

**A FREUDIAN INTERPRETATION OF  
EUGENE O'NEILL'S DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS**

**BY**

**MARGARET DILL SMITH**

A FREUDIAN INTERPRETATION OF EUGENE O'NEILL'S

DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS

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A Research Paper

Presented to  
the Graduate Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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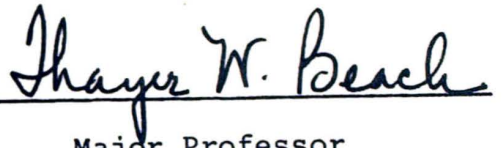
In Partial Fulfillment  
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by  
Margaret Dill Smith  
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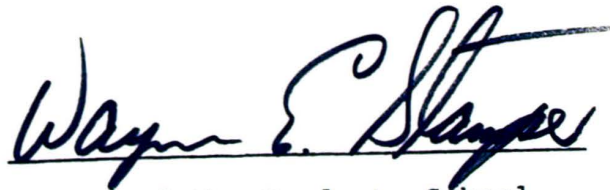
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Margaret D. Smith entitled "A Freudian Interpretation of Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.



Major Professor

Accepted for the Council:



Dean of the Graduate School

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## INTRODUCTION

. . . life is struggle, often, if not usually, unsuccessful struggle; for most of us have something within us which prevents us from accomplishing what we dream and desire.<sup>1</sup>

These words, spoken by Eugene O'Neill to Oliver M. Sayer in an interview, may well represent the playwright's view of universal man and his own disgust with his personal existence. However, they become more than mere opinion when we view them in the light of O'Neill's "tortured heroes" and Sigmund Freud's interpretation of mankind's psychology. Although O'Neill declared that he was not influenced by Freud's writings, an added dimension in understanding his characters may be achieved through a Freudian interpretation. David Sievers terms him "the playwright who epitomizes the Freudian period."<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to Aristotle's opinion about the primacy of plot, Eugene O'Neill placed the greatest emphasis upon character as the core of drama, and it is to his characterizations that this study is devoted. The New York Herald Tribune quotes O'Neill as saying that the topic

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill to Oliver M. Sayer, Modern Drama: Authoritative Texts of The Wild Duck, Three Sisters, The Devil's Disciple, A Dream Play, Desire Under the Elms, Henry IV: Backgrounds and Criticism, edited by Anthony Caputi, (A Norton Critical Edition), New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 1966, p. 451.

<sup>2</sup>David Sievers, Freud on Broadway: A History of Psychoanalysis and the American Drama, New York, Hermitage House Publishers, 1955, p. 97.

. . . that always was and always will be the one subject for drama. . . is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but is now with himself, his own past . . . . . I personally do not believe that an idea can be readily put over to an audience except through characters.<sup>3</sup>

Since O'Neill himself put such weight on character, it follows that a study of his characters should be of value in investigating the ideas he wrote into his plots.

This study hopes to demonstrate how a sufficient knowledge of Freud's triad of personality and certain other of his theories relevant to man's behavior can be applied to the tragic figures in O'Neill's plays. This added dimension will find the characters, their actions, and their inner struggles more understandable, and hence meaningful to students of the dramatic genre. This study is especially pertinent since many O'Neill characters, particularly the women, are on the surface maladjusted neurotics, atypical of the common man in the audience who is trying to gain some vicarious experience from the drama. It is not the purpose of this study to evaluate the extent of Freud's influence on O'Neill's plays nor to prove or disprove any influence at all. The play selected for Freudian explication in this study is Desire Under the Elms.

#### BACKGROUND

Sigmund Freud hypothesized that the personality of man is governed by three components unified to make a psychologically

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<sup>3</sup>Eugene O'Neill, "O'Neill Talks About His Plays" from an interview in the New York Herald Tribune, November 16, 1924. European Theories of the Drama, edited by Barrett H. Clark, New York: Crown Publishers, Incorporated., 1965, p. 502.

normal being. When the unity or balance of these components is disrupted, anxiety and suffering result.

