

## INHERITANCE AND INFANTICIDE IN EUGENE O' NEILL'S *DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS*

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### **Abstract**

Greek mythology serves as the background of this play. O' Neill was familiar with Hippolytus and Medea of Euripedes. Critics believe that these plays serve as the modals of the play. The farm also serves as the background of the play. The characters in the play display a sense of possessiveness. The patriarch of the family Ephraim marries for the third time to a woman much younger than him. It is not only the male characters in the family who show interest in the farm but also the newlywed female character Abbie who shows interest in the farm. It is evident in the play that she has married Eben only for her monetary gain. Her main aim was to inherit the farm with her newly gained position. Her recently achieved position as Ephraim's wife makes her greedy. However there is a turn of events in the play as Abbie cannot control her sexual desires and ends up having an intimate relationship with her stepson Eben. She soon delivers a baby who is eventually discovered to be Eben's son. Eben's hatred has no bound and he wishes the baby to be dead. Abbie in order to prove her love commits infanticide, eventually killing the baby.

**Keywords:** possessiveness, inheritance, greed, infanticide

Women of the mid- nineteenth century are seen to be unfit for holding property, employment and even their own mind. They are not believed to have more ability other than raising a child. The ideal woman of this time is an obedient wife and is expected to follow her husband's every order. Elizabeth Cady Stanton in *The Essential Feminist Reader* believes that this society has "a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquency's

which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed a little account in man.” (60)

Progressing towards the twentieth century, men such as John Stewart Mill began to see women’s role as precious and crucial to the household, however women is still thought to be better left at home. By 1875, women such as Susan B, Anthony began to gather at the conventions to promote women’s rights. The need for women’s rights is stimulated by a need to purify society of immoral acts such as drinking and licentiousness. Unlike the mid- nineteenth century woman that is portrayed as helpless, the late nineteenth century woman can be trusted to watch her own morals and chastity.

The theme of infanticide has always been principal theme in the composition of Eugene O’ Neill, the first and the greatest American playwright. His other play *Strange Interlude* written in 1928 also projects a similar view, the topic under discussion, child murder. They are placed in the pragmatic and realistic tradition, as O.G Brockett in *The Theatre* adds:

The playwright should strive for a truthful depiction of the real world: since he may know the real world only through direct observation, he should write about the society around him: he should strive to be as objective as possible. (313)

Nevertheless the two plays also show the way back into the myth through the archetypal figure of the scapegoat. *Desire Under the Elms* is also the first of O’ Neill’s drama in which the theme of Greek tragedy appears. C. Pickering in the *Works of Eugene O’ Neill* remarks that, “the young dramatist had no inhibitions about incorporating Greek and Shakespearean dramatic techniques into his contemporary framework. Most modern writers would have balked at the Greek themes of incest and infanticide, but not O’ Neill. He was familiar with the Hippolytus and Medea of Euripides and saw no reason why Medea of Euripides should not be translated to the American stage.”(125). Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love takes revenge on Hippolytus, son of Thesues, King of Athens by trying to inspire Phaedra, his stepmother to fall in love with him. This story ends with Phaedra hanging herself and Thesues cursing his son to exile and death. In Euripides’s Medea, Jason plans to abandon Medea and marry a new woman. He abandons Medea, and Medea decides to kill his children in order to leave Jason heirless. Medea kills the children to avenge the man.

One believes as per critics that Euripede’s *Hippolytus* and Jean Raune’s *Phaedra* are the principal modals of the play. This similarity is not too exact for this study of infanticide, because while Phaedra hangs herself and Hippolytus who spurred her advances was exiled by Thesues and was killed by Posiedon.

One cannot draw parallels with Medea of Euripedes as the actions of Medea were basically based on revenge which led to her murdering of Jason his love Glauke and her two sons who were not infants.

Normally critics draw parallels to drama and subsequent infanticide with Greek Mythology quoting tragedies like Hippolytus and Medea of Euripedes. It should be pointed out that O’ Neill comes to his own describing a New England farm, and the environment of family turmoil which leads to this crime. Ephraim as a man who is in control of the farm as a figure of authority and his sons due to lack of local employment opportunity working alongside was a normal rural phenomenon of those times. New England was one of the first states the European’s colonized in America and used for farming was actually exhausted by the time this play was written. It was after 1850 that New England went into industrialization which opened doors of opportunity with the advent of railways which also were introduced at the same time. California

was passing through gold rush. The dreams of easy riches caused Simeon and Peter to abandon the farm in Eben's favor. For this they received help from Eben, who stole money from Ephraim's secret cache.

In the play, certain aspects arise which lead to the child murder. The characters reality is the farm. However they sometimes seem to abhor the farm, they are emotionally involved with it due to a sense of possessiveness. The family has a sense of belongingness to the farm. That is, they like the farm house for it gives them material refuge; but at the same time their reactions are of dislike and disgust as can be seen through the stage directions:

Eben spits on the ground with intense disgust,  
 turns and goes back to the house. (3)

This sense of greed and lack of security is also evident in Simeon and Peter who leave for California to look for gold. They feel that the farm is not enough for their future and hence think of California then where they may find material security that everybody in the play is looking for:

PETER: The's gold in the West, Sim.

SIMEON: (still under the influence of sunset — vaguely)  
 In the sky!

PETER: Waal — in a manner o' speakin' — thar's the  
 promise. (Growing excited) Gold in the sky — in the West - Golden  
 Gate - California! Goldest West! - fields o' gold!

