Eugene O’Neill, one of the greatest American playwrights of his time, is credited with creating the “serious American drama”. He prided himself as a writer of tragedy on the lines of the Greek poets. According to Winther, in his book *Eugene O’Neill*, Fate or God was the force that determined destiny in the Greek drama while in O’Neill’s modern world, it was the modern biological and psychological interpretation of man’s behavior.1 *Desire Under the Elms* written in 1924 is a tragic story of intense passion and desire on a New England farm that takes its readers on a journey through the vast canvas of human emotions ranging from lust to love to covetousness to hatred. According to Joseph Krutch, the play is more about man’s eternal fate, than about the violent events in the lives of the “Puritan New Englanders”.

Outwardly it is a realistic, if heightened, study of the manners, morals and psychological processes of a definite society. But it is impossible not to realize that O’Neill is here interested less in New England as such than in an aspect of the eternal tragedy of man and his passions.2

However from a feminist viewpoint, *Desire under the Elms* is not only about the eternal tragedy of man but also the accumulative tragedy of womankind, heightened, by rigid norms in a puritanical society. In the last chapter, Maurya's tragic fate meted out to her by the sea raised the question whether women, who are traditionally associated with nature, are in reality the victims of nature, and in this chapter the intensity of that question seems to heighten vis-à-vis the violent events in the plot.
Here the theory of associating women with nature takes concrete shape as the male protagonists make constant and frequent associations of women with nature. In the agrarian society portrayed here women are constantly associated either with animals or with inanimate objects in nature. Simeon, the elder son of the family, remembers his dead wife by comparing her to an animal, recollecting that “her hair was as long's a hoss' tail”.

Smitten by Abbie's beauty, Cabot even uses some Biblical phrases when he compares her anatomy with different objects in nature.

CABOT: Yew air my Rose O’ Sharon! Behold, yew air fair; yer eyes air doves; yer lips air like scarlet; yer two breasts air like two fawns; yer navel be like a round goblet; yer belly be like a heap o’ wheat...

Ynestra King in her essay in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of eco feminism* asserted that the woman nature identification was a male ideology and a tool of oppression which must itself be overcome. The male characters in *Desire* however, encourage the woman nature connection. To Eben, Min the prostitute has attributes similar to the night and to the earth.

EBEN: She's like t' night, she's soft 'n' wa'm, her eyes kin wink like a star, her mouth's wa'm, her arms’re wa’m, she smells like a wa'm plowed field, she's purty….(145)

Feminists however do not take positively to such associations. According to some, comparing women with non human nature is derogatory to women’s self esteem and to their personality. Simone de Beauvoir too reacted against the constant woman nature connection hyped by a patriarchal society.

Metaphors that associate women with non human nature, far from being ecological are mystifications of oppressive patriarchal stereotypes.
The play also highlights another of Beauvoir’s claims: of the western notion of treating women as the "other", as objects equivalent to nature but different from men. As we shall see, this play is a striking example of the chauvinistic attitude of a society that regarded its women as inferior to men. All the male protagonists in the play including Eben, the young son, look upon women as objects to be possessed. Throughout the play there are strong indications of women as status symbols for men. This sense of a woman "belonging" to a man is a typical trait of male chauvinism. Eben feels a sense of pride in having an affair with Min, the prostitute who earlier "belonged" to his father. The fact that he "tuk" Min was not very important for Eben. He triumphs in the feeling that for once he has vanquished his father. For him it was more significant that Min who earlier "belonged" to his father now belongs to him.

EBEN: What do I care fur her- ‘ceptin’ she’s round an’ wa’m? The p’nt is she was his’n -an’ now she b’ongs t’mе!(14)

Later, his affair with Abbie changes his whole personality and he no longer feels scared of his father. Early on in the play Simeon had foreshadowed this liaison gauging the intense desire Eben had to possess a thing that belonged to his father. Hence he asks Eben of Abbie, "Mebbe ye'll try t' make her your'n too"?(148) which Eben eventually does. His “bold and confident expression” after cuckolding the old man is more due to the fact that he has finally usurped something that rightfully belonged to his father.

