

# Women's Empowerment in Tragedy: Gendered Narratives and Affective Spaces in *Thunderstorm* and *Desire Under the Elms*\*

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**Abstract**—*Thunderstorm* and *Desire under the Elms* exhibit striking similarities in thematic elements and the portrayal of female characters, which suggests the two playwrights, Cao Yu (1910-1996) and Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), shared aesthetic vision in their creative writings. Prior studies of these plays have often focused on the characterisation of the protagonists, thereby overshadowing gender as a critical factor in shaping tragedies. This paper argues that the tragedies in these works are not merely personal misfortunes but are deeply embedded in gendered dynamics, specifically the oppressive force of phallogentrism. It posits that the central cause of tragedy is the conflict between societal constraints and the female characters' aspirations for power, equality, freedom, and spiritual autonomy. A comparative study of these plays reveals that both Cao Yu and Eugene O'Neill crafted an affective space where the female protagonists, Fanyi and Abbie, despite their different social contexts, share a fundamental human essence. This comparison not only underscores the essence of tragedy within diverse national frameworks but also highlights the commonalities in how the two playwrights perceive and portray women's destinies and existential predicaments.

**Index Terms**—gendered narratives, affective spaces, *Thunderstorm*, *Desire Under the Elms*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Both Cao Yu and Eugene O'Neill are regarded as the "Shakespeare" of their respective countries, having made significant contributions to the history of modern drama. Due to the differing cultural backgrounds of the writers, their plays exhibit distinct artistic personalities in terms of realism, ethical consciousness, tragic form, the roots of female tragedy, and paths to salvation. These differences effectively reflect the cultural traditions of China and America. Nevertheless, numerous scholars have observed that Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* and Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* share certain similarities. These similarities are evident not only in the thematic forms, characterization, and literary techniques but also in deeper narrative structures, such as the authors' concepts of tragedy and their understandings of society and human nature.

Eugene O'Neill introduced the concept of true tragedy to American theatre, while Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* is regarded as the inaugural example of true tragedy in modern Chinese drama. Both *Thunderstorm* and *Desire Under the Elms* utilize an incestuous relationship to develop their narratives and conclude with the destruction of the individual characters. This paper posits that the tragedies in these works are not merely personal misfortunes but are deeply embedded in gender dynamics, specifically the oppressive force of phallogentrism.

## II. FANYI AND ABBIE: "NEW WOMEN" IN OLD FAMILIES

Fanyi and Abbie are the female protagonists in *Thunderstorm* and *Desire Under the Elms*, respectively. Both characters share the commonality of being women who have experienced oppression and endured significant mental distress. They both seek to assert their right to love and be loved, and they are willing to fight for this right with great determination, even committing incest with their stepchildren. However, their actions ultimately lead to severe consequences, including death and madness.

In both works, the presentation of these tragic female characters deviates from the conventional image of traditional tragic figures. Fanyi and Abbie possess profound modern symbolic meanings. Firstly, it can be argued that Eugene O'Neill, the author of *Desire Under the Elms*, was not a male chauvinist. Despite the influence of his early family environment, which caused his personality traits to be out of tune with the societal norms of the time, he held women in high regard. This respect influenced his approach to characterization, allowing him to challenge traditional notions of female roles and explore the concept of female sadness in a way that was both compelling and destructive. The beauty of female tragedy is reflected in the fact that the female characters in O'Neill's works are more morally upright than the male characters and are also more open-minded. This contrasting beauty evokes a sense of admiration from the audience.