The first and most basic of the three divisions of personality is the id. The id is lowest because it has no regard for its counterparts in personality or for the external world. It only seeks its own pleasure without scruples and it represents what laymen might term "the instincts." Calvin S. Hall describes the id as follows:

The id is not governed by laws of reason or logic, and it does not possess values, ethics or morality. It is driven by one consideration only, to obtain satisfaction for instinctual needs . . . .<sup>4</sup>

The id is complex and esoteric because it is confined to the innermost part of man and it is not witnessed except in those cases where man is maladjusted and the balance of personality control is leaning in favor of the id. Such cases are represented in dreamers, neurotics and psychotics.

Hall interprets the id as

. . . the foundation upon which the personality is built. The id retains its infantile character throughout life. It cannot tolerate tension. It wants immediate gratification. It is demanding, impulsive, irrational, asocial, selfish, and pleasure-loving. It is omnipotent because it has the magical power of fulfilling its wishes by imagination, fantasy, hallucinations, and dreams.<sup>5</sup>

The ego is the thinking part of man's personality. Its function is to maintain a balance between the self-gratifying

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<sup>4</sup>Calvin S. Hall, A Primer of Freudian Psychology, Cleveland, The World Publishing Company, 1954, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup>Hall, p. 21.



id, self-restraining superego, and the reality of the external world. The ego seeks to aid the id in finding satisfaction for its desires. However, when an object of fulfillment is unavailable, the ego will often postpone the satisfaction until a real object of pleasure can be located, thus discouraging temporary gratification through dreams and hallucinations.

In the well-adjusted person the ego is the executive of the personality . . . . When the ego is performing its executive functions wisely, harmony and adjustment prevail. Should the ego abdicate or surrender too much of its power to the id, to the superego, or to the external world,<sup>6</sup> disharmony and maladjustments will ensue.

The ego employs a "secondary process" as opposed to the primary process used by the id to achieve its pleasures. This secondary process rationalizes the desires of the id and tries to discover the best means of satisfaction. "The secondary process accomplishes what the primary process is unable to do, namely, to separate the subjective world of the mind from the objective world of physical reality."<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes the ego may indulge in daydreams too, but the ego is fully aware at all times that the fantasies are imaginings and not real objects of satisfaction as the id would regard them. To restrain actions of the ego, the personality of man contains a third component, the superego.

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<sup>6</sup>Hall, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>Hall, p. 23.

The long period of childhood, during which the growing human being lives in dependence upon his parents, leaves behind it a precipitate, which forms within the ego a special agency in which this parental influence is prolonged.<sup>8</sup> It has received the name of superego.

Like a parent, it is the responsibility of the superego to punish and reward the ego for its moral behavior through feelings of guilt or pride. Hall points out that the superego reflects not the behavior of the parents but the superego of the parents. Although it is recognized that parents have the single greatest effect upon the shaping of the superego, other factors do contribute. Such social forces as school, church, peer group, locale, etc., do also influence the development of an individual's superego. The superego makes no distinction between the events that actually occur in the real world and the events that are imagined in the id or the ego. If the ego has an immoral thought, the superego will punish the personality just as if the action were committed in reality. The superego might be termed the "perfectionist" of the personality, because it strives for the ideal as opposed to the id's pleasure or the ego's reality.

Calvin Hall, discussing the superego, evaluates this portion of the personality in this way:

Primarily it serves the purpose of controlling and regulating those impulses whose uncontrolled expression would endanger the stability of society. These impulses are

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<sup>8</sup>Sigmund Freud, An Outline of Psychoanalysis, (translated by James Strachey), New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 1949, p. 16.

sex and aggression . . . . The superego . . .  
enables a person to become a law-abiding mem-  
ber of society.<sup>9</sup>

These Freudian ideas weigh heavily in the understanding of the characters in O'Neill's plays. Other important concepts are sexual denial and its resulting frustrations, ego ideal versus reality, the Oedipus complex of son and mother, the Electra or father-daughter relationship, guilt feelings, repressions, suppressions, anxiety, neurosis, and "Thanatos", the "death instinct."

Freud says that "the weak point in the organization of the ego lies in the behavior toward the sexual function . . ."<sup>10</sup> When the ego or superego channel the libido, which can be defined as man's sexual energy, toward reality or the moral ideal, the chances are that the pleasure-seeking aim of the id will be frustrated; if prolonged, the frustration will lead to anxiety or neurosis.

The ego-ideal is governed by the superego and the ideal strives to make the personality morally perfect.