SIMEON: (excited in his turn) Fortunes layin' just atop  
 O' the ground waitin' t'be picked! Solomon's  
 mines, they says! (4)

Ephraim Cabot is self reliant and is cut off from humanity. In Ephraim Cabot, W. Sievers said, "O' Neill creates prototype of the primal father, hard, all powerful and ruthless." (113) This harsh behavior creates a wall between himself and his sons. There is lack of unity or community of privilege. There is only greed and autocratic power. He is a character who likes to live in his own world although he lives with his family. He believes in a God who lives in the stones and the nature around him. The stones do not symbolize walls around him but his dominating nature. Ephraim Cabot is described as hard as stone:

CABOT: When I came here fifty odd year ago- I was just twenty an' the  
 strongest and the hardest ye evr seen- ten times as strong as fifty  
 times as hard as Eben. Waal-this place was nothin' but field's o  
 stones. Folks laughed when I tuk it. They couldn't  
 know wat I knowed. (45)

He is fond of his isolation and he is a man of little emotion or no real emotion. He has been hard with his children and his two wives throughout. He does not have an emotional relationship with his sons, rather it is a mechanical one. He makes them work on the farm in exchange of food and shelter. He dominates them with a patriarchal authority. He torments them in a sadistic way. Peter has expressed his feelings for his father through the following words:

PETER: Here-it's stones atop o' ground, atop o' stones-making stone walls-  
 year atop o'year- him 'n' yew 'n' then Eben- makin' stone walls fur  
 him to fence us in. (6)

Eben is like Robert in *Horizon*, ignorant of his belonging. Through the eyes of his brothers, he is the "spittin image" of his father. But he is aware of the fact that he is different. He is a person who cannot be happy with the material possession. He identifies himself as an heir of his mother:

I'm Maw- every drop o' blood! (10) This similarity between Eben and his mother is also recognized by Ephraim who hates him as "soft-headed, like his Maw." (11) Critics have noticed the special quality that Eben bears which sets him apart from other Cabots. Bogard in *Contours of Time* has observed that Eben is in quest for his identity advocated by his requirement to fit in.

He seeks the same identification with nature and moves listlessly in alien places, in the kitchen, the world of women where he can sink no roots. His desire brings him into inevitable conflict with more hardened souls whose needs are less because they are aware of less. (209)

His frustration for identity arises from his double inheritance of his parents. Eben is shaped and twisted by the utilitarian egoism of his father; he carries the influence of his mother too. His mother is depicted as a woman with a loving nature who was "kind to everyone". She endured her pain silently and devoted her life to her whole family and passed away in fatigue. Her death became a symbol of ultraistic love and generosity. But as the play progresses her presence can be felt even after her death. Eben's identification with his mother reveals his longing and declaration of selfless love.

The basics of Agrarian society in America in 1850 was the need of an heir. Though O' Neill's depiction of New England rural life is remarkable but one does not understand seventy five year old Ephraim's need for a third marriage to woman forty years younger. He had three sons who were grown up and capable of handling the farm chores. His second marriage could be explained because Simeon and Peter were children and had to be brought up as it was an impossible task for a man who also has a farm to look after. He was also younger that is forty five years at that time. Also through this marriage he secured the land whose deeds were contested by Eben's mother's family. If a woman was needed in the house the priority one feels would be the marriage of the sons. O' Neill's unusual approach against Rural American norms though criticized is probably needed to build up this story. This gives Ephraim who quotes God and the Bible a strange complex character.

Critics also feel that O' Neill has also borrowed heavily from Nietzsche's doctrine. Nietzsche a German philosopher rejected the 'Slave Morality' and values of Christianity and proposed the philosophy of Self and the will to Power. His works are based upon the distance between thought and emotion emphasizing the value of intense emotion in Art and Life. Nietzsche's approach to philosophy and Conflict of Dionysian versus Apollonian forces are used by O' Neill to explain the conflict on the farm. For the readers information this theory is based on the two sons of Zeus, Dionysus and Apollo. While Dionysus was the God of Wine representing dreams and ecstasy and Apollo was the God of Sun representing reason.

With Nietzsche's help O' Neill has purported that the conflict between Eben and Ephraim is the conflict between Dionysian and Apollonian forces acting against each other in the universe represented by the farm. Eben's actions can be described as Dionysian and based on emotions, ecstasy and dreams. One cannot describe Ephraim's actions as Apollonian. His second marriage itself is a contradiction to the Apollonian thought process. One can see that this marriage for reasons unknown caused the tumult which eventually led to the tragedy. The logical step should have been the marriage of his sons. His own desire for woman including the prostitute does not bring him anywhere near Apollonian principles. We cannot see O' Neill's play as a reflection of Nietzsche's theory, rather one can view it as a crime committed due to a strange situation caused by Ephraim's third marriage and the struggle for the inheritance of the farm.

It is not only the Cabot family who feels attachment to the farm house, Abbie Putnam,

who has been recently married in the house also seems to be interested in the farm. It is evident from the beginning of the play that she has married Ephraim only because of his money. It is revealed further she had a terrible life in the past which persuaded her to be an insatiable person. She longs for a better life now. Her recently achieved position as Ephraim's wife makes her greedy. Hence as Abbie enters the house, she displays the same sense of possessiveness as apparent in all the others members of the family. She wants to take advantage of the situation and make sure that everything in the house is hers:

ABBIE: (with lust for the word) Hum! (her eyes gloating on the house without seeming to see the two stiff figures at the gate) Its purty-purty! I can't b'lieve it's r'ally mine.