Furthermore, the beauty of female sadness in *Desire Under the Elms* is reflected in the transformation of Abbie's

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materialistic desires into spirituality. This transformation is closely related to the era during which O'Neill was writing, a period when the United States was transitioning from liberal capitalism to monopoly capitalism. This transition saw a significant shift in moral concepts, moving from the pursuit of spirituality to the pursuit of material and carnal pleasure. Inevitably, as a woman of the lower class, Abbie was subjected to a great deal of cruel and unfair treatment. In this context, Abbie marries Old Cabot in pursuit of material wealth, despite the considerable age difference between them. However, as the plot progresses, Abbie's perspective shifts, and her pursuit of love gradually supersedes her pursuit of material things. When she develops a relationship and sincere feelings for Old Cabot's son, she resorts to extreme measures to convey the depth of her emotional pain. The destruction of her character presents an extreme sense of beauty, reflecting her inner pain. This allows the audience to understand the deeper connotations of the text. O'Neill creates the character of Abbie from a godlike perspective and vividly expresses through the plot the characteristics of the era embodied by female characters of that time.

O'Neill creates the character of Abbie from a godlike perspective and vividly expresses through the plot the characteristics of the era embodied by female characters of that time. Abbie is 35 years old when she appears in the play. She has just married Cabot, a 76-year-old farmer, and her sole motivation for doing so is to have a place to live when the old man dies. There is no love between her and Cabot, and she experiences his domination on the farm. To secure an heir to her inheritance, Abbie seduces her stepson, the young and robust Eben. However, she develops a genuine affection for Eben, and when Eben suspects that she is only using him to have a son and take over the farm, she kills their son to demonstrate her true feelings. Abbie was born into a lower-class family and has suffered a great deal of humiliation and adversity throughout her life. She informs Eben that her life has been characterized by a pervasive sense of desolation: she was orphaned at an early age, compelled to work for others, married a man prone to alcohol consumption, and both of them were employed by another person. Subsequently, her husband and son died. She believed she was liberated, but she realized that it meant working for a new master and that she had "never worked for her own family" (Eugene, 1988, p. 89). Upon arriving at the farm, her previously suppressed emotions were rekindled. She sought emotional support and to satisfy her physical desires. She felt liberated from the shackles of worldly rituals and laws. From Eben, she experienced a sense of security and warmth that she had never felt before. She regarded their love as her "only joy", which was "more beautiful than heaven." When this love is threatened, she is prepared to kill her son and commit a crime.

Fanyi was born into a wealthy family, married into the Zhou family at the age of 18, and lived the life of a young grandmother. However, she discovered that the Zhou Mansion was a "haunted house," and she was merely one of the furnishings used to instill obedience in the children under Zhou Puyuan's authoritarian rule. This was a particularly cruel form of mental torture. Fanyi is a strong-willed woman with a fiery temperament. She is passionate in her affections and equally passionate in her hatred. However, in the Zhou family, she gradually became a mere shell of her former self. She is not the kind of woman who merely accepts the status quo. She is unwilling to continue living like this. She wants to fight and break the shackles on her body. She fell in love with Zhou Ping, which not only represented a catharsis of her long-suppressed feelings but also served as a form of revenge against Zhou Puyuan. In the isolation of the Zhou Mansion, this deformed love became the sole source of support for her soul and the meaning of her life. However, Zhou Ping subsequently abandoned her, and Fanyi came to realize that a woman cannot be bullied by two generations. Consequently, the most extreme form of love becomes the most intolerable form of hatred, and her revenge ultimately leads to the destruction of the Zhou family and her own destruction.

In this play, both playwrights convey the idea that the pursuit of the freedom to love and be loved is an inherent aspect of human nature and an inalienable right. Any external oppression is contrary to human nature and will inevitably lead to resistance. The greater the oppression, the more forceful the resistance will be, and the result is often tragic. This pursuit of love is a universal aspect of human nature. The playwrights do not divide their characters by race or nationality. Despite the differences in time, status, and environment between Abbie and Fanyi, they share a common desire for love. Consequently, they both commit the same crime. Once they possess the love they desire, they both defend it with great determination. When their cherished love is threatened, they both go to any lengths, including risking their lives, to preserve it. The power displayed by the two protagonists is considerable. Both O'Neill and Cao Yu portray their heroines in a sympathetic manner, indicating the authors' support and celebration of this universal humanity.