A person who has a lot of his energy tied up in the ego ideal is idealistic and high-minded. His choice of objects and interests is determined more by their moralistic than by their realistic values. He is more concerned with differentiating the good from the bad than he is with distinguishing between the true and the false.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Hall, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup>Hall, pp. 43-44.

<sup>11</sup>David Stafford-Clark, What Freud Really Said, New York, Schocken Books, 1966, pp.148-149.



In his plays O'Neill includes characters who are confronted with a conflict between the ego-ideal in the Puritan values of their own time and the reality of their own passions.

In Desire Under the Elms Eben suffers from what could be categorized as an Oedipal conflict. Abbie is presented as a mother figure who is attracted to Eben, the stepson.

Anxiety is a frequently-used term among laymen as well as among psychologists. Stafford-Clark terms it "the commonest form of distress from which we can suffer." In his discussion, he continues to define anxiety by saying,

. . . it is a situation which, if prolonged, produces disturbances of physiology and of mental equilibrium which can become intolerably destructive.<sup>12</sup>

The anxiety state can be caused by threatening or denying the libido its pleasure.

A psychic state that is more critical than anxiety is neurosis which can lead to disaster if a person allows himself to be overpowered by it. Freud postulates that the seeds for this neurosis are sown before the age of six. However, insufficient background is given to measure this theory with the characters in Desire Under the Elms; therefore, only those instances in which O'Neill characters display neurosis in their adult lives will be the concern in this study. Stafford-Clark amply defines the neurotic condition.

Neuroses are now recognized as disorders of the pattern of thought, feeling, and behavior which is developed during the life

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<sup>12</sup> Stafford-Clark, p. 142.



of the individual and tend progressively to limit and disable that individual's capacity for normal existence.<sup>13</sup>

Since O'Neill's characters often find themselves on the path toward inevitable disaster and death, the Freudian concept of "Thanatos" or the death wish becomes important in discussing the characters. Freud defined the idea in An Outline of Psychoanalysis as the desire

. . . to undo connections and so to destroy things. We may suppose that the final aim of the destructive instinct is to reduce living things to an inorganic state.<sup>14</sup>

Two perversions functioning as a result of an overpowering Thanatos are masochism and sadism. Both of these attributes seek to destroy unity and bring about total destruction, and they are to be found in moments of great anguish for the characters in several of O'Neill's plays.

The O'Neill characters in Desire Under the Elms are plagued with agonies. These agonies result from the interactions of complexities in their personalities. Perhaps through an explanation in Freudian concepts, they will be more comprehensible to O'Neill audiences.

#### ANALYSIS OF DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS

The characters in Desire Under the Elms are filled with components of Freudian theory. Eugene O'Neill first demonstrates knowledge of psychology in the setting of this play.

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<sup>13</sup>Stafford-Clark, p. 142.

<sup>14</sup>Freud, p. 20.

The farmhouse is needing paint; it is "grayish" and "faded". This is also characteristic of those who dwell within the house. The two huge elm trees that hover over the house reflect the personality of Abbie and the other women who inhabited the house. The trees are described as having "a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption."<sup>15</sup> Abbie becomes the "sinister" mother for both Eben and the newborn son. Jealousy is reflected in her desire to own the farm and Eben; in fact, it is this selfish jealousy that ultimately crushes Eben and the baby and robs Ephraim of his paternal happiness.

This "sinister maternity" if reflected in the two other mothers whose lives were lost under the pressures of the farm. The heaviness of the elms is symbolic of the oppression present in Cabot's home. The preceding women leave behind their oppressed spirits to haunt the New England homestead.

Abbie Putnam, around whom Desire Under the Elms evolves, is predominantly motivated by the pleasure-seeking id. O'Neill makes this known in his description when she is introduced in Part I, scene iv.

Abbie is thirty-five, buxom, full of vitality. Her round face is pretty but marred by its rather gross sensuality. There is strength and obstinacy in her jaw, a hard determination in her eyes, and about her

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<sup>15</sup> Eugene O'Neill, Desire Under the Elms in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill (selected by the author, introduction by Joseph Wood Krutch), New York, The Modern Library of Random House, Incorporated, pages 136-206, p. 136. All subsequent references will be identified in the text by Part, scene, and page number.

whole personality the same unsettled,  
untamed, desperate quality . . . .  
(Desire, I, iv, p. 155)

From this initial portrait, presented in terms like "gross", obstinate, or "hard", and the lack of restraint in her personality, Abbie emerges as a different character than the desirable figure that might be anticipated from the title.

