

A Brief Comparative Study on Tragedy in *Desire Under the Elms* and in the Javanese Chronicle Account of *RaraOyi*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is aimed at analyzing tragedy in a play entitled *Desire Under the Elms* portraying the primitive desires that influence several characters of the afore-mentioned play in the 1920s New England, and also that in a Javanese chronicle account of *RaraOyi* that happened during the reign of SunanAmangkurat I from 1646 to 1677 in the kingdom of Islamic Mataram.

Tragedy discussed in this paper is an occurrence that involves people of high status or people of high nobility, as well as ordinary people, who suffer and whose lives lead to their downfall partly because of the trouble they are unable to get rid of. The play *Desire Under the Elms* portrays tragedy that takes place among ordinary people, while the Javanese Chronicle story of *RaraOyi* depicts tragedy of RaraOyi, an ordinary but beautiful young lady vied by two noblemen, the king SunanAmangkurat I of the kingdom of Islamic Mataram and his own crown prince, PangeranAdipatiAnom alias Prince Tejaningrat.

The analysis focuses on comparing the tragedy that befall either the protagonists or the antagonists in both the play and the chronicle account mentioned above. It turns out that their lives are in ruins due to their fate as they are not able to realize their dream of living with the lady they are madly in love with and wish to marry.

Keywords: tragedy, protagonist, antagonist

1. INTRODUCTION

The word tragedy has often been misled in daily life. For instance, a fatal traffic accident, a deadly terror bomb or a deep suffering caused by a natural disaster may readily be claimed as tragedy due to their sudden occurrence and tragic effect to the casualties. Nevertheless, no one may find a well-organized plot, and intricacies of tragedy that happens in daily life. Tragedy in drama, as a matter of fact, is inseparable from the objects, namely character, action, setting, and also the verbal tools, namely language and style. The term tragedy is commonly used for a type of drama in which the protagonist is defeated (Potter, 1967:138-139). The nature of tragedy in the play *Desire Under the Elms* and in the Javanese Chronicle account of *RaraOyi* absolutely differs from such occurrences as stated in the initial part of the introduction. In *Desire Under the Elms*, the nature of tragedy is represented by adultery and infanticide portrayed in a series of events. Eben, one of Ephraim Cabot's sons, rebels against his father and covets his father's wife, AbbiePutnam. Abbie, the stepmother, whom Eben comes to love, bravely accepts the consequences of both adulterous love and murder. There can be no doubt that the play *Desire Under the Elms* is a ferocious picture of primitive desires in modern New England.

The same portrayal of desire is also apparent in the Javanese Chronicle account of *RaraOyi*, even though it is not illustrated in a straightforward manner. The crown prince, PangeranAdipatiAnom alias Prince Tejaningrat, was wrongly involved in a covetous affair with the young woman whom his father had hidden secretly and whom the latter wished, in the long run, to marry as his own concubine. Unbeknown to his father at first, yet with the help of his grandfather, the crown prince was unable to resist the temptation to take the woman, who belongs to his father, as his own wife.

The events taking place in both *Desire Under the Elms* and the Javanese Chronicle account of *RaraOyi* lead to tragedy. The tragedy is mainly caused by uncontrollable desire around which the theme center. It is the tragedy involving ordinary people in a family that is illustrated in the play entitled *Desire Under the Elms*. On the contrary, tragedy that happened to RaraOyi, the main character in the Javanese Chronicle account of *RaraOyi* involves people of high nobility.

What people learn about a tragic event in ancient time is that it happens only to noble people much of the time, and it rarely happens to ordinary people. Consider, for example, that the main characters in a Shakespearean tragedy are depicted as having high social status or high military rank like Macbeth and Othello. In addition to this, such noble people as Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus that are

based on ancient Roman figures are illustrated to experience tragedy as well. European ancient times and middle ages saw such kind of tragedy.

1.1. Protagonist, antagonist and tragic hero

Barnet (1957:7) states that “tragedy depicts man’s troubles.” “Most loosely a tragedy is a profoundly sad event or situation” (Potter 1967:138). Potter (1967) further states “In literature the term is conventionally reserved for a type of drama in which the protagonist is defeated.”

In the concept of drama what is known as man’s trouble might be defined as a sort of unpleasant, grievous problem that one may have beyond his or her wish, and, thus, which makes him or her suffer or even, at worst, lead to his or her defeat. The trouble that man experiences varies from one another, and so does its level, quantity and depth and the man himself. The man or character--as the term is applied in plays or drama--may be regarded as facing bitter suffering because of his misfortunes and unexpected fate. Such a man or character is commonly known as a protagonist. According to Potter (1967:7) a protagonist is “always the focal point of the action of a story, the character that the story is most obviously about. He is usually in the forefront of the action, and usually has the most to say, whether we like or approve him or not.”

