

## Critical analysis of *Desire Under the Elms* Eugene O'Neill =

*Desire Under the Elms* was the last of Eugene O'Neill's naturalistic play and one of his most effective. The structural set, showing the entire farmhouse with one wall removed, was an innovation in its day. In this play, O'Neill's daring reduction of human motives to the simple impulses of love, hate, lust, and greed gives an impression of human nature as convincing and complete as the more complex studies of his later plays.

One of O'Neill's most admired and frequently performed plays, *Desire Under the Elms* provoked enormous controversy during its first stagings. Some audiences were scandalized by what one critic called "distresses" that "range from unholy lust to infanticide, and include drinking, cursing, vengeance, and something approaching incest." In Los Angeles, the cast was arrested for having presented a lewd, obscene, and immoral play. A bizarre trial followed, in which at one point the entire court witnessed a special private performance. The jury was finally dismissed when they could not resolve their deadlock, eight members voting for conviction and four for acquittal.

It gradually became apparent that O'Neill was aiming at something more than a shocking revelation of unconscious drives and primordial fears, elements that were clearly subordinate to his larger purpose of reintroducing authentic tragic vision to American theater. O'Neill's supporters could point out that the Greek and biblical sources that had inspired the play were replete with the very "immoralities" he depicted.

Euripides' *Hippolytos* (428 b.c.e.; *Hippolytus*, 1781) and Jean Racine's *Phèdre* (1677; *Phaedra*, 1701) served as O'Neill's principal models. These works both draw on the archetypal plot in which a father returns from a journey with a wife, who falls in love with her new stepson. This attachment, at first resisted or concealed, results in a struggle between father and son, in which the father achieves a Pyrrhic victory that costs him both son and spouse. The situation is tragic in that all participants are forced to make conscious choices of evil for the sake of a higher good. It is fate that so structures events as to necessitate the downfall of essentially noble characters. O'Neill complicates the classic plot by introducing Old Testament motifs: the hardness and vengeance of God; the superiority of justice over mercy; and the battle among sons for birthrights and fatherly favor. He also relies on Freudian psychology in his treatment of sexual relationships.

It is questionable whether O'Neill does finally succeed in giving true tragic stature to his characters. There can be no doubt that his drama possesses genuinely tragic aspects, but that the whole deserves the term "tragedy" is doubtful. Three considerations sustain this judgment. First, Eben's basic motivation remains unclear throughout the play, as does the central question whether he is the rightful heir to the farm. Second, in being as preoccupied as they are with struggles for possession and revenge, Abbie and Eben lack that nobility of purpose that the reader associates with truly tragic characters. Third, Eben is made to seem totally a victim of psychological drives, and he does not arrive at his choices freely. This element in particular makes pathos, not tragedy, the dominant quality in *Desire Under the Elms*.

At least one critic has persuasively argued that O'Neill designed his play around a single moral fact: Ephraim Cabot ruined the life of Eben's mother—"murdered her with his

hardness,” as Eben says—and this sin now cries out for retribution. O’Neill’s opening stage directions call for two enormous, expressionistically rendered elms that bend over the farmhouse; they should suggest suffering women and dominate the entire scene with “a sinister maternity.” From the beginning, Eben proclaims his monomaniacal desire to take “her vengeance on him—so’s she kin rest quiet in her grave.” When Abbie enters the parlor, her scheming and erotic tendencies are momentarily subdued by the felt presence of the dead woman’s spirit. Eben does not allow himself to be seduced until he is assured that he is doing his mother’s will.

The structure of the action reinforces this central theme. In part 1, Eben solidifies his claim to the farm by inducing his half brothers to leave. He uses his mother’s money to do this, thus depriving Ephraim of both the fortune and the assistance of his older sons. In part 2, Eben takes Ephraim’s wife from him, begets a son, and sets in motion the process whereby Ephraim is humiliated in the eyes of the community. In part 3, Abbie’s killing of the child prevents Ephraim from naming a new heir, and Abbie and Eben’s departure dooms Ephraim to that condition of isolation that he has always feared most. He becomes in effect an exile, living on a farm that has become a curse to him. With that, the pattern of crime and justified punishment has been completed.

Tragic in outline, *Desire Under the Elms* is less than tragic in substance. O’Neill lets the issue of Ephraim’s persecution of Eben’s mother become clouded. This information comes only from Eben, who is a somewhat unreliable source, given his overwhelming Oedipus complex and his deep desire to inherit the farm. That Eben stands to benefit economically by his revenge tends to tarnish his motivation and undermine his credibility. O’Neill intensifies the economic theme by showing how deeply Peter and Simeon covet the farm, and by casting doubt on Eben’s claim that he has a clear legal right of ownership. Ephraim, who has worked the farm for years, discounts the claim completely.

Ironically, the fact that *Desire Under the Elms* is not a fully realized tragedy probably accounts partially for its appeal, as does O’Neill’s choice of a pastoral, precivilized setting that helps convey the workings of unconscious forces with astonishing power. Although outraged protests such as the sensational Los Angeles court case came from irate middle-class theatergoers, it was actually the literate American middle class that formed O’Neill’s most avid audience. O’Neill was an iconoclast whose attacks, likened in one of his early poems to torpedoes fired from the submarine of his soul, were directed against middle-class complacency. Much to its credit, however, the audience whose values were under fire responded to plays such as *Desire Under the Elms* with that respect and enthusiasm that springs from recognition of the truth, however disconcerting or uncomfortable that truth may be.