The desire to possess is foremost in importance to every character in the play. Simeon and Peter both hoped to own the New England farm one day; however, when they learn of Cabot's remarriage, they realize that the farm can never be theirs and they go off to California in hopes of possessing new-found gold. Eben believes the farm to be rightfully his. Although the issue of whether the farm was Ephraim's or Eben's mother's is never resolved, Eben obtains the shares of his brothers and battles with Abbie that the farm is his. Ephraim, however, is very possessive of his farm and admits the desire to take it with him when he dies.

Possessiveness appears as a part of Abbie's personality when she first arrives at the Cabot home. The rocky farm looks "purty" to her and she immediately assumes possession by referring to the farm and the house and all of the things within the house as "mine". She offers a bit of her philosophy to explain this possessiveness when she states that a woman must have a home. At this early moment we discover why a woman as young as Abbie would marry seventy-five-year-old Ephraim Cabot.

Alan S. Downer discusses O'Neill view of possessiveness which he transmits through the figures in the play.



Their morals, their religion, and their love for others are of a lesser importance than the security of having a home.

The desire to possess grows out of a feeling of instability or insecurity. Thus his (O'Neill's) vision is of life without foundation, without creeds or beliefs, struggling for a symbol of security, a few rocky acres of a New England farmstead.<sup>16</sup>

A knowledge of the past of an individual is a requirement for Freudian psychoanalysis. O'Neill carefully includes a description of the background of each of the major characters. Eben's description is scattered throughout the play and often-times seems contradictory. The imbalance in his portrait is probably designed by O'Neill to characterize the imbalance in Eben's personality. He is sometimes seen as "soft" and moralistic while at other times he is "hard" and animalistic. His conception of his mother and her treatment by Ephraim differs from Ephraim's account. The brooding that is so much a part of Eben's personality is the suppression of the closeness he feels to his mother and later for Abbie. It is this strife among the parts of his personality that camouflages the clearest understanding of him which comes in psychological terms. Initially, he is governed by his superego when he discusses the ill treatment of his mother and vows to avenge her slave-like death. Soon after his id moves into control and directs

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<sup>16</sup>Alan S. Downer, "Eugene O'Neill as Poet of the Theatre" in O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism, edited by Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin, and William Fishcer, New York, New York University Press, 1961, p. 471.



him to visit the "wa'm" harlot, Min. Then, he faces reality and produces the legal papers for his brothers to sign to control their shares of the farm. These constant shifts in his personality are dominant throughout the play. As the play concludes, his id causes him to fight Cabot when he learns of Abbie's scheme to secure the farm for herself. With the passions of this id raging, he says that he hates Abbie and wishes the child were dead. When Abbie murders their son, Eben is controlled by his superego and goes for the sheriff to see that punishment is brought to Abbie. However, Eben is struck by the reality of the situation and his ego directs him back to Abbie where he is directed by his superego to acknowledge his own guilt in the crime and faces punishment with Abbie whom he still loves.

Ephraim's background is best seen in the confession he offers to Abbie in Part II, scene ii. His personality is a curious mixture of id and superego, animalism and religiosity. His courting id is described by the sons as "goin' whorin'" and in his own terms as a directive from God. His personality juxtaposes ego and superego. The reality of the hard life on the rocky farm is glossed over by the ideal that the rocks and the assignment to overcome them and the poor farmland is from God.

The toil that Ephraim poured into the rocky land is an escape from his loneliness. During this passage he confesses that never has anyone known him, not even his former wives, one for twenty years and one for sixteen. He has always been lonely which perhaps justifies his close identification and

acceptance of God's ways. He considers Abbie his "Rose o' Sharon," whom God had directed him to find. Ephraim's super-ego is shaped by no man but by his identifying to the difficult ways of God. He has idealized himself a faithful servant to God and this image blurs his vision of the real world and his position in it. He is blind to Eben and Abbie's affair, to the disgruntled son who wants to trick him, and to a recognition of himself as an old fool.

