

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE BIBLICAL ECHO IN
EUGENE O'NEILL'S DESIRE UNDER
THE ELMS

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Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate College
of the Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
May, 1974

Thesis
1974
S5615f
Cop. 2

SEP 4 1974

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PREFACE

I have been impressed by the ample evidence of the biblical echo in Desire Under the Elms. I have also been impressed by the general critical inattention to its possible significance. After a close study of the play, I have found that the biblical allusions are extensively and significantly used there. They perform a bifurcate function. Besides evoking a biblical atmosphere conducive to the establishment of the play as a tragedy, they bring about ironies whereby an important segment of the meaning of the play--that is, themes related to imprisonment, hardness, and incomprehension--is dramatized.

The idea for this work was inspired by a course dealing with the biblical impact on British and American literature, which was taught by Dr. David S. Berkeley. I wish to thank Dr. Berkeley, not only for the above-mentioned inspiration he gave me, but also for his encouragement and valuable advice in his capacity as my thesis adviser. I wish also to thank Dr. John Milstead, Dr. William R. Wray, and Dr. Samuel H. Woods, Jr. for their useful suggestions at the various stages of the writing of this thesis.

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THE FUNCTION OF THE BIBLICAL ECHO IN EUGENE

O'NEILL'S DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS

Even a casual reader of Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms will be impressed with its ample evidence of the biblical echo; but, curiously, the biblical echo and its possible significance in this play have so far received little critical attention. For example, several critics have noticed the combination of realism and symbolism in Desire¹ but none has suggested the possibility of the biblical echo as a contributing factor in effecting this admirable combination. By and large, critics concerned with the general aspects of the play tend to ignore altogether its biblical echo or treat it only cursorily. Characteristically, Timo Tiusanen has discussed in detail the significance of such disparate elements as realism, melodrama, expressionism, and Greek tragedy in the play,² neglecting, however, the biblical echo. Also characteristically, a short sentence in Clifford Leech's Eugene O'Neill constitutes his sole reference to the play's biblical echo: "He [Ephraim] is a cheap-jack's version of the God of the Old Testament."³ In Edgar F. Racey, Jr.'s "Myth as Tragic Structure in Desire Under the Elms,"⁴ where the approach employed is understandably mythic-archetypal, the significance of the biblical echo still has not received due recognition. Racey, to be sure, has made several admirable identifications of the biblical allusions and conjectured with insight that the biblical echo functions to create "a kind of Biblical atmosphere, and perhaps a kind of primitivism."⁵ But since his main

interest is in the Hippolytus-Phaedra-Theseus myth, the extent to which he identifies the biblical allusions and discusses their significance is still quite limited. Such general inattention seems attributable to the fact that many allusions have undergone so much transformation in the process of displacement that their biblical relevance is hardly recognizable, and also to the fact that since they scatter apparently in a disconnected way, they seem unable to form into patterns of significance.

A close study of the biblical echo in the play nevertheless leads to the conclusion that the biblical allusions are here so extensively and significantly used that they, besides evoking a biblical atmosphere conducive to the establishment of the play as tragedy, bring about ironies whereby an important segment of the meaning of the play is expressed. From the thematic perspective and in abstract terms, Desire can be described as dealing with the opposition between imprisonment and freedom, hardness and softness, understanding and incomprehension, and, in addition, with the relationships among these antitheses. The significance of the biblical echo in this connection lies in the fact that such obvious negatives as imprisonment, hardness, and incomprehension are chiefly dramatized through an ironic use of the biblical allusions. But, paradoxically, the very biblical allusions ironically used for the thematic purpose also function to lend the play scriptural dignity and gravity, and thus, in conjunction with other tragic elements, shape its tragic form. That the biblical echo is capable of the functions forwarded above is contingent upon the presence of a large number of the biblical allusions, for otherwise the ironies cannot have more than local significance, and the

atmosphere, depending on cumulative associations, cannot be established.

The biblical echo in this play appears in various forms with various degrees of resemblance or relatedness to the biblical originals. First of all, many of the characters' names are of biblical origin. Ephraim, Peter, and Simeon are unequivocally biblical names; Eben highly suggests a biblical origin by reason of its being a component of the biblical word "Ebenezer" (I Samuel 4, 1).⁶ In addition to the characters' names, the echo is found in the biblical flavor that characterizes many of the characters' speeches overlaid with biblical diction, phraseology, and references. There are many examples. When Simeon sarcastically refers to Eben's sullenness as "sorrowin' over his lust o' the flesh" (I, 4, p. 216),⁷ he is using a biblical phrase "lust of the flesh" which appears, sometimes with slight variations, in Galatians 5, 16; I John 2, 16; and II Peter 2, 18. When in one of his more reflective moods Ephraim philosophizes: "But arter three score and ten the Lord warns ye t' prepare" (II, 1, p. 232), he is referring to "The days of our years are three score years and ten" (Psalm 90, 10). When Simeon says he wants to be as free as "lilies o' the field" (I, 4, p. 216) he is using a phrase from Matthew 6, 28. When Eben ironically exclaims: "Honor thy father!" (I, 1, pl 205), he is using exactly the same words as appear in Exodus 20, 12; Deuteronomy 5, 6; Matthew 15, 4; and Ephesians 6,2. Furthermore, Peter, in a friendly banter, uses two biblical references within a short space of time, namely, "Samson" and "the Scarlet Woman" (I, 2, 210), the former being an obvious reference to Judges and the latter an allusion to Revelations 17. The biblical echo may also appear in

