

CHAPTER IV

DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS

 Desire Under the Elms is O Neill’s third of the realistic plays completed during the period of his association with the Triumvirate. He wrote it at Ridgefield Connecticut, in the winter and spring of 1924 and finished in June. Like 'Welded' and 'All God’s Children Got Wings’, this play accepted the recommendations of the prophets of the Art Theater movement. The play moves towards a more performed realism, revealing the psychological essences and primitive mythic forces working in modern lives and attempting to reach a state of spiritual abstraction.

 Desire Under the Elms is essentially the story of physical solitude, the solitude of the lord, of men’s dream, of love, of life. The God behind the existence created on this New England farm is a harsh God, who is alone and is not understood. The minds of the people in this story are shaken and tangled with loneliness, with thwarted passion, with the trivial, the intense exaltation and denial of life. Underneath this solitude desire works, the redemption through love.

 In this play the children of the old Cabot hate him. The youngest, the son of the second wife, remembers his dead mother and sees her around the place risen from the grave. The father brings home a third wife. The two older sons go away to California; the younger stays and thinks to
avenge his mother. As the time passes he and the young wife come to love each other. A son is born, which old Cabot thinks is to be heir to the farm, leaving the second wife’s son adrift in the world.

While a dance in the honor of the new born child goes on in the kitchen, the father and son quarrel outside. The son believes his father when he hears that the woman wanted a son only to cheat him and not the desire for the farm that had driven her to him, she kills the child. He runs off for the sheriff. The father turns the livestock loose in the woods and plans to go away. He finds the money gone from his hiding place. The son returns from the sheriff, he falls at the knees of the woman, takes part of the blame on himself, and they go away together to prison.

The main outline of the story has been given by Barret H. Clark:

Ephraim Cabot, a new England farmer who believes that “God is harsh” and bases his life on that principle, has just married his third wife, Abbie Putnan, an attractive woman of thirty five, half his own age. She accepts him in order to provide a home for herself. She finds awaiting her Eben, Ephraim’s thirty two year old son by his second wife. Believing that the farm belongs rightfully to him, Eben looks upon his new step mother as a designing and dangerous interloper, and he hates her with all the venom of a true son of
Ephraim Cabot. Abbie is both clever and sexually attractive, and to keep the farm in her possession she tells her husband that she could conceive a child by him. The old man is delighted and promises that if she could so bless him he will make over his property to the new heir. Abbie then proceeds cold-bloodedly to seduce Eben but during the process she falls desperately in love with him, as she does with him. A son is born to them and Ephraim believes it his own. Abbie, for all her cleverness has aroused in her heart a passion that wrecks all her plans. Eben tells everything to his father. Ephraim then destroys the last vestige of Eben’s illusion by telling him what was the literal truth; that Abbie has pretended to love him only in order to make sure of the property. The young man in fury of rage and disappointment decides to leave home to Abbie’s utter despair. The irony of the situation is not clear to her. She is so deeply attached to Eben that she cannot convince him that though in the beginning she did make love to him for an ulterior purpose, she is now completely mastered by her passion. She frantically tells him that she loves him for his own sake but he will not listen. She must now prove at any cost that she is sincere. She therefore strangles the child. Eben is at last convinced of her love for him, but is so horrified at her act that he runs of atone and tells
the police. The last scene finds the lovers once more in each other’s arms. Eben confesses that he is an accomplice and he is ready to pay the penalty with Abbie. They are taken off by the sheriff and his men, happy and exultant. They have drunk deep of life and passion, and they have no regrets. They have passed out of the realm where tragedy-as ordinarily understood-can touch them. Of “sin” they have no consciousness: victims of puritanical repressions, and of the mighty current of life. They have fashioned their romance apart from the sordidness of their surroundings. Though they have broken through the light of day. Among the rocks and them hard soil where they have yearned for beauty at last found it. ” [1947: 52]

The plot of the play as given here shows that it is crowded with incidents and the spectator has to pass from one to another tense moment with terrific rapidity that he can hardly succeed in enjoining the play. The scenes of violence seem to have been piled with one upon another to such an extent that the audience feels sated. On account of the dramatist’s fondness for violent outward circumstances and for depicting fieriest passions he had to give a rather elaborate frame work to this tragedy. He introduced two almost superfluous scenes in order to show Eben’s older half brother leaving the farm for California in the year 1850.
Desire Under the Elms is notable for its vivid characters. Though almost all the characters have been drawn effectively, the portraits of Ephraim Cabot and of Abbie are especially important. Henry Raleigh thinks that Ephraim Cabot is the most important character in the play. “He is a great grotesque, a powerful buffon in the tradition of the elder Karamasov. A note of pathos, still grotesque, is introduced by his love of cows.

