

LEO TOLSTOY'S "THE POWER OF DARKNESS" AND EUGENE O'NEILL'S "DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS": ON THE PROBLEM OF TYPOLOGICAL AFFINITY

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Abstract: Leo Tolstoy's impact on world literature cannot be overestimated. Many authors claim his influence on their creativity, which has been quite extensively studied in criticism. However his impact on world drama has not so far been properly addressed, even though his dramas have been staged on both European and American stage. In this essay we give comparative analysis of two plays written in different epochs by the authors belonging to very different cultural traditions – that is Leo Tolstoy's "The Power of Darkness" and Eugene O'Neill's "Desire under the Elms". Comparing the plot, conflict and system of images we come to the conclusion that O'Neill can be considered as a follower of Tolstoy's humanistic traditions and we may qualify the similarity of the theme and the plot as typological affinity. At the same time in O'Neill's play a similar plot structure acquires a different meaning in conformity with his own artistic method, his concept of man, and his philosophical background.

Keywords: tradition, influence, naturalism, drama, religion

1 Introduction

It is common knowledge that Leo Tolstoy had a long-lasting impact on 20th century Western culture. "Although Tolstoy ultimately believed that art should serve a religious and ethical code, he himself serves primarily as a model of the consummate artist, and his greatest works are exemplary of the nature and traditions of modern literature" – pointed out the translator of his works Aylmer Maude (Leo Tolstoy, 1919). "Tolstoy's cry against convention that disregards spiritual struggle, and system that ignores human growth, will find answering cries in many breasts in many lands" – claims Arthur Hopkins (Redemption And Two Other Plays By Leo Tolstoy, 2017). However though his plays have been translated into English and performed in America very little so far has been written about the influence he exercised on the development of American drama. This kind of juxtaposition can be justified by the permanent interest American playwrights have expressed for Russian drama of the turn of the 19th century, including Eugene O'Neill.

2 Methods and Materials

This essay deals with Tolstoy's "The Power of Darkness" and O'Neill's "Desire under the Elms". American scholars don't seem to have noticed any similarity between these plays while in Russia the only scholar who noticed this affinity and mentioned it in her monograph was Maya Koreneva (Koreneva, 1990). The main objective of this essay is not just to reveal similar forms and ideas but also to show their place in the aesthetic and ideological systems of both artists, in the world picture they draw in their dramas. Although their social and aesthetic views, their philosophical foundations and genre structures of their works are different, such comparison is not incidental. Each of them possessed to the highest degree the makings of a true humanist – an acute sensitivity to the ills of the time and a passionate, fiery nature whose most organic need was to help an individual in his/her search for moral values, place to belong in the disintegrated world. It remains unknown whether O'Neill read Tolstoy's "The Power of Darkness", though it is highly possible taking into consideration the interest he expressed in Russian classics. Still although we cannot assert whether he had it in mind when writing "Desire under the Elms" or completely forgot about it we may definitely speak about a typological

affinity of the two dramas. What is of real interest and importance to a researcher is the very fact of this artistic interaction and those aesthetic results that it produced. The essay is based on the method of comparative literary analysis introduced by Dionis Durishin in his fundamental monograph "The Theory of Comparative Literary Studies" (Durishin, 1979) and further developed by such scholars as Amineva V.R., Ibragimov M.I., Nagumanova E.F., Khabibullina A.Z., Bekmetov (Amineva et al, 2015; <http://www.medwelljournals.com/abstract/?doi=sscience.2015.1868.1872>, 2017; Motif as a concept of comparative poetics, 2014).

3 Results

Both plays deal with a well-off farmers' household. Tolstoy's play is set in Russia after the reform of 1861, and O'Neill's drama unfolds itself in the New England of 1850 – the year when gold was discovered in California, the fact which is mentioned several times in the play. The characters of both plays are farmers who have spent all their lives on the land and who consider the ownership of this land to be the major goal of their existence. Therefore the basic conflict in both dramas is the struggle for property, which is aggravated by complex family and erotic relationships.

Both playwrights in this case explore an Oedipal situation: in Tolstoy's play, Nikita, after marrying Anisya, sleeps with her stepdaughter, Akulina; in "Desire under the Elms" Eben has relations with his stepmother Abbie. Also similar is the most brutal moment of both dramas – the slaughter of the illegitimate child. There is great similarity in the structure of the plays as well: both cover roughly the same time period, a little more than a year and half in "The Power of Darkness" and one year and two months in "Desire under the Elms". In both dramas, the climax is the slaughter of the child, which takes place in approximately the same situation: right after the departure of the drunken best-men in "The Power of Darkness", and after the drunken festivity of the christening party in "Desire under the Elms". And finally both plays end with the heroes' confessions of the committed crime and their readiness to accept the due punishment.