On the contrary, an antagonist is “the main person or thing or force that opposes the protagonist.” In other words, when a character demonstrates the especial instrument of a general force showing the basic opposition to the protagonist, he is the antagonist. Likewise, “the protagonist in tragedy, called the tragic hero, has certain general characteristics: he is almost always fundamentally good, he is a capable person, and he is somehow humanly significant” (Potter, 1967:139).

Potter (1967:140) further states that

Kings, princes, and noblemen were considered proper tragic heroes up through most of the eighteenth century because they clearly had considerable symbolic stature as human beings while the lower classes seemed not to. Nowadays, on the other hand we are more inclined to maintain that, since social position is less significant than the intrinsic or acquired worth of the individual, any “true” man could be a tragic hero.

What Potter states above is in accordance with some of Shakespeare’s plays.

2.2. Tragic action

In tragedy, the hero undergoes a kind of catastrophe: a fatal defeat. This turns out to be an important characteristic in his action, since this may bring about death to him. Potter (1967) argues the destruction of the hero’s personal ambitions, his belief in himself, and his whole set of values, or his conceptions of the nature of things, may essentially lead to his fatal defeat.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study belongs to qualitative research focusing on comparing the plots of both works, those are Eugene O’Neil’s *Desire Under the Elms* and Javanese Chronicle Account of Roro Oyi. These works become the primary source of this research. As for the secondary source, the research employs relevant expert review listed in the bibliography and cited in the literary review.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Eugene O’Neill’s play *Desire Under the Elms* is an illustration of farm life in which the Cabots, Ephraim Cabot with his three sons, Simeon Cabot, Peter Cabot, and Eben Cabot have cultivated the farm. While their father has been away for months with no word, Simeon and Peter Cabot, who are Eben’s half-brothers, complain to each other that they get sick and tired of leading a hard life working in the farm for their father. For that reason, they plan to leave the farm and try their luck by looking for gold in California. Eben, the youngest of the three, tells them not to realize their plan to leave the farm so long as they have their chance to inherit it, which they agree. One day, however, after visiting Minnie the prostitute in town, he tells them that their father has remarried. The three of them realize that it is a sign that the farm will soon belong to their father’s new wife. By stealing their father’s money, Eben offers Simeon and Peter money for their journey to California provided that they are willing to abandon their claim to the farm.

On arriving with his new bride Abbie Putnam, Ephraim Cabot searches for his sons. Coming upon Eben, Abbie tries to make friend with him, which he rejects. The father grows dissatisfied on learning that Simeon and Peter have left him for prospecting in California. The farm daily chores is now left to Cabot and Eben.

Abbie catches Eben going out of the farm house stealthily to see Minnie, and so she makes overtures to him. However, they both quarrel, causing him to leave. Being hurt, Abbie asks her husband if he will

bequeath the farm to Eben but he strongly rejects his wife's idea. He tells her it is better for him to burn the farm before he dies rather than bequeathing it to anybody else. He even disagrees if she inherits it by telling her that it has to be a man who cultivates the farm. Overwhelmed with emotion as she declares she will bear him a son, Cabot together with Abbie pray to God for His blessings.

In the room with Abbie, Cabot describes his trials of the farm to her—how he has made things grow out of nothing. He then goes out of the room to wander around his farm and to sleep in the barn leaving his wife alone in their room. Abbie's thoughts, however, have been on Eben. In their rooms, Eben and Abbie stare at each other through the wall. Abbie, with her determination, then goes towards his room, hugs and kisses him with passion. Returning her kisses at first, Eben flings her away from him. He accuses her of seizing the farm.

Abbie gives birth to a son on the following spring. Gathering around for a celebration, the neighbors gossip that the son's father is Eben. Eben is bending over the cradle to take a look at the baby, when Abbie enters the room to have a check on him. Eben kisses her before he goes out of the room.

Eben is standing by the gate, when Cabot, returning from the barn, sees him. Then Cabot tells him he will not inherit the farm. Getting mad at his description about Abbie's plot to secure the farm for herself and her son, Eben attacks Cabot. Cabot, however, overpowers him. While Cabot chokes him, Abbie comes up to break up the fight. Being hurt, Eben is angry about what Cabot has told him of her plot. As he is still hurt, Eben tells her he is going to leave to join his brothers in California and to return and take his right.