He can talk to the cows, he says for they know the farm and him. In his fierce possessiveness he would like to burn down the farm, and everything on it, so that it would not pass on to anyone else but he would turn the cows free. “They’ll give me peace”. It is this aspect of his character that comes out occasionally in a facial expression that has a strange incongruous dreamy quality (Part II, Scene I). And he has a genuinely somber side as well:

Goe’s hard, not easy! and life is as he “lonesome”, keeps repeating. [1979:29]

He has an ego of monumental proportions and is, in fact, that very God he keeps referring to and calling upon. For what he really represents is pure power, physically and emotionally. His great dramatic moment occurs when he explodes in scene I of part III at the party celebrating the
birth of his son. The old man of seventy six outdrinks and outdances all the younger men in the room.

In the midst of his wild dance, leaping, capering, prancing, kicking, which he steadily stepped up until the fiddler is exhausted, he bellows out the story of one of his legendary feats, namely, how when he was out West, he was attacked by Indians shot in the back side by an arrow and chased by the whole tribe which he outran. He returned and took his revenge --“Ten eyes for an eye that was my motto” (198) and scalped the dead Indians. And he is of course as hard as nails, and at end all his sons gone, his wife a murderous, he goes off to round up the stock. Of all O’Neill characters Cabot is the one who comes closest to suggesting a great natural force and who is a complete strange to guilt. As Louis Sheaffer puts it:

He is the New England farmer raised to mythic proportions, and without him. *Desire Under the Elms* would be only a well-contrived melodrama or another expression of “exposure” literature. [1968:31]

In order to evaluate Ephraim’s properly, we must take into consideration his conception of God. Many readers would consider him to be irreligious man and would refer to sex life, his cruelty, hatred and hard unsympathetic nature as evidence of their viewpoint but in fact, his
character should be judged in the light of what he thinks about God. He
describes God in these words:

Ephraim: Wall—this place was nothing” but O’Stones. Folks
laughed when I took it. They could’nt know what I knowed.
When ye kin wake corn sprout out O’stones, God’s livin in
yw! They wa’n’t strong enuf fur that! They reckoned God
was easy. They laughed. They don’t laugh no more. Some
died hereabouts. Some went West an’ died. They’ all
underground – fur follerin’ arter an easy God. God hain’t
easy. An I growed hard...........God’s hard, not easy! God’s
in the stones! Build my church on the rocks—out O’stones
an’ I’ll be in them! That’s what he mea Peter! Stones! I
picked’em up and piled ’em into walls. em into walls. Ye kin
read the years O’ my life in them walls, every day a hefted
stone, climbin over the hills up and down, fencin’ in the
fields that was mine, whar I’d thin’s grow out O nothin’ –
like the will O! God, like the servant O! His hand. Hand. It
wa’n’t sasy. It was hard an! He made me hard fur it. (171)

Abbie is another character in the play who reveals the dramatist’s
power of characterization. She is aged thirty-five, she is pretty; she has
married Ephraim for security. She will be mistress of a farm-house, not
simply during Epharim’s remaining years, but for the rest of her life.
There is a strong determination in her.
Michael Manheim describes her:

She is full of vitality. Her round face is pretty, but marred by its rather gross sensuality. There is a strength and obstinacy in her view, a hard determination in her eyes, and about her whole personality the same unsettled, untamed, desperate quality which is so apparent in Eben.[1982:24]

Abbie’s murder of her child is her attempt to be God, but the act of self-denying will, the sin against love and the life of the Dionysians, is more proper to the services of Ephraim’s God than to hers. Hearing of her action.

Eben: Oh, God A’mighty! A’mighty God! Maw, whar was ye, why didn’t ye stop her? ” To this, Abbie replies, “She went back t’ her grave that night we fust done it, remember? I hain’t felt her about since. ” (174)

Her words suggest that perhaps now the ghost will return and wander restlessly, since the God has left. Ephraim in his desolation threatens to set fire to the house and barn:

I’ll leave yer Maw t’ haunt the ashes.” His words are akin to recognition of the force that has haunted him:
If he was Eden’s (baby), I glad he air gone! An’ mebbe I suspicioned it all along. I felt they was somethin’ onnateral—somewhars—the house got so lonesome--an’ cold--drivin’ me down t’ the beast o’ field......Ay-eh. I must’ve suspicioned--somethin’. Ye didn’t fool me—not altogether, leastways--I’m too old a bird—growin ’ ripe on the bough. (177)

Momentarily, he considers going west, but at the last, he realizes he cannot leave.