Upon Fanyi's appearance, the script provides this description: "Her gaze would be filled with the pain and resentment of a young woman after a disappointment, and the corners of her mouth would curve back slightly, revealing an inhibited woman regulating herself" (Cao, 1996, p. 56). The inhibitions and disappointments imposed on her by Zhou Puyuan are conveyed succinctly, as is the stifling heat of the house and Zhou Puyuan's compulsion to close all the unnecessarily opened windows. It can be argued that the well in the Zhou Mansion symbolizes the well that Zhou Puyuan built brick by brick, sealing its mouth. During the period in which Zhou Puyuan was at home, the Zhou Mansion was characterized by a sense of unease and gloom. There were a total of four clashes between Fanyi and Zhou Puyuan on the same day, epitomizing her resistance over the eighteen years since she married into the Zhou family. On the first two occasions, Zhou Puyuan insisted that she was unwell and needed to drink medicine and see a doctor. Fanyi resisted, but on the first three occasions, she was ultimately forced to submit. On the first occasion, Fanyi refused to drink the medicine, and Zhou Puyuan compelled Zhou Ping to kneel and force his stepmother to drink it. On the second

occasion, Fanyi refused to see a doctor, and Zhou Puyuan compelled Zhou Ping to accompany the doctor to see his stepmother. On the third occasion, Fanyi refused to go upstairs to sleep, and Zhou Puyuan compelled Zhou Ping to accompany his stepmother upstairs so that the servants could wait for her to sleep. Fanyi's capitulation to the despotic authority of the feudal system reflects the ugliness of the persecution of human nature.

Zhou Puyuan has consistently maintained that Fanyi is mentally unstable, publicly declaring her to be insane and hiring a German physician to examine her brain. However, these assertions are false and serve to obfuscate his own criminal conduct. Fifteen years ago, he became intoxicated and informed Fanyi that Zhou Ping was his illegitimate child and that he had abandoned Zhou Ping's mother. Following the third altercation with Zhou Puyuan, Fanyi told Zhou Ping that he should "call a few people to pull me up and lock me up" (Cao, 1996, p. 89). She also stated that he is aware of her understanding of his motives, that he is afraid of her, and that he is willing for others to view her as a monster and a madwoman. These statements further corroborate the narrative of her demise. In the prologue, the stage cue reads, "Suddenly, there are sounds of things being thrown around upstairs, chains, footsteps, women laughing wildly, and strange screams." Ultimately, Fanyi is incarcerated upstairs and is perceived as a monster. She becomes what she least wants to be, a fate similar to the destructive "locked up" ending in the ancient Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. This fate is representative of the character's struggle.

However, Fanyi's tragedy is not only a tragedy of fate but also a Shakespearean tragedy of character. Fanyi says to Zhou Chong: "Your mother died long ago, and your father was crushed and smothered to death. I am in this prison, accompanied by a king of hell for eighteen years" (Cao, 1996, p. 104). She was aware of Zhou Puyuan's transgressions and the reason behind his persecution of her, yet she was unable to articulate it. She lacked the capacity to confide in anyone, and external conflicts were transformed into internalized negative emotions, which were further distorted and alienated. In the fourth conflict, Fanyi reveals the hypocrisy and shame underpinning Zhou Puyuan's actions, as evidenced by his public condemnation of her as "crazy". However, this condemnation also reflects his own internalized shame and hypocrisy. The deaths of Zhou Chong and Zhou Ping, her lover and stepson, are all attributed to her self-perception of being "not like a mother, not like a mistress". This kind of self-directed psychological conflict transforms from the relative stability of the inhibited self into a hysterical outburst, inevitably leading to the character being driven to the extreme of madness.

### III. FROM ROMANCE TO HATRED: TABOO RELATIONSHIPS IN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

In this gloomy and despondent Zhou Mansion, Fanyi is as lifeless as a corpse, devoid of any hope for the future. Zhou Ping, a young man with a rebellious streak, possessed a quality that, along with his father's heart, was the source of Fanyi's enduring love. In the context of their relationship, Fanyi's love for Zhou Ping was akin to a hungry dog biting its favorite bone. She clung to this quality of hope as if it were a lifeline, believing it would lead her out of the dark and despairing situation she found herself in.

