

ANALYSIS

Desire Under the Elms (1924)



Eugene O'Neill

(1888-1953)

“The emotions as well as the intellect and the understanding must throw off completely the desire to turn back to protecting motherly arms and a world of make believe. O'Neill chose to express the idea of this struggle in the terms and symbols of Greek incest tragedy, and the first play of this new struggle was called *Desire Under the Elms*. Nothing could explain more clearly the exact implications of this play than O'Neill's description of the elm trees brooding over the Cabot farmhouse in New England in which the entire action takes place. These two enormous elms 'bend their trailing branches down over the roof.' They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humanness. They brood oppressively over the house....

He was writing a play of extraordinary emotional intensity in which, consciously or unconsciously, he was using the incest formula of Greek tragedy to express that first terrific battle of the soul to escape from its own chains to childhood.... The desire of the soul to remain in its prison conquers, for the moment, the desire to escape. Unless the play is understood in this perspective, and in this profound relationship to the pagan symbols of similar soul struggles, it loses all meaning in the scheme of the poet's quest.

The main characters of *Desire Under the Elms* are old Ephraim Cabot, hard fisted and stony hearted owner of the old farm, who frequently confuses himself with an 'old testament 'God, Whom he believes to be both hard and lonesome; Simeon and Peter Cabot, Ephraim's sons by a first wife; Eben Cabot, his son by a second wife, now dead, from whom he inherited the farm; and Abbie Putnam, a proud and possessive younger woman whom Ephraim brings back to the farm as his third wife, to the consternation of his sons, who see their inheritance threatened.

Although old Ephraim Cabot dominates the entire play, and is felt when not seen, it is Eben who is the dramatic hero, who becomes the symbol of youth seeking escape, only to find itself hopelessly entangled in old yearnings. The very first description of him gives the key to his character: 'His face is well formed, good-looking, but its expression is resentful and defensive. His defiant, dark eyes remind one of a wild

animal's in captivity. Each day is a cage in which he finds himself trapped but inwardly unsubdued. There is a fierce repressed vitality about him.' In other words, he is O'Neill's equivalent of...Orestes driven on by the furies.

But O'Neill's equivalent of these mythological heroes is of a very different texture from the originals, wholly without the benefit of mythological proportions. Eben Cabot is the personification of youthful lust driven on by devotion to his dead mother's image and the suppressed rage he feels at her early death, which he believes was brought on by his father's cruelty. He believes the farm to be rightly his, because it was his mother's before him; his father, in his eyes, is an interloper and a robber, fit only to be hated and cheated at every turn. When Eben goes brutally to a notorious woman in the village, it is revenge as well as lust that drives him, because he has heard that his father once knew this woman too. He boasts of it to his brothers... So deeply has Eben identified himself with his mother's wrongs that his every act is motivated in large part by the desire for revenge on his father.

The older brothers resent old Ephraim, too, but for a simpler reason. He has driven them like slaves, made them hedge their lives around with the stone fences lifted from the rebellious soil, and given them nothing in exchange. In sudden rebellion, when they hear their father has married again, thus destroying their last chance of inheriting the farm, they leave for the California gold hills, making over their worthless shares in the farm to Eben in exchange for Ephraim's hidden hoard of gold which Eben discloses to them. In Eben's mind, the gold was the result of his mother's slavery and death—it belongs to his mother and to him! With this setting of suppressed desires and distorted passions we are fully prepared for the consequences of Ephraim's third marriage to a young wife.

At first, Eben resents her furiously as an intruder in his mother's place. Then he succumbs to his attraction toward her youth and coarse beauty and to the same frantic feeling he held toward the woman in the village—to make his own everything that his father has possessed. The play becomes a three-cornered battle, for imperious domination by the father, for the destruction of the father by the son, and for the possession of the farm and all else by Abbie. Abbie is described as '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 whole personality the same unsettled, untamed, desperate quality which is so apparent in Eben.'