Eden: I kin hear His voices warnin’ me agen t’ be hard an’ stay on my farm. I kin see His hand usin’ Eben t’ steal t’ keep me from weakness. I kin feel I be in the palm o’ His hand, His fingers guidin’ me. . . . . It’s a-goin’ t’ be lonesome now that it ever war afore-- an’ I’ m gittin’ old, Lord—ripe on the bough. . . . . Waal—what D’ye want? God’s lonesome, hain’t He? God’s hard an’ lonesome! (179)

At the end Ephraim’s God has returned to the farm vanquishing the material force that Eben and Abbie had served and betrayed.
The most striking quality in the character of Abbie lies in the complexity in her inner life, in the three standard web of desire that sizes her. Dorris Alexander has explained Abbie’s character in these words:

Abbie wishes to establish good relation with Eben, for she wants to dominate the household and not risk losing the farm when Ephraim dies. But soon she has a further motive for attempting to cure Eben of his resentment that she has taken his mother’s place. Epharim will leave the farm to her if she gives him a son. So she determines to have a son and Eben must be its father. But the pursuit of Eben that she engages in is not simply caused by her desire of security. She has strong sexual feelings, and the young Eben arouses them. And she is ten years older than Eben; she has taken his mother’s place in the house. There is in her attitude to him a manifestation of the maternal element in her which was thwarted when her child died. This three standard wave of desire is further complicated by the slow development in her of a “normal” love of woman for a man. Slowly she breaks down Eben’s resistance, and they become lovers in the parlor which was Ephraim’s special room and which has not been used since her death. In this setting Eben thinks of, and sorrows for, his mother. Abbie asserts that his mother blesses their union, and this is no pretence: in his mother’s room, this “new maw” can identify herself with the dead woman, can
love this lost son as a mother would, can love him, too, as a lover. [1992:30]

For the sake of her love for Eben, Abbie is prepared to sacrifice her child and this action of her shocks our susceptibilities but in the play, it has its own importance. It gives rather the effect of a knot being united, so that secrecy may be banished and all comfort may go. Abbie’s complex character is suddenly resolved into that of a woman who loves Eben. Perhaps O’Neill intended to keep the natural element in this love strongly evident: Abbie must give her grown up son anything he wants, even his own child’s death.

But this does not sufficiently emerge in the dialogue, and in the play’s ending they are simply two lovers sharing a desperate plight. The plotting has finally become a dominant element lessening the character’s abundant vitality. As Abbie forgets to be a mother, forgets her wish for a secure mistress-ship of the farmhouse, so Eben forgets his longing for the farm. And these things were too strong to forget.

Though Eben is much smaller character than Ephraim Cabot, his act of sacrifice for the sake of love is something admirable. He is lost in the world for the sake of love. He is faced with death and thought he can escape from it so he chooses it, but he cannot think of doing so. He
explains to Abbie that he cannot forget her and he must share everything with her, “prison r’ death ’r hell.” (208)

The imagery of the sun arises in many contexts and develops meanings crucial to the play. It is, in fact, the last image, where all meanings that have accrued around it, those of nature, of love, of covetousness, are synthesized and restated:

Eben : I love ye, Abbie. . . . . . Sun’s a-rizin’. Purty, hain’t it!

Abbie : Ay-eh. (they strongly stand for a moment looking up raptly in attitudes strangely aloof and devout.)

Sheriff : (looking around at the farm enviously. . . . ) It’s a jim-dandy farm, no denyin’. Wished I owned it! (206)

It seems that O’Neill was influenced by Freud and in this play he has shown a group of peasants who are seeking for sex gratification and in order to emphasize this point the dramatist has employed the symbolist technique in psychoanalytical manner.

O’Neill sets the stage for Desire Under the Elms with the description of the two elms as having ’a sinister maternity in their aspect.’ His use of psychoanalytical symbolism becomes evident in his description, where he compares the elms to exhausted woman resting their staging breasts and hands and hair on the roof.’ The elms are the only soft things on this rocked-ribbed farm however.
Fortunately the novelistic rhetoric that links the elms with Eben’s dead mother and with an exhausted life force holds no meaning beyond the printed pages. In the context of the play’s realistic action, the elms are not symbols in any discrete or absolute sense. The meaning is reached only as the character becomes aware of the presence, and as the elms, in consequence become part of the action. When, for example, Ephraim Cabot associates the evil he feels in the house with something dropping from the trees, their significance is made clear and psychologically plausible, their symbolism as elements of the play’s core. They do not, as the Congo mask did, wrap the drama’s action in order to justify their presence.

*Desire Under the Elms* is a tale of ancient desire and violence structured around many centres of meaning. All the conflicts in the play arise from the self-centered, exploitative desire of the characters ambushing each other in a game of cunning derring-do. Ephraim Cabot, the synoptic centre of all these desires of greed, lust, authority and acquisitiveness, stalks over his New England farm like a giant of fierce indurate will, under whose power the rest of men look like mere manikins. His real rival is the dead wife, demanding the restitution of an ancient wrong, unleashing the fury of her vengeful, and violated maternity. She is symbolized by the elm trees described at the outset of the play.
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 crunching, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted woman resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickles down monotonously and rot on the shingles.