CABOT: (sharply) "Yew'r'n? mine? (He stares at her penetratingly, she stares back. He adds relently) Our'n –mebbe! It was lonesome too long. I was growin' old in the spring. A hum's got t' hev a women".

ABBIE: (Her voice taking possession) "A woman's got t' hav a hum!" (18)

Hence the three brothers accept the fact that a new "stepmother" is coming to the house, they comprehend that the farm property is in great danger, as the sense of possession that is imminent in every member of the family will be for the sense of possession that is present so strongly in every member of the family will be there in their new "stepmother" as well. Thus she is regarded as a threat to everything they own, and their reaction towards the woman approaching the house is negative:

SIMEON: (after a pause - thoughtfully) What d'ye calc'late she'll be like - our new Maw? Like Eben thinks?

PETER: More' n' likely.

SIMEON: (vindictively) Waal - I hope she's a she devil that'll make him wish he was dead an' Livin' in the pit o' hell fur comfort!

PETER: (fervently) Amen! (13)

The sense of possessiveness which Abbie displays for the farm is the strongest reason for Eben's hatred for her. He has only one notion in his mind. She has arrived at the farm to take everything that belongs to Cabots. This theme of greediness is recurrent in the play and both the characters, Eben and Abbie are viewed as greedy and materialistic. This stress on materialism and greediness is not only eminent in Eben and Abbie, but also Ephraim and his other two sons. They are also conquered by it throughout the play. W.P Fleming JR in *Tragedy in American Dream* adds that, "material goods seem a necessity in twentieth century." (19) He scrutinizes the fact that the Modern tragedy is subjugated by materialism. Eben believes as the farm belonged to his mother, he has the right to own it. Abbie on the other hand married Ephraim to claim material security. As mentioned above, she has come to the farm with only one sole purpose in mind, to own it:

ABBIE: (savagely seizing on his weak point) Your'n? Yew mean - my farm?

EBEN: I mean the farm yew sold yerself fur like any other old whore - my farm!

ABBIE: (stung - fiercely) Ye'll never live t'see the day when even a stikin' weed on it'll belong t'ye! (Then in a scream) Git out o'my sight! (26)

Although Eben hatred for Abbie is apparent in the play, as she has come to steal away the farm from them, yet both characters have a lot of common traits. While hate separates them temporarily, they are brought together by their similarities.



Abbie's relation with Eben, her greed for material possession is the central driving force that propels her towards marriage, in her relationship to Eben, this force is however restrained and displaced by another force. As money no longer serves as the essential driving force, Eben makes her sensuality aroused.

A moment later the kitchen door is slowly pushed open and Abbie enters. For a moment she stands looking at Eben. He does not notice her at first. Her eyes take him in penetratingly with a calculating appraisal of his strength as against hers. But under this her desire is dimly awakened by his youth and good looks. (21)

Even though for a little while, Abbie appears to be pressed against a different direction. She feels now attracted towards Eben's fine looks, which her old husband is deficient in. But if Abbie feels attracted towards him, Eben's reaction towards her is not positive; he does not have a wish to have her as a surrogate mother. As mentioned above he is aware of the fact that she married his father just because of the farm. J. Gassner in *O' Neill: A collection of Critical Essays* argues that, "there is no drama of O' Neill's in which an intense love relationship is presented as creative or satisfying. The deepest emotional drive in his plays is based on father-daughter, mother-son relationship. Their passion is necessarily evil, because it is incestuous; yet it is unavoidable because it is the condition upon which they are born." (43) He regards his mother on a high pedestal and idealizes her. Eben's reliance on his mother is the permanent dimension of O'Neill's drama. Eben feels stabbed when his father substitutes someone else in the place of his mother. His devotion to his mother makes him jealous for her affection that he finds it difficult enough to share this even with his father and cannot bear her substitution with another woman. Eben as a child in the past, dislikes having shared his mother's love even with his own father, and considers him as a foe and wants him out of the way. His feeling of resentment against his father breeds everyday:

E BEN: I'm getting' stronger. I kin feel it growin' in me – growin' an growin' – till it'll bust out–! (20)

Hence, the first encounter between Abbie and Eben is disturbed for they seem to have revulsion towards each other and this revulsion seems to develop as they talk.

Considering the stage directions, although Eben talks with fury and revolt, secretly he feels attracted to her and tries to struggle against it. The two selves of Eben are now visible: inside he is attracted to Abbie but outwardly he shows resistance. This ambivalent reaction towards Abbie dominates all of Eben's attitudes. He is subjugated by love and hate where love becomes a synonym for desire. Here hate and desire come together. He shows revulsion for the woman for what she stands for: greed and possession. But at the same time she becomes a desire for him.

So, as in a play, the "mother-son" relationship has been projected and is permeated by the conflicting elements. But, their evident hate will be kept aside and their sexual desires for each other will bring them together so that the theme of "child murder" will appear and finally the crime will be accomplished. One cause for the future murder is the materialism that is sensed from the beginning of the play. Abbie and Eben serve as the agents of the future murder.

