Girls, gold, and gods: perverted individualism and heightened secularism in O’Neill’s Desire Under the Elms

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ABSTRACT
Beyond the archetypal themes and motifs such as chauvinism, family dysfunctions and conflicts, Nietzschean and Freudian elements, Desire Under the Elms was a critique of America’s brands of individualist and secularist ideologies. Spreading in the US at the time was a faulty form of individualism which continues to affect and permeate other parts of the world through cultural imperialism. Concomitant with perverted self-reliance was a growing secularist worldview that was challenging established religion, as if demanding freedom from hundreds of years of clout from Calvinist Christianity. In this article, I will emphasize that the drama captured an increased preference for an extreme form of individualism that was going wayward, juxtaposed with the movement toward secularization before and during the early 1900s. Further, I will highlight that these twin ideologies underpin the three major themes in the award-winning drama: the peripheralization, objectification, and often negative portrayal of women, the obsession over possessions and of persons, and the rejection of religion.

1. Introduction
Kurt provides significant background information about Eugene Gladstone O’Neill, including the “canonical claim that [he] ‘is the United States’ greatest playwright and the founding father of American drama’” (181). He also quotes Tennessee Williams as saying that the 20th century playwright “gave birth to the American theatre and died for it” (18). Kennedy, for his part, like an insider who is privy to certain details about O’Neill
provides a favorable background for his favorite dramatist. He notes the “generally unkind” reception of O’Neill’s masterpieces by critics specifically *Desire Under the Elms* (henceforth, *Desire*), which was rejected as “most morbid,” “gruesome to the nth degree,” and a play lacking in entertainment value. As if undermining O’Neill’s detractors, he then puts the playwright on a pedestal and hails him as a theater pioneer who had a tremendous influence on the next generations of playwrights, *Kennedy* underscores O’Neill’s ability to showcase what it “means to be an American” in his plays and so are his theatrical feats that are considered of Shakespearean value.

In a seminal commentary on O’Neill’s contributions to American theater, Diggins offers a divergent yet fresh perspective on the writings of the “greatest playwright” that the United States has ever known (qtd. in *Kurt 181*). While recognizing O’Neill’s dexterity in his chosen genre, Diggins elucidates that the dramatist’s purpose for creating his masterpieces overshadowed his dramaturgical excellence, intending for the most part to foreground his works’ impact and “implications for social and political philosophy and intellectual history” (*Geary 229*). Additionally, O’Neill is described as a writer who critiqued “the past as well as the status quo and [asserted] that genuine freedom rests within the individual rather than in any idealized system of government or religion” (229). O’Neill is of the view, as per Diggins, that both government and religion are not the key to one’s true liberation. In short, the theater giant was espousing a form of individualism that was free of religious fundamentalism and societal control, and this makes a lot of sense since as *Gatta* opines, O’Neill was preaching against “warped” individualist ideology in his writings (232). Gatta believes that the iconic drama which was set in a rural New England farm in 1850 was a big leap from O’Neill’s image of being a “social critic” of American materialism, attempting to accomplish “the more probing analysis of a moral historian” (232). Ultimately, the author found himself “[stressing] the failure of . . . a genuinely autonomous individuality” and concomitantly promoting a society that was less dependent on, if not distant from, any form of piety. *Hays* agrees and notes the playwright’s attempt to undertake “a great deal of social criticism” as demonstrated in *Desire*, written in 1924 and subsequently staged the following year and thereafter (423). O’Neill’s works, then, transcended the aesthetics; in fact, in all his creations, he played the roles of a political commentator and a philosophical genius. More than just highlighting theatrics, he was putting America on trial.