some situations in the play which have, sometimes not very definite, biblical parallels or counterparts. For example, when Abbie tells Ephraim that she has been praying to God for a son for him, the ecstatic septuagenarian exclaims: "It'd be the blessin' o' God A'mighty on me--in my old age--in my lonesomeness," and, enjoining his young wife to pray again, he says: "'An' God hearkened unto Rachel'! An' God hearkened unto Abbie! Pray, Abbie! Pray fur him to hearken."⁸ Here is an obvious reference to a passage in Genesis 30,22: "And God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her, and opened her womb." Furthermore, the "promise" of an heir to Ephraim in his old age echoes the fact that Abraham and Sarah were blessed with an heir in their old age. Thus the two O'Neill characters are in a situation related--ironically, to be sure, as to be discussed later--to two biblical situations. Finally, the biblical echo occurs in the characterization of Ephraim. The old man is associated, again ironically, with a prophet and a patriarch in the biblical sense of the terms. An important characteristic of a biblical prophet is his access to intimate communion with God. In Ephraim's speeches there are repeated references to his personally experienced intercourse with God. Significantly, he begins one of his accounts of such experiences with the introductory expression "the voice o' God sayin'" (II, 2, p. 237), which echoes a biblical counterpart "the word of the Lord came"⁹ wherewith the Old Testament prophets began their prophecies. Among other things, Ephraim's speeches reveal his concept of himself as a prophet, which indirectly associates him with the biblical patriarch. Besides tremendous authority over the other members of his family,¹⁰ a biblical patriarch was characterized by access to

personal communion with God or His agents: Abraham, Lot, and Jacob, to cite only three examples, all had such experiences. In this way he shared a characteristic of a prophet. It may therefore be conjectured that a biblical patriarch's authority over his family and, by extension, his tribe was attributable not only to his "paternal" status but also to divine endorsement. Where Ephraim is concerned, the combination of his paternity and his self-imagined role as a prophet makes him strongly reminiscent of a biblical patriarch.

The above effort at identifications intends to show, still suggestively, the great scope of the biblical echo in Desire. The allusions discussed above exhibit varying degrees of correspondence to their biblical originals. For example, Ephraim's reference to the normal span of human life can be regarded as a biblical allusion entirely identical with its biblical originals whereas the relationship of the term "the Scarlet Woman" to Revelations 17 is perhaps less obvious. Since allusions to a broad common source are mutually evocative, a latent biblical echo in, for instance, an expression may become a prominent echo under the associative influence of other allusions around that expression. For example, such a phrase in Desire as "a rock o' jedgment" (III, 4, p. 264) has only a marginal relationship in the way of verbal structure to such biblical phrases as "the rock of my salvation" (II Samuel 22:47) and "rock of refuge" (Psalm 71:3), but, read in the context of other biblical allusions in the play, the phrase seems to vibrate with the unmistakable echo in the sense that it is suggestive of biblical diction. This is the rationale for many identifications made in the preceding paragraph, notably the identification which leads to the proposition that the promise of an

heir to Ephraim in his old age echoes a situation involving Abraham. Read in this perspective, Desire exhibits far more biblical allusions than usually recognized. For example, California, the land that holds out promises of freedom and wealth to many characters, can be approximately regarded as echoing Canaan.

That the numerous biblical allusions are functional in Desire can first be demonstrated in light of their relationships to the meaning of the play. A brief thematic study therefore seems necessary. As mentioned before, thematically, Desire centers around three sets of opposites, namely, imprisonment vs. freedom, hardness vs. softness, and incomprehension vs. understanding. The play is first of all noted for its prevalent imagery of imprisonment. Eben's eyes are described as suggestive of "a wild animal's in captivity" (I, 1, p. 203). Peter thinks that the function of the stone wall he had helped to build is for his father to fence him and his brothers in.¹¹ Eben thinks that his dead mother was so much inured to thralldom while alive that she "can't git used t' being free--even in her grave" (I, 2, p. 209). As a matter of fact, with the only exception of Abbie, all the Cabots have for some time been "imprisoned," physically and psychologically. The three sons are forced by their father to lead an arid existence consisting of only hard labor; the father, on his part, compulsively imposes such an existence on himself. Furthermore, Peter and Simeon are "imprisoned" by general lack of understanding. Eben, though perceptive on the whole, is "imprisoned," unconsciously, by an almost incestuous attachment to his dead mother, which has for some time incapacitated him for normal erotic love. Ephraim, also without his knowing it, is "imprisoned" by his monomaniacal obsession with