Eugene O'Neill has made the use of Greek model of incest to project Eben's unconscious desire for mother. J. Gassner argues that *Desire Under the Elms* is, "true tragedy, the power of the passions, the impressiveness of the characters, the timelessness of the inner struggle between a son and a father ensure tragic elevation." (205) Normand Berlin in his work *Eugene O' Neill* remarks, "*Desire Under the Elms* is surely his first 'Greek' tragedy-not as imitatively Greek as

*Mourning Becomes Elektra*, but Greek none the less- going to sources that deal with Greek myths, to the subject matter the Greeks treated, and invoking a determinism that is as potent as that found in Greek drama.” (71)

Eben’s and Abbie relationship results in the birth of a son who is murdered by Abbie, bringing to mind another Greek myth, that of Oedipal Myth. O’Neill puts this conviction into performance by going into Sophocles great play *Oedipus Rex*. According to O’Neill *Desire Under the Elms* contains reverberations of Oedipus Rex. Oedipus when born is left on a mountain top as his parents are told by an Oracle that he would someday be killed by his father and would marry his mother. Usually speaking, O’Neill adopts the myth of the son against the father and the son falling for mother into *Desire Under the Elms*. Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman and William Burto in *Eight Great Tragedies* point out that, “O’Neill attempts to turn his tale of adultery and infanticide into something of a modern Oedipus, where strong passions gain a kind of glory. The son rebels against the father and covets the father’s wife.” (352)

Eben’s feelings that the farm should be his because it belonged to his mother is repeatedly discussed matter through the whole play. The arrival of Abbie who also was a resource less, abandoned woman caused a confrontation between them as Eben feels his right to the farm is threatened. She was on her admission managing to survive by working in other people’s homes and longed to have a right on the farm. With the passage of time Eben and Abbie could not resist the attraction for each other causing physical intimacy which leads to the birth of the baby. Eben’s attraction for Abbie cannot be explained as an Oedipus Complex because they were nearer in age and she was not his real mother. It can be described as the fulfillment of emotions and sexual interaction of the two young people in an isolated surrounding.

Abbie’s seduction of Eben in this play is not the most powerful stray from traditional conventions for women. However, in part two, scene three, Abbie commits infanticide she justifies her actions by convincing herself that the murder of her baby will show Eben how much she loves him. Here O’Neill is expressing the psychology behind the crime committed by a woman such as killing her own child. This probing in psychology leads to a deeper discussion of role of the mother as a nurturer. Ibsen in *A Doll’s House*, explores the abandonment of one’s child in an attempt to explore the fears the society has about the evolution of the free woman. Ibsen’s character Nora is a portrayal of a woman who has chosen to claim freedom for herself. Comparing Nora with Abbie, Abbie is the personification of fear that society has about the evolution of the free woman. Abbie is the product of a woman’s freedom, representing an individual with vicious sexual behavior and confused unclear thoughts and dreams. Her crime of infanticide can also be understood as an act of control. First she gives birth to her child and then kills it, claiming control over both life and death, giving her a god-like quality.

Stanton’s criticism involves legal implications of the institution of marriage itself stating, “He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.”(59) Stanton’s statement refers to the English common law performed in all the United States colonies and states in the mid-nineteenth century, which confirmed women to have no legal standing once they got married. Women were not allowed to have their own property or land or have control over their own assets. This inability to possess property or to make her own financial decisions affects her in two ways. Firstly, she is taken under the control of her father, husband or brother. Secondly she is equated to a child and is released from the responsibility of her actions.

Stanton has addressed the laws which take responsibility out of the hands of woman: “He has made her, morally an irresponsible being, as she can commit many crimes with impunity, provided they be done in the presence of her husband. In the covenant of marriage, she is

compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming to all intents and purposes, her master- the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement.”(59) Stanton has used the example of criminal behavior to exaggerate the male ownership. Her statement incites the imagery of woman stealing from a bank or taking a life under the vigilant gaze of her husband in order to create a pitiable plea to her audience regarding the injustice of the current laws. Stanton’s strong appeal exemplifies the emotions of the woman during this period of nil ownership rights.

In terms of Clark in *Eugene O’Neill: The Man and His Plays*, “the unity of the play lies rather in the character of Abbie. (152) Abbie is the main character who has committed the murder, and she is the one who arouses the passion of Eben. Abbie’s passion for Eben is one of the reasons that cause this crime to happen. Although Abbie feels hostile towards Eben in the beginning, she shows her will to sacrifice her own child in order to prove her love for him. On the whole, O’Neill exposes the feminist perspective through Abbie, however she shows her love to Eben through an extreme way by killing their beloved baby. Accordingly, her passion Eben for eventually lead to the ultimate tragedy. Clark states that:

In arousing the repressed passion of Eben she has forgotten, or perhaps never known, that the sex instinct cannot easily be controlled; she has depended on her own craftiness to see her machinations through in cold blood to the end. Then suddenly she finds herself caught in her own trap. (152)

Like Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, *Desire Under the Elm’s* explores the result of changing social conventions. Abbie shows us the possible result of a woman who breaks the defined social conventions by trying to control the men around her.

The topic of possession is also revealed through Abbie and Ephraim’s talk. Ephraim refers that as he is getting old Eben, is the only son who hasn’t left him. Abbie feels that she has been deceived due to her husband’s outlook and approach, but he later explains his point of view. He believes the fact that leaving the farm to a son will be similar as possessing it to himself once he reflects that a son is the extension of his existence. He believes that a son is like a part of himself.