With his carpetbag beside him, Eben is sitting in the kitchen. He is ready to leave. Abbie comes into the kitchen to see him and then tells him that she has proved she loves him. She tries to deter him from leaving but he senses something strange about what she says. He asks her why she looks mad and what she actually has done. Abbie finally tells him she has killed their son. Shocked, Eben hurries to call the Sheriff.

As Abbie waits for Eben to get back with the Sheriff, Cabot comes up. Abbie tells him that she has just killed her son and that he is not his son but Eben's. This enrages Cabot, who tries to strangle her. Eben returns and realizes that he truly loves Abbie. He decides to tell the Sheriff that it is not only Abbie who kills their son but he himself is also involved in the murder. He tells her he is ready to share with her: to go to prison with her and to die with her. Meanwhile, Cabot returns from the barn and goes into the kitchen to find Abbie and Eben hugging each other. Looking a bit crazy, he says he has turned the livestock loose, is ready to burn down the house and the barn and, thereafter, go to California to join Simeon and Peter. When the Sheriff arrives, both Eben and Abbie are led away, and Cabot is left alone in the farm.

From the synopsis written above, it can be perceived that Simeon, Peter, and Eben fall victims of their own father, Ephraim Cabot, who has been so possessive with his farm, and demands unconditional sacrifice. The outset of the tragic destiny that befalls the three of them reveals since Cabot has forced his sons to work hard on the isolated and lonely farm. The farm is full of stones and hard to cultivate. Meanwhile, Cabot does not guarantee either anyone of them or his new bride Abbie to inherit it even after he dies. Because of his unfair treatment to his sons to cultivate his stony farmland that needs extra physical strength, the sons rebel against him. Simeon and Peter want to take revenge on him by leaving the farm to lead a much better life by prospecting gold in California. Eben is left alone carrying on his half-brothers' jobs in the farm.

The life in the farm that Eben has experienced proves too hard for him especially since the death of his mother whom he loves so much. He feels life gets more and more bitter. He loses her care and love that he feels so helpful in overcoming the hardship he has suffered from cultivating his father's farm. However, he believes that even though his mother has died, her spirit is still present accompanying him, and helping him survive in the farm even after his half-brothers have left him. The soul of his mother serves as consolation to him. The arrival of his father's new bride, Abbie, however, prepares for his fatal defeat. Though not attracted to her at first, Eben is overcome with desire and submits to her seduction. This leads to his committing adultery with her followed by the birth of their son. Cabot, when he learns that Abbie has betrayed him, and that the son is not his but Eben's, has to face tragedy which he never expects before. What he has prepared for his son, that is to be the rightful heir to his farm, proves futile. Tragedy grows more intense as Abbie murders her baby in the hope that she is able to make things better between her and Eben, that both of them will be able to secure the farm. The murder of the innocent baby brings about tragic irony in that Eben and Abbie's desire to own the farm cannot be fulfilled. Enraged and heartbroken at first but then regaining his love for Abbie, especially after telling the Sheriff of her murder of their son, Eben decides to stand by her no matter if he has to go to jail as well. From this, tragedy appears. Eben, the protagonist in *Desire Under the Elms*, works quite hard in cultivating the farm belonging to his father, Ephraim Cabot.

Because he feels that his father has badly treated him and decided not to bequeath the farm to him, Eben wants to take revenge on him. He then is attracted to his own father's new wife, and makes love relationship with her. They both have a baby as a result of their committing adultery, and they then both make a plan of seizing Ephraim Cabot's farm. However, their plan becomes futile, and this leads to a tragic

event as Abbie kills their son to prove her love to Eben. Seeing that she has committed infanticide, she has to go to jail. Feeling pity on her, Eben decides to keep her company in jail.

In Indonesia, especially in Javanese historiography during the seventh century A.D., tragedy also happened during the reign of SunanAmangkurat I of the Islamic Mataram kingdom, and it involved the Sunan himself, the then fourth king of Islamic Mataram Kingdom in Central Java ruling from 1646 to 1677 (Sudarsono 1990:62). The term 'Sunan', which is shortened from 'Susuhunan', is a title used to refer to kings of Mataram royal palace (Sudarsono 1990:325). According to Moedjanto (1993:22-23) the title Susuhunan appeared to be used by AgungHanyakrakusumo, the third great Islamic Mataram king, father of Amangkurat I, in his effort to make his position become more powerful, in particular "in facing the territories of the religious leaders or their descendants and followers in general. He began to use the title Susuhunan in 1625 "to glorify himself and with that he declared to other people, especially to the regents or his opponents, that his glory and greatness were the same as that of the religious leaders." Then, AgungHanyakrakusumo used the title Sultan in 1641 "which he obtained from Mekkahulamas who gave him a robe as a token." The title "Sunan" has actually been used much earlier by Muslim Holy Teachers or honorable religious leaders, the *WaliSongoor* the nine saints who spread Islam in Java, the most famous of whom is SunanKalijaga. Later on this title is also used by Amangkurat I, presumably with the same purpose as that of his father. More importantly, the use of the title Susuhunan by the king implies that parents whose daughter is married by the king will be filled with pride, become well known and feel greatly honored by the society; thus, their social status may rise more highly. It is obvious that by using the title 'Susuhunan,' Amangkurat I made himself an absolute monarch, and strengthened his position not only as a person of high nobility but also as a king whose wish no one might fail to fulfill.