If the elms represent growth and fertility, the rocky soil of the farm and the stone fences built by Ephraim stand for man-made values, which seem to thwart the free, aspiring spontaneity of the life-force. As Peter complains:

> the father has slaved everybody to death, so that the farm may live and yield.(168)

Thus, the quick and the dead, in combat of their evenly matched powers, bring remote, explosive forces out of the darker regions of the racial unconscious to converge on their helpless forbears. Ephraim, the patriarch of the primitive horde, is intensely feared and hated by his sons, who struggle against his omnipotent will, and desire to steal his farm, his mistresses, his gold, in short, his generative principles. Simeon and Peter, the two elder sons, are somewhat unequal to the task, and, lacking logistic
subtlety, try to achieve a symbolic slaying of the fathers by themselves fleeing to California. But Eden, wily like his father, whom he resembles physically, too, and, protected by the guardian spirit of his mother, combines he two primal lusts of possessiveness and revenge into an effective strategy for the usurpation of Ephraim.

The themes of possessiveness and revenge are unified in Eben’s quest for a harmonious adult life. For he is the victim of an Oedipus complex, caught between the father’s desire to possess and the mother’s desire for revenge. The incest with his step mother is an outlet for this double fulfillment, as well as means of normalizing his physic urges. Abbie’s marriage to Ephraim is in itself the mother’s first act of revenge: for she marries Ephraim for exactly the same reason as he had married Eben’s mother—the possession of the farm.

Furthermore, the mother obtains her natural fulfillment for sex through adultery of Abbie, her symbolic incarnation. For the lover themselves, their coming together results in a self-knowledge, and a transfiguration of their initial desires. Eben’s desire for revenge and Abbie’s for the farm, changes concomitantly into a desire for each other. By killing her child, Abbie proves that her lust has become love; and by unconsciously sharing the crime, Eben achieves the murder of the primordial father, whose symbolic surrogate the child really is. Their mutual sacrifice constitutes a consecration of selfhood, and liberation
from the dragons of adolescence so that they can grow freely into a meaningful adulthood.

The mother and son ’belong ’ to each other, as well as the lovers, because the experience of growth, once feared, is now accepted through a edification of desire. A mark of their acceptance of adult life is that they are free from guilt feelings.

Abbie : (shaking her head) I got t’ take my punishment--t’pay fur my sin.

Eben : Then I want t’share with ye.

Abbie : Ye didn’t do nothin’.

Eben : I put it in yer head. I wisht hr was dead! I as much as urged ye t’ do it!

Abbie : It was me alone!

Eben : I’m guilty as yew be! He wa 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!

Eben : Nor me—but it led up t’ the other. (190)
But the world belongs to Ephraim. His identification with the universe is aided, rather than destroyed by his pride. He remains undefeated, if not victorious, because like his own God, he is severe, immutable and lonely, the very centre of a perpetual, indestructible power. As he says:

**EPHRAIM**: When I came here fifty old year ago—I was jest twenty an’ the strongest ye ever seen—ten times as strong an’ fifty times as hard as Eden. Wall—this place was nothin’ but fields o’ stones. Folks laughed when I tuk it. They couldn’t know what I knowed. When ye kin make corn sprout out o’ stones, God’s livin in yew!. They laughed. They don’t laugh no more. Some died here abouts. Some went West an’ died. They’re all ground—fur hollerin’ after an easy God. God hain’t easy. (he shakes his head slowly) An’ I growed hard. Folks kept allus sayin’ he’s a hard man like ’t was sinful t’be hard, so’s at last I said back at ’em : Waal then, by thunders, ye’ll git me hard as’ see how he likes it!. . . . God’s hard, not easy! God’s in the stones! Build my church on a rock—out o’ stones! And I’ll be in them! That’s what he meant t’ Peter! (h sighs heavily—a pause) Stones. I picked ’em up and piled ’em into walls. Ye kin read the years of my life in them walls, every day a hefted stone, climbin over the hills up and down, fencing’ in the fields that was
In Ephraim, O’Neill has modernized the portrait of the Puritan, in that he has traced the ambiguities of Puritan spirituality and Puritan sensuality alike to the mechanics of pure power. Ironically enough, the most positive quality of power is essentially negative, and consists in the denial of power, and possibly life, to others. Mencken had touched on a similar truth when he remarked that the Puritan is one who fears that somewhere someone might be happy. Ephraim’s spirituality is in fact reduced to the purely passional love. He finds himself more at home among his cows and horses and fowls them among men. For Ephraim, Abbie is literally the farm:

Cabot: The farm needs a son

Abbie: I need a son

Cabot: Ay-ye. Sometimes ye air the farm an’ sometimes the farm be yew. That’s why I clove t’ ye in my lone-someness. . . . Me an’ the farm has got t’ beget a son. (185)

