

Desire Under the Elms

Eugene O'Neill's [*Desire Under the Elms*](#) is one of the playwright's most intriguing early works, and is exemplary of his desire to unite the modern and the ancient Greek. Written and first performed in 1924, it is influenced by the stories of Oedipus, Medea, and Hippolytus. The language is that of the New England vernacular in the antebellum period, making the play a hallmark of naturalistic theater. There are also tinges of Freud and Nietzsche in the work, thinkers with whom O'Neill was very familiar.

O'Neill described his play thusly: "a tragedy of the possessive –the pitiful longing of man to build his own heaven here on earth by glutting his sense of power with ownership of the land, people, money –but principally the land and other people's lives."

According to Walter Huston, the actor who played [Ephraim Cabot](#) in the first staging of the play, O'Neill composed it in one night between Christmas Eve and New Year's of 1923. He continued to work on it into 1924, completing the script in June. His time spent in Brook Farm, Connecticut, no doubt influenced his depiction of a lonesome, melancholy New England landscape.

O'Neill worked with those who were part of the famed "Triumvirate" -- producer Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmond Jones, the set designer. They were the most progressive theater group in the wake of the Provincetown Players.

The play debuted on November 11, 1924 at the Greenwich Village Theatre in New York City. It attracted the attention of city authorities, which tried to shut it down on the basis on obscene sex and violence. It was also targeted for censorship in Boston, Los Angeles, and London. Avoiding shutdown, it went on to play 208 times in New York and was acclaimed by critics. It also brought O'Neill a great deal of attention and money.

Two major revivals were staged in 1952 and 2009; in the latter, Brian Dennehy played Ephraim Cabot, Pablo Schrieber played [Eben Cabot](#), and Carla Gugino played [Abbie Putnam](#). A film version was produced in 1958.

Summary

The setting is a New England farmhouse in 1850. Two great, oppressive, drooping elms frame the house. [Eben Cabot](#), a handsome but hard young man, lives there with his two half-brothers, [Simeon](#) and [Peter](#). Their father, [Ephraim Cabot](#) (known as Cabot), an old but strong man, left two months ago for an unknown reason. The brothers all want the farmland and claim that it is theirs. Eben believes his claim is

strongest because his beloved [Maw](#) died working it, and for that he resents his father strongly.

The brothers hear that Cabot is on his way home with a new wife, and it is assumed the land will go to her. They accept Eben's buyout of their shares so they can go to California to seek their fortune in the gold fields.

They barely stay long enough to see Cabot and his new wife, [Abbie Putnam](#), a vivacious and buxom thirty-five year old, arrive at the farm. She is excited to see the land, which is clearly why she married Cabot.

When she sees Eben, his good looks and aloof demeanor immediately strike her. She revolts him because he fears she wants to take his land, and he refuses all of her flirtatious advances.

As time goes on, Eben has trouble controlling his desire and hatred for Abbie. She gets frustrated with him and tells Cabot offhandedly that Eben flirted with her. He grows irate and threatens to kill him, but she manages to convince him she did not mean it. Abbie decides she will have a son, which makes Cabot very happy. He has been lonesome of late, and claims that none of his past wives ever truly knew him; all he did was work hard his whole life yet is still lonesome.

Abbie continues to try and seduce Eben, and he finally gives in once he realizes that his Maw, whose presence haunts the parlor, probably approves of this union as a way to seek vengeance against Cabot. Eben and Abbie begin their torrid affair, and eventually have a son.

After the baby is born, there is a party at the house. Cabot is drunk and dancing around, naively uncomprehending of the gossip townspeople's comments about how blind he is to the affair of Eben and Abbie and the baby's true parentage. Eben stays upstairs, conflicted about his son. Abbie joins him, and they embrace.

Later Eben steps outside and Cabot joins him. Cabot says jocularly that Eben should get married soon and get a piece of a farm, to which Eben retorts that this is his farm already. Cabot tells him that it is Abbie's and his new son's, and he thinks Eben should stay away from Abbie, and that he knows he tried to flirt with her. Eben is stunned by this, and believes Abbie had a son to trick him and get the land.