hardness, or, for that matter, with a hard God, a complex which finds expression in masochistic fascination with hard work, a grotesque pride in bodily hardness (which, owing to his peculiar way of reasoning, is a manifestation of hardness), and a hardened heart. Of all the characters, Ephraim exhibits the greatest degree of imprisonment in terms of the intensity with which he is fettered by the monomania for hardness, the fierceness with which he acts out that monomania in daily life, and his total imperception of the pathos and absurdity involved in such a situation. At the other extreme from Ephraim is Abbie, who epitomizes freedom, softness, and understanding. Her sole religion is love, which is, so she rhapsodizes, "the on'y joy I ever knowed--like heaven t' me--purtier'n heaven"(III, 2, p. 258). She believes that love justifies everything, an attitude revealed in the following remark made by her immediately after her first illicit sexual encounter with Eben: "Vengeance o' God on the hull o' us! What d' we give a durn? I love ye, Eben! God knows I love ye!" (II, 3, p. 244). Such an attitude frees her from all prohibitions and inhibitions. In contrast to Ephraim's fascination with hardness, she believes in softness, which means living in accordance with nature. The articulateness with which she expresses this conviction, as evidenced by the following remark of hers, demonstrates her good understanding and thus sets her farther apart from Ephraim: "Hain't the sun strong an' hot? Ye kin feel it burnin' into the earth--nature--makin' thin's grow--bigger 'n' bigger--burning 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" (II, 1, p. 229). Clearly, Ephraim's hardness

represents sterility whereas Abbie's softness represents productivity. Here it must be mentioned that our affirmative view of Abbie is based on the assumption that she represents the authorial point of view. The assumption seems validated by the fact that at the end of the play, she is presented as essentially (morally) triumphant¹² while ready to accept corporeal punishment for infanticide, which she had committed while acting on her conviction.

It is noteworthy that the biblical allusions are chiefly employed to provide ironic comments on those aspects of the characters in relation to imprisonment, hardness, and incomprehension. Since the biblical allusions in the characters' speeches, in the context of the dramatic action, are often distortions or even inversions of their biblical originals, they often function to reflect the speakers' incomprehension. The biblical echo which relates a character (for that matter, Ephraim) or a dramatic situation to a certain biblical counterpart often serves to accentuate the substantial disparity beneath the apparent similarity between them. The disparity, again, often reveals the negative aspects of the characters.

Where it concerns the *dramatis personae* in general, frequency of the biblical use, or, more accurately, misuse in the characters' speeches is positively proportionate to the extent of their imprisonment, incomprehension, and when applicable, hardness. Furthermore, it anticipates, adversely, the characters' potentials for achieving freedom and understanding. Eben uses the biblical allusion only once and that tendentiously for an ironic effect. On one occasion when Peter and Simeon are expressing their hope that Ephraim is dead, Eben cuts in with a biblical injunction: "Honor thy father!" and immediately

follows it with an antipodal expression of hatred: "I pray he's dead" (I, 1, p. 205). Generally speaking, Eben exhibits quite good understanding, which is the basis for his achieving complete self-knowledge and hence complete freedom at the end of the play. Unlike Eben, Peter and Simeon are dull and earthy. Corresponding to this aspect of their character, they are noted for fondness for decking their speeches out with biblical allusions, and that only for manneristic reasons. At one key point their idiosyncratic use of the biblical allusions creates an irony which provides an oblique comment on them. The moment before they set out for California, Simeon expresses his elation over the prospect of freedom with a biblical reference in his speech: "We're aimin' t' start bein' lilies o' the field," the real implication of which is made clear by Peter's remark immediately following it: "Nary a toil 'r wuk do we put in!" (I, 4, p. 216). Here the two brothers reveal incomprehension in their simplistic, out-of-context use of Matthew 6, 28. The biblical originals, when properly read in combination with verse 33,¹³ is clearly an advocacy for strenuous efforts to live up to Christian ideals rather than a condonation for laziness. Their improper use of the biblical allusion is particularly significant here, considering the fact that they are at the turning point of their lives, and, in terms of the dramatic action, they are making their last appearance. It reaffirms their incomprehension and implies, furthermore, that despite physical freedom, their bondage to incomprehension will remain. But Ephraim's speeches are most saturated with biblical allusions, which becomes a sure index of the great extent of his imprisonment, hardness, and incomprehension, and, as the denouement bears it out, a sure prediction of his inability to

change for the better.