Therefore, as we can see, Tolstoy and O'Neill use practically the same plot scheme. However, this similarity of the main points of the dramas makes still more striking the difference in the treatment of the main conflict and the motivations of the characters' actions, caused by the difference of the aesthetic principles of the authors and the goals they pursued.

Tolstoy in his play tends towards a broader epic portrayal of reality. The image of *Darkness* turns into the symbol of the way of life not only of this particular peasant community, but of the whole Russia at large. Tolstoy insists that his heroes are not degenerates but common people whose crimes are the result of the "idiocy of village life," illiteracy, oppression and ignorance.

"How should the likes of you not go to the bad? Who teaches you? What do you see? What do you hear? Only vileness," says the ex-soldier Mitrich to the ten-year-old Anyutka. (Bekmetov, 2015).

Stressing the typical, socially determined manner of his characters' behavior Tolstoy points out how Matrena should be impersonated on stage:

"Matrena should not be played as a villain, a kind of Lady Macbeth, as some think. She is a common old woman, cunning, wishing all the best to her son in her own way." (Bekmetov, 2015).

Each character in Tolstoy's play is an offspring of the Darkness reigning around, generated by it, and at the same time bears it within. Matrena from her own life experience has learned "all the seventy-seven tricks" with the help of which her mercenary plans can be implemented. Anisya, married to an unloved man and having no other possibility to regulate her life and be happy, poisons and robs her husband, Peter. And later, deceived and humiliated, she makes Nikita to kill the illegitimate child. Nikita who as his mother puts it is "tender-hearted," "unable to slaughter a chicken" following the established order of life, wouldn't marry the girl deceived by him and once strongly desired, the dowerless Marina; instead he marries Anisya. Their life together soon becomes unbearable, leading him to adultery with his step-daughter Akulina and eventually to the crime. Anisya's step-daughter Akulina having witnessed depravity in her own family from her very childhood follows this path herself. Even those who are in a way opposed to the realm of Darkness — Marina, Nikita's father, Akim, the ex-soldier Mitrich — cannot offer anything except Christian preaching of living in accordance with God's commandments.

Thus, the main conflict of the drama is split and multiplied, involving more and more characters, and reflecting how the fierce struggle for property deforms most natural human feelings and relations.

This problem becomes one of the major concerns of the American playwright as well. But while Tolstoy is widening the sphere of the main conflict, O'Neill on the contrary limits it to the amorous triangle — old Cabot, his young wife Abbie, and his son Eben. Cabot's elder sons, Simeon and Peter, appear only in the exposition of the play, in the first scenes. Thus, unlike Tolstoy O'Neill is not striving to create a wide social panorama but goes deep down into the depth of human soul, concentrating the action to the maximum and thus achieving the utmost psychological intensity. We can see this process by comparing one of the major themes of both plays — the motif of incest. In both cases, erotic relations of the heroes are closely interwoven with their mercenary interests; in O'Neill's drama, however, this interlacing is more complex. For Eben, his father's wife, Abbie becomes at the same time an object of a very strong sexual desire, the main rival in his struggle for the farm, the vehicle of vengeance to his father and the woman who in a way substitutes for his deceased mother. Thus, the traits that in Tolstoy's play were inherent in several women — Marina, Anisya, Akulina and Matrena are accumulated and elaborately entangled in Abbie's character. This leads to a considerable complication of the psychological motivations and casts quite a different light on the basic episode of the play — the slaughter of the child. In "The Power of Darkness" the murder was motivated primarily by the urge to hush-hush the matter, to avoid scandal. Besides, the child would prevent Anisya's marrying off the hated Akulina.

Thus, in Tolstoy's play this crime is one more step forward along the path of moral degradation. It is not accidental that Anisya who was horrified at the sight of her dying husband, commits this crime almost in cold blood, while for Nikita the murder becomes the last straw, a shock, followed by moral purification.

In O'Neill's play the fatal actions become the climax of "love vs property" conflict. The child of love, the vehicle of Eben's vengeance on his father -- his son at the same time becomes Eben's major rival; now he will inherit the farm. Furthermore the very fact of his birth questions the sincerity of Abbie's feelings for Eben. Shocked at this revelation and in a state of nervous breakdown, Abbie kills her son, realizing that this is the only way to prove that her love for Eben has taken over the mercenary instincts in her heart.

Just like the characters in Tolstoy's play O'Neill's heroes are "people of earth." But if in Tolstoy's play, this closeness to nature remains a precondition, in O'Neill's drama, it becomes one of the major factors motivating the actions of the heroes. On the one hand this closeness to earth results in their primitiveness; on the other, it generates the violence and ineradicable power of

their passions and desires. There are allusions to the natural world scattered throughout the play: Eben's defiant dark eyes "remind one of a wild animal in captivity" (The Works of Leo Tolstoy, 1928); Simeon and Peter "smell of earth" (Ibidem); Eben's mistress "smells like a warm ploughed field" (Ibidem); Simeon and Peter "hurry clumsily to their food, like two friendly oxen towards their evening meal" (Ibidem); they eat "as naturally unrestrained as beasts of the field" (Ibidem).

