

Research Article

The Convergence of Psychoanalysis and Environment in *Desire Under the Elms*

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Abstract

Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* interweaves intricate psychological dynamics with a stark, unyielding rural setting to examine human desire, suppression, and pain. This presentation will examine the psychoanalytic foundations of O'Neill's characters, focusing on the patriarchal figure of Ephraim Cabot and his sons as they contend with the burdens of familial lineage, guilt, and desire. The research utilizes Freudian and Jungian theories of the unconscious, repression, and desire to analyze how the characters' internal problems are expressed in their relationships with the land and one another. The play's natural backdrop, reflecting the individuals' psyches, serves as a potent representation of their emotional and psychological conditions. The intersection of psychoanalysis and environment not only determines the sad destinies of the people but also mirrors overarching themes of inheritance, power relations, and the unavoidable influence of the past. This thesis contends that the interaction between the mind and the environment in *Desire Under the Elms* illustrates a profoundly interconnected connection, whereby the characters' wants and their surroundings simultaneously influence and restrict their fates, providing a stinging indictment of the human condition.

Keywords

Unconscious, Psychoanalysis, Environment, Jungian Psychology.

1. Introduction

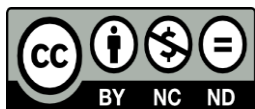
Eugene O'Neill (1888–1953), whose life was deeply entwined with theater (Black & Manheim, 1998), faced profound personal tragedies early on, losing his entire family before he turned twenty-five. This loss overwhelmed him, and the mourning period stretched over two decades. From that point onward, themes of death, grief, and sorrow became dominant in his plays. Writing served as O'Neill's way of coping with these deep-seated emotions. Between 1920 and 1943,

O'Neill experienced a prolific period, producing numerous short works and twenty full-length plays. His early sea plays, including *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916), *The Moon of Caribbees* (1918), *In the Zone* (1917), and *The Long Voyage Home* (1917), garnered him widespread recognition. The painful events of his life, coupled with his study of Greek tragedy, found a poignant expression in his first full-length play, *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), which remains one of his most

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significant works (Conn, 1989, p. 367).

In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill delves into themes of family conflict and humanity's complicated relationship with God. Set in mid-19th century New England, the play's rural backdrop and action mirror the characters' inner emotional turmoil. Death looms over the narrative, with characters such as Simeon grieving the loss of his wife, Jenn, Eben harboring resentment toward his deceased father Ephraim, and Abbie committing a tragic act of infanticide. Throughout, the characters are driven by their selfish desire for what they perceive as their rightful inheritance, creating an atmosphere of distrust, resentment, and familial strife. The pervasive themes of passion, insecurity, and greed shape the characters' lives, as they move through a "tunnel of desire," only to encounter destruction and death at its end. The central theme of "desire"—whether for wealth, warmth, or personal gain—echoes throughout, as the characters' pursuits of these desires ultimately lead to their downfall.

This study explores the key issues of *Desire Under the Elms* in a manner that resonates with modern readers, particularly those from Generation Z and Generation Alpha, who may struggle to connect with a work written over a century ago. By applying psychoanalytic theories, the analysis illuminates the cultural and psychological conflicts within the Cabot family's environment, offering contemporary readers insight into the complexities of the play. Addressing questions likely to arise from 21st-century audiences, such as the significance of pursuing material and physical desires and the social and psychological consequences of these pursuits, the study examines whether the characters' violent and impulsive actions are driven more by their environment or by unconscious forces.

2. Methods

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach, employing psychoanalytic theory and literary analysis to examine the characters' psychological motives and environmental effects in *Desire Under the Elms*. The study examines Freudian and Jungian themes, including the unconscious, repression, and desire, to analyze how these internal forces influence the characters' actions. A meticulous examination of the text is performed, focusing on imagery, symbolism, and character relationships, to assess how the unforgiving atmosphere of the Cabot farm influences the protagonists' psyches. Secondary sources, such as psychoanalytic critiques, are employed to substantiate the analysis.