Ephraim Cabot, in contrast, is described as 'seventy-five, tall and gaunt, with great, wiry, concentrated power, but stoop-shouldered from toil. His face is as hard as if it were hewn out of a boulder, yet there is a weakness in it, a petty pride in his own narrow strength. His eyes are small, close together, and extremely near-sighted, blinking continually in the effort to focus on objects, their stare having a straining, ingrowing quality.' It is well worth noting at this point a strong characteristic of O'Neill's method, particularly evident in his later plays, of dealing with evil. He does not romanticize it. He is blunt to the point of brutality in describing evil passions, whether those of lust or pride or possessiveness. But even though the motivations he gives his characters may explain their evil actions, they are not motivations that seek to excuse, palliate or romanticize the evil they bring.

Abbie's face is 'marred' by her gross sensuality. The criticism is always valid that the grosser forms of evil need not be depicted on the stage—that drama, after the Greek fashion, can deal with the consequences of evil rather than with the description of evil itself. But once an author makes the decision to depict evil at all in the body of his play, the whole question of the integrity of his work from that point on depends on a complete disregarding of that oily, narcotic deception of pretending that good and evil are one and the same, to be distinguished only by custom or convention. With such a premise, the whole core of serious drama vanishes, and with it all sense of the spiritual integrity which is the hall mark of the true poet. From her first appearance on the farm, Abbie takes deep and full possession of everything, including Eben, who becomes at once, in her eyes, a means to an end—further undisputed possession of all that Eben holds dear. To this end she tries to gain his sympathy by telling him of her own hard life, and to gain his affection by pointed reference to the youth they share. At first, Eben tries furiously to resist his growing feeling for her... In the meantime, old Ephraim begins to develop a curious tolerance of the 'softness' he sees in Eben, and Abbie begins to be frightened. What if Ephraim, who feels he is getting old and 'ripe on the bow,' should decide to leave the farm to Eben instead of to her?

This...leads to her discovery that what Ephraim most desires in the world is another son, that if Abbie can bring him this last blessing on his old age, he will give her anything she asks, even the farm. This discovery only strengthens Abbie's determination to make Eben love her—to be more than ever the means to her great possessive end. She plays upon his love for his mother, covers her evil desires with a veneer of mother love, and finally, in the parlor of the house, the room in which Eben's mother was laid out before burial, she persuades him that in loving her he is only revenging his mother's death. Thus Eben, by the false road of an incestuous love, thinks he has discovered freedom from the softness and humiliation of his youthful resentment. But Eben's false sense of freedom is short lived. Within a year, Abbie has a son by Eben—but Eben finds once more that his father stands above him....

It is old Ephraim, boastful and derisive in what he believes to be his new fatherhood, who strikes the second blow at Eben. He gloats over the boy, and then tells him that Abbie always despised him, and wanted to have a son only to make sure that she and not Eben would have the farm. In a rage, Eben attacks his father and the two men struggle until Abbie rushes out to separate them. Then, when his father has gone, Eben vents his rage on Abbie—tells her what he has heard, and refuses to believe her wild protests that she really loves him now, and that all she once said was simply in resentment when he hated and ignored her.... As he leaves her, threatening never to see her again, Abbie, who does love Eben now with a tortured intensity, says strangely, 'Mebbe I kin take back one thin' God does!'... To prove her love for Eben, Abbie kills her new-born son!...

She comes to Eben to tell him what she had done. At first he thinks she has killed his father, and takes a sort of grim delight in the idea, but when he at last understands that it is his son who has been killed—the one thing really his in the world—a new rage sweeps over him.... He rushes off to get the Sheriff. Then comes Abbie's complete confession to old Ephraim—Eben's frantic return to Abbie, whom he still loves in spite of himself—his plea that they run away together... When the Sheriff comes, Eben gives himself up as a partner in the crime—his one and only act of true manliness. Even old Ephraim gives him one look of grudging admiration....

This play will always be subject to the criticism of being too brutal and realistic a treatment of a universal theme which the classic dramatists have always approached with a grandiose and coldly symbolic attitude. It is a torrential outpouring of crude feeling, almost terrifying in its raw projection upon a realistic stage.... It is the first great struggle to emerge into maturity."