Arguably, beyond the archetypal, O’Neillian themes and motifs such as images of women and male chauvinism (see *Manheim*), family dysfunctions and conflicts and Nietzschean and Freudian elements (see *Kushner*) including unrestrained lust and Oedipal attraction (see *Majumdar; Stinnett*), the masterpiece was a criticism of individualist and secularist doctrines. Spreading in the US at the time of *Desire* was a flawed form of individualism which continues to dominate various facets of American life, affecting and permeating even the rest of the world through this nation’s so-called cultural imperialism (*Gatta 232*). Contingent with this distorted self-reliance was a creeping secularist worldview that was challenging America’s Calvinist Christianity, as if demanding freedom from hundreds of years of clout from a faith system whose God, according to *Racey* was misunderstood as “hard” and “incomprehensible” (qtd. in *Stinnett 348*). This paper attempts to highlight the increased preference for a distorted brand of individualism and a move to secular life in America at the turn of the 20th century. These twin ideologies appear to underpin the three major themes in *Desire,*
namely, the peripheralization, objectification, and often negative portrayal of women, the obsession over material possessions and of persons, and the denunciation and rejection of traditional religion.

2. O’Neill’s misunderstood drama

*Desire*, according to *Narey*, is a misunderstood literary material, and this misunderstanding is often seen in what he calls advancing of “thematic formulas . . . that pose as blanket truths and offer universalities” (50). Yet, he seems to contradict himself by making the same mistake of universalizing in the play, notably in his generalized observation of “animalism,” missing the very same point raised by *Geary* and *Gatta* about O’Neill’s concern for social and moral criticism in his writings. What *Narey* failed to point out is that his references to “animalistic passions” that were replete in the drama must be treated as part and parcel of the overall themes of altered individualism and/or secularism’s growing influence both of which fit well in O’Neill’s role as a social and moral judge of his 20th century North American society. Still *Narey* has a point in this propensity among literary scholars to, as O’Neill’s works were previously understood, offer generalizations without consideration of the author’s real intent. For instance, critics tend to emphasize the Greekness of O’Neill’s works, particularly in *Desire*, a drama, which when carefully examined what Falls calls a demonstration of the true American spirit (*Kennedy* 91). Along these lines, *Stinnett* (11 & 21) and Mujandar elucidate on the Apollonian-Dionysian tension, a struggle between reason and unrestrained passion, among others, in a typical Greek tragedy as philosophized by Nietzsche. *Geary* (228–229) is commendable in espousing the need to forsake the usual psychological-cum-autobiographical approach in O’Neill scholarship by focusing instead on the social, political, and moral underpinnings of the plethora of ideas in his dramas. This being said, the need for literary criticism that is anchored on the *whys* is reinforced because focusing on the *what* is nothing but a superficial scholastic endeavor as *Geary* seems to suggest.

To amplify on the preceding observation, studies on *Desire* were lacking in terms of socio-political, economic, and religious theorizing. This article, then, is timely because it not only fills a void in the criticism of O’Neill’s work but also clarifies the driving forces behind all the superficial concerns and aspects in the dramatic play that others have focused on in the past. Indeed, beyond the classic issues and motifs that have resulted from years of O’Neillian scholarship, two overarching socio-political and economic realities as showcased in *Desire* – namely individualist and secularist philosophies – are yet to be fully explored. On a macro level, these ideologies are demonstrated through the depiction or treatment of female characters, fixation on the possession of material goods, and the rejection of Puritan beliefs that have been entrenched in the social and political landscapes of the United States since its founding in the 1700s. On a micro perspective, instances of individualist-secularist views are sprinkled all over the play, from prefatory statements at the beginning of a number of scenes to the dialogs. This paper will first examine how the portrayal of female personas points to the yearning for a misunderstood sense of individualism. It will also establish a connection between the capitalistic concept of property rights/ ownership and individualism as highlighted in the drama. Finally, it will argue that the often-negative allusions to “perversion of religious sentiment,” as *Stinnett* and *Hays* find, signaled the beginning if not the continuation of a movement
toward the secularization of Protestant America. To iterate, all three themes were a product of O’Neill’s social and moral criticism of the US. Other features in Desire such as its modernist-expressionistic approach in its writing and the psychological themes are not the concern of this critique since its main intent is to focus on establishing the political and philosophical underpinnings of three significant and major themes in Desire as previously outlined.