Eben's intense desire of snatching the farm away from his father is transferred to snatching and possessing his women for the time being. In this male dominated society, women are seen as men's private properties. Min and Abbie thus increase Eben's self-confidence by belonging to him and becoming his possessions. Ironically
this sense of belonging and possessiveness is “acceptable” as the forte of only the male characters. When Abbie ambitiously speaks the language of possessiveness, both Ephraim and Eben resent it. The men cannot tolerate a woman speaking in possessive tones.

CABOT: (as they enter- a queer strangled emotion in his dry cracking voice) Har we be t'hum Abbie.
ABBIE: (with lust for the word) Hum! (Her eyes gloating on the house without seeming to see the two stiff figures at the gate) It's purty- purty! I can't b'lieve it's r'ally mine.
CABOT: (sharply) Yewr'n? Mine! (He stares at her penetratingly. She stares back. He adds relentingly) Our'n- mebbe! It was lonesome too long. I was growi ng old in the spring. A hum's got t'hev a woman. (155)

Similarly Eben who later falls madly in love with Abbie, is nettled when she calls the parlor room her own.

ABBIE: This room's been dead long enuf. Now it's goin' t'be my room! 
EBEN: (frowning) Ay- eh.
ABBIE: (hastily) I meant our room. (180)

In this society the first person possessives are, by an unwritten rule, meant to be spoken only by males. Abbie's independent language of "my" and "mine" challenges this norm and she even succeeds to a certain extent when the men give in to her wishes. Abbie manages to survive in the hostile and patriarchal environment of the New England farm and even gets the better of the male protagonists. Her fierce determination to have a "hum" propels her into cuckolding her old patriarch of a husband, displaying the scorn she has for him, as well as for the puritanical attitudes of that society. In spite of being a woman, Abbie dominates the proceedings in the patriarchal Cabot household, threatening to usurp Cabot's supreme authority. Her intense desire for the farm disturbs the prevailing status quo in the Cabot household. The brothers' hopes of inheriting the farm wither away after her arrival. The elder
brothers Simeon and Peter leave the farm in the hope of better prospects in the gold fields of California. Eben who stays behind with the single minded determination of "fightin' fur Maw's rights to her home", falls hopelessly in love with Abbie when she manipulates his sensitivity towards his mother and plays mother-lover to him. Abbie, Eben and Ephraim form part of a monstrous love triangle where each character is obsessed with possession (primarily of the farm as also of each other), which eventually leads to their destruction, leaving only the hardened patriarch in agonising loneliness.

O'Neill has drawn the character of Cabot on the lines of the grand old patriarch who rules over his household with dictatorial authority. He wields absolute power in his house and over his family members. Insensitive to their feelings and sentiments, Cabot misuses his power to lord over his family and extract maximum work from them. He is the prototype of the powerful authority that Weber describes in his definition of Power:

The probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.\(^5\)

Cabot's sons resent the authority of their father but are too weak to rebel against him. They can only grumble and count their woes as the eldest Simeon says-

SIMEON: We've wuked. Give our strength. Give our years. Plowed 'em under in the ground- (he stamps his foot rebelliously)-rottin'- makin' soil for his crops! (138)

Not only the sons, Cabot's first two wives also suffered under his authoritarian rule, so much so that both of them died due to overwork. In the Cabot household, wives were looked upon merely as helpers and reproducers and were evaluated on the basis of the amount of work they did. The only memories Cabot has of his dead wives are as mothers and workers. His attitude portrays the narrow mindedness of a society that
failed to look at women beyond their biological capacity. Speaking of his first wife

Cabot recalls-

    CABOT: I tuk a wife. She bore Simeon an' Peter. She
    was a good woman. She wuked hard. We was married
twenty year. She never knowed me. She helped me but
she never knowed what she was helpin'. (173)

The second wife too evokes similar associations-

    CABOT: She bore Eben. She was purty-but soft. She
    tried t'be hard. She couldn't. She never knowed me nor
    nothin'. (173)

In all cultures women are looked upon primarily as mothers and homemakers,

albeit in a condescending way. Patriarchal lineage ensures that the mother is always
relegated to the background. Rosaldo concluded that the constant assertion of
women’s roles as homemakers decreased their self esteem in society.