Since Ephraim is the most negatively presented character, O'Neill's negative use of the biblical echo is more prominent in relation to him. Among other things, the biblical echo used in this connection creates three major ironies which bear on Ephraim's state of imprisonment, hardness, and incomprehension, and the cause and consequences thereof.

The first major irony is located in Ephraim's many references to stone which vibrate with the biblical echo. Such references, which are clues to understanding Ephraim's concept of hardness and hence the etiology of his monomania, are most meaningfully concentrated in the prolonged soliloquy where Ephraim reviews his past life.¹⁴ The soliloquy reveals that as a young man, Ephraim deliberately took a stony field to farm in the belief that "When ye kin make corn sprout out o' stones, God's livin' in yew" (p. 236). It also reveals that he was once tempted to seek opportunities in a richer land; but a divine injunction, so he thinks, interfered with this attempt. In the course of time, as his soliloquy further reveals, he has developed a highly idiosyncratic concept of God, the essence of which is clearly expressed in the following passage: "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!" (p. 237). There is a quasi-scriptural tone in the soliloquy because of the many biblical allusions used there. First, there is the obvious reference to Matthew 16, 18: "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church." Besides, there is the echo of such biblical references to God as the rock as "The Rock of his salvation"(Deuteronomy 32, 15), "the Rock that begat thee" (Deuteronomy 32, 18), and "my rock and my

fortress" (Psalm 31, 3). Finally, there is an echo of Jeremiah 48, 28: "O ye that dwell in Moab, leave the cities, and dwell in the rock."¹⁵ But, despite partial, peripheral affinities with the biblical originals, the allusions are more significant as oversimplifications and distortions of them. Read with the biblical originals in mind, the soliloquy acutely shows the speaker's inability to differentiate (for example, between the rock referred to Peter and that referred to God) and literal-mindedness, as evidenced by, for example, his regarding God as literally existing in the stones. Also with the biblical originals in mind, the reasoning process involved in Ephraim's establishment of his concept of God becomes apparent (God is the Rock. Rock is hard, therefore God is hard). He obviously commits a fallacy of equivocation by confusing the metaphorical rock with the mineral rock. This is a further testimony to his incomprehension.

A significant irony about Ephraim, as revealed by the above discussion, is that he has developed and become bound to a religion which, contrary to his belief, can find no scriptural endorsement. Another significant irony lies in the fact that his bondage to this religion, besides accounting for his pathetic situation, sets him farthest apart from the Christian ideals. Ephraim's life is reduced to a wasted existence in his effort to live according to the dictates devolved (again, further grievous misapplication and fallacious thinking are involved here) from his religious belief. The physical aspect of this wasted existence is best demonstrated by another passage from his soliloquy: "Stones I picked 'em up an' piled 'em into walls, every day a hefted stone . . . fencin' in the fields that was mine, whar I'd made thin's grow out o' His hand" (II, 2, p. 237). But barrenness

of his existence is more psychological than physical. To emulate his hard God, he hardens his heart against whatever appears to him as manifestations of softness, such as leniency and love, which finally leads to his total alienation. If we consider this psychological alienation in the relevant biblical context, as the play's biblical echo provokes this attempt, we find a paramount irony here. Ephraim runs counter to a scriptural teaching which implicitly denounces the hardened heart for, presumably, its inability to reciprocate with human love and consequently divine love: "A new heart also will I give you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36, 26).

In addition to the irony arising out of the stone references, there is another major irony concerning virility. Ephraim is very proud of his physical power. He considers himself "sound 'n' tough as hickory" (II, 1, p. 232) and physically superior to most young men: "By the Eternal, I kin break most of the young fellers' backs at any kind of work . . ." (II, 1, p. 234). To a simple-minded man like Ephraim, physical power is often equated with virility. Furthermore, the role of the biblical patriarch echoing in him reinforces the association of virility with him. The chief concern of the biblical patriarchs, as Marshall John Holt has pointed out, was the establishment and continuation of the family,¹⁶ and an impressive blessing of God to them was the promise to multiply their seed "as the stars of the heaven" (Genesis 22, 17 and 26, 4). The irony concerning Ephraim in this connection arises from his failure to fulfill the role of a procreative patriarch.

Ephraim's life-long bondage to a religion of hardness incapacitates

him for natural, spontaneous responses to the erotic love. It is significant that the only time he verbalizes his erotic desire for Abbie, he uses the following corrupted, jumbled version of the Song of Solomon as vehicle of communication: "Yew air my Rose o' Sharon! Behold, yew air fair; yer two breasts air like two fawns; yer navel be like a round goblet; yer belly be like a heap o' wheat" (II, 1, p. 232). Clearly, the inevitable mask created by the use of a convention, the lifelessness of expression owing to clumsy transplantation of biblical conceits, and the general theatrical tone of the passage--all these are unfit for expressing the most genuine and spontaneous feeling he is supposed to have on that occasion. Thus the passage reflects adversely on Ephraim in relation to virility.