Even in the sear, residual loneliness of the play, after everybody has left the farm, Ephraim is faithful to his god-creed.
EPHRAIM: I kin hear His voice warmin’me agen t’ be hard an’ stay on my farm. I kin see his hand usin’ Eben t’ steal t’ keep me from weakness. I kin feel I be in the palm o’ His hand, His fingers guidin’ me. (A pause—then he mutters sadly) It’s a-goin’ t’ lonesome now than ever it war afore—an’ I’m getting old, Lord—ripple on the bough. . . . (Then stiffening) Waal—what d’ want? God’s Lonesome, hain’t He? God’s hard an’ lonesome! (186)

On the other hand Ephraim is also a prisoner of the farm over which the sinister serenity of his dead wife’s motherhood broods, torturing him with a tyrannical love that makes him guilty.

Dorris Faulk comments on this relationship:

The father and the mother, interlocked in a continual context for power and authority, have no escape from each other. They prevail as opposites, for they are the immitigable archetypes into which all unicellular life must divide; and man in space and time must always be composite work of the two.Man, because of his very humanity, must needs be torn between the Father’s love of power and the Mother’s power of love. This duality of primal nature is the moral and psychological conditioning of man’s being an insight which O’Neill reinforces in Desire Under the Elms by integrating into a single complex the etiological typologies of
Puritanism, naturalism, primitivism and Freudianism.
[1958:34]

O’Neill has depicted the fierce fight between Ephraim and his sons in accordance with what he read in Freud’s Totem and Taboo. In Ephraim the dramatist has created the prototype of the primal father, hard, all-powerful, ruthless and possessive. He brings home his third wife, Abbie, and there by revives the hostility of his three sons. Simeon, Peter and the youngest, Eben, a brooding neurotic who violently hates his father for driving his Maw, with whom he has identified, into the grave.

Eben goes to the same village prostitute whom his father has patronised, and with this introduction of sexual jealousy motif, we are prepared to watch the growing hostility between the new Maw and the boys. The older two, in a kind of mawkish, leering defiance, taunt their father and leave for California “the rebellion of the sons”. The dialogue here is charged with the Totem and Taboo, as Simeon says to his father:

Simeon : “with his sardonic burst of laughter> Ha ! Eben’s chip O’ yew--spit’n image-- hard’n bitter’s hickory tree ! Dog’ll eat dog. He’ll eat ye yet, old man!

Cabot : “commandingly” ye git’t wuk !
Simeon: We’re free, old man—free O’ yew an’ hull dammed farm! “they grow more and more hilarious and excitd.”

Peter: An’ we’re startin’ out for the gold fields O’ California!

Simeon: We’re free as Injuns! Lucky we don’ skulp ye!

Peter: An’ burn yer bar an’ kill the stock!

Simeon: An’ rape yer new woman! Whoopp! (163)

They throw rocks that penetrate the window of the room where Abbie is, and caper off; The plot centres on Abbie’s possessive struggle for the farm which Ephraim regards as his. Abbie’s way of dominating Eben is to attempt him seductively though Eben fiercely fights her off. Lusting for Eben, Abbie tells Cabot that Eben has attempted to seduce her—an illustration of the classic Phaedra mechanism of projection.

To prevent Eben getting the farm, Abbie realizes she must bear Ephraim, a son, in a scene of powerful sexual undercurrents, O’Neill shows us two bedrooms simultaneously—Eben alone and brooding in his, and the married couple in theirs—the fierce concentration on the sounds from Eben’s bedroom. Ephraim tells in a highly reveling speech how he punished himself by a life of farming in rocky, forbidding soil, his pleasure in hard work, a masochistic denial of his repressed sexual needs.
Now, however Abbie is unresponsive to him that he goes down to the barn:

ABBIE: “Down whar it’s restful—whar it’ warm--down’t the barn. I kin talk’t the crows. They know. They know the farm an’ me. They’ll give me peace” (212)

Eben is torn with his desire for and his resentment of Abbie but she finally leads him to the parlor that had not been opened since his mother died. Eben strongly feels his presence of his mother in the room and talks to her. He senses his mother would approve the union with Abbie—as a way of revealing herself as cabot. Acting the role of Eben’s mother-image, Abbie externalizes for him his infantile wish to return to his mother. Their kisses are but momentarily pure, however, and surge into fierce passion. After their night of love, Eben is bold, confident and at peace with himself, his Oedipal feelings purged; now his mother can sleep in her grave. Ephraim too slept peacefully with the cows and even able to smile with his son.