3. Peripheralization of women and male hegemony as offshoots of warped individualism

This paper argues that female characters in the play are peripheralized and/or depicted in a negative way, and this connects to a “warped” individualism that O’Neill tried to expose in his controversial drama (Getta 232). This obscuration is seen in the preliminary setting where three deceased and faceless (defined operationally as insignificant and incidental) female characters are introduced. These are: Simeon’s wife, Jenn, who had been dead for 18 years before the opening scene; Ephraim Cabot’s (alternatively, Cabot) first wife whose identity is unknown; and the patriarch’s second wife identified only as “Maw,” a colloquial form of “mother” in a New England dialect as portrayed in the play. The penchant for the generic name for the female persona further illuminates the argument of women being sidelined in pre-war America. That all three women had already passed away at the start of the narrative and mentioned only in passing without too many details, particularly Jenn and Ephraim’s first wife, confirms the society’s inclination to spotlight male superiority. Whether or not O’Neill was simply echoing the realities of his era in order to educate his audience on the matter or that he was critical of anti-feminist agendas in literature deserves further investigation. It is, however, worth noting that prior to the writing of the drama, the US Congress had passed a landmark bill enshrining the right of suffrage for the female population (“19th Amendment”). This piece of legislation chronicles a historic event in the struggle of women’s groups in America for political recognition, particularly, the right of suffrage. A witness to the women’s lack of equal treatment, this 1919 legislation precedes the writing of O’Neill’s Desire Under the Elms, a play which is considered vocal against the repression of the female populace. Was it possible that the playwright was using this event as a backdrop for his exposure of society’s unfair treatment of women in a country that guarantees equality? Through the play, the audience is enlightened about the prevalence and effects of male domination-cum-female-subjugation that underlie a perverted individualism as O’Neill has aptly interspersed all over his three-part masterpiece.

Concerning the development of the plot, the three characters are almost non-essential, except perhaps for Maw, who is perceived to occupy an active role all throughout the narrative albeit only as some presence or “something” which Byrd (21) insists is a major role. Stinnett may have a point in raising the role of Maw as a unifying force in the development of the narrative, hence, providing what he terms a “coherent plot structure” (11); however, he also recognizes the woman’s “presence/absence,” as an indication of faceless female characters in the narrative. Lee is more succinct and claims that the “dead mother has lost not only her life and land, but also her name, stripped of any identity outside of her maternal role” (70). Again, was O’Neill attacking the denigration of women? It seems that the answer leans toward the affirmative. As Gatta alludes to, the
playwright was being true to his role as “a fictive analyst of the American- and Puritan-soul” (228), exposing the evils committed against certain members of society, particularly women. Providing a glimpse of the tension in society (and possibly in O’Neill) on how to situate women, the drama exemplifies two opposing sides: females being recognized to some extent for their important place in a male-dominated world and their relegation to the sidelines no matter how crucial their roles may be. Interestingly, in describing the elms on both sides of the Cabot house, the author uses the image of “exhausted women,” likely an allusion to the way women were viewed in 19th and 20th century America. The phrase appears to point to the treatment of two invisible Cabot women, again reflective of their diminutive place in the real world. In scene 1 of Part I, the audience is apprised of the possible cause of death of Maw as unraveled in the conversations between the “tall and sinewy” Eben and his older siblings, Simeon and Peter. In fact, in repeated emotion-filled allegations, the 25-year-old insists that the mother suffered greatly under the hands of an abusive husband, and without hesitation alleges that the older Cabot had “killed her!” (O’Neill 1.1.1,17). Rhetorically, the young man asks, “Didn’t he slave Maw t’ death?,” lamenting at the same time his half-brothers’ brazen failure to intervene when their patriarch “was slavin’ her to her grave” (37–38).