The Javanese Chronicle account of *RaraOyi* involves three major characters namely RaraOyi, the protagonist and also the tragic heroine, SunanAmangkurat I, and the crown prince PangeranAdipatiAnom alias Prince Tejaningrat, both of whom may be regarded as antagonists. However, the account of *RaraOyi* has never been published as a literary work except that it was written as an account in the Javanese Chronicle or *Babad Tanah Jawi*. Even so, as it has passed through words of mouth, it has acquired wide popularity among people not only hundreds of years ago but also until today, in spite of the fact whether the account happened in real life or not at that time.

After the death of his queen, RatuWetan, sometime earlier, SunanAmangkurat I became forlorn. He felt lonely and lived in agony of remorse owing to the death of the woman he loved most. As he did not want to be enveloped in deepening sadness, the King wanted to have a substitute wife whose beauty was at least to be the same as that of his late queen. It is by reason of this that the King ordered two special envoys, Nayatrana and Yudakarti, to find him a substitute woman to replace his late queen. The woman was to be found in an area where there was a well from which fragrant smell was expelled. This very area was close to the bank of the Kali Mas, Surabaya. According to the Javanese chronicle account, RaraOyi was the daughter of a village official NgabeiMangunjaya, whose domicile lay under the jurisdiction of Prince Pekik, the regent of Surabaya, the vassal to the Mataram Kingdom. It is worth noting that Prince Pekik's wife, RatuPandan, turns out to be Amangkurat I's aunt, the younger sister of Sultan AgungHanyakrakusumo. RaraOyi, whose age was not more than that of a teenager as she was mentioned to be only 11 years of age, and who was fond of flowers, was eventually found by the two special envoys mentioned above. It is NgabeiMangunjaya himself who offered his own daughter to the two special envoys who, upon meeting her, were themselves enchanted by her beauty. Taken to call on the King, RaraOyi was considered rather too young, and so was entrusted to the head official NgabeiWirareja until she was regarded as mature enough to enter the palace. Such kind of fact commonly happened in the royal Javanese family when someone was about to live inside the royal palace. He or she had to be taught Javanese culture and mannerism, i.e. how to speak politely using a high speech level of Javanese, how to behave like a Javanese, being able to exercise appropriate attitude (Mulder, 2006:119). As time went on RaraOyi grew up along with her beauty. Her skin turned as delicate as silk. She took care of her body enthusiastically day after day, making herself more and more beautiful. One day, the crown prince, PangeranAdipatiAnom, paid a visit to Wirareja by chance, and there he saw RaraOyi who was practicing how to draw patterns of batik with her foster mother, NyaiWirareja. Surprised and frightened, she fled but turned her head a moment to tidy up her hair. What she did at the moment of fleeing had made the crown prince get more and more madly in love with her. He asked NgabeiWirareja about the beautiful girl who ran away, and the latter explained that that beautiful pearl had been especially intended for his father, SusuhunanAmangkurat I. Due to his having been madly in love with RaraOyi, the crown prince got sick. He was in a terrible agony. He lay down covering himself with a piece of batik cloth, and locking himself in his room. He had no appetite to eat nor was he able to sleep. He thought only about her amorously. It turned out that he had suffered from terrible lovesick. Having been informed about what happened to his grandson the crown prince, Prince Pekik, who loved him so much, decided to cheer him up. Along with his wife, RatuPandan, he went to see Wirareja. Prince Pekik persuaded Wirareja to

