

Desire under the Elms: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The paper depicts overlapping of love, possession and greed in American play, 'Desire under the Elms' with vivid reference. Psychological interpretation of love and of revenge is explained here grandly. The purpose of the research is to find out the Freudian psychological theory in this play. The presentation of love, sex and family relation are exposed intensely. 'Desire under the Elms' (1924) is one of the most well-known Plays of famous American dramatist of the twentieth century, Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953). In this drama, he draws a series of notable themes of modern American literature.

KEYWORDS: love, greed, sex, Freudian psychological theory, emotion

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INTRODUCTION

'Eugene Gladstone O'Neill is regarded as one of the greatest dramatists of America, the creator of serious American drama, one to whom goes the credit of securing international recognition and fame for the American drama' (KAPIL 41). Desire under the Elms (1924), an eminent play of Eugene O'Neill, accumulates love, possession and greed in a breathtaking fashion. It is a tragedy that comes about in and outside of Cabot farmhouse in New England in the year 1850. The drama started in a family farmhouse in New England. On either side of the house are two huge elm trees as they guard the house. The two branches of the tree are spread around the leaves, so looking at them, it would seem as if a woman was resting at noon with her hair.

Ephraim Cabot is the patriarch of this family. He has three sons; Simeon and Peter are the sons by his first wife and Eben by his second wife. "In Desire Under the Elms, O'Neill makes the figure of the 'father' as a paradigm of the antiquated hard, hubristic and heartless dad. O'Neill presents him, as a manifestation of the human will to control." (Aldewan 165). The play opens with Simeon and Peter coming in from a hard day's work. As they come, they talk about moving to California to strike gold and become rich. Their father Ephraim Cabot is now living alone after the death of his two wives. He departs his farm because of his monotonous life in there. These two brothers wished for the death of their father so that they could get what they deserved very quickly. They hated their father for having worked so hard on this farm. In the afternoon Eben goes to the Minnie. Minnie was a young village prostitute. Old Cabot and his two sons, Simon and Peter, used to visit her at once to appease their sexual desires. However, Eben unexpectedly informs his step brothers that their father is about to marry

for a third time. Angry at this, the brothers muse on leaving the farm immediately to move to California. Eben makes them an offer: he will give three hundred dollars to each if they sell their share of the farm.

Meanwhile, Ephraim, father of three sons, comes with his young bride Abbie Putnam. Within a few days, Abbie is seen to be attracted to Eben. Abby comes to know that Eben goes to Minnie to satisfy his sexual desire. By doing this she feels very jealous of it. Then she tries to stop him from going to Minnie but Eben tells Abbie that Minnie is thousands of times better than her. Because Minnie cares of him. Then Abbie wants to make courtship with him but the later rebuffs. She sometimes tries to entice him by placing her arm on his arm. In part 2, scene 2, Ephraim tells Abbie in his chamber to bear his son, who will be the heir of his property. "O'Neill's play, *Desire under the Elms* is seen to manifest the psychologically intensive and conflicting nature of Eben Cabot. He is the protagonist of the play, who impersonates an intensive feeling of inner tension regarding the death of his mother, whom he supposes to be killed by Ephraim Cabot, his father." (Rashid 1).

On this occasion Abbie leaps and kisses a burning fire of lust over Eben lying in the adjoining room. Eben kisses first but then he removes her face. In the room below, where Eben's mother died, Abbie told Eben to come to the house. Eben refuses to go there because he thinks his mother's soul is there. Abby goes there with a lot of force. Eben goes there too. Abbie tries to kiss Eben again by force. Eben interrupts her. Abbie tells her why he is fighting against his mind. Abbie realizes that Eben has a strong attachment to Abbie. At this time, Abbie again tells him that someone in the room is going to be seen. She tells him her mother is here. Then Abbie told

her that I would play the role of your mother from now on. I'll be your lover again. Then Eben thinks that if he continues this relationship with her, it will be a big revenge for Cabot and thus his mother will be able to sleep peacefully in the grave. He therefore mates her." O'Neill abstracted and reformulated Greek tragedy by exercising Freudian and Jungian psychological theories blending the components of ancient Greek and American mythology. " (Fathima 10). Abbie and Eben are seen sitting in a room. Abbie feels a passion of love in body and mind; Eben is still trying to behave as a son. Abbie in a motherly gesture, yet lustfully enough, puts her arms around him and tells him that she wants to be his mother as well as his lover. " The most important meaning of desire here is the illicit, sensual desire of Abbie for Eben, a carnal desire to which he too responds fully after a time. " (Srivastava 1). Eben feels as if his mother's spirit wants him to sleep with her to take revenge for his father's callous treatment. He comes out from the house as a changed man, bright and cheerful. Abbie pokes her head out of the window for one last kiss, and then they have a flirtatious conversation over who has more kisses. " Here, the elms represent the nature thwarted by Puritanism (strictness in beliefs and practices). Nature can be suppressed, but not for long. It takes revenge upon its oppressors. Hence, the elms come to represent the brooding and ultimately triumphant fate. " (Srivastava 2).

After ten months, Abbie delivers a son. It is Eben's son but Ephraim believes it to be his. About two weeks after the baby is born, Cabot hosts a dance party at his house. He tells everyone to rejoice there. This time, he dances a lot in the party too. The old Cabot is short in the eye. By the appearance of the child, people in the area realize that his father is not Cabot but Eben. Ephraim Cabot is very happy now and declares that Abbie and his 'youngest son' will have possession of his farm. Meanwhile, Eben thinks that his mother used him to bear a child so she can have the farm. Abbie tries to convince him that her love for him is true and genuine but Eben remains unmoved. He challenges her to prove her love. Next dawn, the most horrible thing's happens. Abbie comes to Eben saying she killed the baby to prove that her love is genuine and she didn't plan to be heir of his father's property. Knowing that, Eben becomes infuriated as it was his son too. Abbie tries to convince saying Eben that she kills her only to get his love. Being angry, Eben then goes to call the sheriff. He calls Sheriff whereas Abbie, reaffirming her passion, faints on the ground.

At the final scene, Ephraim Cabot rises up from the bed and goes downstairs. When he asks Abbie about the condition of the newborn baby, she tells him the truth, that its true father is Eben whom she loves. She also informs him that she has killed the baby.

Eben is caught in a whirlwind of emotions. He is broken-hearted for the loss of his son, but his love for Abbie has returned. He tells her he wishes to go to jail with her, to die with her. " "Desire Under the Elms" alludes to the ancient Greek legends and the contemporary Freudian theory of Oedipus complex. " (Fathima 1). He tells her he's going to tell the sheriff that the two of them planned the murder. Ephraim Cabot then decides to go to California to live with his two sons, leaving the farm. After that the Sheriff escorts the two lovers out of the farm, saying, '*It's a Jimdandy farm, no denyin'. Wished I owned it*'. Here, the farm is a symbol of conflicts and greed for possession. And the writer tries to show that intense love can be very dangerous sometimes and can, end up disastrously. " This play is an example of a modern realistic drama in which the problems of real life situations have been presented with an emotional insight into the character's minds and behaviours. " (Srivastava 3).

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