CABOT: Ye’re on’y a woman.

ABBIE: I’m yewr wife.

CABOT: That hain’t me. A son is me- my blood -mine. Mine ought to t’git mine. An’ then it’s still mine - even though I be six foot under. D’ye see?

ABBIE: (giving him a look of hatred) Ay-eh. I see. (She becomes very thoughtful, her face growing shrewd, her eyes studying Cabot craftily) (29)

At the same time as Ephraim considers having a son who would inherit the farm, Abbie decides to have a son in order to inherit the farm herself.

ABBIE: (suddenly) Mebbe the Lord’ll give us a son.

CABOT: (turns and stares at her eagerly) Ye mean a son – t’ me’ n’ yew?

ABBIE: (with a cajoling smile) Ye’ re a strong man yet, hain’t ye? ‘Tain’t nowadays impossible, be it? We know that. Why d’ye stare so? Hain’t ye never thought o’ that afore? I been thinkin’o’ it all along, Ay-ehan’ I been prayin’ it’d happen, too.

CABOT: (his face growing full of joyous pride and a sort of religious ecstasy)



Ye been Prayin', Abbie? - fur a son? – t'us?

ABBIE: Ay-eh. (with a grim resolution) I want a son now. (29)

Hence her desire to possess the farm is stronger than anybody else. The only way of acquiring it is by giving Ephraim a new heir. Ephraim acknowledges this, unaware of her real intention behind it.

But to achieve her plan she requires Eben, to offer Ephraim a son. Taking Abbie's feelings in consideration, it is clear that she detests Ephraim but desires to possess her stepson. Eben will serve as her medium in acquiring a child once she seduces him. Eben's memory of his mother serves as another aspect in the play. He goes to the parlor in the remembrance of her. The parlor and his mother are vividly present in him. With these mixed feelings he calls out to his mother:

ABBIE: (holding his eyes and putting all her will into her words as she backs out the door) I'll expect ye afore long, Eben.

EBEN: (stares after her for a while, walking toward the door. A light appears in the parlor window. He murmurs) In the parlor? (This seems to arouse connotations for he comes back and puts on his white shirt, collar, half ties the tie mechanically, puts on coat, takes his hat, stands barefooted looking about him in bewilderment, mutters wonderingly) Maw! Whar air yew? 1(Then goes slowly toward the door in rear). (34)

The reminiscence of his mother and the unrestrained lust for Abbie urges Eben to go to parlor, on the other hand Abbie goes there only for one purpose: Eben is needed to be seduced by her so that she can have a son and inherit the farm.

The seduction scene takes place in the parlor where Abbie displays that she is stronger than Eben and thus, a child is born through an incestuous stepmother-son relationship.

The interior of the parlor is shown. A grim, repressed room like a tomb in which the family has been interred alive. Abbie sits on the edge of the horsehair sofa. She has lighted all the candles and the room is revealed in all its preserved ugliness. A change has come over the woman. She looks awed and frightened now, ready to run away. The door is opened and Eben appears. His face wears an expression of obsessed confusion. He stands staring at her, his- arms hanging disjointedly from his shoulders his feet bare, his hat in his hand. (35)

From the description above, both characters seem to have changed. All of Abbie's self assurance has disappeared and now she seems to be a frightened and awed person. Now she shows a drawback attitude in comparison to her early behavior which was bolder. On the other hand Eben has also under gone a change. At first he meant to show his revulsion, now he is standing by her to do whatever she wants, his attitude is of a passive person with no reactions against her.

From the very beginning of Abbie and Eben's conversation, the emphasis is always put on the mother. Her presence is felt even when Abbie and Eben are inside the parlor. Notwithstanding, as W.P Fleming J.R in *Tragedy in American Dream* states, "the dominance of the dead mother is symbolically indicated by the scenery. 'Two enormous elms are on each side of the house'. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof." (19) Therefore from the very beginning of the play the mother seems to prove her existence.

The celebration of the new arrival and the confrontation between the father and the son can be called the spark which led to this blaze eventually. Ephraim saying that Eben had molested Abbie and that Abbie wanted this child to rob Eben's property rights caused the outburst between Eben and Abbie. Both of these incidents were one year old; a period during which Abbie and Eben had reached a new level of intimacy.

The reaction to this unpleasant verbal interaction with Ephraim was Eben having a bitter argument with Abbie. He accuses her of plotting with his father to disinherit him by having the baby and making a fool out of him. He declares that he would rather have the baby dead. Abbie in an emotional state felt that she would lose Eben's love which is probably the closest thing she had to a relationship in all her miserable life. Hence Abbie committed the crime in a desperate attempt to win back Eben. Actually as one can see that whatever Eben reacted to; is an interaction between Abbie and Eben which took place before the baby being conceived and it gave Eben the impression that he is part of an intrigue by Abbie to grab the farm. To counteract Eben's feelings explain Abbie's motive behind the infanticide.