    An emphasis on women's maternal role leads to a
    universal opposition between 'domestic' and 'public'
    roles that is necessarily asymmetrical; women confined
    to the domestic sphere do not have access to the sorts of
    authority, prestige and cultural values that are the
    prerogatives of men.  

Cabot's first two wives led humiliating lives by being confined to the domestic sphere
and even when they worked, they worked mechanically on the orders of their ‘lord’
Cabot. Like the early "tillers of the soil" Cabot evaluated the worth of his women on
the basis of their produce, just as he would evaluate a piece of land. His line of
thought is similar to Beauvoir's "early men" who saw a close affinity between their
women and their land.

    Among the nomads procreation seemed hardly more
    than accidental, and the wealth of the soil remained
    unknown; but the husbandsman marvelled at the
    mystery of the fecundity that burgeoned in his furrows
    and in the maternal body: he realised that he had been
    engendered like the cattle and the crops, he wanted his
    clan to engender other men who would perpetuate it
    while perpetuating the fertility of the fields.  

In this atmosphere of utter humiliation for a woman, the character of Cabot's third wife Abbie comes as a breath of fresh air. She displays the rare traits of ambition and passion, qualities unimaginable in a woman in that society. Edwin Engel calls her a woman with an obstinate strength and a calculating intelligence who combines the two powerful drives of possessiveness and sexual desire. Thus to him, "Abbie is a type of the primitive female- rapacious and maternal".

In a place where the woman is seen as merely an object to be possessed, Abbie stands out in her desire to possess the farm. She is a striking contrast to the earlier wives who did not have any will of their own and merely slaved for their husband. Even Abbie's decision to marry Ephraim is purely for the purpose of owning a farm and a "hum", and she even has the cheek to admit that to Eben.

ABBIE: Waal what if I did need a hum? What else'd I marry an old man like him fur? (160)

She shrewdly manages to manipulate the old patriarch and knows she can make him dance to her tunes, as she proudly tells Eben:

ABBIE: Mebbe with me fur a fren ye'd find ye'd like living here better. I kin make it easy fur ye with him, mebbe. (With a scornful sense of power) I calc'late I kin git him t'do most anything fur me. (159)

However, when Abbie realises that marrying old Cabot was not enough to own the farm and that she also needed a son, she targets the young Eben as a means to reach her goal. Using her shrewdness and her native vigour, Abbie manages to cuckold her old husband and at the same time retain her image of a dutiful wife to Ephraim, thus ensuring that the farm never slips from her hands.

ABBIE: (suddenly) Mebbe the Lord'll give us a son.
CABOT: (turns and stares at her eagerly) Ye me mean- a son- t’ me ‘n’ yew?
ABBIE: (with a cajoling smile) Ye’re a strong man yet, hain’t ye? ‘Tain’t noways impossible, be it?..... I been
thinkin’ o’ it all along. Ay-eh-an’ I been prayin’ it’d happen, too. (172)

Louise Lamphere’s study of the ways and means women use to gain power showed that it was almost impossible for women to have access to power through direct means in a chauvinistic society. She concluded that nevertheless women do manage to find a solution in each situation.

Women's strategies are directly related to the power structure of the family. Where power and authority are in the hands of men, women work to influence them. 9

Abbie seems to be a living example of Lamphere’s theory. She uses her influence, her charms and her intelligence to possess the farm that would never come to her the straight way due to rigid patriarchal conventions that decree only men as heirs to property.

Ironically, though the men in the play associate women with nature, they refuse to acknowledge this association when it comes to practical matters. Thus on the one hand Cabot equates the farm with Abbie and vice versa.

CABOT: Sometimes ye air the farm an’ sometimes the farm be yew. That's why I clove t'ye in my lonesomeness…. Me an’ the farm has got t'beget a son.(171)

On the other hand, he refuses to accept Abbie as an inheritor of his farm. For him as well as for the other male protagonists, women have no rights in land or in property and so he bemoans the going away of his sons.

CABOT: What son o'mine'll keep on here t'he farm when the lord does call me? Simeon an' Peter air gone to hell and Eben's follerin' 'em.