A virility-related irony which is more dramatically conveyed is found in the episode concerning the promise of an heir to Ephraim. Ephraim has a typical patriarch's aspiration for an heir, as is expressed in the following remark of his: "A son is me--my blood--mine" (II, 1, p. 234). He never regards any of his adult sons as an heir by reason of the manifest hostility between father and sons; this explains his ecstasy at Abbie's indication of willingness to bear a child to him. As has been previously pointed out, the beginning part of this episode, that is, where Abbie is presented as revealing her intention, echoes the blessing of an heir to Rachel and to Abraham and Sarah. The irony here lies in the fact that the nature of the blessing to Ephraim is diametrically different from the blessing to biblical characters. That the blessing to Ephraim is ironic is clear from the start since it is understood by readers that Abbie views an heir out of her as an expedient to secure the ultimate possession of the farm.

The irony becomes most poignant when it is revealed at the end of the episode that the child was fathered by Eben. Thus what has promised to be a blessing turns out to be a curse which causes Ephraim the greatest possible humiliation. The episode is in a sense an ironic comment on Ephraim's virility; it derives, to a large extent, its ironic impact from the biblical echo.

Thematically speaking, Ephraim's failure to be procreative is part of a larger pattern of barrenness which characterizes his life as a consequence of thralldom to a religion of hardness. The fact that at the end of the play he is left alone when all his sons, for one reason or another, have left the farm, is, symbolically, an ultimate negation of his virility. The biblical echo which links him to the biblical patriarchs accentuates his disparity from them in terms of procreateness.

If the irony we have just discussed arises from Ephraim's unfulfillment of the role as a biblical patriarch, still another major irony arises from his failure to fulfill the role as a biblical prophet. This last irony most emphatically comments on his lack of understanding about himself and about people and happenings around him.

Ephraim seems to regard himself as prophet-like, and such a self-image ironically reflects his incomprehension. In one of his remarks, as quoted and mocked at by Simeon, he all but explicitly identifies himself with the prophets: "'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 and thar he knew plumb well he was goin' whorin', the stinkin' old hypocrite!" (I, 3, p. 215). Simeon's caustic criticism shows the

great disparity between Ephraim's self-image and what he actually appears to others. Ephraim's concept of himself as prophet-like is also revealed--though less explicitly--in many of his other remarks, which often contain within themselves elements to prove his self-image as unwarranted. In one such remark, addressed to Abbie, he recounts what guided him to take her for wife: ". . . the voice o' God cryin' in my wilderness, in my lonesomeness--t' go out an' seek and find . . . I sought ye an' I found ye!" (II, 2, p. 238). Here Ephraim suggests his likelihood to prophets by referring to his experience of direct communion with God. The likelihood is further suggested by his choice of markedly Bible-echoing diction and phrasing as the medium of expression. The remark contains allusions to Matthew 7, 7: ". . . seek, and ye shall find"; to Mark 1, 3: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness"; and possibly also to Numbers 9,1: "And the Lord spoke unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai." However, what he identifies as the divine call is obviously a mere biological drive. Granting that the Old Testament abounds in instances which glorify the erotic love, Ephraim's attributing biblical significance to a raw life force in this particular instance is downright overstatement and improper at that. Considering that the play is--outwardly at least--intended to be realistic, the situation here actually involves an ordinary person expressing an ordinary aspiration. The improper overstatement testifies to the speaker's lack of understanding and meanwhile causes the implicit concept of himself as prophet-like to appear absurdly unwarranted.

The irony concerning Ephraim's unfulfillment of the role as a prophet arises primarily from his incomprehension of the people and

happenings around him, or, to put it another way, from his false prophecies. His prophecies have the equivocality characteristic of most oracles; only here it is he, the prognosticator, who proves to be the uncomprehending party. One significant example is found in his prediction of the redemptive function of the new-born baby.¹⁷ Lamenting over his alienation in that prolonged soliloquy, and bitterly expressing his doubt that anyone will ever really understand him, Ephraim abruptly brings up the idea of a redeeming son; the abruptness with which the idea is introduced suggests its possible significance. The spectacular nature of the word "redeem" (noted, of course, for its biblical and religious significance) in the following excerpt from the play further enhances the possibility of significance:

Cabot. (Pushing her [Abbie] away from him angrily)
Ye don't know nothin'--nor never will. If ye don't
have a son t' redeem ye. . . (This in a tone of
cold threat) (II, 2, p. 238).