The circumstances surrounding the demise of Cabot’s first wife is something that O’Neill did not explore, but taking cues from Eben, it could be surmised that she, too, was a victim of the father’s enslavement of people. Such harshness was motivated by his maniacal hold on the farm, a hallmark of a debased form of individualism which underscores the relegation of others, particularly women, as instrumentations of selfish or capitalistic agendas as per Nussbaum (249–291) (qtd. in “Feminist Perspectives”). Indeed, such peripheralization of women, which mirrors the marginalization of a specific gender in the culture, showcases individualism’s clout on people and its ill effects on the “inalienable rights of all,” particularly women, who are supposed to be equally protected under the nation’s constitution (Maran). The character of Abbie is a proof of this assertion. Majumdar maintains that the character is merely a bearer of a desired child, and even for such a pivotal role as a mother, she, “in his eyes, lacks the social standing for such a legacy,” making her “incidental, a means to an end.” Cabot’s “[relieving] his lonesome existence,” he adds, “is secondary to producing progeny.”

Two other women – the opposite of Ephraim’s deceased wives – are featured in the play, this time not as subservient slaves who “worked to death to serve [Cabot’s] passion for the farm” as Narey (50) aptly puts it, but a case of females being cast in a bad light. Minnie, a woman of low refute, does not play an essential part in tragedy except that of being a source of commodity – sexual services to be exact. In fact, in carefully examining the play, one could argue she has no significant impact in the development of the play, its inclusion perhaps intended to expose moral degradation and the predilection for what satisfies the flesh. Referred to as the “scarlet woman,” the label suggests another negative characterization. To satisfy his passion, Eben goes down the village and meets her. It is apparent that the same selfish desire and treatment of a woman as an object of pleasure is embodied by Ephraim and the two brothers and ultimately in O’Neill’s society. This foreshadows Eben’s lack of internal struggles as he engages in an adulterous, and what Kao (48) describes as tantamount to an incestuous relationship, with his stepmother, Abbie Putnam, the fourth female character.
Commenting on the portrayal of women in the play, Pacheco complains, “Women are never seen as intellectual companions but as sex objects” (57). Nussbaum adds that objectifying women is tantamount to a “denial of [their] autonomy” and to their right to “self-determination,” a practice that comes from a twisted individualistic mind-set (qtd. in “Feminist Perspectives”). In the story, the prostitute neither has a voice nor the right to pursue a better life because of the culture’s stereotype of those engaged in flesh trade, contradictory to the very essence of individualism which promotes personal liberty and economic advancement. Roberts (66) sees O’Neill’s attempt in his works to highlight that women’s identity and value depend on men. Signifying ownership of Min, Eben says smugly, “What do I care fur her – ’ceptin’ she’s round an’ wa’m? The p’int is she was his’n – an’ now she b’longs t’ me!” (2:329). Min as a sex object typifies de Tocqueville’s description of individualism as something that pushes people to only “look after their own needs” and a disregard of others’ (qtd. in Fischer 364).

How Ephraim won the heart of his third wife is another mystery in the play, but it nevertheless revealed the seeming ease for men – at least in the eyes of O’Neill to acquire women of their choice as if they were purchasing a piece of property, further illustrative of the individualist psyche. Abbie is portrayed as an aggressive, flirtatious, and devious woman motivated by economic gains and inflated desires. This is an obvious “reimagination” of Greek tragedy (McDonald 169), notably the character Medea in Euripides’ tragic drama. That the female character, Medea, seduced her stepson Jason provides a different view of a woman, that is, one who plays the role of a victimizer, akin to the French concept of femme fatale, a scheming and often “ruinous” persona (Wyngaard 468). Abbie’s initial portrayal somewhat elevates women in the play – and perhaps in the conception of O’Neill and the social milieu – one that has the power to pursue their wishes and dreams, including the possibility of achieving a better life by resorting to machinations and personal whims for convenience’s sake. The character was on a quest for, and indeed she was on the verge of acquiring, a prized property through marriage, but before its consummation, successfully entices an equally lustful man into a debasing union. Here, one is reminded of what; Lee calls “gender exploitation,” which is instructive about the power of women (as emphasized in the manipulation of Eben’s vulnerabilities by Abbie) and their capacity to exhibit individualistic fervor, something that O’Neill attributed mostly to his male characters. As a victim, the 35-year-old seducer eventually reaps the consequences of an obvious marriage of convenience. When trapped in her own wiles and schemes to obtain a tract of land and a younger lover whom she later chooses over Cabot as well as the property and her child, she cascades down the lowest pits of life and commits infanticide just to prove the sincerity of her affection to the supposed stepson.