ABBIE: They's me
CABOT: Ye're only a woman
ABBIE: I'm yewr wife
CABOT: That hain't me. A son is me- my blood- mine. Mine ought t'git mine. (169)
Abbie remains undeterred in the face of Ephraim's determination that only a son can be his true heir and cleverly goes about cuckolding the old man under his own blind eyes. She uses Eben's mother fixation to lure him to her and fulfil her desire of begetting a son. She promises Eben that she would be everything to him that his own mother was and portrays herself as the very incarnation of his mother.

ABBIE: Tell me about yer Maw, Eben.
EBEN: They hain't nothin' much. She was kind. She was good.
ABBIE: (putting one arm over his shoulder. He does not seem to notice- passionately) I'll be kind an' good t'ye!
EBEN: Sometimes she used t'sing fur me.
ABBIE: I'll sing fur ye!
EBEN: This was her hum. This was her farm.
ABBIE: This is my hum! This is my farm!
EBEN: He married her t'steal 'em. She was soft an' easy. He couldn't 'preciate her.
ABBIE: He can't 'preciate me!
EBEN: He murdered her with his hardness.
ABBIE: He's murderin' me!
EBEN: She died. (A pause) Sometimes she used to sing fur me. (He bursts into a fit of sobbing)
ABBIE: (both her arms around him- with wild passion) I'll sing fur ye! I'll die fur ye! Don't cry Eben. I'll take yer Maw's place! I'll be everything she was t'ye! Let me kiss ye, Eben!(178)

Coupled with Abbie’s desire for the farm, is her intense desire for Eben and she boldly makes advances towards him, an unimaginable thing for a woman to do in a patriarchal society. Ironically, society has no qualms about the amount of lust that a man has; however, for a woman to be lustful is tantamount to grave sin. Abbie remains unconcerned about the moral laws of society and unabashedly resorts to "incest". In taking this bold step, Abbie defies patriarchy which sets down rigid moral laws for its women. Ania Loomba elaborates on this issue in her essay "Sexuality and Racial Difference".

Active female sexuality is disruptive of patriarchal control, not just because it is an emblem for, and
analogous to, other sorts of rebellion but because it directly threatens the power base of patriarchy which is dependent upon its regulation and control.\textsuperscript{10}

Thus Abbie in her own assertive way keeps toppling patriarchal notions of the ideal woman and defies society and its conventional norms, unconcerned about the scandal that her action would evoke. Abbie initially plans to use Eben as a means of owning the farm via a son. However, as fate decrees both fall truly in love with each other, so much so that they forget the conventions of society. Abbie's resorting to incest would naturally be looked upon by traditionalists as "idiosyncratic, disruptive, unimportant or undesirable"\textsuperscript{11} in view of the dominant norms of society; however for Abbie it is the only way in which she can possess a home. Collier argued that women should be looked upon as "political strategists" who use resources available to them in support of interests often opposed to those of men.

Women's strategies may appear to be deviant and disruptive, yet they are nonetheless important components of the actual processes by which social life proceeds.\textsuperscript{12}

Through her actions, Abbie confirms that she does not belong to the breed of passive women who sit back and take whatever comes to them. She believes in action and in reaching her goal by all possible means. Her own feelings and emotions are of utmost importance and she does not hesitate in displaying her 'unnatural' passion for Eben. Moreover, her personality is much stronger than the earlier Greek heroines who were ashamed of their desires. In the related Greek myth, the stepmother/lover Phaedra considers herself a pawn in Aphrodite’s revenge scheme and curses herself for her senselessness in harbouring an illicit passion towards her stepson Hippolytus.

\begin{center}
PHAEDRA: O hapless I- what is this I have done? Whitherward have I wandered from wisdom’s way? I was mad, by a God’s curse overthrown. Oh ill-starred- welladay! Dear Nurse, veil over mine head once more;
\end{center}
For I blush for the words from my lips that came.
Veil me: the tears from mine eyes down pour,
And mine eyelids sink for shame.\textsuperscript{13}

Abbie, cast in the mould of a nineteenth century American woman has no regrets for incestuous passions and remains proud of her love for Eben.