For Fanyi, grasping this glimmer of hope is akin to grasping a straw to save her life. She believes this is the rope that can take her away from this deep well, but she is unaware that this rope can stir up a bigger wave and ultimately turn into the last straw that crushes the camel to death. The absence of a maternal figure in Zhou Ping's life has led to the development of a distorted emotional response toward his stepmother. This has resulted in a sense of unease and distress within the family home, which has been described as "haunted". Zhou Ping has expressed remorse for his actions, yet he is reluctant to confront the situation and instead wishes to escape from the family home. He also subjected Sifeng, an innocent girl, to his influence. He believed that such a young, beautiful, and pure girl could purify his own dirty soul, but he was unwilling to descend into a more horrific abyss. He despised himself, but his only desire was to cover up and escape, as well as to blame his stepmother. He was as incompetent and cowardly as his father, unable to do anything constructive.

Fanyi implored Zhou Ping to stay or accompany her, offering her entire being and spirit, sacrificing her life and reputation. She declared, "I am indifferent to all else," and "you cannot see the new world and flee alone" (Cao, 1996, p. 123). This new world is about to leave Zhou Puyuan. Her desire is poignant and heartbreaking, yet she was rejected with utter cruelty. Although Zhou Ping is not worthy of trust or affection, she has no alternative. She has only Zhou Ping around her and has been deprived of social interaction and daily contact with family and subordinates. Zhou Puyuan's autocratic brutality and prolonged absence from home have left her emotionally exhausted. The heart of Fanyi's feelings has been worn out. Zhou Chong is her own son, still young and full of heart, full of beautiful dreams. Lu Gui is the family's servant, coarse and greedy, with a tendency to be powerful. However, he is also the family's servant. In such a familial context, she has long been subject to a distorted psychology, with the sole exception of Zhou Ping, who serves as an outlet for emotional catharsis.

In this monstrous, unethical love, the little light she craved went out, never to be kindled again, and her devotion, her affection, was pressed like a flame into a glacier. She warned, "Be careful, be careful, you don't push a disappointed woman too hard; she is capable of anything." When Fanyi braved the heavy rain and listened outside Sifeng's window to Zhou Ping's rendezvous with Sifeng, her heart died completely, and her anger and madness arose layer by layer like ripples in water. However, there was no place to release it, so she could only burn herself. Upon exiting the premises, she secured the window from the exterior, exhibiting a state of emotional distress and a lack of caution. Her objective was to expose the illicit relationship between the two individuals, topple the hypocritical façades of those involved, and

assert her own autonomy and defiance. In pursuit of these goals, she was willing to inflict irreparable harm upon herself. Fanyi is not the primary cause of the misfortune that befell the Zhou and Lu families. However, she is undoubtedly a contributing factor to the veracity of the tragedy.

Both Abbie and Fanyi share a similar tragic fate and a similar act of resistance to love through incest. However, the causes of their tragic journeys are entirely different. Abbie comes to Cabot Hall with a clear desire for material possessions, and, as she herself confesses, “What else could I want by marrying an old man like him?” (Eugene, 1988, p. 87). This kind of marital union, with money and wealth as leverage, seems to be “voluntarily concluded” and “mutually agreed,” but it is essentially a slave contract driven by money and selfishness, which typically represents the bourgeois marital and family relationship.