The old primary hatred of father and son seems worked out Eben chuckles: “I’m the prize rooster O’ this root When Abbie bears a son.” However, Ephraim taunts Eben that the farm now belongs to the new child. Hamlet like Eben goes into a state of shock at his betrayal of Abbie; but Abbie is sincerely in love with Eben now—and is disolate at his thoughts of leaving for California. To prove that here love transcends her materialistic grasping for the farm, she smothers her baby, Eben goes
voluntarily with Abbie and the Sheriff who comes to get her at the final ironic curtain of his masterful exploration of the dark and murderous impulse confined within the Cobalt’s rockbound environment.

O’Neill’s technique of psychoanalytical symbolism combines the influences of Freud and Jung. To Freud’s primal father O’Neill has added Jung’s primal mother and he has succeeded in achieving a tragic effect. The war between the expansion and impossible proudful image of the father and the submissive spirit of the mother has been depicted by means of Freudian and Jungian symbolism. Dorris Faulk has explained this war between the opposing forces in terms of sexuality and also desire and motives which have caused it.

Old Ephraim’s Puritan conception of sex as an ugly, sinful necessity has perverted all sexuality into a brutal lust as egotistical and exploitive as his other greeds; but in the brooding material spirits symbolised by the elms sex is a spontaneous, beautiful, unselfish, and amoral life force, perverted into a powerful avenging spirit by suppression. O’Neill views this suppressed maternal aspect as Eben’s “real” self from which he has been alienated in his pursuit of the proudful father himself. When Eben sacrifices his own life, with Abbie, he has relinquished the chase. The conflict is over, and he becomes capable of spontaneous love. In the young couple’s fulfillment of their desire and in
the transmutation of sex to love, reality has finally asserted itself, has
struck through the illusory mask of pride.

The theme of the lost mother and the weak and questing son was
important to O’Neill for many reasons. Yet as the work of other
dramatists amply demonstrates, it was not only his private concern. It was
a theme important to his society, as the society was represented in
microcosm in his audience and in the public that read his work with
sufficient eagerness to make them bestselling books. His assumption of a
position of leadership in his theatre may well be attributed in a part of his
sensitive treatment of what was an American “universal, ” social truth, a
cultural need.

Desire Under the Elms differs from other plays exploring this
theme in that it does more than present a simplified, somewhat
stereotypical response to the Oedipal drives in American society. Rather,
centering as the theme as a basic pattern of American customs, it frames
an action that attempts to understand the need by defining it in terms of
large philosophical concepts that may be able to explain and thus partly to
resolve the tensions the hopeless quest creates. Unlike most of his
observations of a social phenomenon, O’Neill provided a philosophical
scheme that patterned a broad interpretation of his central concern.
The first striking point about the dramatic technique employed by O’Neill in *Desire Under the Elms* is that the alteration between the interior and exterior that marked the earlier play is replaced by a continuing duality throughout the action.

The rhythm is achieved through the repetition of words and broken phrases—in the continual, choric repetition of “ay-eh” for example, or in such passage as the “duet between Eben’s brothers—Simeon and Peter:

EBEN: Why didn’t ye never stand between him ’n’ my Maw when he was slavin’ her to her grave--t’ pay her back fut the kindness she done’t yew?

(There is a long pause. They stare at him in surprise.)

Simeon: Waal—the stock’d got t’ be watered.

Peter: ’R they was woodin’ to do.

Simeon: ’R plowin’.

Peter: ’Rhayin’.

Simeon: ’R spreadin’ manure.

Peter: ’R weedin’.

Simeon: ’R prunin’.

Peter: ’R milkin’.
Eben: “breaking in harshly” An’makin walls—stone atop o’ stone-makin’ walls till yer heart’s a stone ye heft up out o’ the way o’ growth onto a stone wall’t wall in yer heart (163,164)

We are conscious both of the domestic lives of the characters and of the farm which is the framework of their lives and a consuming object of their desire. The notion of the frame is visually represented by the overhanging trees:

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 sebdue; there is a sinister maternity in the aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. When the wind does not keep them astir, they develop from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house, they are like exhausted woman resting their sagging breast and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickles down monotonously and rot on the shingles [Part I, Scene I]

In *Desire under the Elms*, however, all strains are eased; surface and interior actions are brought into perfect conjunction. Technical
experimentation is no longer self-assertively symbolic as were the shrinking rooms and follow-spots of the earlier plays. Now experiment serves realism and also, unobtrusively, opens the play to fuller perspectives. The characteristic dramatis personae—poetic hero, Strindbergian woman, materialistic brother, aloof and difficult father—are present, but they are drawn without the self-consciousness that derives from excessive autobiographical concern.

The typical themes—the yearning for a lost mother, for a home, for identification with a life force to be found in nature, and for the discovery of a God in marriage—are rooted, at last, in a credible fiction and characterizations. In all respect, Desire Under the Elms. Fulfills the promise of O’Neill’s early career and is the first important tragedy to be written in America.