3. Analysis and Discussion

This study examines whether the violent and impulsive actions of the characters in *Desire Under the Elms* are driven by their harsh environment or unconscious forces. Set on a

decaying farm in 1850s New England, the play's bleak and oppressive physical setting mirrors the emotional turmoil within the Cabot family. The environment, marked by isolation and decay, shapes the characters' personalities, particularly the Cabot brothers, whose resentment and hostility toward their father are reflected in their interactions. The strained family dynamics are further intensified by the land's influence, highlighting the complex relationship between environment and psychological conflict.

Ephraim's own personality—marked by lust, rigidity, and greed—dominates the Cabot household. His marriages, especially the third one to a woman much younger than him, reflect his impulsive and self-serving nature. His behavior aligns with Freud's tripartite theory of the psyche (O'Leary, 2014, p. 124), where Ephraim's reliance on instinctual gratification represents the "id," while his lack of moral conscience reflects an absence of the "superego." His material greed further distorts the family dynamic, making it impossible for the Cabots to form a cohesive, loving unit.

The next section of this study delves into the psychological underpinnings of the Cabot family's violence. We explore the nature of Ephraim's unconscious desires and how they manifest in the violence that permeates the household. Ephraim's self-centeredness and impulsivity are evident in his relationship with Abbie, his third wife. Although he occasionally shows affection for her, his possessive and arrogant nature resurfaces when he perceives that she is using the farmhouse for her own purposes. Ephraim's fixation on property ownership leads him to declare that he would rather destroy everything than let anyone else own it. His obsession with control and his inability to form meaningful emotional connections with his family reveal the destructive nature of his unconscious impulses and their impact on the household.

An overwhelming arrogance prevents Ephraim from recognizing his feeble attempt to cultivate a poetic self—a loving father who seeks to express affection for Eben and a husband who wishes to connect with Abbie. Much like the farm and its creatures, he desires to possess Abbie and the boys. Even though he mistrusts his current sons, he seems deeply driven by a delusion, a misguided hope that one day he will raise another child capable of inheriting his wealth. Ephraim's denial of the connection between reproduction and life reveals that he does not adhere to the values of primitive societies, where social bonds derived from lineage were vital for survival (Kuper, 1988, p. 17).

In the longest conversation with Abbie (O'Neill, 1925, 2.2), Ephraim reiterates his distorted sense of self-worth, his perverted puritanism, and vague references to his loneliness, portraying him as a psychopathic personality. Ephraim defends his harshness and cruelty by boasting about how he surpassed everyone else in the area and became the owner of a large property. In an attempt to elicit sympathy, he makes multiple references to his isolation, claiming that neither his first wife

nor his second wife (Eben's mother) understood him. Both women passed away, and Ephraim asserts that they "coveted the farm without knowin'" (2.2) what it truly represented. However, this is when Ephraim's concept of "knowing" or understanding becomes warped. According to Wikipedia, "understanding" (2024) is the relationship between the knower and the object of knowledge. Was Ephraim ever aware of his emotional connection with his wives? There is never a "we-talk" scenario in his self-narrative to foster intimacy. Ephraim's traits of low emotionality and low conscientiousness exemplify his psychopathy. His inability to experience love reflects the emptiness described by Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig, who argues that psychopaths have a barren inner world (Yow, 1996, p. 149).

Research indicates that psychopaths are manipulative and deceptive (Book et al., 2007, p. 4). They are social predators, armed with a Machiavellian intelligence that allows them to manipulate and deceive others. Psychopaths tend to experience intense feelings of anger, rage, mistrust, and irritability (Book et al., 2007, p. 2). Quinsey also pointed out that psychopathy is positively correlated with dishonesty (Book et al., 2007, p. 2). Ephraim displays all of these traits: his dishonesty, rage, distrust, and impatience dominate the characters around him. Ephraim's two institutions—his puritanism and marriage—are set up as defenses against his malevolent nature. Clearly, his view of a harsh God contradicts Christian theology, which asserts that God granted *donum superadditum*, the original righteousness bestowed on human nature to uphold morality in the world (Bugay, 2014). Ephraim, however, misrepresents the concept of divinity.