O'Neill has made use of the mother archetype to explore into Eben's personality. One cannot miss Eben's internal conflict, for it goes to the psychological core of O'Neill's play. The exploration of Eben's personality must be held on regard to his relationship with his mother. The main source of Eben's tragedy must be sought in his psychological quest for a mother figure. In the person of the protagonist, Eben, the play exemplifies the inner conflict between emotional demands for a woman and inner subjectivity. O'Neill explores the predicament of Eben's character. The source of Eben's problem goes back to his young childhood. Eben's search is only an indication for the need of an emotional bond. His mother plays an active part in his quest for the emotional bond though it does not physically. Her apparition in the play is not physical. She does not appear in the play. Eben recounts his childhood remembrances about his mother and father, his soft spot for his mother and his detestation for his father to his brothers in the commencement of the play. Eben finally learns that his parents do not love each other. Eben's loathing for his father leads him to search for emotional satisfaction of his feelings in his step-mother, Abbie. Abbie is the first woman with whom Eben comes in deeper relationship, and she plays a great role in the progression of Eben's manliness. Eben involuntarily acts in response to his step-mother. Eben's unbreakable and secluded self is the product of the lack of his father's love. Abbie, plays the role of mother archetype, forms the groundwork of the mother-complex. Typical effects of the mother-complex on the son according to Jung in *Symbols of Transformation*:

are homosexuality and Don Juanism, and sometimes also impotence. In homosexuality, the son's entire heterosexuality is tied to the mother in an unconscious form; in Don Juanism, he unconsciously seeks his mother in every woman he meets. Because of the difference in sex, a son's mother-complex does not appear in pure form. This is the reason why in every masculine mother-complex, side by side with the mother archetype, a significant role is played by the image of the man's sexual counterpart, the anima.(85)

Eben's haunting past is one of the tragic elements O'Neill used in *Desire Under the Elms*. The past in the play resolves and reins the tragic action. In the play the present is controlled by the past and hence it creates the future. Throughout the play the mother dominance is felt, although she is not present on the stage. In the beginning of the play the elms represent the figure of the mother, standing for the dominance of mother over the play. In Jungian psychology, the tree has

a maternal significance. It represents the symbol of mother archetype. Carl Jung in *Symbols of Transformation* states that, it is closely associated with, “the origin in the sense of the mother. It represents the source of life, of that magical life force.” (258). The maternal significance of trees in the garden of the Cabot farmhouse is made clear as they bend over the house like a mother who is holding her child. These elms protect and shelter the house with their long branches.

It is clearly evident in the play that both the characters Abbie and Eben can feel a presence in the room. The presence in the room is no other than Eben’s mother. Hence the characters go through a change, and it is due to this mysterious presence. It is her presence that changes their way of behavior.

ABBIE: When I fust come in - in the dark – they seemed something’ here.

EBEN: (simply) Maw.

ABBIE: At fust I was feered o’ it. I wanted t’yell an’ run. Now - since yew come - seems like it's growin’ soft an’ kind t’me. (Addressing the air-queerly) Thank yew.

EBEN: Maw allus loved me. (35)

Eben has great affection for his mother and Abbie becomes aware of this “mother-son love”. She tries to overpower him by first behaving as a mother treats her child.

ABBIE: (both her arms around him - with wild passion) I'll sing fur ye! I'll die fur ye! (inspite of her overwhelming desire for him, there is a sincere maternal love in her manner and voice - a horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love) Don’t cry Eben! I'll take yer Maw’s place! I'll be everythin’ she was t’ye! Let me kiss ye, Eben.’ (She pulls his head around. He makes a bewildered pretense of resistance. She is tender) Don’t be afeered! I'll kiss ye pure, Eben – same’s if I was a Maw t’ye - an’ ye kin kiss me back’s if yew was my son - my boy sayin’ good-night t’me. Kiss me Eben. (36)

But at this time this “mother-son” relationship” is shattered; his approach towards Abbie also changes. At this moment it seemed that he wanted to love her as a mother, not a woman. But Abbie cannot stop herself and begs Eben’s mother to intervene constructively in their relationship and she succeeds again, that is, by making Eben act the way she wants him to.

EBEN: (to the presence he feels in the room) Maw! Maw! What d’ye want? What air ye tellin’ me?

ABBIE: She's tellin ye t’ love me. She knows I love ye an’ I’ll be good t’ye. Can’t ye feel it? Don't ye know? She's tellin’ yet’ love me Eben!

EBEN: Ay - eh. I feel - mebbe she - but - I can’t figger out - why - when ye’ve stole her place- here in her hum - in the parlor whar she was -

ABBIE: (fiercely) She knows I love ye!

EBEN: (his face suddenly lighting up with a fierce, triumphant grin) I see it! I sees why. It’s her vengeance on him-so’s she kin rest quiet in her grave. (37)

Both, Eben and Abbie begin their relationship as two self centric people who try to gain from each other. They try to take advantage of each other. Doris Falk in *Eugene O’Neill and the Tragic Tension* analysis Eben, “is drawn to Abbie not by love, but by lust, greed, and the desire for revenge.”(96) In the same way, Abbie’s attention towards Eben develops from lust and her plot of acquiring the farm with the help of a baby. However as both of them fall in love, their selfish motives are transformed into new feelings. After the confrontation with Abbie, Eben finds himself going through unsuspecting changes. This change is indebted to their communication

through the medium of language. Charles Taylor observes that our moral sense originates from our dialogues with other interlocutors. Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self* clarifies the relationship between language and self as follows:

One cannot be a self on one's own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who are essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who were crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding. (36)