Insinuated in the drama is that women can only fantasize about strength because in reality they are weak, incapable of making wise decisions. At the same time, women are presented not only as victims of male domination and society’s injustices but also as victimizers of the opposite sex since they, too, can be driven by deep-seated individualist desires that are thought to be natural among men as O’Neill depicted. Pacheco (55–56) takes a different opinion and considers such characterization as nothing but a bad portrayal of women. The Hispanic scholar is critical of the playwright and perceives an intentional silencing of the females in the drama. She concludes, “O’Neill’s female characters lack identity because this is the way [he] and his society see and portray
women” (62). This is an indictment of O’Neill. Pacheco is echoing a sad reality in America then and now for, as a case in point, it was only in 1919 when the country recognized women’s right to vote (“19th Amendment”). Rohlinger is of the same view, lamenting that even in the 21st century America, women are yet to fully enjoy equal treatment.

4. The battle royale: fixation over gold

A heightened, problematic American individualism is evident throughout the play as seen in the preponderance of an obsession to possess the gold of the world, both the literal precious metal and other forms of property. At the beginning scene, the ownership of an inheritance is being contested, causing cracks in the already fractured rural family. In fact, the narrative revolves around the major characters’ craze over the farm – by Ephraim, Eben, the two other Cabot brothers, and later Abbie. The New England patriarch’s maniacal desire to keep his farm cannot be ignored. Lee agrees and highlights the “excesses” of extreme and twisted forms of self-reliance as typified by Cabot, who transforms “domestic spaces into oppressive devices to serve his own ends” (71). O’Neill is critical of such extreme behavior which, according to Grabb et al. does not seem to align with the true spirit of the so-called “American Creed” and “exceptionalism” (512), a worldview that governs or dictates the pursuit of one’s “desired goals and interest” (516).

Eben, too, is unrelentless in trying to secure the inheritance and finds himself overcome “with queer excitement.” Declaring himself as the rightful owner, he insists, “It’s Maw’s farm agen! It’s my farm! Them’s my cows! I’ll milk my durn fingers off fur cows o’ mine! (2.22). Such mania is even made more vivid as he is depicted making an “embracing glance of desire” while contending, “It’s purty! It’s damned purty! It’s mine! . . . Mine, d’ye hear? Mine!” (2.26–29). Simeon and Peter, equally obsessive of the acreage, resent their brother, dismissing him as “[l]ike his Paw.” Simeon continues, “Waal–let dog eat dog!” (26), illuminating the worsening familial conflict. The desire for the farm plunges the Cabot brothers into a triangular struggle with the arrival of Abbie, who will be torn between her yearning for the estate and her lust for her “prize bull,” a reference to Eben (2.1.6). From either angle, Cabot’s young wife is seen as craving for what is not hers, symbolic of America’s endless hunger for economic advancement, a characteristic of the prevailing individualist philosophy. At one point, she gloats over the farm “with the conqueror’s conscious superiority” (1.4.39). It is not unlikely that her choice to engage in an illicit relationship and have a child from her stepson are motivated by the material obsession as symbolized by the farm. Moreover, that this love-hate relationship that has so engulfed the unlikely partners demonstrates an ensuing battle for control of the inheritance, which leads to the killing of their love child and their eventual incarceration.