To justify his intemperate behavior, Ephraim falls prey to his own delusional character. He has always been a dishonest spouse and parent, depriving his sons and wives of a loving home. Robert Trivers, an American evolutionary biologist and sociobiologist, argues that disloyalty and self-deception are often complementary traits. The core element in defining self-deception is the selective exclusion of truthful information from one's consciousness (Trivers et al., 2010). This self-deception is particularly evident in the party scene. Everyone knows that Eben is the biological father, except Ephraim. Throughout his life, Ephraim has deceived himself by ignoring filial piety. Now that he is not the child's father, he deceives himself into believing that the new child is his "new son." The newborn, who is not his own, breathes life into him. He dances and speaks softly. Ephraim deludes himself to prevent him from acknowledging who he truly is. Despite letting his animals roam free after realizing his failure (O'Neill, 1925, 3.4), he refuses to examine his own soul. His conscious self's mechanism remains dormant. Because of his psychopathic tendencies, Ephraim is incapable of assessing his own mental health or forming judgments about his actions and words.

The next question is how Abbie and Eben respond to the violence in the farmhouse. Upon arriving at the Cabot

farmhouse with her own agenda, Abbie seems to be a continuation of the theme of deception in the play. Her deceptive actions stem from her dual motivations—her intense passion for her young stepson and her desire for financial gain from her marriage to Ephraim. Abbie has experienced unstable family and financial circumstances in the past, and she intends to acquire the farm at any cost. All the Cabots, including Abbie, disregard societal norms and unapologetically pursue self-interest. Abbie openly admits to her avarice and lust without reconciling them with her "persona," which Carl Jung views as masks worn to cope with public relations (Williams, 2018, p. 61).

Let us now hypothesize about Abbie if she did not possess the shadow archetypes of lust and greed. Her genuine purpose would be to fulfill the Cabot family's responsibilities upon entering their household. In addition to working on the farm, cooking, and caring for the spouse, she might give birth to a son. Would she find comfort and tranquility in this moral and ethical way of life? As with the previous spouses, we suspect that Ephraim's conceit would have led her to an early grave as well. Now, let us examine the role the shadow archetypes play in our lives. According to Jung, shadows are characteristics that we detest or choose to ignore. As Jung stated, "the brighter the light, the blacker the shadow" (Jolande & Hull, 1970, p. 25), meaning that the shadow has a crucial role in maintaining the overall balance of the psyche. He did not believe the shadow was without purpose or significance. A person without a well-developed shadow side is prone to becoming a walking persona, superficial and overly concerned with the views of others. For human growth, both light and dark are essential, just as conflict is crucial for the advancement of any good novel's storyline. Abbie's shadow archetypes enable her to speak up about her needs and desires.

However, Abbie is not entirely defined by her shadow. When she truly connects emotionally with Eben, she is capable of experiencing compassion. She shows empathy after realizing that Eben has "been fightin' [his] nature ever since the day she came" (O'Neill, 2.3). According to Jung, empathy requires a subjective sense of confidence toward the object. In empathy, there is a clear understanding of both the subject and the object (Sharp, 1991). In loving Eben, Abbie becomes more conscious of herself. Her individuation begins with this realization. Jung views "individuation" as the self's journey that integrates experience and realization (Williams, 2018, p. 63). In this process, a person becomes aware of her uniqueness (Williams, 2018, p. 64). By setting aside her avarice and recognizing her love for Eben, Abbie appears to be moving toward a unique whole.