The subsequent development of the dramatic action confirms the significance of the idea, for the child turns out to perform a redemptive function, only, ironically, not in the sense as Ephraim originally meant it. Significantly, it is through the sacrifice of the child that the love between Eben and Abbie becomes consolidated and sublimated. Eben fully realizes the intensity of his love for Abbie only after he has reported the infanticide to the sheriff, and his decision to share the punishment exalts the basis for their love from purely sexual attraction to mutual concern. The child proves redemptive even in relation to Ephraim. The only time he is completely freed from the bondage to hardness is the moment when he learns of the death of the child, though that lasts only briefly. The following passage shows

his spontaneous response:

(He lapses into crushed silence--then with a strange emotion) He's dead, sart'n. I felt his heart. Pore little critter! (He blinks back one tear, wiping his sleeve across his nose.) (III, 4 p. 264).

This is the only time, he, being lachrymal, has visibly shown softness; more important, this softness is a sign of charity since by this time he has already known that the child was begot by Eben.

Another example of Ephraim's false prophecy is found in a speech where the old man describes the significance of the illicit love and the infanticide in relation to the future: "Ye make a slick pair o' murderin' turtle doves! Ye'd ought t' be both hung on the same limb an' left thar t' swing in the breeze an' rot--a warnin' t' old fools like me t' b'ar lonesomeness alone--and fur young fools like ye t' hobble their lust" (III, 4, p. 267). This speech again underscores the speaker's incomprehension. When the meaning of the play--or, the authorial point of view--is taken into consideration, Ephraim is right in his assertion that the events ought to persuade a person like him to bear the consequences of a hardened heart alone, but he is wrong in his assertion that they ought to discourage those capable of love from struggling for it. Read in this perspective, Ephraim's use of an extended metaphor in which the two lovers are compared to turtle doves becomes significant. The turtle dove (or dove, pigeon) is often mentioned in the Bible. In the Song of Solomon, its frequent use, as George Soper Cansdale in All the Animals of the Bible Land points out, "is largely as a term of endearment, from the pigeons which pair for a long time as show obvious signs of affection in and around the nest."¹⁸ In likening the two lovers to the turtle doves, Ephraim unintentionally points to their capability for affection, which, to be

sure, characterizes their love after the murder. Another irony arises from the biblical association of the turtle doves with sacrifices for purification. The turtle doves were used in the offering for purification, as it was commanded in, for example, Numbers 6 and Leviticus 12, 6. The two lovers' acceptance of punishment can be interpreted as sacrificing themselves in an offering for their own purification. As a matter of fact, the purifying effect of the offering is already felt immediately after their decision to accept the punishment, considering that their love has since become sublimated. The comparison of the two lovers to the turtle doves involves a significance beyond the speaker's comprehension.

The discussion made heretofore has, hopefully, established the point that the biblical use, viewed in relation to the meaning of the play, is remarkable for functioning to bring about irony. Their irony-creating function notwithstanding, the biblical allusions themselves, as they appear in the play, often emanate a biblical flavor, as evidenced by the following speech by Ephraim which was previously examined in another context: ". . . the voice o' God cryin' in my wilderness, in my lonesomeness--t' go out an' seek an' find . . . I sought ye an' I found ye!" The passage's unmistakable tonal affinity to the Bible is obviously attributable to its many allusions. But, more important, it is attributable to the high seriousness in the speaker's attitude towards the use of the allusions. As regards the speaker's attitude, Ephraim is in direct contrast to, for example, the imagined narrator of "Absolom and Achitophel" (to be distinguished, of course, from John Dryden). The latter can be regarded as parodizing the Second Book of Samuel in the sense that while relating a biblical

event, he deliberately adds anachronisms which effect a comical tone. The irony in "Absolom and Achitophel" in relation to the biblical echo lies in the poem's parodic tone. By contrast, the irony in the passage under discussion is derived from the incompatibility between the "voice" of the prophet implied in the passage and the failure of the speaker to fulfill the role of a prophet, as manifested to a small extent within the passage itself but mostly in the larger context of the whole play. Since most instances of the biblical echo exist as part of Ephraim's speeches, the characteristic in relation to irony found in this specific passage seems representative of most instances of the biblical echo in the play. Significantly, if the biblical echo is closely related to theme by reason of the irony it produces, it is closely related to form by reason of a tonal affinity to the Bible, which it creates. Specifically, the biblical echo functions to endue the play with qualities of Greek tragedy.