Richard Dana Skinner
Eugene O'Neill, A Poet's Quest
(Longmans, Green 1935) 143-56

"The scene of *Desire Under the Elms* is rural New England in the nineteenth century. The method is strictly realistic, and the story revolves around a struggle for dominance between a son and his father—the father being a patriarch convinced that he is under the special protection of a 'hard' Old Testament God, and the son competing with him for both his young wife and the ancestral farm.... To many, *Desire Under the Elms* was a contribution to the fashionable effort to 'debunk' the nation's Puritan forefathers whom this play was supposed to present as tyrannical and lustful...

Desire Under the Elms implies the theme and achieves artistic success only because in it O'Neill chooses to write of the past. Here the struggle between father and son can reach tragic proportions, can indeed achieve a quality which immediately challenges comparison with classic treatments of this fundamental conflict: because the father never wavers in his conviction that Jehovah is one of the protagonists, and because even the son has not lost all sense of living in a universe more grandiose than any which can be known to those who acknowledge only man-made laws. Moreover, the distinction is clearly drawn in the last scene between these protagonists to whom the modern, represented by the sheriff, to whom the farm is desirable merely as a piece of salable real estate."

Joseph Wood Krutch
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1245-46

“*Desire Under the Elms* was first produced by the Provincetown Players...at the Greenwich Village Theatre on November 11, 1924. O’Neill once told the actor Walter Huston that he dreamed the entire play one night. The starkness and simplicity of the play would seem to confirm this claim. But the simplicity turns out to be of the surface only. Although the action and setting may seem at first glance somewhat sparse and barren, a deeper look, especially at the characters, will reveal complexities worth exploring.

One of the most powerful presences in the play is Eben Cabot’s dead mother. O’Neill suggests her brooding presence in his opening description of the large elms bending over the farm house with a ‘sinister maternity in their aspect.’ When Eben is seduced by his stepmother, O’Neill is careful to place the seduction scene in the parlor preserved as a memorial to the dead mother. And at the climactic moment, Eben identifies his stepmother with his mother. All of these and other details suggest that the action of the play, on one level at least, is a symbolic reenactment of the Oedipus story, the story (in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*) of the man who murdered his father and married his mother. But, of course, O’Neill’s emphasis on the psychological overtones of his classical situation would inevitably suggest to modern audiences Sigmund Freud and his elaborate theories of the Oedipus complex.

But there are dimensions other than the psychological in *Desire Under the Elms* which give the play an elemental quality and impact. The names of the characters in the play are Biblical and conjure up the ancient familial relationships of the Old Testament. Moreover, the events of the play are suggestive of the events of Greek tragedy, particularly of Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, in which Phaedra falls in love with her stepson.... Above all, however, *Desire Under the Elms* is a compelling drama of human passion, savage in its intensity, primitive in its portrayal and appeal.”

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1112-13

“Outwardly the play is a realistic, if heightened, study of the manners, morals, and psychological processes of a definite society—that of Puritan New England in the middle of the last century.... He chose this particular time and particular place, partly because he knew something about them; partly because the stern repressions of puritan customs make the kind of explosion with which he proposed to deal particularly picturesque and particularly violent; but chiefly because it is necessary to give every dramatic story *some* local habitation and name. Questions concerning the historical accuracy of any detail are not strictly relevant. Realistic in manner though the presentation is, this puritan society is treated as already half fabulous, and the events, though feigned to occur in New England, also happen out of place and out of time....

The chief characters are Ephraim Cabot, a hard and self-righteous patriarch; Eben, a son by his second wife; and Abbie Putnam, a proud and ambitious young woman who has married Ephraim in his old age. There is a three-cornered struggle for power. The patriarch will yield nothing; Abbie schemes to secure for herself and her children the farm on which they all live; Eben is determined to escape the domination of the patriarch and also to retain the rights of an eldest son now threatened by Abbie. She realizes that an heir of her own would be the surest road to her purpose and undertakes to seduce Eben by whom she hopes to bear a son to be foisted upon the patriarch as his own. Eben resents her as the usurper of his own mother’s place but he succumbs, not so much merely to lust, as to the feeling that he will revenge his mother and establish his own spiritual independence if he steals Ephraim’s wife.