Fanyi, on the other hand, is inexplicably and helplessly made the wife of the Zhou family. This is a marriage based on the interests of the family and the feudal practice of arranged marriages, representing a form of dual power in which the individual is a commodity. This social system and its marriage system determine the character and actions of the individuals involved. Abbie’s actions and character are shaped by the hypocritical values of capitalism, which espouses freedom and equality. However, her actions and character are consistently proactive and aggressive in acquiring property. Upon entering the house, Abbie promptly takes control, claiming all the property in the house, including the bedroom, as her own. Eben is the only one to concede defeat in this scene of courtship. The situation is distinct in the case of Fanyi, who is a weak woman caught in the web of feudal relations and capitalist forces that have intertwined over centuries. Her marriage is a transaction to be auctioned off, and after marriage, her life is a prisoner-like existence. She simply wants to “wait for death quietly,” and even the love she experiences is “twisted” due to Zhou’s actions and beyond her control. The distortion of her love is due to Zhou Ping’s lure, to which she then fully commits her life, honor, hope, body, and feelings to the young master of the feudal capitalist family. The house echoed with her cries like those of a miserable female ghost. It is evident that, from the beginning, Fanyi’s position is passive. This is entirely consistent with the historical marginalization of women in Chinese society, both politically and economically, and the associated moral and ethical norms.

The existential experiences gained by two playwrights during their childhood often become the source of their creativity, filled with romance and hatred. Childhood experience as a structure of prescient imagery has a multifaceted impact on creativity. Generally speaking, a writer’s way of perception, emotional attitude, imaginative ability, aesthetic tendency, and artistic pursuit when facing life are largely influenced by this prior imagery structure. The misfortunes endured in a motherless childhood serve as the foundation for the portrayal of female tragedy in O’Neill’s and Cao Yu’s plays. Each play presents a distinct emotional tone of female tragedy.

Gelb Arthur (1962) found that O’Neill’s father was an actor, and the entire family accompanied him on tours, leading a nomadic existence. His mother’s tragic life had a profound impact on him. She married Old O’Neill, who was more than a dozen years older than she was, with a debauched pre-marital emotional life and a drinking problem after marriage. Subsequently, the family experienced considerable upheaval, enduring the pain of losing their son and suffering from illness. Furthermore, O’Neill’s mother endured a difficult labor when giving birth to him. The quack doctor that her miserly husband hired to save money used an overdose of morphine to ease her pain, which led to her addiction to drugs.

Cao Yu was born into a declining feudal-bureaucratic family (Sun, 1998). Despite the family’s wealth and numerous servants, the atmosphere within the family was characterized by a pervasive sense of gloom and despondency. He lost his mother at an early age, and his father was a dominant figure in the family, resulting in a childhood marked by solitude and a lack of maternal affection. The personal experiences of the two playwrights led to unresolved psychological distress, which became the source and motivation for their creativity. They both experienced ambivalent feelings towards their fathers and a lifelong longing for the love of their mothers. They felt that they were always spiritually exiled and were searching for a spiritual home throughout their lives. As a result, the concept of “mother” became O’Neill’s and Cao Yu’s lifelong preoccupation, and the theme of “home” became the most important one in their creations. Their shared upbringing and the absence of maternal love in their family backgrounds prompted O’Neill and Cao Yu to explore the representation of women’s experiences of tragedy in their works. They incorporated their own creative ideas and diverse cultural connotations, thereby demonstrating their originality and creativity.

The two works depict the taboo relationships of two female protagonists in a patriarchal society, exhibiting both similarities and subtle differences. This is largely influenced by the cultural environment. However, in terms of the characteristics of the times, the social status of women was generally lower. Consequently, the two playwrights used the creation of female characters to express their own inner Oedipus complex and comment on the current state of society, which holds certain innovative significance. Furthermore, the two works share a similar depth of connotation and symbolism. They both explore the material and spiritual pursuits of women, reflecting the beauty of female sadness and prompting the audience to engage with the material on a deeper level.

#### IV. THE PURSUIT OF SPIRITUAL AUTONOMY AND THE SUBVERSION OUT OF HUMAN ESSENCE

Both *Thunderstorm* and *Desire Under the Elms* are works that emerged from the profound national culture. The two playwrights originate from different social contexts and situate the plots of their plays within the real world, with the intention of analysing the weaknesses of human nature. Puritanism represents an important historical and cultural