Abbie tries to make friends with Eben by identifying her own past life with his.

Wall--I've had a hard life, too--oceans  
o' trouble an' nuthin' but wuk for reward.  
I was an orphan early an' had t' wuk fur  
others in other folks' hums. Then I married  
an' he turned out a drunken spreer an' so  
he had t' wuk fur others an' me too agen in  
other folks' hums, an' the baby died, an'  
my husband got sick an' died too, an' I was  
glad sayin' now I'm free fur once, on'y I  
diskivered right away all I was free fur  
was t' wuk agen in other folks' hums, doin'  
other folks' wuk till I'd most give up hopes  
o' ever doin' my own wuk in my own hum, an'  
then your Paw come. (Desire, I, iv, p. 160)

When Abbie opens her life story to Eben, she appears to be a well-balanced personality governed by her ego. There can be little doubt that at this moment she is facing reality and is truthfully admitting why she married old Cabot. This confession is more than an account of Abbie's childhood, for it also is a statement of the number-one priority in her life. More than love or family, the most important thing in Abbie's life is to have a home.

The stage directions indicate that from their first encounter, desire is dimly awakened in Abbie and she treats

Eben in a seductive manner. At the beginning of Part II, occurring some two weeks later, Abbie seems to be bored with her happy home. On a hot Sunday afternoon Eben shares some of the desire that was first felt by Abbie. Her possessive nature is now reaching out for a second priority. Abbie is now seeking a real love to fill her newly-gained home. She mystifies Eben with powerful eyes which almost hypnotize him, and it is revealed that she has softened Cabot. Abbie tries to seduce Eben but she experiences a sudden change of attitude when she learns that Eben is going into town to visit Min, the town harlot.

ABBIE. (weakly) What d' ye want t' waste time of her fur?

EBEN. (revenging himself now--grinning at her) Ye can't beat Nature, didn't ye say? (He laughs and again starts to walk away).

ABBIE. (bursting out) An ugly old hake!

EBEN. (with a tantalizing sneer) She's purtier'n yew be!

ABBIE. That every wuthless drunk in the country has . . .

EBEN (tauntingly) Mebbe--but she's better'n yew. She owns up fa'r' ' squar' t' her doin's.

ABBIE. (furiously) Don't ye dare compare . . .

EBEN. She don't go sneakin' an' stealin'-- what's mine.

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 stinkin' weed on it'll belong t' ye! (Then in a scream) Git out o' my sight! Go on t' yer slut--disgracin' yer Paw 'n' me! I'll git yer Paw t' horsewhip ye off the place if I want t'! Ye're only livin' here 'cause I tolerate ye! Git along! I hate the sight o' ye! (She stops, panting and glaring at him). (Desire, II, i, p. 165)

This fit of rage clearly demonstrates the id in action.

Abbie moves from the temptress to the screaming neurotic in



a second. Eben impelled her anger with taunts at her own character, but, nevertheless, there can be no doubt that this jealous fit of anger is impulsive, uncontrolled, and receives its energy from the id. These fits of anger occur in the other characters as well. Ephraim approaches this rage when Abbie tells him that Eben tried to make love to her and when he is told that Abbie murdered the child. Eben resorts to anger several times during the play; the wildest fit in which he loses all rationality is when Cabot discloses Abbie's successful plot to possess the farm. Abbie becomes jealous of the old man's softening toward Eben, and consequently, she begins to calculate how to secure both the home from Ephraim and the deep love that she has been denied in life from Eben. Abbie's plans were to give birth to a son who would inherit the farm. Ephraim, filled with pride, gave his promise that, were he to be blessed with a son, the farm would be Abbie's and her son's upon his death.

Soon after the happy moment when Abbie and Ephraim decide to have a child, Cabot is ironically driven from Abbie's bed by a mysterious coldness lingering about the house, which is later described in the parlor scene as the haunting spirit of Eben's mother. After Cabot has found more peaceful surroundings with the beasts in the barn, Abbie is once more overpowered by her id and she is drawn into Eben's bedroom where she passionately throws herself on him with kisses.

