

Eugene O'Neill

Desire Under the Elms

Plot

Inspired by both Greek tragedy and Greek myths, *Desire Under the Elms* explores large, difficult themes of greed, vengeance, desire, and troubled, even incestuous, family dynamics. The play begins in New England in 1850, outside a farmhouse flanked by two large, domineering elm trees. Eben Cabot, a handsome young man, comes out and rings a bell, signaling to his half-brothers, Simeon and Peter, to come in for supper. When Eben returns inside, his half-brothers arrive discussing heading west in search of gold. Eben leans through the window, and they talk about their father, a tough 75-year-old man known simply as Cabot. They discuss how the old man left two months ago and conclude that they cannot head west until he dies. Eben says he wishes their father were already dead. Over supper in the farmhouse kitchen, Simeon and Peter chastise their half-brother for this, but Eben refuses to back down, claiming that Cabot overworked his mother, leading to her premature death. He also blames his half-brothers for failing to protect her. When Eben leaves to visit a prostitute, Simeon and Peter say that Eben is just like their father.

Eben returns that night with news that their father is returning with his new, thirty-five-year-old bride. Simeon and Peter decide to head to California, accepting that Cabot's new wife will inherit the farm. Eben offers to buy their shares of the farm for \$300 each. They say they will think about it but quickly decide to stop working on the farm. The next day, they drink while Eben starts the farm's chores. When Eben spots Cabot and his wife, Abbie, approaching, Simeon and Peter decide they cannot stay on the farm once the old man returns, so they sign over their shares to Eben, and he pays them the money. When the newlyweds arrive, Abbie immediately begins bragging that the farm is hers while Cabot reprimands Simeon and Peter for not working. They tell him delightedly that they are now free and heading to California, and they mock both Abbie and their father, saying that Eben is just like the old man and will chew him up and spit him out. When Cabot threatens to have them committed to a mental asylum, they smash a window and leave, singing and laughing. Inside the house, Abbie encounters Eben for the first time. They are powerfully attracted to one another, and Abbie immediately starts behaving seductively. However, Eben rejects her advances, saying Cabot bought her like a prostitute and claiming the farm as his own. They argue and Eben storms off, conflicted and confused by his anger and lust, taunting his father who tells him he should be working.

Two months later, Abbie again attempts to seduce Eben, but he remains focused on gaining the farm and turns her down. Concerned that Cabot is warming to the idea of Eben inheriting the farm, Abbie tells her husband that his son has been flirting with her. Cabot is furious and threatens to kill Eben or drive him from the farm, but Abbie talks him down. She proposes that she and Cabot have a son. Cabot is delighted and promises they will have the farm when he dies. He also talks about how lonely his life has been, but Abbie is unimpressed and goes to Eben's room to kiss the younger man. Eben tries to resist but eventually agrees to be with Abbie in the parlor, a long-unused room haunted by Eben's mother's presence, reasoning that his mother would approve of this as a form of vengeance against Cabot. Eben

and Abbie then begin an affair, characterized by undertones of incest with Abbie presenting herself as Eben's new mother whilst simultaneously seducing him.

Several months later, Abbie bears Eben a son, but Cabot believes that the child is his and throws a party to celebrate, entirely missing various partygoers' allusions to Abbie and Eben's affair. Later that night, Cabot tells Eben the farm will go to Abbie and the child Cabot believes to be his own, and the two men fight. Abbie separates them but, once Cabot has returned indoors, Eben accuses her of using him to get pregnant so she could claim the child was Cabot's and take the farm. Abbie is distraught and promises to find a way to prove him wrong. The next morning, as Eben prepares to leave for California, Abbie tells him that she has killed their son, proving that she is not simply trying to steal the farm from him. Shocked and appalled, Eben goes to tell the local sheriff. When Cabot comes down for breakfast, Abbie tells him what has happened, and Eben returns to tell her that he loves and trusts her and that he is also responsible for the child's death. Disgusted and distressed, Cabot wants to burn down the farm and leave for California, but concludes that God wants him to stay and live a difficult and lonely life. Finally, the sheriff arrives to arrest Abbie, but Eben also confesses. The play ends with the sheriff leading them both away and saying that the farm is so pleasant he wished to own it himself.

Desire Under the Elms reflects O'Neill's interest in Greek theater, both in its presentation of the inescapable, tragic fate awaiting its characters and in its treatment of subjects such as incest and infanticide. Such themes made the play highly controversial and it was banned for several years in some American states and for more than fifteen years in Britain. One early production in Los Angeles led to the entire cast facing obscenity charges. However, the play is now recognized as a great work by one of America's foremost playwrights and continues to be frequently performed throughout the world.