EBEN: I’m as guilty as yew be! He was the child o’ our sin.
ABBIE: (lifting her head as if defying God) I don’t repent that sin! I hain't askin' God t'forgive that! (203)

The violent passion and drama in the play is clearly an influence of Greek tragedy. The popular Greek themes of incest and infanticide are used here to evoke the tragic aspect. According to Arthur Gelb, O’Neill "seized upon the dramatic devices utilized by the Greeks and thrust them into his own contemporary dramatic mold".\textsuperscript{14}

Abbie’s initial lust for Eben soon transforms to true love with a combination of maternal love. Nonetheless the affair is incestuous. Abbie in a way succeeds in seducing Eben unlike Phaedra of the Greek myth or even her ‘avatars’ in Euripides or Seneca or Racine who is spurned by her step son Hippolytus.

Here the step son Eben falls madly in love with Abbie. He is Abbie’s junior by ten years, and having lost a child earlier, Eben possibly becomes a substitute for Abbie’s dead child. Apart from being unrepentant about having committed incest, she even commits infanticide to prove to Eben that she truly loves him. This single act of Abbie’s has aroused many passions. As seen earlier in this chapter and the chapter on Riders, woman is generally associated with nature because of her reproductive capacity. Just as the earth flowers and brings forth life, so does woman, wherein the term ‘Earth Mother’ becomes synonymous for both earth and woman. According to most readers, Abbie killing her own son is an unnatural and disruptive act that goes against the whole concept of motherhood, for no mother would kill her own child.
However from the viewpoint of the feminist who believes that woman and nature should not be treated as equals, the act proves that the woman-nature connection is only a myth perpetuated by society. In killing her son, Abbie breaks free from even this patriarchal convention. However according to Cahill, Abbie does this because she is a “fragmented” woman and because her love for Eben is not pure; it being a combination of “lust and mother love”.

> Seen in this light, the seduction emerges not only as a struggle between man and woman, but also as a conflict of two emotional impulses in which mother love is overcome by sexual desire. It is this smothering of the maternal instinct that later enables Abbie to smother her own child.\(^{15}\)

Of course, Abbie’s killing of her son in no way glorifies her as a heroine and this dissertation does not endorse the killing of children as a means to women’s liberation. The main reason for including this play is to show Abbie’s difference from the conventional women of her time, of highlighting her passions and emotions which manage to find an outlet in a patriarchal society.

The theme of infanticide that O’Neill introduces here was rarely seen on modern stage. At the turn of the century, the New Drama did handle this issue. In *Alan’s Wife* written by Elizabeth Robins and Florence Bell, an anguished mother smothers her weak and crippled infant, afraid that he would lead a life of suffering if she were to die before him. The play is a powerful expression of maternal anguish, that questions the experience of motherhood, much like *Desire Under the Elms*. In both plays, the mothers are led away to be hanged, but both remain calm and do not regret their act.

In the last chapter we saw the unequal relation between a dominating nature and an old woman wherein the woman gains a psychological victory over nature. Western society however, as we have seen looks upon women and nature as equals, as similar
to and as different from men. Feminists oppose this viewpoint and believe that the nature-woman association is just another ploy employed by patriarchal society to dominate over women and debar their entry into the cultural world. Ecofeminists insist that "women and nature have not only been associated but have been seen as other by Western culture".  

In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir elaborated on the notion of men treating women as the "other".

Man seeks in women the Other as Nature and as his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings Nature inspires in man. He exploits her but she crushes him, he is born of her and dies in her; she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will.

Not only the characters but the whole atmosphere in *Desire* is suffused with the woman nature connection. The two elm trees facing the house are given feminine attributes symbolising Eben's dead mother.

> Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humanness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles. (136)

Gloria Cahill believes that O'Neill meant the two elm trees to symbolize the two mother figures in his own life, his biological mother Ella O’Neill and his nanny Sarah Sandy; and in the context of the play, Eben’s biological mother and his mother-lover.