But if Eben's mother is taken as one who has passed ultraistic love to Eben in the past, then Abbie is the present interlocutor who continues affecting Eben. When Abbie narrates her unfortunate past experiences, Eben is affected by her tragic story. He has to fight "against his growing attraction and sympathy to her"(32). This act depicts his controversial sentiments and emotions regarding Abbie. Even though she still serves as a rival for him, his antagonism is changing from pity towards attraction. Language serves as a supernatural measure that evokes some hidden feelings in one and these feelings in turn reveals one's moral stand. Eben's sympathy is disloyal to his suppressed capability for love. When Abbie asks him to be a friend with her, he becomes "hypnotized" in spite of himself. The parlor scene in which Abbie and Eben come together finally illustrates how language breaks up the hard shell of possessive hatred and frees the self that desires for the long lost love. It is worth mentioning that in Abbie's attempt in convincing Eben of her sincere love, the image of mother plays a significant role. At first, Eben scorns Abbie and Abbie tries to resist her temptation. However change occurs when Abbie acts as a substitute of his mother and encourages Eben that she shall love him similarly like 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! (36)

In this dialogue, Abbie keeps persuading Eben to take her as her mother. Abbie has imagined Eben's hunger for love, his need to provide love and to be loved. She tries playing a role of love-giver and a love object for Eben. In the play it is hinted as human nature to love and to be loved. This accounts for Abbie reminding Eben, "Nature'll beat ye, Eben."(35) Abbie tries to stir up the suppressed nature of Eben to submit himself to love.

Later as Abbie assumes the role of Eben's mother, she also discloses the fact that to love and to be loved is part of her human nature as the mother's love stands for the most selfless and chaste human sentiment. Thus, through the image of mother, O'Neill infuses the play with a moral power in opposition with the utilitarianism, that is, the Christian value of other regarding and self-sacrifice. In comparison to the functional egoistic force which is characterized by the stone cold father Ephraim, the moral power of other concerning love is connected with the affection of the mother and the vitality of human nature.

An absurdity in their relationship occurs in the parlor, which becomes the cause of their adverse misunderstanding. As Abbie identifies herself with Eben's mother, through her promises of love and devotion, her love for Eben gets awakened and she is truly altered into a woman whose self-centeredness has vanished. In *Sources of Self*, Charles Taylor notes:



To say that man is a self-interpreting animal is not just to say that he has some compulsive tendency to form reflexive views of himself, but rather that as he is, he is always partly constituted by self-interpretation. (72)

And he also notes that, “our self (mis)understanding shape what we feel.”(65) Her transformation and self interpretation is brought about by articulation of the self. Abbie’s self-interpretation motivates her to get a hold of her new self, a woman who is capable to love and sacrifice. But Eben is still stuck to his egoistic self. He fails to perceive Abbie’s sincerity and his own need to love and to be loved. He balances his relationship with Abbie as vengeance on his father Ephraim– springing from the will of his mother. Making love to Abbie is merely an act of revenge for Eben. Eben’s fails to recognize Abbie’s love and his love for Abbie becomes the cause of the tragedy.

As Eben has not abandoned his desire for possession, in his relationship with Abbie, his feeling is towards her is ambiguous. His love for her grows gradually. But he feels he can’t offer himself to his love. Abbie remains an impending danger to the farm. These clashing emotions and uncertainty of his moral stand treat him as an easy prey to Ephraim’s mockery. Thus when Ephraim reveals that Abbie has intentions to take over the farm with her new-born son, Eben turns back to his old self who perceives everything from a utilitarian and egoist point of view. He believes that he has been betrayed by Abbie and been used as a device for stealing the farm, Eben talks in contempt against Abbie and her baby, wishing that the baby had never been born. Eben’s doubts about everything eventually lead Abbie killing the baby as a proof of love for Eben.

One of the greatest sins in the Greek tragedy is to kill someone of your own blood. Medea does the killing in full consciousness. She was free to change the fate of the children, but she chose to kill them. In *Desire Under the Elms*, in order to provide herself with security, Abbie sees that the only way out is to provide a son to Ephraim. She suggests to him, “mebbe the lord’ll give us a son” (28) Eben will be disinherited by a new son, although Eben is his father. Abbie gives birth to Eben’s child, and Ephraim believes it to be his child although his neighbours know the reality about the son. Ephraim discloses to Eben regarding Abbie’s earlier agreement to have a son and her desire to turn Eben out: “An’ she says, I wants Eben cut off so’s this farm’ll be mine when ye die!” (38) Eben in his rage and perplexity rebuffs Abbie who tries to express her love for him. However Eben states: “I wish he never was born! I wish he’d die this minit! I wish I’d never sot eyes on him! It’s him-yew havin’ him-a purpose t’ steal-That’s changed everythin!” Eben’s wish is analogous to Theseus curse on Hippolytus in *Phaedra*. In order to prove her love for Eben, Abbie murders the child like Medea. As Edward L. Shaughnessy states in *Down the Night and Down the Days*, “a mother suffocating her own baby surely constitutes an unnatural act. In Abbie we may be reminded of the daunting will of a Medea or Lady Macbeth.”(98)

Eben’s mother had been made to work hard intolerably, and it was the works that finally lead to her death. Besides there is a reason to believe that Ephraim has taken the farm from her and therefore from their son. But if the injustice done to Eben’s mother lingers over the play like a curse, then Abbie and Eben are seen as lifeless agents of the process of justice heading towards Ephraim.

Therefore both Abbie and Eben have discovered love and affection for each other. In this way their life has changed. Thus in *Desire Under the Elms*, the mother serves as a symbolic force who seems to show the two lovers the way to accomplish the unchaining process that their love relationship generates: sexual intercourse, the birth of the child, its death, the penalty and



rebirth of both the characters. The mother here is seen as sympathetic figure that will be guiding the two lovers to reach their final goal.