Eben and Cabot physically fight, and Abbie runs outside to break it up. Eben flings her aside. After Cabot goes inside, Eben spits out how much he hates Abbie. She is confused until he accuses her of her plot to take Maw's land from him. Frantic and desperate, Abbie tries to explain that she never did such a thing, but Eben

stubbornly refuses to believe her. He even says he wishes the baby had never been born, and Abbie realizes that the baby stands between them.

Eben proclaims he will go to California and get rich and buy the farm himself, and seek his revenge. Abbie wildly asks if she could fix things if he would love her again, and he says that is not possible because she is not God. After he leaves Abbie vows to earn his love again.

Before dawn of the next morning Abbie stands over the cradle and smothers the baby to death. She tells Eben, who is preparing to leave, what she did. She is feverish and proud, but he is horrified and says he will go tell the Sheriff. She does not care because she only wants his love. He departs.

Abbie sits at the kitchen table and Cabot comes downstairs. He asks for food and says the baby is sleeping, to which she dully says the baby is dead. Cabot is incredulous but sees that it is true, and bemoans his fate. Abbie cruelly tells him the truth of the baby's parentage and Cabot says he will go get the Sheriff too. Abbie tells him not to bother since Eben already did.

Eben comes back and says the Sheriff is on his way. He then turns to Abbie and tells her that he realized he loves her more than anything and will take the blame for the baby's death. Elated, Abbie embraces him. They disgust Cabot.

Cabot plans to go to California too and give up the farm; he set the cows free and wants to burn the whole thing down. When he realizes that Eben had taken the saved money and given it to Simeon and Peter to buy them out, he knows that God wants him to stay; he knows God is hard and life is to be lonesome.

The Sheriff comes to arrest Abbie and Eben announces he is guilty too. They are led outside and stare up at the beautiful sky before being led away. The Sheriff remarks on how beautiful a farm it is, and how he wished he owned it.

Character List

Ephraim Cabot

The patriarch of the Cabot family who worked the farm and made it successful, Ephraim has been married three times. His first wife bore him Simeon and Peter but died, and his second wife bore him Eben and also died. He brings home Abbie, his new wife, after a journey he undertakes ostensibly for religious purposes. Ephraim is seventy-six years old at the beginning the play, but is still strong in body. He has poor eyesight, though, and does not notice what is happening around

him. His mind is going a bit, and he craves the warmth of the barn rather than the house. He complains of being lonesome and the fact that no one really knows him.

Eben Cabot

A handsome but angry and grim young man, Eben desires nothing else than the farmland that his beloved Maw worked so hard and died upon. He pays off his half brothers but is threatened by his father's new wife Abbie. They fall in love and have a son, but he comes to think she tricked him and wants the land for himself. After she kills their son as an act of love, Eben cannot deny his passion for her anymore and proclaims he will go to prison with her or for her.

Abbie Putnam

A sensual and passionate woman of thirty-five, Abbie marries Cabot for his land and falls in love with Eben. She bears his son and is happy until Eben comes to think she was tricking him for the land. In a crazed act of love for Eben, she smothers their son. She tells Cabot how much she hates him just as Eben returns and proclaims his love for her too. She is going to prison at the end of the play.

Simeon

One of Eben's half-brothers and son to Cabot and his first wife, Simeon is a middle-aged, hard, and squat man. He and Peter dream of California's gold fields, and accept Eben's buyout of their share of the farm so they can go seek their fortune. They are not heard from again.

Peter

One of Eben's half-brothers and son to Cabot and his first wife, Peter is a middle-aged, hard, and squat man. He and Peter dream of California's gold fields, and accept Eben's buyout of their share of the farm so they can go seek their fortune. They are not heard from again.