In this play O’Neill has employed the symbolist technique with a remarkable expressiveness. To form imagery and rhythms that evolve character and setting, but which yet elicit from rural speech rhythms something of the strangeness, the uniqueness of poetry is a device of O’Neill which he might have learnt from the work of Synge and other dramatist’s of the Abbey Theatre. Whatever the source, the technique as displayed in the inarticulate self-justification of Simeon and Peter creates a vivid impression of the way in which diurnal realities obscure moral perception. At the same time, the words that suggest the simple rhythms
of farm life provide a foil and balance to Eden’s fuller perception of the heart as a stone.

Eden’s imagery is drawn from the reality of the farm, indeed helps to create that reality. It is neither decorative nor inappropriately philosophical. Like all easy in this play, verbal imagery comes from character and action, as Ephraim’s biblical cadences do, for instance, or as Abbie’s desire for Eden is expressed in terms of her response to the land itself:

ABBIE: Hain’t the sun strong an’ hot? Ye kin feel it burnin’ into the earth—Nature—makin’, thin’s grow—bigger ’n ’ bigger--burnin’ inside ye--makin’ ye want t’ grow—into somethin’ else—till ye’re jined with it--an’ it’s your’n—but it owns ye, too--an’ makes ye grow bigger—like a tree—like them elums. (185)

It is not merely nature and a stone farmland that is symbolized: the mental trees represent also the secret dominance of the female in the action: the dead second wife of Ephraim Cabot, worked to exhaustion by her husband, is yet powerful in the life of her son Eben; Ephraim’s third wife Abbie is strong enough to destroy Ephraim and Eben and the child that is born to Eben and herself.
In this respect *Desire Under the Elms* has the kind of generalising quality that O’Neill has cultivated in the expressionist plays, and this is reinforced by the echoes of the *Hippolytus*, the *Oedipus Rex* and the *Medea*. Abbie is her step-son’s seducer and the murderess of her child; Eden’s love for Abbie is part a love for the mother whose place she has taken.

Like all poetic dialogue, O’Neill’s is rhythmic, but in this play there is none of the overly crafted, high conscious rhythmic effect found in other of his work. Where rhythmic repetition effect found in other of his works. Where rhythmic occurs, it does so naturally, as in Eden’s quasi-illiterate use of the word “warm” and the ironic changes rung on the word “pretty” in his final soliloquy in the play’s second scene:

EBEN: Waal--thar’s a star, an’ somewhar’s they’s him, an’ here’s me’an’thar’s Min up the road—in the same night. What if I does kiss her? She’s like t’night, she’s soft ’n ’ wa’m, her eyes kin wink like a star, her mouth’s wa’m, her arm’re wa’m, she smells like a wa’m plowed field, she’s purty. . . . Ay-eh! By God A’mighty she’s purty, an’I don’t give a damn how many sins she’s sinned afore mine or who she’s sinned ’em with, my sin’s as purty as any one on ’em! (166)
O’Neill has adopted a multiple setting in the play which gave him the advantage of bringing eternal nature and domestic interior into permanent juxtaposition. The play is remarkable for effective counterpoint at several moments at the play. Thus in Part II, scene I (the play is oddly divided into three “parts”, not acts, we see both the bedrooms of Eben: the young man’s stillness is contrasted with the uneasy conversation in the other room, where Ephraim talks in anguish of his need of a so. When Ephraim goes to the bran, Abbie and Eben eco each other’s sighing, and he then seems to become conscious of her movements on the other side of the dividing wall: his yes follow her as she goes to the door on the way to his room.

The use of time and place are successfully in part because O’Neill has set the play firmly in historical context. *Desire Under the Elms* was not his first venture into historical drama. *The Fountain* of 1921 marked his debut as a historian, but its romanticized view of history is unlike the realistic image he created of New England in 1850. O’Neill is entirely convincing that Cabots sprang from the world. Unlike much that passes for history in theater, the Cabots are not modern in costume. To envision them as contemporary beings is not really possible, despite conceived as of coming from an earlier period in American history. They are only of their time and place. Notably the play contains no elaborate devices to suggest the period.
A few specific references, such as those to the Gold Rush or the songs that are sung, establish the calendar time, but the reality of historical period like the symbolism emerges from the character’s themselves. They could not exist in time different from their own because their problems and their way of reacting to them arise from the world that O’Neill, now emerging as a major historical dramatist, has created for them. The setting, as it is in all great plays, is finally the creation not for the designer, but of the playwright, who evolves its reality through the action.