The son is born and Eben finally becomes conscious of the fact that he had been a mere a puppet to Abbie with whom she could play and get whatever she wanted. She always had a scheme in her mind, to possess the farm. As soon as Eben finds out the greed in Abbie, his attitude and behavior towards her and their son change; he puts his “cuss” on Abbie and even on his son. If the child had served to materialize her plans, he wishes the child had never been born.

EBEN: (unheedingly. With tortured passion) I wish ye was dead! I wish I was dead along with ye afore this come !

EBEN: (with fierce determination) I’m a – goin’, I tell ye! I’ll git rich thar an’ come back an’ fight him fur the farm he stole – an’ I’ll kick ye both out in the road – t’beg an’ sleep in the woods – an’ yer son along with ye - t’ starve an’ die !

ABBIE: (with a shudder - humbly) He’s yewr son, too, Eben.

EBEN: (torturedly) I wish he never was born! I wish he’d die this minit! I wish I’d never sot eyes on him! It’s him - yew havin’ him - a - purpose t’steal – that’s changed everythin’! (48)

Therefore, after Eben has let out his feelings of what he thinks about the situation, Abbie starts to think again. Their present situation including their love, their baby has changed their lives completely. Before the birth of the baby they felt strongly infatuated with each other. Before Eben had discovered Abbie’s plans, their son seemed to connect them both, he seemed to strengthen their love they had felt towards each other. But now, this child represents the end of affection they had felt for each other back then. As for Eben the child symbolizes Abbie’s greed so he hates him. Even more, the son has caused Eben to hate Abbie, but as Abbie loves him very much, so in spite of the farm, she tries come up with a new plan to win back Eben. She wants him back like before the baby was born. Hence the first idea of committing infanticide, originates in Abbie’s minds. If the child has been the cause of their lack of love, this cause has to be finished so that their love may triumph.

ABBIE: (after a pause - with a dreadful cold intensity- slowly) If that’s what his comin’s done t’me – killin’ yewr love – takin’ yew away -my on’y joy - the on’y joy I ever knowed – like heaven t’me – purtier’n heaven - then I hate him, too, even if I be his Maw!

EBEN: (bitterly) Lies! Ye love him! He’ll steal the farm fur ye!

ABBIE: (distractedly) He won’t steal! I’d kill him fust! I do love ye! I’ll prove t’ ye ...! (49)

At the commencement of the play Abbie is shown to be a selfish character. She wanted a son so that she could acquire the farm; now the farm is no longer important. What she really is concerned about is Eben’s love for her and, in the same way she did everything to attain her purpose related to the farmhouse, she is going to do anything to get back Eben’s love.

Abbie’s plan involves killing the child in order to gain Eben back. She believes the child has caused the end of their love affair. So, she thinks there is only one thing to be done to bring his love back; it is to murder her own child and, by doing this, she once more, accomplishes her personal and selfish aspirations.

ABBIE: (hysterically) I done it, Eben! I told ye I’d do it! I’ve proved I love ye – better’ n everythin’ – so’s ye can’t never doubt me no more!

ABBIE: I left the piller over his little face. Then he killed himself. He stopped

breathin'. (She begins to weep softly)

EBEN: (rage beginning to mingle with grief) He looked like me. He was mine, damn ye!

ABBIE: (slowly and brokenly) I didn't want t' do it. I hated myself fur doin' it. I loved him. He was so purty - dead spit'n' image o'yew. But I loved yew more – an'yew was goin' away - far off whar I'd never see ye agen, never kiss ye, never feel ye pressed agin me agen. (52)

But as in the preceding scenes, Eben's hatred for Abbie is noticeable, in the last scene of the play, he repents and the only thing he wants is forgiveness. He now releases that it is not Abbie alone who is guilty of child murder, he is equally responsible for the crime. If the sheriff is coming, it is not only Abbie who has to compensate for the sin but he himself has to compensate as an accomplice in it.

Eventually, if on one hand, the child can be seen as something negative, sinful (once it had been conceived in a sinful atmosphere – a stepmother/stepson relationship, and it had arrived in the world to gratify the sexual desire Abbie and Eben felt for one another and Abbie's personal desire for possession), on the other hand, Abbie murders the child in order to reiterate their love, in order to prove Eben she loves him. R. Poulard in *O'Neill and Nietzsche* gives us a similar idea when she says:

The baby died because he was conceived in a moment of animal passion. He was at first a means of gaining possession of the farm and revenge and later on became a possession to Eben. He was not born through the desire to create overhuman, (as Ephraim wanted him to be) and died in Abbie's attempt to prove all too human love for Eben. (104)

O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* serves as a good example of the archetypal motif of the sacrificial scapegoat in modern American drama. W. Guerin in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches* goes back into religion and points out the fact that even Jesus Christ can also be looked upon as a scapegoat to all mankind. He points out that, "The central figure in Christian religion played out a gruesome role of the godking as scapegoat, so that man might achieve spiritual rebirth." (125) Here the child can be treated as a scapegoat, even if only for the mother. It has been observed that possessiveness, greed, lust, sexual attractiveness and finally love led to the child murder; but it is after Abbie has offered her child as a scapegoat to atone for her sins, that their true love is achieved and they can reach spiritual rebirth.

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