Abbie's underlying spirituality emerges as a newfound awareness, one that is triggered by her empathy for Eben, which makes her come to appreciate nature: "Nature—makin' thn's grow—bigger 'n' bigger—burnin' inside ye—makin' ye want t' grow—into somethin' else—till ye're jined with

it...like a tree—like them elums” (O’Neill, 1925, 2.1). She realizes that she and Eben are driven by the same force in life: wealth. However, she is momentarily distracted from this desire by her connection with Eben, something she undoubtedly enjoys. In Abbie’s transindividual concern and subsequent self-discovery, the parlor scene plays a crucial role. Here, Abbie encounters her other self—the person who is capable of love. According to Jung:

Emotion is the alchemical fire whose warmth brings everything into existence and whose heat burns all superfluities to ashes (omnes superfluitates comburit)... emotion is the moment when steel meets flint and a spark is struck forth, for emotion is the chief source of consciousness. There is no change from darkness to light or from inertia to movement without emotion.” (Sharp, 1991, “Emotion”)

Now, Abbie has the ability to both radiate her energy and absorb that of others. She responds to Eben’s compulsive nostalgia for his mother. By “lighting all the candles” (O’Neill, 1925, 2.3), Abbie makes the repressed area feel more intimate and spiritual. Or perhaps her transformation into a loving entity is symbolized by the streaming candlelight. This moment serves as a somber articulation of her personal spiritual doctrine. When she tells Eben, “I love ye” (2.3), it is something Ephraim has never said to anyone. Abbie is now able to cry out submissively, “Don’t ye leave me, Eben!” (O’Neill, 1925, 2.3), presenting the reader with a different image of her than the harsh, brassy woman introduced in Part One.

The emotional tie undeniably has a significant impact on Eben as well. The experience in the parlor notably transforms him from an indifferent individual to a man who is tentatively responsive to emotions. Although not naive in their sexuality, these two young individuals establish a spiritual connection, and for the first time, love is acknowledged at the Cabot residence. However, Eben’s commitment to this companionship remains uncertain until the end of the play. In the final argument between father and son, Eben’s wavering passion causes him to question Abbie’s love for him. His past, which lacked any strong familial bonds, impedes his ability to think clearly in this regard. At this point, Eben’s bold statements, “I wish he had never been born! I wish he had passed away right now! Ahh. and yew having him as a purpose to steal!” (O’Neill, 1925, 3.2), provoke Abbie to commit the most heinous act—a mother’s murder of her own child.

Abbie’s transformation, so evident in the parlor scene, is violently disrupted by the murder of the child, as if she has been severed from the life force of the world. Driven by an intense fear of abandonment, she screams, “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!” (O’Neill, 1925, 3.2).

The murder of the infant represents a pivotal moment where Abbie’s “self” must be examined. Jung defines the “self” as “the totality of all psychic facts and contents” (Williams, 2018, p. 24). The energy that manifests as “self” enables us to adapt and grow, reorienting us toward balance and greater wholeness (Bobroff, 2020, p. 120).

The following assertions can be used to assess Abbie’s “self”:

a) Her passion clouds her judgment, making her unable to recognize the value of community ethics. She is too impulsive to see the importance of social norms for survival;

b) She lacks the maturity and refined reasoning necessary to convince Eben of her genuine love;

c) She is a hysterical individual who will go to any lengths to achieve her goals, viewing the child as an obstacle to her intense relationship with Eben;

d) Abbie appears to be more reckless and desperate in her pursuit of her desires than Lady Macbeth, who loses her sanity following the king’s death. We do not, however, witness Abbie’s psychological collapse in the same way.

Abbie’s personality is predominantly driven by impulse, as evidenced by the child-murdering incident. Throughout her life, her conscious mind remains largely inactive. Jung posits that the integration of the conscious and unconscious minds forms the “self,” representing the completeness of an individual’s personality. Consciousness serves as the starting point for the journey toward wholeness. If successful, this journey leads to a more profound, richer consciousness (Farah, 2023). The emergence of consciousness occurs in two distinct ways: one through great emotional tension, and the other through a contemplative state where concepts materialize as vision (Jung, 1981). Though never depicted as reflective, Abbie discovers something entirely new in her life—consciousness—prompted by two highly emotional events: one in the parlor and the other involving the murder of her child.