background in *Desire Under the Elms*. Western society was in a state of turmoil following the First World War, with traditional moral values being eroded. This resulted in a period of confusion, during which people began to turn to the worship of money and the combination of money and lust gradually corrupted modern society. Puritanism, by combining faith in life with the acquisition of wealth, adapted to the spirituality desired by the bourgeoisie of nineteenth-century Europe. O'Neill regarded the spirit of Puritanism as an important part of 19th-century American society and culture. He placed the realistic space of the play's creation in the New England region, where Puritanism was strong, and analysed the Puritans profoundly (Lee, 2012). He depicted the process of their gradual destruction after being controlled by their desires, in order to make the play have a realistic significance. In almost all of his works, O'Neill attempts to demonstrate that this fanatical desire has the effect of constraining the mental outlook and social life of modern people. It is this uncontrollable desire that causes fear, emptiness and loneliness in the human spirit. The abnormal development of material civilisation has led to a situation where human values and dignity are threatened and challenged, becoming more and more confused, fearful, desperate and helpless.

In the ancient Greek era, the lack of scientific and technological advancement led to the belief that many natural phenomena were caused by the gods. This concept gave rise to the term "fate", which played a significant role in the history of ancient Greek struggle and some of the literature (Nietzsche, 1999). In ancient Greek tragedy, the struggle between fate and the unyielding spirit is a recurring theme. Ultimately, the struggle is depicted as futile, with the body as the ultimate victim. The history of ancient Greek struggle and some of its literary works demonstrate that the ancient Greek tragedy presents the unyielding spirit of fighting with "fate" and the sadness that is reflected in the failure of the struggle in the end. This tragic spirit of Ancient Greece directly influenced O'Neill and Cao Yu, who took the tragic spirit of Ancient Greece as the keynote of their works. They further inherited and developed the spirit by integrating their own unique cultural understanding and characteristics of the times. Firstly, in O'Neill's works, the perseverance and fighting spirit of the protagonist in pursuit of his ideal is the core of the ancient Greek tragic spirit. Nevertheless, there is a subtle difference between the protagonist in O'Neill's and Cao Yu's works and those of ancient Greek tragedy. The object of the protagonist's struggle has changed; it is no longer the omnipotent gods, but the inward pursuit of the deepest desires and contradictions. As Freud posited, every individual who has experienced a lack of maternal love is susceptible to the Oedipus complex. O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* exemplifies Freud's theory. In O'Neill's writing, whether the protagonist or other female characters are concerned, the tragedy is attributed to the expression and venting of the Oedipus complex in their hearts. Consequently, O'Neill's own experience led him to conclude that the majority of contemporary societal tragedies originate from a spiritual crisis within the individual concerned. He incorporated some of the tragic episodes of Ancient Greece into his own works, which was his intention precisely to make the spirit of Greek tragedy emerge with new connotations in the context of modern society. The majority of female characters in his writings attempt to overcome their spiritual anguish, yet ultimately succumb to the realities of life. This is undoubtedly one of his own techniques. This technique is undoubtedly an allusion to O'Neill himself. It could be argued that *Desire Under the Elm* represents a concentrated manifestation of O'Neill's inner spiritual desires. Each character in the play is a part of him, speaking out against the society in which he lived.

In contrast, Cao Yu was influenced by both Greek tragedy and the works of O'Neill. The shadow of Greek theories of fate can be seen throughout his works, especially in *Thunderstorm*, where most of the female characters attempt to change their destinies under challenging circumstances. However, there is a limit to human power, and they cannot ultimately break free from the net of destiny. For instance, the experience of Sifeng appears to be controlled by an unseen force, which is comparable to Greek melodrama. In conclusion, *Thunderstorm* and *Desire Under the Elms* reflect the playwrights' conscious creation and the outward expression of their spiritual essence. The encounters and experiences of the female characters in these works present a unique sadness, contributing to the legendary status of both plays.