Besides the appetite for ownership of land, the centrality of gold is also evident in the play. For instance, Part 1 highlights Ephraim’s abandonment of his family in search of gold in the West Coast, its magical lure made more prominent by a conspicuously displayed print advertisement on the wall of the Cabot House. Finally, Simeon and Peter give up their claim to the farm – not without any form of compensation though – and enticed by the promise of a better life in California decide to replicate their father’s
adventure to the Pacific US. Capturing the gold rush at a time of the writing of the play, O’Neill mirrors how the so-called American dream can drive one to set aside family ties for the sake of individual advancement.

Representing the value of ownership, power, and wealth, the farm was a temptation that is so hard to resist, O’Neill captured its irresistible power to lure as he ends his dramatic piece. In an ironic twist, he concludes his play with yet another sign of enchantment with the estate, this time the coveter is none other than the town’s sheriff, who desirously quips, “It’s a jim-dandy farm, no denyin.’ Wished I owned it!” (3.4.118). Gatta equates this appetite for various forms of possessions as “a destructive religion of self-worship,” the image of individualist-secularist ideology that has pervaded America throughout the past centuries (232). In the final analysis, “the founding father of [US] drama” was either chronicling about or preaching against the two philosophies that were spreading like wildfire during his day (Kurt 181; Saur 103).

5. Of divinity and destiny: departure from deism to secularism

Tension between deism and secularism is extant in Desire Under the Elms, and departure from the former and movement toward the latter is made manifest through the objectification and obscuration of women with the intent to control material wealth. This appears to be a byproduct of individualism as observed in the attitude of extreme independence, a lifestyle of living the way one wishes and exploiting “the resources that [they] find for [their] own purposes” (Ebeling). In such a philosophy, wealth or possessions are worshiped and the self is enshrined as the new god. This is consistent with the Lockean principles that underpin American individualism, an ideology that promotes the preservation of individual rights, which according to Ebeling, “precede government” and are “unalienable.” Further, O’Neill’s spotlight on the conflict about the farm and the quest for California’s gold reflect society’s preference for individualism and secularism that culminate in the denunciation of religion. Through this preoccupation for personal satisfaction – the new creed of the 20th century as far as O’Neill was concerned – most characters display no reservations regarding decency or ethics. Coming from a Puritan background which frowned upon all corrupt acts, Ephraim defies his own convictions, enslaving and mistreating one wife after the other. Moreover, he philanders with a prostitute, an act that is replicated by the three Cabot siblings. Evident is the characters’ deviation from their clan’s supposed pious background, particularly Ephraim, who is vocal about his religious beliefs. The siblings likewise show no sign of imbibing any sort of faith, most notably Eben, who, consumed with a seething anger, maintains a disrespectful and vengeful attitude throughout the play. His escapades with Min and his “Oedipal transgressions” (Majumdar 41) establish the absence of morals and of spirituality. As further proven by his disdain for anything spiritual, he arrogantly declares, “I don’t give a damn how many sins she’s (Min) sinned afore mine or who she’s sinned ’em with ... my sin’s as purty as any one on ’em!” (1.2.326). Eben’s character exhibits more than agnosticism; he treats what is regarded as divine with utter contempt, consistent with his moral choices and perversion of Old Judeo-Christian themes. At the height of his anger and bitterness toward his father, the young man cursed, “T’ hell with yewr God! (1.4.214), an absolute refusal to embrace his father’s pretentious religiosity and his God.
The preeminence of Biblical perversions is observed all throughout the drama, replete with erroneous, sarcastic, and ironic references to or references to scriptural texts and other religious notions that are irreverent and bordering on blasphemy. Protestantism, in particular, is cast on a bad light, portrayed as “merciless,” “harsh” and “twisted . . . loveless” denomination (Hays 423; Saur 103). The concept of Christian prayer is also distorted in the drama. Simeon, for instance comments, “Ye prayed he’d died,” referring to their father, and Eben retorts, “Waal–don’t yew pray it? (a pause) (3.2.4–5). On several occasions, negative references to God and obvious distortions of sacred texts are referenced in the play. Ephraim, the only one with religious convictions as far as O’Neill is concerned, albeit also twisted, proves this quandary, describing the God he worships as “lonesome, hain’t He? God’s hard an’ lonesome!” (3.4.377).