S. K. Winther comments upon Abbie's behavior:

Abbie has no fixed value by which she can live. Greed, ambition, power, and carnal love are so mixed in her behavior



that she never finds a principle by which she can reconcile her practice with a fixed standard of conduct.<sup>17</sup>

Because she has no fixed values, she has no sense of right or wrong; consequently, as a result of her orphaned childhood, no superego exists to chide her for this unrestrained behavior.

When Eben throws Abbie from him, she taunts him that he is in love with her because he returned her passion. Abbie is in a strange psychic state during this scene as indicated in the stage directions in which the actress is told to deliver a "shrill" and a "crazy triumphant laugh". (*Desire*, II, ii, p. 175-6) She has hypnotic power over Eben as her eyes compel him to enter his dead mother's parlor that has not been opened since her burial.

A few minutes later in the parlor we see an action demonstrating the Oedipus complex. Abbie becomes a mother image for Eben before Freud's combination mother love and lust overcomes them.

EBEN. . . .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!  
 EBEN This was her hum. This was her farm.  
 ABBIE. This is my hum! This is my farm!  
 EBEN. He married her t' steal 'em. She  
 was soft an' easy. He couldn't 'preciate her.

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<sup>17</sup>S. K. Winther, "*Desire Under the Elms*, A Modern Tragedy" in *Modern Drama: Authoritative Texts of The Wild Duck, Three Sisters, The Devil's Disciple, A Dream Play, Desire Under the Elms, Henry IV: Backgrounds and Criticism*, edited by Anthony Caputi, (A Norton Critical Edition), New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 1966, p. 465.

ABBIE. He can't 'preciate me!

EBEN. He murdered her with his hardness.

ABBIE. He's murderin' me!

EBEN. She died. (A pause) Sometimes she used to sing fur me. (He bursts into a fit of sobbing).

ABBIE. (both her arms around him--with wild passion) I'll sing fur ye! I'll die fur ye! (In spite of her overwhelming desire for him, there is a sincere material love in her manner and voice--a horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love) Don't cry Eben! I'll take your 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. (They kiss in restrained fashion. Then suddenly wild passion overcomes her. She kisses him lustfully again and again and he flings his arms about her and returns her kisses . . .) (Desire, II, iii, p. 178)

The id is still seeking pleasure and Abbie is working toward her second priority--a deep love with Eben. Throughout the speeches above, Abbie is controlled by passionate feelings for Eben and she does not plan the most logical way to get him under her power; however, she instinctively succeeds. She cannot see farther than the moment and achieving gratification for her libido. On this particular evening she gains power over Eben by gaining control over his mother's parlor which had been off limits to her and she gains the love she desires from Eben. She really wants to take Maw's place, for Maw possessed both of these things. More than anything she wanted to be the embodiment of the former Mrs. Cabot, but that wasn't enough. Her love for Eben was more than a mother love and they discovered that fulfillment could only be found in a deeper involvement.

Both Abbie and Eben found contentment. Abbie achieved the love she was seeking and Eben found a replacement for his dead mother. The parlor where their love was born regained life and Maw returned to her grave supposedly leaving the home in peace instead of the spirit which she had left creeping about the house. However, Eben mentioned the possibility that Maw's condoning of Abbie and their love could be a means of gaining revenge upon Ephraim, and this ironically proves to be true in the end.

The most obvious portrayal of Freudian theory is Eben's behavior in the parlor scene. His recollection of his mother is in terms that clearly indicate that he is suffering from an Oedipus complex. His speeches are delivered in a trance-like state. His short rhythmic statements are echoed by Abbie which demonstrates O'Neill's art of creating in dialogue the back and forth erotic motion in the foreplay of sexual intercourse. When Eben enters the parlor, he appears in "obsessed confusion". This obsession is with the image of his mother. Eben characterizes his mother as "kind" and "good". Her "singing" may represent the lullaby he heard as a child as he was cuddled to her breast. Despite Abbie's assurances that she will do all the things his Maw did, Eben remains in a trance with the hallucination of being in his mother's arms. When Abbie goes from a maternal kiss to a lustful embrace, Eben makes the transition also by returning the passion. The hallucination becomes real and for a few moments Eben is lustfully kissing his mother. His response when he realizes his incest causes him to tremble "all over in a strange state