In this respect, it is very important to pay attention to the image of the eponymous elms, which predominate in the stage design. They symbolize the eternal life forces of nature itself, nourishing the love of the heroes. In addition, the elms in the play are associated with the image of Eben's mother, whose spirit seems to be wondering about the farm:

"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 brood oppressively over the house" (Ibidem).

Thus the following chain of images is formed in the play: farm — mother — earth — nature. In this particular context the incest motif acquires a philosophical and symbolic meaning. The unity with mother means here the restoration of natural integrity, return to primeval harmony, and discovery of one's belonging. That's what Eben subconsciously looks for in Abbie.

In both "The Power of Darkness" and "Desire under the Elms" religion plays quite an important part. In Tolstoy's drama, it is the moral imperative, the criterion against which the characters' actions are evaluated. The bearer of this moral, religious consciousness is Nikita's father, Akim who sees the root of all evil in the "filthy life," in the fact that people have abandoned God, and do not care about the soul. It is he who preaches at the end, concluding the play articulating the message:

"Speak, my son! Tell everything — you'll feel belter! Confess to God, don't fear men! God - God! It's He!... God will forgive you, my own son!" (Bekmetov, 2015).

In O'Neill's drama, the bearer of the religious consciousness is also the hero's father, Cabot. However, unlike Akim he is far from being the author's mouthpiece. Cabot's God is punishing and ruthless:

"God's hard, nor easy! God's in the stones! Build my Church on a rock-out o' stones an' I'll be in them. (...) He made me hard fur it", — Cabot says to Abbie (The Works of Leo Tolstoy, 1928).

Already in this play O'Neill starts to develop the opposition that becomes especially productive in his later works — the opposition of the maternal and fraternal deities. If fraternal deity is associated with old Cabot, who keeps quoting the Bible and acting like God the Father himself, maternal is incarnated in Eben's mother. And while Cabot's God like himself is associated with rock, stone, maternal deity is associated with the elms and the earth, the images of fertility. As a matter of fact the opposition of the two kinds of deities is nothing but the opposition of puritan and pagan elements (it is not incidental that the action takes place in New England). And puritanism in O'Neill's plays always stands for a life distorting dead force.

4 Summary

Tolstoy's play ends with the author's orthodox conclusion that Christian humbleness and life lived in conformity with God's commandments is the answer to all questions. Following the logic of his own art — the logic of moral attitude towards the subject, Tolstoy wants the denouement of his play to be the answer that could help a man in his search for truth, hence the didactic subtitle of the play, "If the claw is caught the bird is lost."

As for the American playwright, O'Neill, in his search for God, concentrates his attention on individual and his/her own moral resources. We agree with Polina Ribina who points out that O'Neill's philosophical tragedy "is close to existentialism as related to the problem of individuality and freedom of an individual." (O'Neill E. Anna Christie, 1960). Indeed, an individual for O'Neill, is the starting and the end point; it is he/she who should define the degree of his/her own guilt and responsibility for the crime. That is why Abbie, who is ready to accept the punishment, says that one must "pay for sin," but denies repentance:

"Abbie (lifting her head as if defying God): I don't repent this sin! I ain't askin'

even God t'fergive that! Nor me — ..." (The Works of Leo Tolstoy, 1928).

So we do not find in O'Neill's play the motif that was crucial for Tolstoy — repentance and forgiveness — and was of major ethical significance in "The Power of Darkness". Still, as Kathy Anderson justly puts it: "Those looking for titillation misunderstood O'Neill's serious intention of using what he called a "poetical vision" to touch on themes of bereavement, love of the land and the tragedy of family relationships" (Ribina, 2003). O'Neill does not want to give any direct answer; in his works, he only creates a perspective in which this answer can be found.

5 Conclusion

Thus, in our opinion O'Neill can justly be considered a follower of Tolstoy's humanistic traditions. At the same time, in O'Neill's play, a similar plot structure acquires a different meaning in conformity with his own artistic method, his concept of man, and his philosophical background. The major pathos of Tolstoy's drama is directed against the horrible social conditions that turn a man into a beast; his aim was to show people the way of liberation from the *Power of Darkness*. The social aspect is also important to O'Neill, but it is only part of a more general conflict — the struggle between natural and possessive instincts — both, in the outer world and in human soul. And while Tolstoy's characters are primarily the products of their social environment, O'Neill's — are the children of Earth, of Nature, which they destroy. That's why O'Neill directs his characters in their search for belonging and moral identity not back to God, but back to natural elements, to their own selves, and to the maternal deity incarnated in Nature's harmony.

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