First of all, the biblical atmosphere established by the many biblical associations helps to lend the issues treated in the play a universal significance. An important quality of Greek tragedy is its serious treatment of fundamental human issues, which implies, of course, universal relevance. Several critics have noticed this quality in the play. For example, Leech finds in it the suggestion of "the idea of a recurrent pattern in human relationships,"¹⁹ and Tiusanen finds an element of Greek tragedy in its treatment of basic human passion.²⁰ As a matter of fact, that the play, when reduced to its very essentials, is a dramatization of the Oedipal complex entails a paradox as regards universality. On the one hand, the use of a supposedly universal psychological phenomenon as its basic idea

automatically promises universal relevance; on the other hand, when what exists in an amorphous state in the unconscious is expressed in terms of events in the conscious realm, these events may appear as extremely particular cases. But for some saving elements, Desire, with its descriptions of hatred between father and sons, of incest, and of infanticide, could easily pass for the case history of a neurotic family. To secure universal significance for Desire, O'Neill has employed, among other things, the Hippolytus-Phaedra-Theseus myth and the convention of Greek tragedy, which appears in the presentation suggestive of --as Tiusanen points out--the Dionysian levity and "time of eternal recurrence."²¹ Finally, there is the biblical atmosphere. The characters' biblical names, their Bible-echoing language, situations with biblical associations, biblical associations in Ephraim's characterization--all these tend to remove the setting of the play from its professed New England of 1850 to an indefinitely remote "biblical" land in a "biblical" age. Such a suggestion of the past in the present and there in here achieves a sense of universality. As mentioned before, critics have noticed the combination of realism and symbolism in Desire. Universalization through the biblical echo seems a means to achieve such combination in the broad sense that what the Cabots experience is thereby made symbolic of a timeless and ubiquitous human situation.

In addition, the biblical associations tend to relate Ephraim to a tragic hero. John Henry Raleigh has summed up O'Neill's characterization of Ephraim as follows: "Of all O'Neill characters Cabot is the one who comes closest to suggesting a great natural force and who is a complete stranger to guilt. He is the New England farmer raised to

mythic proportions."²² Though not exactly on the same ground (for example, the contention that Ephraim suggests a natural force seems questionable),²³ we also find Ephraim a larger-than-life character. The larger-than-life dimensions seem manifested in his physical prowess (considering that he, a septuagenarian, can outdance all young men and overwhelm Eben in a brawl), his relentless obsession with hardness, and his sensed utter alienation. The last two manifestations almost exalt him to the status of a tragic hero in the sense that he suffers for unswerving dedication to a "cause" and is keenly conscious of the suffering. Here his association with the biblical prophets becomes significant. Prophets' lives were characterized by loneliness and misery. Even though the Bible contains few direct references to their private lives, the prevalent depressed tone that characterizes their prophecies seems indicative of their felt alienation. Two more specific references are, however, found in the Book of Jeremiah. The following remark by Jeremiah, which expresses intense weariness with existence itself, vividly, though still indirectly, points to a prophet's alienation: "Wheretofore came I forth out of the womb to see labor and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?" (20, 18). A prophet's sense of misery was aggravated by the awareness that he was powerless to desist from playing his assigned role. Significantly, Jeremiah described the compulsion to prophesy in terms of an urgent need to relieve physical pain: "Then I said I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" (20, 9). It is noteworthy that there is a parallel between the biblical prophet's

suffering and that of Ephraim in that both's alienation results from a compulsive dedication. Ephraim's other prophet-related qualities compel one to notice this parallel, and accordingly, his suffering, owing to the biblical association, acquires a semblance of dignity, which in turn enhances his resemblance to a tragic hero.

Finally, from a strictly technical point of view, the biblical echo seems to help achieve a compactness which characterizes Greek tragedy. As already mentioned, the larger-than-life dimensions in Ephraim's character are established largely through the association of him with the biblical prophets; in this way, suggestion takes the place of direct delineation. The biblical associations also help cause two intrinsically melodramatic elements, namely, Ephraim's unusual physical power and the infanticide episode, to fit effortlessly into the supposedly realistic setting of the play, for the suggestion of remoteness, brought about by the biblical atmosphere, relaxes the need to adhere to strict realism. The biblical associations, furthermore, replace discursive elaborations otherwise necessary to lend credibility to the potentially improbable situation in which father and sons find themselves in the beginning part of the play. At this point of the dramatic action Ephraim is presented as exercising tyrannical authority over his sons. The latter's total submission seems unusual, considering their detestation of his tyrannical control, their physical maturity to resist it, and, most important, their utter lack of affection for him. Here the association of absolute paternal authority exercised by the biblical patriarchs most likely functions to make this situation credible.

One thing noteworthy about the biblical echo in this play is its simultaneous performance of two functions which under most circumstances seem mutually exclusive. Such a performance is possible here because the biblical allusions, with other elements, are employed for the overall purpose of establishing the play as tragedy. Significantly, the ironies brought about by the biblical use are serious in tone; even though they often function to comment on the absurdity about Ephraim, an ever-present implication of pathos in the absurdity precludes any comical possibility. Accordingly, seriousness in tone unites the irony and the biblical atmosphere, both of which are created by the biblical echo.