The two trees that dominate the stage symbolize Eben’s natural mother, who died, and the substitute mother who has come to renew the life of the farm. The house is the point at which these two figures intersect.
O'Neill himself had ambiguous feelings towards his own mother, Ella O’Neill. She got addicted to morphine at about the time of O’Neill’s birth. Sometimes O’Neill hated her for her addiction, while at other times he felt sorry and suffered guilt pangs as it was his painful birth that had triggered her addiction. At such times, Sheaffer says, he looked upon the mother as a victim and this feeling crept into his plays.

But sometimes, viewing her as a victim of her husband, the playwright also drew tender images of her, chiefly in Eben Cabot's recollection of his own mother in *Desire under the Elms.*

It is also significant to add here, that O’Neill always regretted that as a child, he never got the love, care and attention of his own mother. A hired nurse, Sarah Sandy was to play surrogate mother for the first seven years of his life. The different personalities of these two mother figures, was to have a deep impact on the young O’Neill. Ella’s conventional, religious and feminine upbringing was in sharp contrast to the lower class Sarah’s, whose extreme poverty made her a bread winner early in life. Cahill believes that all of O’Neill’s literary mothers represent to some extent these two mother figures in his life.

Fragmented and unfulfilled, these two women came to represent a yin and yang of the mother image in O’Neill’s mind. Each incomplete in her own right, it seemed to O’Neill that if the two were combined, the result would be a whole woman in whom strength and vulnerability could harmoniously coexist and nurture the child in him. The search for a woman who possessed the qualities of both became a recurring theme in both his life and his work.

Most cultures treat women as inferior; however these same cultures place the mother on a pedestal wherefrom she is idealised. She is supposed to be all loving and self sacrificing. Jane Collier elaborates on the Christian tradition of looking upon a woman.
There are two types of women in the world, those who take after Eve and tempt men away from God and those who follow Mary and devote themselves to their sons.  

Eben's late “maw” with her strong protective instinct falls in the second category while Abbie who lures Eben falls in the first. Collier further states that "in reality Eve and Mary are the same woman for she who would be Mary to her son must inevitably be Eve to her husband".  

Abbie combines the attributes of both a physically and emotionally strong mother who can look well after Eben, but at the same time she is also his lover. D.K. Raghavacharyulu in his book Eugene O'Neill believes that Abbie is a symbolic reincarnation of Eben's mother and her aim of destroying Cabot's authority is similar to Eben's "maw". Both "b'ars him a grudge" and they are out to overthrow his patriarchal authority. Abbie cuckolds the old man and turns his sons against him while the dead mother becomes an ominous presence in the house turning the authoritarian patriarch into a nervous and uncomfortable wreck.

CABOT: It's cold in this house. It's oneasy. They's thin's pokin' about in the dark- in the corners. (174)

Raghavacharyulu feels that it is Eben's mother, more than Abbie, who poses a direct threat to the patriarchal authority of old Cabot by making him uncomfortable in his own home.

Ephraim's real rival is his dead wife, demanding the restitution of an ancient wrong unleashing the invisible fury of her vengeful, violated maternity.

Thus in a way, our play has two heroines who both aim to destroy Cabot's authority. Resorting to “incest” and later by killing her son, Abbie breaks the woman-nature connection and shows the least concern she has for society and its norms. Neither society nor old Ephraim bother her now. Significantly, alongith her downfall,
Eben and Ephraim are also pulled in. Eben is doomed to share her fate by admitting of being partner to the infanticide while Ephraim is left all alone to fend for himself and begin life anew.

Cabot's authoritarian patriarchy is defeated in the end by the combined efforts of Abbie and Eben's "maw". Though he is the only character who survives at the end of the play, his life, by his own admittance, will be lonelier with no friends or family near him. Edwin Engel rightly calls the play a "victory of mother and son over the father". 24

CABOT: It's a-goin' to be lonesomer now than ever it wa'r afore- an' I'm getting' old, Lord- ripe on the bough....(205)
NOTES


3. Eugene O’Neill, "Desire under the Elms", *Nine Plays* (New York: The Modern Library, 1941) 167. This edition has been used throughout the chapter and page numbers have been mentioned in parentheses.


12. Ibid.

182


22. Ibid.
