

# The Application of Symbolism in *Desire Under the Elms*

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**Abstract:** Eugene O'Neill is a gifted writer in American Literature. This paper, through the interpretation of symbolism and its specific usages in *Desire Under the Elms*, shows O'Neill's distinctive artistic talent.

### 1 Introduction

Eugene O'Neil was born in a private hotel of Broadway in October 1888. His father was an actor, so he had to go on tour following the troupe and had a vagrant life. He had no friend since the childhood and his life was like a "duckweed". He was admitted to Princeton College with an excellent performance in 1906, but left school due to his indolent personality and then became a sailor wandering everywhere. He "saw the inequality of the society and experienced the fickleness of the world" from the life experience in the bottom of society. He became a reporter in 1912, which made him have solid writing foundation, accumulate rich life experience and cultivate keen insight. O'Neil brought the American drama to be mature and was called "Shakespeare of the United States".

Many critics think O'Neil is a writer with the most changes of writing style. He is good at using rich artistic creation techniques in his works, such as realism, expressionism, symbolism and stream of consciousness. The rapid stylistic changes are amazing. "Symbolism is used most in his works."

### 2 Interpretation of symbolism

#### 2.1 Definition of symbolism

As an important expression technique of literary and artistic creation, symbolism is favored by Chinese and western writers and reader because it can enhance the connotation and vitality of literature and make readers experience the deep thought expressed by the writer in its literature by virtue of image.

In Chi Hai, symbolism is to imply an abstract concept with an object, that is, express the similar concept, thought and feeling with certain concrete image. In addition, Hegel defined the symbolism as a "symbol" and said: "In these symbols, the existing perceptual things have had the meaning to be expressed. In this sense, symbolism is not an insignificant symbol, but an universal meaning implied by the appearance." No matter how "symbolism" is defined, its use adds infinite artistic appeal and fresh vitality of Chinese and western literature.

#### 2.2 Symbolism and American literature in the 21st century

The use of symbolism could be traced back to The Book of Songs, but that in American literature started from the modern literature in the 20th century. American society in the 20th century experienced the world war, but its economy and science and technology developed rapidly in the relatively peaceful and stable social atmosphere thereafter. With the rich material life, the spiritual life of human changed greatly, "the aesthetic taste of writers and readers updated increasingly and the modern novel creation was intended to be philosophical and poetic". In addition, symbolism was widely referred and used by American writers.

With symbolism, the creator deepens the writing intention of works, "deepens the theme of works", stimulates the imagination of readers, expands the imagination space of readers and "sublimates the sensory experience to the inner experience of theme." All in all, the emerging and use of symbolism can be regarded as a revolution of "literature theory and creation history", injecting vitality into tedious and rigid American culture and bringing a spring to American

literature.

### 3 Embodiment of symbolism in *Desire Under the Elms*

*Desire Under the Elms*, created in 1924, is an excellent representative of artistic works of O'Neil in his middle period, in which rich symbolism is used. Many critics think the symbolism use of O'Neil is just in a bold exploration and experiment stage because it is not full and mature. However, it cannot be denied that O'Neil dares to innovate and change in the artistic creation technique.

Hegel said: "Symbolism is a kind of existing outward thing directly presented in the perceptual view and the outward thing should be seen from its universal meaning implied by it, rather than itself. Therefore, symbolism has two factors: meaning and expression of the meaning. So let's appreciate the embodiment of symbolism use in *Desire Under the Elms*."

#### 3.1 Elm

O'Neil describes the two elms at the gate of the farm in detail at the beginning. "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. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness." The low-hanging branches entangle the house of Cabot, like a huge net, covering the hopes and expectations of people living under it. Under the cover of elms, everything is gloomy, miserable and unvital. The coming of Abbie makes the elms have a symbolic meaning of "maternity". "They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles." Guo Jide once said: "Occupying a dominant position in the drama, Ebbie overlooks the farm like elms, dominates the Cabots and takes a path following her nature and desire. The realization of her desire destroys herself and the family."

#### 3.2 Farm

Farm is the focus of the drama and also the source of desire. On this farm symbolizing wealth, everyone fights for it. Cabot swears to possess the farm all his life. Even if he cannot "survive endless", he could "in my dying hour, I'd set it a fire and watch it burn--this house an' every ear o' corn an' every tree down to the last blade o' hay! I'd sit and know it was all a-dying with me and no one else'd ever own what was mine, what I'd made out of nothing with my own sweat and blood!" Eben is also eager to be the successor of the farm and encourages his two old brothers to give up the succession right of the farm. After success, "Eben stares around with glowing, possessive eyes" and hopes his father dies earlier. Wealth seems to be the sole pursuit of people in their life and the precious kinship has disappeared. The purpose that young Abbie gets married with Cabot who is 30 years older than her is to have a "home" and wealth to get rid of the impoverished life, so she strives to dominate it "with the excellence of conqueror" upon arrival at the farm. To get this farm, she has an incestuous relationship with Eben only to born a son that Cabot is satisfied to become the successor of the farm. The wealth war is becoming increasingly fierce, leading to a destruction of humanity.

#### 3.3 Stone wall

Stone is mentioned by characters in the drama for many times. Simon and Peter hate the stones in the field. "Here--it's stones atop o' the ground--stones atop o' stones--makin' stone walls--year atop o' year--him 'n' yew 'n' me 'n' then Eben--makin' stone walls fur him to fence us in!" They regard the stones as a cage built by them, in which the pursuit of dream and future and eager for freedom evaporate. The mechanical work in the field all the day torments their body and benumbs their spirit. When they determine to get away from the cage, they pick up stones and throw them to break the glass of parlor to show the determination of breaking the shackles, running to the future and bidding farewell to the past. Affected by the puritanism, Cabot regards the stones in the fields as his mission. He still thinks "God is one the stones ---build its temple on the massive rock --- base on the massive rock". Therefore, he also builds his wealth on the stones following the guide of God. At the same time, to better protect his fruits with his sweat and blood, he "picks up the stones and builds a wall" to be an evidence of his hard working.

### 3.4 Barn and dairy cow

The Cabots show special preferences to barn and dairy cow and like speaking with the dairy cow if depressed. Simon and Peter treat the dairy cow as their blood brother, Ben regards it as his property and Cabot tell it his depression. "I can talk with the cow because they know my words, the farm and me." In this materialistic world, the humanity has been completely alienated and the kinship, friendship and love have been lost. In addition, the home is not a real shelter; on the contrary, the barn is the refuge harbor of heart.

## 4 Conclusion

From the lifelong creation of O'Neil, we can find he has been always pursuing the bold exploration and innovation and "looking for a most perfect form to express the hidden inner world and subconsciousness of human" on the road of artistic creation. However, his persistent pursuit of novel artistic expression technique is to break the dilemma that American drama is restricted by the traditions and make the drama works pay more attention to "express the emotion and psychological factors of people and pursue the depiction of internal conflict of people". O'Neil always thinks: "The most lofty and significant function of drama is to give a poetic interpretation and symbolic praise of life and give this religion to people". O'Neil follows the creation principle of "making the form serve the content". The subtle use of symbolism in *Desire Under the Elms* is the best interpretation of the creation concept and innovation principle of O'Neil.

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