

An Interpretation of *Desire Under the Elms* from Žižek's Ideological Theory

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Abstract: This paper takes Slavoj Žižek's theory of ideological criticism as the framework to interpret the deep structure of the conflicts among material desire, sexual desire and ethics in Eugene O'Neill's drama *Desire Under the Elms*. Through the analysis of the characters' possessive desire for the farm, the incestuous love between Abbie and Eben, and the division of their subjectivity, it reveals how the ideological illusion in the capitalist patriarchal society manipulates the behavior of the subject through the mechanism of the "unconscious", and explores the dilemma and tragic nature of the subject in the process of "traversing the illusion".

Keywords: Slavoj Žižek; Ideological Illusion; Sublime Object; *Desire Under The Elms*; Symbolization

1. Introduction

Žižek's ideological theory (2017) inherits and develops Marx's alienation theory and Lacan's psychoanalysis theory. Its core point is that ideology is not a "false consciousness", but a practical system of constructing subject cognition through symbolic order. It stitches up the cracks of social confrontation through the illusion of "sublime object" (such as money, country and religion), and makes the subject voluntarily obey the power structure.^[1]

This theory provides a new perspective for interpreting *Desire Under the Elms*. The tragedy of the characters in the play is not only the out-of-control of personal desires, but also the inevitable result of the operation of capitalist ideology. On the surface, the farm family in O'Neill's works is the epitome of Puritan ethics in New England, but in fact it implies the erosion of human nature and family ties by capitalist relations of production. This paper will analyze from three dimensions: the symbolization of farm as a sublime object; the ideological integration of desire and the

dilemma of subjectivity division, and finally get its tragic enlightenment.

2. Introduction of Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*

Desire Under the Elms (2006) is a classic tragic work by American playwright Eugene O'Neill, which was created in 1924 and premiered in Boston. The following year, it was put on Broadway stage and caused a sensation. This play is regarded as one of O'Neill's most expressive and psychological works, which combines the fatalism of ancient Greek tragedy with the conflict of desires in modern society, and establishes its position in the history of American drama.^[2]

Set on a farm in New England in the 19th century, the story revolves around the power, desire and revenge of three generations of the Cabot family. Old Cabot is the owner of the farm, stubborn and stingy, and his possessive desire for land far exceeds his family feelings. He and his ex-wife's sons had many conflicts over property inheritance, and finally drove their sons out of the farm. Eben, the son of old Cabot and his second wife, is full of hatred for his father and eager to prove his existence value by inheriting the farm. He conspired with his half-brother to seize the farm, but his plan fell through because his father married a young wife. Abbie, the third wife of old Cabot, was only 20 years old and married a farmer because of poverty. She had a taboo love affair with Eben and tried to compete for the inheritance right of the farm by giving birth to children. However, Abbie gradually fell into the true feelings for Eben, and finally killed the baby to prove her love, which led Eben to surrender to the police and the two people went to destruction.

3. The Core Dimension of Žižek's Ideological Theory

Žižek (2017) thinks that ideology is not "false consciousness", but constructs the symbolic

order of social reality through “unconscious illusion”. The operation of ideology depends on the subject’s “knowingly committing crimes” to the symbol system, that is, “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it”.^[1] This cynical ideology reveals the symbiotic relationship between material desires and ethical norms in capitalist society. According to Professor Xia Ying (2019), this cynicism stems from the manipulation of desire by ideological illusion, and by internalizing contradictions into jouissance, the subject voluntarily participates in the reproduction of symbolic order.^[3] The research of Yuan Xin and Yan Mengwei (2021) pointed out that even if spontaneous ideology debunks the “illusion” or “delusion” created by free ideology through theoretical reflection, it does not mean that people can get rid of the domination and control of ideology.^[4]

Žižek (2017) proposed that ideology stitches the traumatic cracks (i.e. Symptoms) of social confrontation through “fantasy”. Illusion is not a cover for reality, but a condition for constructing reality. For example, the illusion of “free choice” in democratic politics conceals structural oppression, but at the same time becomes the driving force for the operation of social order.^[1] Han Zhenjiang (2009) takes Lacan’s desire chart as a framework to explain how illusion guides the subject’s desire and creates symbolic identity through the sliding of signifier chain (such as the concepts of “equality” and “progress”).^[5] Zhang Yibing (2004) further pointed out that social symptoms, as the “surplus” of illusion, are not only the collapse point of ideology, but also the breakthrough point of radical political action.^[6] The function of ideological illusion is to cover up the internal contradictions of social order and maintain the power structure by endowing “signifier chain” with consistency. Illusion is not a cover for desire, but a framework for the organization of desire. As a “sublime object”, the farm in the play is the materialized symbol of this illusion.