hand over RaraOyi to his grandson AdipatiAnom. Formerly Wirareja had strongly objected to Prince Pekik's persuasion for fear that he would be severely punished by SunanAmangkurat I. Eventually, however, he surrendered as Prince Pekik kept persuading him persistently by giving him precious and expensive gifts, and by telling him not to worry about what his decision was. He told him assuredly that he would take all the consequences for what he did at all costs. In similar occasion, RatuPandan also presented NyaiWirareja with gifts too precious for her to be refused. Before long, everything was prepared for RaraOyi to take a leave of her guardians and/or foster parents, Ngabei and NyaiWirareja. RaraOyi was then taken to the crown prince's residence riding on a carriage. On learning what his grandparents had done for him, the crown prince felt he was alive again. His face turned from pale to radiant, full of lust and desire. RaraOyi, whom the King wanted very much to marry when she had been considered a grown up young lady, was abducted and secretly married by the crown prince AdipatiAnom without his father's consent. Another version of the account mentions that the marriage that took place between the crown prince and RaraOyi is officially blessed by religious leaders. Of his wrongdoing, the grandfather, Prince Pekik, realized completely that he would be severely punished by Mangkurat I but he decided to help his grandson end his lovesick. This, of course, enraged the King, and he, consequently, ordered the crown prince to kill RaraOyi with his own hand by stabbing her with a kris. SunanAmangkurat I's order to the crown prince is in fact an attempt to free himself from humiliation as he was not only able to have a substitute woman to replace RatuWetan but also he felt he was foolishly tricked by his own son. This gives rise to tragic event happening to RaraOyi. RaraOyi had to accept her fate tragically. She died young on the hand of the man she was not really in love with (De Graaf, 1987:26-27) (Soemarsono, 2008:188-189).

From the account written above, we learn that even though both the King and the crown prince are depicted as facing trouble because of the death of RaraOyi whom they both love passionately, they do not deserve to be called tragic heroes. Instead, it is RaraOyi who deserves to be regarded as the protagonist or the tragic heroine. She is an ordinary woman with no apparent flaw. She is just an innocent young girl. She herself never has any intention let alone ambition to become the wife of a person of high nobility, or a king to be exact. She is too young to meet her unfortunate fate, i.e. to die as a victim of the two noblemen, the King and the crown prince, greedily vying one another to win her love. As for the King and the crown prince, they can be regarded only as pathetic figures. They are truly the antagonists. Following Potter's argument, it can be generally acknowledged that RaraOyi in her being a tragic heroine is fundamentally good in the sense that, regardless of her very young age, she did not mind being taken to call on the King, though, perhaps she never imagined that she would then be made a concubine nor did she imagine that she had to be married for a short while to the King's crown prince. This signifies how good her behavior is. Her practice of drawing the pattern of batik under the guidance of her foster mother NyiWirareja also shows that she is also capable of maintaining her behavior (exercising her patience to acquire the skill of drawing patterns of batik), and these two facts represent the first characteristic. As she grew up, she might have been informed by her foster parents, Kyai and NyaiWirareja, of the King's intention of entrusting her to them (of why she should stay with her foster parents who might then inform her that it was the King, SunanAmangkurat I who had the intention of entrusting her to them). It was probable that she did not love the King, and this can be regarded as a force that opposed her but she was capable of resisting it, since she never had any attempt to run away from her foster parents or even from the King. Lastly, RaraOyi as the tragic heroine is significant because, as Potter (1967) puts it, she "represents mankind in some way. She is not too eccentric nor too ordinary, for she inspires sympathy and respect and make us feel that she and what happens to her are important to us as human beings." The fatal defeat that leads to RaraOyi's death is based neither on her personal ambitions, as has been discussed above, nor on her belief in herself because she was too young to think about ambitions.

In the case of RaraOyi what mostly counts is her belief in herself in that she never thinks about why she has to be separated from her parents in her very young age. She does not seem to have any negative feeling to other people she does not know personally. She truly believes that her separation from her parents means no harm to her. That was why she does not mind being picked up by SunanAmangkurat I's two special envoys, Nayatrana and Yudakarti, although she does not know why she has to leave her parents. She simply has never been aware of what will happen to her on arriving at Mataram, the place she has never been or known before. She has never been aware that, as time goes on, tragedy has been threatening her life.

4. CONCLUSION

From the discussion elaborated previously it appears that both *Desire Under the Elms* portraying the society in the 1920s New England and the Javanese Chronicle Account of *RaraOyi* occurring during the seventeenth century share certain similarities in that both depict tragedy of human beings. Both present characters who are destined to die against their will. What distinguishes both is that the former is a play that portrays a tragic hero of an ordinary family in which the father, Ephraim Cabot, and his son, Eben Cabot, are intrigued by primitive desire of the love to Abbie Putnam, while the latter is a true story revealing a tragic

heroine whose life was surrounded by two noblemen, one of the kings of the Islamic Mataram Kingdom, Amangkurat I and his own Crown Prince, Pangeran Adipati Anom alias Prince Tejaningrat, vying with each other for her love.

Tragedy in both the play and the account previously mentioned represent human life, taking place not only among ordinary people but people of high nobility as well.

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