Concurring with the repudiation of religion, Narey sees a “God under siege” (51) in the famous drama while Stinnett, echoing Hays writes about an “incomprehensible” deity (348), proving an assessment (and possibly a rejection) of America’s Puritanical background and the society’s inclination toward the secular. This further cements the claim of O’Neill’s attack on what Gatta calls America’s “warped” version of individualism and a criticism of the nation’s predominant religion. Conversely, it is obvious that the play was used as a platform to mirror a shift toward secularization in America, signifying a fondness for more of the self, a reinforcement of the very foundation of Americanism which puts personal liberty as a priority. Although the breaking away from Anglophilia was a common theme in American drama such as in 18th and 19th century plays, notably those by Anna Cora Mowatt’s Fashion, Dion Boucicault’s The Octoroon, and Royall Tyler’s The Octoroon, the highlighting of individualism was more palpable, setting O’Neill apart from other pioneers in theater. Undeniably, O’Neill pointed to the ever-pervasive American individualism that would find an ally in secularism.

The secularist psyche which works alongside an altered form of individualism, as, O’Neill painted, is at its height in the commission of the ghastly crime of infanticide in the tragedy. This disregard for human life – a senseless killing – is the epitome of a lack of moral judgment, again a rejection of Puritan convictions that were distinctive in New England. O’Neill is silent as to the religious upbringing of Abbie, whose calloused spirit would drive her to asphyxiate an innocent, helpless child, her own flesh and blood, in the name of love. One can only assume a lack of moral or spiritual influence just like Eben, and perhaps so since O’Neill provided no details of any internal struggle prior to the murder. This, too, is individualism at its most distorted version – pursuing one’s desires even at the expense of other people’s lives. Gatta says it best:

Every catastrophic turn in the action, as when the lovers destroy their own child, illustrates how easily man can be tempted to make his own grasping ego into a god – to his own destruction. And O’Neill seems to have thought that such perversions of genuine self-reliance were very much encouraged by the cultural atmosphere of America, a country whose “main idea” he once described as “that everlasting game of trying to possess your own soul by the possession of something outside it. (232)

Gatta’s words typify “rugged individualism” that was prominent in the 1920s in the US which underpin such traditional values like the primacy of personal choices over collective good, the capitalist ideology, and exploitation. It appears that the playwright wanted to portray a brewing if not an ongoing religious-cultural rebellion of some sort, a retreat from
the conservative Protestant and Anglophone connection of the United States. Although founded on strong Christian teachings, America showed signs of moving away from its religious roots; O’Neill wanted to capture the creeping secularization and liberal interpretations of scriptures as against the so-called Christian fundamentalism that was waging a war against secularism in the 1920s (Lamport). Fisher concurs, saying that a practice of faith is contradictory to the very essence of American individualism because it “[trumps] the autonomous self in sacred arenas such as the family and the church” (367).

6. Conclusion

I argued in this paper that the three major themes in Desire Under the Elms – the sidelining and objectification of women, the powerful yearning for material possessions, and the enthronement of the self and one’s obsessions which encompasses a rejection of religion – were underpinned by a heightened and wrong version of American individualism and a clamor for a secular culture. Conversely, a problematic brand of individualism, as portrayed by O’Neill, relates to secularism and vice versa, each one scaffolding each other, demonstrating a symbiotic relationship which spirals into the three themes as explored in this paper. It is not incorrect to state that a true form of individualism was being advocated, and this makes a lot of sense since literature finds the theater giant preaching against an individualist principle that had gone awry and continues to deteriorate in the 21st century.

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