4. The Farm: the Ideological Illusion

Žižek (2017) pointed out that the sublime object is the core device of ideology, which conceals the exploitative essence behind it by endowing the empty symbolic object with “sanctity”.^[1] In the play, the farm is such an object. Old Cabot regarded it as “a more real

existence than flesh and blood”, and even declared: “This land sucks my blood dry, but it is mine!”^[2] Farm is not only a symbol of material wealth, but also a symbolic link to maintain family power relations. The old Cabot legalized exploitation by sanctifying the farm through religious language, such as “God-given land”.

4.1 The Cabot Family as the Sublime Object

In Eugene O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms*, the farm of the old Cabot family is not only a space for material production, but also a symbolic carrier for maintaining family power relations. As a symbolized “sublime object”, the farm bears the compensatory fantasy of the old Cabot about the lack of existence and becomes the core support of his subjectivity construction. Old Cabot sanctified the farm as a “monument built with stone and blood”,^[2] He sanctified the possession of land as a religious ceremony, and this ritual practice stripped the farm from its practical value and sublimated it into a transcendental symbolic existence through repetition and strengthening.

This religious symbolic violence transforms the farm into an “impossible real domain”, which is not only the object of desire, but also the barrier of desire, forcing family members to become “docile bodies” in discipline. In the process of symbolization of the farm, “surplus pleasure” was generated, and old Cabot obtained satisfaction beyond material interests in his possession of the land, which in turn strengthened his loyalty to the symbolic order. This mechanism explains why he chose to stick to the farm after discovering Abbie’s betrayal, that is, the sublimity of symbols has surpassed the specific interpersonal conflicts. It is precisely because his persistence in the farm transcends the practical value that the farm becomes an illusion object to fill the anxiety of the subject. This worship of material desires perfectly fits Žižek’s statement that “ideology has penetrated into the capillaries of social existence”.

4.2 The Alienation in the Competition for Inheritance Rights

Old Cabot elevates the symbolic value of the farm above blood relations, transforming land ownership into a religious-like redemption ritual. This symbolic violence constructs a power network centered on the farm, where

sons are stripped of their human subjectivity, reduced to “slaves who irrigate the land with their sweat,” while wives are simplified into “tools for breeding heirs.”^[2] When Simon and Peter discover that the farm’s inheritance rights merely serve as a façade for their father’s continued domination, their choice to join the Gold Rush precisely illustrates Žižek’s assertion that “when symbolic identification fails, the subject inevitably falls into existential anxiety.” Following the collapse of the fantasy, individuals can only fill their existential void through pursuit of new symbolic constructs (such as the Gold Rush).

Eben’s subjectivity alienation presents two dimensions. He is not only a rebel of the symbolic order of the farm, but also a faithful practitioner. This contradiction stems from his guilt towards his mother and his resistance to his father’s power. Eben’s attachment to the farm began with his commitment to his mother. He regarded the land as a continuation of his mother’s life, and this emotion was symbolized as possession of the farm. In the confrontation with his father, Eben tried to redeem his mother by seizing the farm, but repeated his father’s materialized logic in his action. He symbolized Abbie’s body as a new object of contention, and sublimated her lust as an alternative compensation for her mother’s image. This psychological mechanism is highly consistent with Žižek’s (2017) statement that “ideology induces subjects to participate in self-exploitation through surplus pleasure”, and finally falls into madness in the double alienation of “occupying farms” and “occupying women”.

5. The Ideological Collection of Desire

Žižek emphasized that desire is always mediated by symbolic order, and its object is actually “the desire of others”. In *Desire Under the Elms*, it shows the alienation process from biological instinct to symbolic order of the members of the Cabot family. Ideology is like an invisible but indestructible net, and its tragedy lies in the fact that the more the subject tries to break free from ideology, the deeper he falls into its cage.