Human desires encompass both material and spiritual aspects. Desire is not solely the instinctive drives of carnal desire, material desire, and greed; it also includes the emotional pursuit of love and being loved, as well as the spiritual desire for self-affirmation and purpose. Human desire is a paradoxical phenomenon. It is the primordial driving force that propels human progress, yet it is also the sharp blade that destroys human nature. Man exists in the universe and cannot avoid the existence of desire. Consequently, in the process of pursuing desire, man produces pain and struggle, which collectively constitute the tragedy of human desire. When man writes history, he also writes his own tragedy. In response to the claim that there was no theatre in America at the time, O'Neill states, "We are ourselves the most shocking of the tragedies that have been written and those yet to be written" (Eugene, 1988, p. 98). As society enacts tragedy, man himself enacts an even greater tragedy. Man, as a member of society, has his own desires for survival, regardless of the era in which he finds himself. Tragically, he is often lost in these desires and unable to extricate himself from them, leading to destruction. Abbie asserts that she is not a bad woman; she is merely fighting for her rights. Upon discovering that Eben is like her, she transforms her materialistic and self-identified quest into a quest for the right to love, positioning herself as a woman in search of love. Consequently, she loses her morality as a human being and her motherhood and maternal love when she makes a mistake with Eben and then kills her own son with her own hands to prove her love.

In Cao Yu's words, Fanyi is the most "thunderstorm" character, her life intertwined with the cruelest love and the most intolerable hate, a combination of extreme contradictions. As Fanyi, her desire is not to be a wife or a mother, but

to be a woman who is loved by the opposite sex. This is how she positions herself. In Zhou Puyuan's eyes, she is property; to Zhou Chong, she is an indifferent mother. Only by firmly holding onto Zhou Ping can she establish her existence as a woman. Consequently, in order to fulfill this desire, she cruelly reveals all the truth, discards her identity as a wife and mother, kills three people, destroys two families, but fails to find herself. Both Abbie and Fanyi are under the suppression of the desire to survive, but they actively pursue individual spiritual fulfillment, going to extremes to do so. They cannot reconcile the contradiction between the endless pursuit of desire and the inability to fulfill that pursuit. As Schopenhauer observed, the essence of life is suffering. This is because people are driven by an endless pursuit of desire, which inevitably leads to suffering and struggle. Consequently, the pain is immeasurable and never-ending.

The direct cause of the ultimate misfortune of both Abbie and Fanyi is the abandonment by their lovers. Both Eben and Zhou Ping's cold behavior towards these two women reflects the dominant force represented by their fathers. However, this dominant force is manifested in these two men in different ways. Eben suspected that Abbie seduced him with the intention of giving birth to a child to compete with him for the inheritance of the farm. This desire for material possessions led him to categorically reject Abbie and engage in incest with her based on the establishment of a relationship of love. This forced Abbie to take the most barbaric and brutal action to demonstrate the sincerity and pain of her love. Zhou Ping's most extreme action to prove his love was to break free from traditional constraints. Many reasons contributed to this, but one of the most significant was his greatest fear: the crime of incest. The feudal ethics and morality of the "magic shadow" rendered it impossible for him to forget and abandon the love he once had for his stepmother. His surrender to feudal forces, his retreat and selfishness, and Fanyi's relentless pressure lead him to retreat from the desperate situation. The stench of money on Fanyi and Zhou Ping's feudalism highlights another reason why Abbie's and Fanyi's actions differ. It illustrates how a continuum of capital and feudal forces leads to the ultimate tragedy of the two women in different ways. The divergence in the outcomes of Abbie and Fanyi can be attributed to the differing positions of Eben and Zhou Ping within the family structure. In Cabot Mansion, not only is Eben's mother a slave, but Eben and his brothers are also long-term laborers for old Cabot. In terms of property inheritance, they have an irreconcilable conflict with the cold, greedy, and selfish Cabot. Consequently, despite his strong desire for material possessions, Eben's position as a slave forces him to acknowledge the nature of human beings. This realization ultimately leads him to desire freedom, which he shares with Abbie. Consequently, he is ultimately able to relinquish all his desires and proceed to prison with Abbie. Zhou Ping is the eldest son of the Zhou family and occupies a certain position within the feudal hierarchy. He and Zhou Puyuan have no fundamental conflict of interest. In many ways, he supports and admires his father. Coupled with his cowardly character formed in specific life circumstances, he is even less likely to sacrifice the relationship between father and son for the sake of a woman, or sacrifice his personal reputation and family interests. Therefore, Fanyi's destiny can only end in madness.