of terror." His superego tries to justify his lustful attraction to Abbie as a means of obtaining revenge on old Cabot, but his ego reveals his true feelings when he says, "I been dyin' fur want o' ye--every hour since ye come! I love ye!" (Desire, II, iii, p. 179) For several years Eben has lived with men except for an occasional visit to Min. During those years Eben has had to resort to memories of his mother and his imagination has distorted his thoughts making him neurotic and incapable of normal behavior. Abbie's presence in the home has served as the embodiment of his mother, and try as he has to repress his lust through avoidance or taunts at her character, Abbie becomes the object of his Oedipus complex. In the above lines, he admits his lust and his ego accepts Abbie as gratification for his id. Eben's entering his mother's "tomb," i.e., the parlor, is symbolic of his entering her womb by way of Abbie. From his subsequent rebirth he emerges cured of his obsession to possess his mother. The id has won and gratification for the libido has been found and accepted.

Abbie and Eben find a happier world after that night in the parlor and Ephraim finds new joy in the prospect of being a father. Their world remains balanced until after the birth of the baby when Abbie and Eben find their love shadowed because they must pretend that their son belongs to Cabot. At the neighborhood gathering to welcome the birth of the Cabot baby, we notice that the wildness that was in Abbie has settled. Ephraim makes a drunken fool of himself while the neighbors cast knowing glances and make aside remarks to Abbie.

The neighbors serve as a sort of potential superego for Abbie but never does she admit the guilt that an adulteress should feel.

Eben's hysterical reaction to the revelation of Abbie's scheme and the subsequent fight with Cabot cause some reactions in Abbie that need amplification. When Eben rejects Abbie and the child, she shudders, for her lust has become the long-desired happiness in love. He continues by saying that he will leave in the morning to be rid of such lies and schemes. Abbie becomes distracted as she realizes that it is the child who has complicated their happiness. There is a "strange intensity" as Abbie says, "Mebbe I kin take back one thin' God does!" (Desire, III, ii, p. 195) She has resolved at this point to correct the mistake. Her decision is not a product of her ego but rather the desperate response of her id to retain Eben, the nearest to love she has ever known. She hopes that her resolution will convince Eben that her love is real and not a plot to evict him and usurp the farm.

The following morning when Abbie and Eben meet in the kitchen before he leaves, Abbie is hysterical as she screams, "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!" (Desire, III, iii, p. 196) She has murdered the child of their love. She has rationalized her act based on Eben's words the preceding evening.

(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--  
 an' ye said ye hated me fur havin' him--ye  
 said ye hated him an' wished he was dead--ye  
 said if it hadn't been fur him comin' it'd  
 be the same's afore between us. (Desire,  
 III, iii, p. 199)

She does not realize that these words were spoken impulsively by Eben when he was under the influence of his id during the fight with Cabot and the argument with her. These words did not represent Eben's true feelings toward his son. Obviously, Abbie's ego has not gained control of her behavior during the night. She is still acting from the id as she selfishly kills her son to maintain the love she had found with Eben. George Pierce Baker comments upon the realistic characters created by O'Neill who are frequently so complex that they lack self-realization. Abbie seems to be one such example, for at this point in the play she cannot recognize the barbarity of her crime, Eben's reaction, or anything beyond the fact that she is losing her lover.

O'Neill deals with men and women as conventions of the stage, not even as they should be, but exactly as he sees them, far too often creatures blindly, helplessly driven by forces they have not the character to withstand. . . notably in Desire Under the Elms.<sup>18</sup>

This description also applies to the complexity of Eben's character as it weaves in and out of the elements in Freud's

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<sup>18</sup>George Pierce Baker, "O'Neill's First Decade" in O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism, edited by Oscar Cargill, Bryllion Fagin, and William Fisher, New York, New York University Press, 1961, p. 246.



triad. Ephraim's character is somewhat stronger but his strength is gained from his religion--a religion that represents a life that is difficult and painful. He rejoices somewhat in his religion, but he endures a religion that brings little happiness, only hard labor and bad luck.

Abbie is numb while she confesses to Cabot that she has murdered the child, but his reaction serves as a catalyst to reactivate Abbie's hysteria. She even has the strength to overpower Cabot when he violently grabs and shakes her.