5.1 Abbie and Eben: Alienated Lust

Lacan once pointed out that human desire is more empty than nothingness. The being of the individual subject is grounded in nothingness,

but desire is more terrible than nothing, because it is more true and false than truth. Therefore, in this sense, desire will always fill the gap of dissatisfaction.^[7] The relationship between Abbie and Eben is a vivid portrayal of this desire. They yearn for each other and sink constantly in the whirlpool of emotions, but they can’t really have each other all the time. Their seemingly bold incest love seems to be a fierce rebellion against patriarchy on the surface, but in fact it exposes the ingenious integration of desire by capitalism.

The essence of Abbie’s marriage is a capital transaction. She tried to achieve class leap by occupying the farm, but fell victim to the symbolic order. The lust between her and Eben is essentially an alternative satisfaction to capital power. However, under the manipulation of symbolic order, her desire has already deviated from the track of pure emotion, and her body has become a new symbolic capital and a tool to obtain material benefits. Abby tried to seek a place for herself in this family full of interest disputes through her relationship with Eben, but finally she went to destruction because of the counter-attack of symbolic order.

Eben’s desire is more complicated, which is mixed with deep empathy for his mother and strong revenge for his patriarchy. He regards Abbie as “the incarnation of mother”, and this emotion has been encoded by symbolic order from the beginning. In his subconscious, Abbie is not only a woman who has emotional entanglements with him, but also a symbol of his resistance to patriarchy and memory of his mother. Under the influence of symbols, his emotions become distorted and complex, and cannot follow the natural emotional logic development. The satisfaction of Eben’s desire is always in a state of delay, because its object is actually the Real, which cannot be accommodated by the symbolic world, and his relationship with Abbie is always in a state of tearing.

This alienation and struggle of desire profoundly reveals the tragic fate of the characters in *Desire under the Elms* under the symbolic order. Their emotions and behaviors seem to be independent, but in fact they are invisibly manipulated by symbolic order and become victims of ideology. This further confirms Žižek’s profound insight into the relationship between desire and ideology, that

is, desire often deviates from its true direction under the intermediary of symbolic order, which makes the subject fall into endless pain and struggle.

5.2 Abbie under the Patriarchal Symbolic Order: The Double Strangulation of Objectification and Sacralization

Within patriarchal ideology, Abbie is simultaneously molded into the “embodiment of material desire” (acquiring the farm through marriage) and subjected to the exacting standards of the “maternal myth.” Her existential predicament perfectly illustrates Žižek's critique of ideological mechanisms. Through the dual coding of “objectification-sacralization,” patriarchal society constructs the female body as a symbolic vessel for desire. Her rebellion reveals Žižek's theoretical framework wherein ideology maintains dominance by granting subjects false alternatives. Women, deprived of authentic subjectivity, are confined to pseudo-choices between “material embodiment” and “maternal mythology.” Though her infanticide breaches ethical norms, it remains trapped within the new fantasy of “love supreme.”

Abbie's ethical dilemma similarly originates from the conflict between natural desire (maternity) and symbolic identity (farm possessor). When she attempts to return to pure maternal instinct (the Natural) through infanticide, declaring “I killed the farm's heir, not my child,”^[2] she paradoxically employs the language of the symbolic order for self-justification, instrumentalizing the act as resistance against farm ownership. While the infanticide constitutes a violent rupture of patriarchal symbolic order, through destroying the infant as symbolic vessel, she attempts to “traverse the fantasy” and return to Lacanian “the Real” maternal instinct.^[1] This act remains pre-defined by patriarchal symbolic networks. Motherhood is sacralized as the core of “family ethics,” while the female body is reduced to an object of material exchange.

Žižek notes that capitalist ideology naturalizes ethical norms (e.g., the sanctity of motherhood) to conceal their symbolic construction. Abbie's infanticide violently exposes this pseudo-naturalness, attempting to “traverse the fantasy” through radical action that echoes Žižek's concept of violent severance from

symbolic order. The tragedy lies in its failure to escape ideological recursive logic: the more intensely one attempts to break free from symbolic order, the more one reinforces its violence.