The Cabot farmhouse, particularly the parlor scene, becomes a pivotal setting for the transformative journey of both Eben and Abbie. Within the candlelit room, Eben’s unconscious begins to stir, awakening him to the value of love. Yet, the journey from a fragmented personality driven by anger, vengeance, and greed to an integrated, conscious whole is a difficult one for him. Eben grapples with an internal struggle between deep-seated anger and more positive emotional traits like empathy and compassion. Despite his growing awareness, he struggles to transmute his hatred into something more admirable. His animosity towards his father, Ephraim, becomes a burden on his conscience, reflecting his inability to escape the cycle of vengeance. By creating the illusion of Ephraim’s death as a suicide and reveling in his father’s demise, Eben demonstrates how deeply imprisoned he is by the need for revenge. His exclamation, “dog will eat dog” (O’Neill, 1925, 1.2), underscores the extent of his moral entrapment.

However, the Cabot family’s self-centeredness continues to

pull Eben away from his positive values. When he realizes the extent of the tragedy—the death of his child—he responds impulsively, shouting, “He was mine, damn you! But I’ll take vengeance now!” (O’Neill, 1925, 3.2). His inability to recognize the deeper emotional stakes leads him to dismiss Abbie’s desperate plea and seek retribution by going after the sheriff.

Amidst the darkness, savagery, and cycles of retaliation that define the Cabot farm, the play’s final scene offers a glimmer of hope. As the “sky brilliant with sunrise” (O’Neill, 1925, 3.4) suggests, there is a metaphorical dawn on the horizon for Eben and Abbie. This marks the point where the two characters’ unconscious minds begin to awaken to the reality of the consequences they will face within the legal system. In this moment, the Cabot family members seem to have an awareness of the potential repercussions of their actions, a realization that marks the first step toward personal transformation. The sunrise in this context can be interpreted as a symbol of reincarnation—a rebirth of consciousness for both Eben and Abbie.

Eben’s willingness to accept responsibility for the crime, now that he has been confronted with the depth of his own actions, marks a pivotal change in him. When he returns home after informing the police about the murder, he is no longer the same pessimistic, angry individual. He has come to terms with the consequences of his own actions. His willingness to share his fate with Abbie—“I want to share with ye, Abbie—prison ‘r death ‘r hell...” (O’Neill, 1925, 3.4)—shows a profound shift in his character. He is no longer self-absorbed; he has come to understand the value of connection, even in the face of suffering. By accepting the punishment for the murder of his child, Eben is symbolically freeing himself from the “stone walls of the farm,” which had previously confined him.

Through his personal transformation, Eben sheds the materialism and animosity that once defined him. He now sees these things as meaningless and chooses instead to embrace a more compassionate, agreeable version of himself. Yet, Ephraim, in contrast, never developed this capacity for self-awareness or connection. His inability to embrace love or share his emotional burdens highlights the tragedy of his character.

The play concludes with a shared utterance between Eben and Abbie—“Sun’s a rizin” (O’Neill, 1925, 3.4)—which signifies the hope of life’s rebirth. In this moment, their simultaneous acknowledgment of the sunrise symbolizes the potential for renewal and the beginning of a new chapter, one where their personal transformation is realized. This shared moment of recognition points toward the possibility of healing and redemption, offering a bittersweet but optimistic conclusion to the story of Eben and Abbie.

5. Conclusions

Desire Under the Elms adeptly demonstrates the intricate

connection between surroundings and unconscious impulses, clarifying how both influence and limit the individuals’ behaviors and feelings. O’Neill examines issues of desire, repression, and trauma through the harsh, isolated New England terrain and the characters’ profound psychological difficulties. The drama highlights the unavoidable impact of inherited legacies and unconscious influences on individual conduct, providing a comprehensive reflection on the intricacies of human nature. The intersection of psychoanalysis and environment not only determines the characters’ terrible fates but also prompts contemplation on the interplay between external conditions and internal motivations in shaping human experience.

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