As previously stated, the concept of tragedy as espoused by the two authors is founded upon a common reality (Nietzsche, 1999). In Cao Yu's acceptance of O'Neill's plays, he had already discerned the social implications of the characters' irrational desire impulses, repeatedly asserting that O'Neill was "basically a realist, a profound realist" (Narey, 1992, p. 50). In fact, O'Neill is renowned as a master of expressionism; however, a significant proportion of his plays are more accurately characterized as realistic. O'Neill was born at a time when the United States was rapidly emerging from a period of economic and social backwardness to become the world's leading capitalist nation. Despite the prevailing optimism, O'Neill exhibited a certain degree of sobriety. He stated that the United States is not the most successful country in the world, but rather the most failed. He suggests that the country's main ideal is the never-ending game, in which people attempt to secure their individual souls through the possession of things outside the body. However, this pursuit ultimately leads to the loss of one's soul and, consequently, the things that one has acquired.

O'Neill asserts that the human desire that originated in the American national culture is the tragedy. He observed the reality of this tragedy. Consequently, the background of the plot is largely discernible in his writing, and the characters are similarly imbued with a corresponding cultural background and local color. Even the language of the characters is imbued with the distinctive New England dialect. The characters in *Desire Under the Elms*, particularly Old Cabot, are unmistakably Puritan in character, as are the rest of the characters.

Cao Yu's plays, like those of O'Neill, are characterized by a profound realism. For instance, in *Thunderstorm*, we witness the transformation of a gentleman's family from a squire to a bourgeoisie, and in *Peking Man*, we see a family evolve from aristocrat to pauper. In *Sunrise*, we encounter a Chinese colonial city. Among these plays, *Thunderstorm* is perhaps the most familiar. Cao Yu is particularly familiar with the so-called Chinese gentlemen, whose human nature is stubborn and violent. This is evident in the realistic depiction of the feudal group's decline. However, like O'Neill, Cao Yu's plots seem to rely on a transcendental understanding of human nature, specifically irrational impulses at the subconscious level. Cao Yu's focus is not on verisimilitude but on human instincts and the limitations of human nature. This is evident even in his external works. For instance, the majority of his plots are set in the darkness of night, involving suicide, murder, and madness, all ending in the failure of the family or the individual.

A quote from Cao Yu perhaps confirms this: "In my personal and somewhat unconventional situation, I have observed and listened to a multitude of characters and scenarios that have prompted me to reflect. I have come to recognize the necessity to consider the world around me. I have come to perceive myself as adrift in a vast sea of unending suffering, and I have been compelled to ascend a lofty mountain to gain a vantage point from which to assess and evaluate the nature of humanity. I have endeavored to discern whether these beings, whom I have come to refer to

as ‘human beings,’ are beautiful or ugly, and to ascertain the complexity of their personalities and the depth of their souls” (Cao, 2009, p. 56).

#### V. CONCLUSION

The two tragedies *Thunderstorm* and *Desire Under the Elms*, written by Cao Yu and Eugene O’Neill, share a common aesthetic vision in their creative endeavors. This vision is not merely about personal misfortune; rather, it is deeply embedded in gender dynamics, particularly the oppressive forces of male-centeredness. The central cause of tragedy is the conflict between social constraints and the female characters’ desire for power, equality, freedom, and spiritual autonomy. A comparative study of the two plays reveals that both playwrights have carefully crafted an emotional space in which the female protagonists, Fanyi and Abbie, possess the fundamental essence of humanity despite their disparate social circumstances. The comparison of *Thunderstorm* and *Desire Under the Elms* not only emphasizes the nature of tragedy in different national frameworks but also highlights the commonalities between the two playwrights in terms of their portrayal of women’s fates and existential dilemmas.

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