hard work to cultivate the land of pebbles with the help of his three sons, Simeon, Peter and Eben. Intense work in this severe environment represents the paternal archetype, where Cabot leads not only the children but his first and second wife to do unbearable and unendurable labor, especially his second wife who suffered greatly and died in adversity. Cabot’s attributes of the paternal archetype induced rebellion in his three sons, and resistance and repression in Eben especially. Rebellion against his father, in turn, intensified Eben’s affection towards his deceased mother who is the symbol of “Great Mother” and represents the maternal archetype. Affectionate feeling is expressed in the form of shade under the elms.

Confrontation with the maternal and paternal archetype—or the shade under the elms—has been examined and clarified in this thesis, although its relationship with the life cycle has not been fully explicated. The life cycle does not imply the personal life cycle of the characters. Rather, the life cycle of Cabot’s 50 years of
life (represented by the stone wall), which started from his journey to the west 2 years after settling at the farm, is now repeated by Simeon and Peter. Eben also starts to repeat his father’s stonewall life cycle. In other words, Cabot’s personal life cycle is now being repeated by Peter and Simeon as well as Eben, who is willing to repeat the stonewall life cycle.

Under the synchronicity of the life cycle, conflicts between old and young and man and woman storms around in the midst of desires, sexual urges, materialistic greed and desire for property. The conflicts related to Freud’s concept of sexual libido and other desires are all described from an objective viewpoint of the sequence of time and space that are a part of the seasonal and daily cycles. The stage settings are effectively used to cleverly manipulate the factor of space.

The conflict of sexual urge is represented not only by the incestuous relationship between Eben and Abbie, but by the contemplated murder of their child which results in transforming the sexual urge to true love between them. This is not the conscious control of sexual urge as expounded by Freud. Rather, it resembles the development of sexual intercourse, as theorized by Jung, to produce a higher form of spiritual love. Sexual urge depicted in the play is not just dramatized through the life cycles of seasons and days, the maternal and paternal archetypes are expressed as passionate love through the life cycle of synchronicity. This not only demonstrates the conflicts of sexual urges resulting from the archetypal “Great Mother” and “Dark Mother”, symbolized by the shade under the elms, but it is also the ultimate symbolism of “Great Mother” who encompasses all of these desires.

NOTES
3) A.H Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the
8) Ibid., p.345

· All the quotes (lines) used in this thesis is cited from Desire Under the Elms, compiled in O'Neill: Complete Plays 1920-1931 (The Library of America, 1988).