Maw

While never seen onstage because she is dead by the time of the play's action, Maw is an important character in the play nonetheless. Her presence is felt in the house, particularly the parlor, until Eben and Abbie claim their love is vengeance for her death-by-overworking at Cabot's hands, and her presence leaves.

Themes

Family

Family is an incredibly important component of the play, but family here is not uplifting, supportive, loving, or healthy. Family is corrupt, incestuous, dark, and tangled. It is a burden, a curse, and a heavy stone that pulls one down below the surface of the waves. It is, however, mostly inescapable. [Simeon](#) and [Peter](#) manage to get out, but Eben is stuck at the farmhouse with his Paw and the spirit of

his [Maw](#). He is forever trying to distance himself from his father but finds this difficult; he eventually embraces the vengeful passion of his Maw, but throughout this struggle can barely articulate a self. Family in this play is associated with the land as well; Eben will free himself from his family and from the land with his likely death after the close of the play.

Revenge

The brothers as well as Abbie are obsessed with the idea of revenge, the former three against Cabot and the latter against Cabot and the child she feels comes between her and Eben. Cabot, though, is the primary focus of the characters' ire: he forced them to toil the land until they could find no meaning in it anymore, and worked their mothers to death. He then returns with a young wife who will inherit the farm -an incredible slap in the face to those who gave their lives and their beloved mothers to the farm. The revenge is all consuming, epic in a biblical and Hellenic intensity. It causes the characters to lose self-awareness and perspicacity, leading one to murder an innocent child. Thus, O'Neill's views on revenge are complicated in this play; it may be justified, but can easily become an obsession.

Sex and Desire

Sex and desire fuel Abbie and Eben, but they are not necessarily depicted as immoral impulses. They are purer than the crass greed and materialism that define Cabot and his other sons' lives. It is only the negotiation of those impulses that requires effort. Sex is what brings these unhappy people meaning in their lives, and allows them to subvert their misleading Apollonian strictures. Once Eben and Abbie fully embrace themselves as sexual beings and remove obstacles in their way can they understand the ecstasies of the spiritual.

Religion

Cabot is the most religious character in the play, but his religion is not the warm and fuzzy type. His God is the Puritans' God: harsh, unyielding, and demanding. Cabot comments that God is not "easy" and wants him to continue to demonstrate his work ethic by remaining on the land, toiling away. The other characters do not buy into this version of Christianity. Their religion is passion, sex, money, or revenge; these things, like Cabot's God, lead them to obsession and despair.

Loneliness

It is a well-known aspect of almost all O'Neill's plays that his characters suffer from profound loneliness, and the characters in *Desire* are no exception. Cabot speaks openly of how lonely he is, and how no one understands him. He only has his land, and finds more comfort with the cows than other humans. Eben is also lonely, suffering on the farm with brothers who do not understand him, a dead mother, and a returning father whom he hates. Simeon speaks of missing his lover, Jenn. Abbie is profoundly lonely as well, and cannot fathom losing Eben, the one

person to offer her "real" love. And finally, we can only guess at the intense loneliness of Cabot's first wives, toiling away on the land that isn't really theirs, dying in obscurity. Human beings are fated to be lonely, O'Neill suggests; this is what religion, modernity, and selfishness bring about.

Work

All of the male characters define their lives by work. Cabot spent his whole life toiling on the farm, and putting his wives to work as well. Simeon and Peter cannot fathom not working for more than ten minutes. Eben also works hard, doing the "chores" the farm necessitates. This is pure Apollonianism, in contrast with Abbie's Dionysianism. Work is backbreaking, cruel, and enervating. Abbie offers Eben something else, and it is Eben's great dilemma to try to resolve this within him.

Nature

Nature and Maw in this play are one and the same. The great elms are described as maternal, brooding, and oppressive. Nature is not necessarily a benevolent force; it is Dionysian, full of passion, vengeful. It tries to subvert the materialism of Cabot, who divides up the land with walls made of hard stone. Nature is not the same as *land*; Maw may care about the land because she worked it, but she wants Eben free from its cruel clutches.