Winther criticized the play because she thought that the dramatist had made use of telepathy without basis in fact, but this criticism does not appear to be tenable. What cannot be ignored in this connection is that we are concerned with two people whose desire for each other has become fully active. Clifford Leech has pointed out:

The symbolic use of the wall makes the action quite well within reasons. That it is separated by a dividing wall, they should constantly be aware of each other’s presences, should be sensitive to slight sounds of movements, is rational enough. [1963:32]

As we watch, there is no need to be distracted by the thoughts of telepathy. We see the wall as a barrier about to crumble; it is symbolically right that it should now become paper-thin and transparent; it is, on the
naturalistic plane, in accord with everyday experience that the desired person should exercise power through a mere bed-room-wall. Even more striking than this is the multiple picture offered in Part III, scene I, where the neighbors are dancing in the kitchen, Eben and Abbie are kissing in the bedroom in the presence of their child, and Ephraim is outside, having suddenly wanted the peace of the farm and its animals after his high-spirited dancing with neighbors he despise. The setting emphasises at once the separateness of the figures in the drama, as they divided by the walls of the house, and their close association with each other and the farm.

Clifford Leech has explained the inappropriateness of the dialogue in several early plays of O’Neill and has pointed out that *Desire Under the Elms* is the first play in which the dialogues have come up to the requirements of the passions that have been depicted:

The achievements of a satisfactory dramatist dialogue were something that did not come easily to O’Neill. He could run into inflated platitude as early as *Servitude*; it was still with him in *Welded*; it was to return distressingly in the plays we shall examine in the next chapter. And he did not show much ear for the common speech about him. The cockney language of the trade Smithers in *The Emperor Jones* is altogether inert and is a serious blemish on the play. The speech of Jones there and of a Yank in *The Hairy Ape* is only acceptable as an economical symbol of semi-
articulateness in type-character: these plays are not given any energy through the words spoken. Above all, we have found O’Neill incapable of every verisimilitude in middle-class language, as in *The First Man* and *Welded*. In *Desire Under the Elms* he needed a speech that was fitting for the complex and powerfully imagined characters, a speech that would not gainsay the vitality of the earth that the characters came from and wrestled with. And indeed the play is successful here as in so many other ways. He went to the past and remote farm-land: a sense of difference from the language of the twentieth century town was acceptable. And he used character from whom words could not come fluently, who would rely on gestures and truncated utterance to convey their wants and directives.” [1963:37]

Ephraim’s sense of the earth as a source of his salvation, Eben’s feeling of dislocation on the farm, Abbie’s alien strangeness and her desire to come home are entirely in the tradition. The elements of incest and adultery, the violence, the crudity are all potentials of the pattern, and, in the thematic exploration of the nature of a “hard” and an “easy” God, the play sees the land both as fertile and as sterile, as giving blessings and as demanding cruel service.
In *Desire Under the Elms*, there is conveyed a sense of operative destiny. The characters are fated man and woman moving in practicable courses to know ends, as impression that is achieved partly by the dramatist’s acceptance of the elements of the genre. O’Neill has realized the necessity of devising fictions to embody his meaning. The fiction is there, and he can explore to the full the philosophical and theological implications of his action.

O’Neill has not contrived destinies for his character by forcing them into patterns prefabricated by Freud and his Oedipal patterns of interest emerge both in Eben’s love for Abbie, and in his seeking out the prostitute Min, with whom his father and his brothers have slept. Yet such patterns in the action do not need a Freudian gloss to be understood. By contrast, the sociological and political theories which governed Arthur Miller’s determination of a fate for his *Willy Loman*, suggest that Willy’s fate is less truth of his character than a demonstration of a thesis. The Freudian patterns of *Desire Under the Elms*, however, appear to be characteristic modes of behavior for the individuals under such circumstances as the play defines.

The play contains elements characteristic of the naturalistic tragedy of Zola and Hauptmann—those grim, depressing narratives of a small men and women defeated by societal and evolutionary forces they cannot control. Yet, as with his use of Freud, O’Neill convinces his
audiences that this story is in no way contrived to demonstrate a sociological point. Focusing less on the pressure of external circumstance, more on the response to circumstance by the central character, he strikes a just world and the people themselves.

Ephraim, Eben and Abbie command sympathy not because they are victims of forces they cannot control but because they are capable of choices and responsibility. The choices they make are forced upon them, but O’Neill, aware of the pressure of the farm on its people, is careful to show how the choices evolved, and permit audiences to draw conclusion about the world from the perspective of his character’s choices.

We can conclude this discussion with these words of Clifford Leech which explains very clearly how O’Neill has succeeded in achieving tragic effect with semi-articulate figures.

Their desire for possession—of land, of home, of body—go along with a profounder, barely recognized desire for companionably warmth—which for a time Abbie and Eben find in each other, which Ephraim has known only with his farm-animals. Tragedy demands a sense of authority in the figures that carry its burden: it is remarkable that O’Neill achieved tragedy here with semi-articulate figures, that his success in Desire Under the Elms was followed by failure when he attempted the cultivation of a more resonant speech.” [1963:40]