The mother-son complex is recapitulated at the end when Eben hurries back to help Abbie escape. Eben realizes that he still loves Abbie. Abbie's reaction is a motherly one, "My boy, hain't ye?" (Desire, III, iv, p. 202). However Abbie is not ready to escape, for she realizes that she must accept punishment for murdering her son. This is the only place in the play where the superego appears in Abbie's personality, and then it is not a comprehensive regret.

EBEN. I'm as guilty as yew be! He  
was the child o' our sin.

ABBIE. (lifting her head as if defying  
God) I don't repent that sin! I hain't  
askin' God t' fergive that! (Desire,  
III, iv, o. 203)

Abbie refuses to acknowledge incest and adultery. To her, the only sin she committed was murdering the child.

Freud would probably condone mother-son feelings as a part of maturation. To others, the ages of Abbie and Eben might contradict any such feelings of development, except for the circumstances of their maturity. Eben felt strong ties with his mother and an obligation to avenge the wrongs he

believed she endured in life. Abbie lost her own son and never before had anyone whom she could love as a mother. These maternal feelings do not waver when Eben becomes a man who is ready to accept his punishment, for Abbie still wants to protect him saying, "No! I don't want yew t' suffer!" (Desire, III, iv, p. 203). Richard Dana Skinner in his discussion of Desire Under the Elms observes a purpose in O'Neill's use of Freud's incest theory which elevates the affair above the shocker level.

. . . the incest problem as we find it in the great tragedies and the enduring myths seems to symbolize very closely a critical stage in the break between childhood and manhood.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, after Eben's involvement with Abbie, his mother figure, he does mature and this declaration accepting responsibility for his part of the crime demonstrates his manhood. The effects of incest are present in Eben's character development even though they are not blood related.

Abbie's priorities seem to have shifted, for through her sudden actions to regain her second priority, Eben, she lost her first priority, her home. Eben and Abbie have few regrets indicated in their ability to still see beauty in the morning sunrise and the farm as they exit--"Sun's a-rizin'. Purty, hain't it?" (Desire, III, iv, p. 205).

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Dana Skinner, "Desire Under the Elms: Dragons of Youth" in Modern Drama: Authoritative Texts of The Wild Duck, Three Sisters, The Devil's Disciple, A Dream Play, Desire Under the Elms, Henry IV: Background and Criticism, edited by Anthony Caputi, (A Norton Critical Edition), New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 1966, p. 455.

These lines opened the play and they point out how the characters have come full circle. They have each gained the farm they wanted and have lost it. O'Neill repeated this optimistic phrase to indicate that their desire has brought them a greater gain and for the possession and maintaining of their love they remain optimistic even in the face of imprisonment or death. John Henry Rawleigh explains this as the "world well lost" theme. He defines the concept by stating that "men and women will ruin their lives or go to their deaths because of a consuming passion."<sup>20</sup> However, John F. Whitman postulates a more acceptable view. He discards the passion theory by reviewing the basis on which their love is built. As was established earlier, each wants to possess the New England farm. These are the rival conditions under which Abbie and Eben meet--conditions that foster "suspicion and hate."

. . . and while their love ultimately asserts itself, the ghost of their earlier distrust, which they have not the faith to exorcise, is not so easily laid. In the end, it is only through an act of violent self-sacrifice that they are freed from their selfishness and disorientation. Their sin, in O'Neill's terms, is not their love but their lack of faith in it, and the murder which that brought about . . . the note on which they leave the stage is not one of resignation to atonement, but joy in each other, in love, and in the revelation that death, together, has no fears.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>John Henry Rawleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965, p. 53.

<sup>21</sup>John F. Whitman, "O'Neill's Search for a Language of the Theatre" in O'Neill, edited by John Gassner, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Incorporated, 1964, p. 152.



In conclusion, it is this self-sacrifice that elevates Abbie, a temptress, adulteress, and a murderess, to a level where an audience can feel compassion for her. The reader, like Whitman, does not condemn but joins in the joy that Abbie and Eben share. A man and a woman with unhappy childhoods find happiness in unsuccessful lives. Abbie was a calculating woman who experienced fits of hysteria. She was controlled by the id which made her selfish and impulsive. Eben was complicated by an Oedipus complex. Abbie, Eben, and Ephraim are truly complex characters. They are among the great characters in American literature and the one's understanding is expanded when Freudian theories are used to analyze their personalities.

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