6. Subjective Split: Collusion and Resistance of Victims

Žižek (2017) believes that the effectiveness of ideology lies in the subject's active recognition of illusion. The characters' competition for farms in the play is the concrete embodiment of capitalist ideology of “sanctification of property”.^[1] O'Neill's naturalistic brushwork coincides with Žižek's criticism of ideology: the destruction of characters in the play is not accidental, but the alienation result inevitably caused by capitalist symbolic order. The “unshakable” of the farm and the disintegration of the family form irony, revealing the fragility of ideological illusion.

6.1 Old Cabot: The “Inhuman” Embodiment of Ideology

Old Cabot is a typical representative of “ideological machine”. He declared that “God wants me to be cold”, but in fact he alienated himself into the executor of capital logic through religious discourse. The ideology of freedom is “an inherent ideological concept as a dogma, a complex of thoughts, beliefs, concepts, etc. Its purpose is to persuade us to believe its ‘truth’, but actually serve a special power system that is secret”.^[8] His “inhumanity” is not a moral defect, but the result of capitalist ideology requiring the subject to be self-instrumentalized.

Žižek's concept of “the Inhuman” proposed in *The Parallax View* (2014) materializes in *Desire Under the Elms* as Old Cabot's symbolic mode of existence. Through spatial domination (designating his deceased wife's bedroom as forbidden space) and linguistic violence (obsessively asserting “my farm”), he constructs himself as the embodiment of symbolic order. When Cabot repeatedly declares “the farm needs a man's iron fist,” he essentially enacts Foucault's “disciplinary power,” molding family members into “docile subjects” compliant with capitalist logic.

Consciously aware of the farm's sanctity as self-constructed fantasy, Old Cabot nevertheless perpetuates its symbolic authority through violence. This “acting in spite of

knowledge” cynicism exemplifies Žižek's (2017) observation: contemporary ideology has transformed from Marx's “they do not know it, but they are doing it” to “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.”^[1]

6.2 Eben: Tearing Loyalty and Resistance

Eben struggled in the gap between the symbolic world and the real world. Eben's commitment to his mother internalized patriarchal ethics and regarded the farm as “mother's flesh and blood”.^[2] This loyalty is essentially the recognition of symbolic order, and he obtains false subjectivity by inheriting his mother's symbolic identity. Eben's desire for Abbie is a rebellion against symbolic order. According to Lacan's mirror stage theory, this desire stems from empathic compensation for the image of mother. However, when he symbolized Abby's body as a new object of contention, he was actually repeating the materialization operation of capital logic. Therefore, when he finally chose to surrender to the police, this behavior was not only obeying the symbolic order--accepting legal sanctions, but also escaping the trauma of the real world--alleviating guilt through symbolic punishment.

Old Cabot's “inhumanity” and Eben's “tearing” together constitute the pros and cons of Žižek's sublime object of ideology. This division is not only a tool of oppression, but also an opportunity for liberation. When Eben finally chose to stand trial arm in arm with Abbie he actually touched the nihilistic nature of ideology. Žižek pointed out in *Less Than Nothing* (2012) that this awakening of nihilism is the first step through illusion. Only by acknowledging the lack of desire and refusing to regard symbolic capital as the ultimate meaning of existence can the subject find true freedom in the ideological fissure.

7. Conclusion

Through Žižek's ideological theory, the deep meaning of *Desire Under the Elms* can be revealed: it is not only a family tragedy, but also a fable about capitalist alienation. Even if we see through the falsehood of ideology, the subject still needs to seek redemption in the symbolic order. The sublime illusion of the farm, the symbolic collection of desires and the split dilemma of the subject together constitute

a sharp criticism of capitalist society. The dialogue between *Desire Under the Elms* and Žižek's theory constructs a critical alliance across time and space. When Abbie walked towards the dawn with the dead baby in her arms, this Žižek-style “negative attitude” showed a tragic road for the modern subject trapped in the maze of symbolic order in exchange for redemption. As Žižek put forward in *Violence: Reflection on Six Sides* (2012), the real liberation action must begin with the violent cutting of symbolic order. Therefore, only by facing the nihilistic nature of ideology can we break free from its shackles and move towards real liberation.

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