Another thing noteworthy about the biblical echo here is that it chiefly serves the aesthetic purposes, for from it alone we can make no inferences about O'Neill's views on the biblical teaching, or, for that matter, Christianity. This distinguishes Desire from, for example, The Grapes of Wrath, which also draws on the biblical echo for an ironic effect and a biblical atmosphere. Casy in The Grapes of Wrath is, in a sense, a counterpart of Ephraim. The novel derives part of its irony from Casy's preaching of a religion of love, which, at least on the surface, shockingly deviates from the accepted exegesis of the Bible and, for that matter, orthodox Christianity. But Casy differs from Ephraim in that he represents the authorial point of view, and the irony in his preaching arises from the disparity between the orthodox interpretation of the Bible and Steinbeck's private interpretation of the Bible from the standpoint of a revolutionary-humanist. The many biblical echoes function to attach scriptural significance to Casy's preaching, thereby to assert that his religion

of love essentially adheres to the true gospel spirit and is thus a valid means of salvation. The biblical use in The Grapes of Wrath, therefore, chiefly functions to convey Steinbeck's religious views. As for Desire, since Ephraim does not represent the authorial point of view, the ironic use of biblical allusions in relation to him only serves to effect a poignant comment on his imprisonment, hardness, and incomprehension; it does not provide clues to O'Neill's religious views. Likewise, the biblical atmosphere functions, just as the Hippolytus myth and the convention of Greek tragedy, to give the play a tragic form.

A ramification from the above discussion of the biblical echo in relation to the meaning and the form of the play bears on the nature of the multiple layers of significance attributed to elements in literary works. Whereas it is a known fact that a literary element (for example, a passage, a motif, or an allusion) may possess multiple layers of significance due to its particular intrinsic quality (for example, its capabilities for evoking associations), it seems less obvious that a literary element without the above-mentioned intrinsic quality may, under some circumstances, also radiate multiple layers of significance when various other elements in the literary work are respectively considered in relation to it, or to put it another way, when it is examined from various perspectives. The biblical echo in Desire, when viewed respectively from the perspective of the theme and that of the form, radiates two different layers of significance. This seems to add substance to that latter hypothesis concerning the nature of the multiple layers of significance in a literary element.

FOOTNOTES

¹Timo Tiusanen in O'Neill's Scenic Images (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 151; Sophus Keith Winters in Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1934), 257; and Clifford Leech in Eugene O'Neill (New York: Grove Press, 1963) have made such an observation.

²p. 151.

³p. 51

⁴In John Gassner, ed., O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pp. 57-61.

⁵p. 58.

⁶All the quotations from the Bible throughout this paper are from the King James Version.

⁷References to Desire Under the Elms throughout this paper are to Eugene O'Neill, Desire Under the Elms in Vol. I of The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (1928; rpt. New York: Random House, 1941), pp. 203-69.

⁸II, 1, pp. 234-35.

⁹For determining the frequency with which and the context in which this formula is used see J. J. Von Allman, ed., A Companion to the Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), under "Word."

¹⁰See John Marshall Holt, The Patriarchs of Israel (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1964), pp. 12-13, 22, 27-29, 39-40.

¹¹I, 1, p. 204.

¹²Both Racey in Gassner, p. 60 and Egil Törnqvist in A Drama of Souls (Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist and Wiksell's Boktryckeri AB, 1968), p. 165 have pointed out this significant implication pivotal to the meaning of the play.

¹³Which reads: "But see ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

¹⁴II, 2, pp. 236-38.

¹⁵This, of course, cannot be taken as an advocacy for living in the rocky area for its own sake. For example, according to Walter Lewis Wilson, in Wilson's Dictionary of Bible Types (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), p. 384, the verse "is a call for sinners to leave their state of wickedness and give themselves to Christ Jesus, the Rock of ages."

¹⁶p. 93.

¹⁷Leech is of the opinion that the murder of the child does not have a clear function (Eugene O'Neill, p. 52). The following discussion, hopefully, will suggest a new angle from which to explore its possible function.

¹⁸All the Animals in the Bible Land (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p. 173.

¹⁹p. 47.

²⁰p. 151.

²¹p. 158.

²²The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 55.

²³Admittedly the term "a natural force" allows many interpretations. I would agree with Raleigh if he uses it to refer to either the seemingly charismatic quality in Ephraim's character or the suggestiveness with which the larger-than-life dimensions in Ephraim's character are conveyed. Otherwise Abbie seems the only character in Desire who suggests a natural force in terms of complete freedom from inhibitions and almost complete impregnability to any sense of guilt.

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