Presently the son is born. Ephraim is now beside himself with triumph, quarrels with Eben whom he tells that Abbie has always despised him, and gloats over the fact her son will inherit the farm. Feeling now that Abbie has merely used him, Eben rejects her protestations that it is now he whom she loves, and Abbie, taking the only way to prove that she no longer cares chiefly for her claim on the farm, kills the child. Eben, horrified and furious, goes off to call the sheriff but when the sheriff comes he declares himself a partner in the crime and wins the grudging admiration even of Ephraim. Eben, thinks his father, is at least hard—not soft like the other sons who have left the farm to seek gold in California. ‘God’s hard, not easy!’

The success of *Desire Under the Elms* was in part a success of scandal. Many saw it either to giggle at the scene in which Eben is seduced or to raise righteous hands in indignation that such obscenity should be

permitted. Still others, fashionably intellectual, took it as an attack upon puritanism, a bold muckraking expose of what really went on in the prim houses of our revered forebears. But what the prudish and the advanced, as well as the merely ribald, failed to perceive is the fact that the themes of *Desire Under the Elms* are the themes of the oldest and the most eternally interesting tragic legends here freshly embodied in a tale native to the American soil. The intense, almost religious possessiveness felt by Ephraim and Eben and Abbie for the soil of New England is set off sharply from the mere impersonal greed of the sheriff. But this is not all or even the most important thing.

The struggle of the son against the father, the son's resentment of the intruding woman, canonical incest itself, are part of the story whose interest is deeper than any local creed or any temporary society, whether of our own time or of another. It is one of the great achievements of the play that it makes us feel them not merely as violent events but as mysteriously fundamental in the human story and hence raises the actors in them somehow above the level of mere characters in a single play, giving them something which suggests the kind of undefined meaning which we feel in an Oedipus or a Hamlet.

The tragedy of mere lust and blood belongs, [some critics argued] to a more primitive age, and incest is not one of the crimes by which contemporary society finds itself seriously threatened. But sensible as such criticisms may at first sight appear, it is worth remembering that they might have been made with almost equal pertinence against Aeschylus or Sophocles. The adventures of Oedipus or Jason do not suggest the home life of a Greek in the Periclean age. Their legends were already remote, archaic, and monstrous. The horror of the plays was for the Greeks as it is for us, nightmarish rather than immediately pertinent, and the singular hold which they continue to have upon the imagination is somehow connected with the fact....

Not until he came some years later to *Mourning Becomes Electra*, probably the finest of his plays, did O'Neill find another story so well suited to development in a spirit fundamentally related to that of classical tragedy. It is not only that the personages of *Desire Under the Elms* are involved in a story which suggests their kinship with the enduring legends of the race. They are also personages who, in the sense so important to their creator, 'belong' to something. They 'belong' both to their soil and to the traditions of their culture... And old Ephraim at least belongs also to God. That God may be, as he says, hard and lonesome. Rationally there may be something absurd in his thoroughgoing identification of himself and his will with the personality and the will of God. But that identification gives him stature. It gives him strength of passion in his struggle with the son whom he feels it necessary to subdue and with the young wife in whose arms he hopes to defy time. It also gives dignity and elevation and a kind of grandeur to the end where he is spiritually triumphant in defeat."

Joseph Wood Krutch
The American Drama Since 1918
(Braziller 1957) 94-100

"*Desire Under the Elms* is a violent drama of conflicting passions, partly Freudian and partly classic Greek in mood. The plot superficially resembles the Theseus-Hippolytus-Phaedra story as it is found in the dramas of Euripides and Racine; O'Neill transfers the basic situation to a New England farm in the period around 1850. Ephraim Cabot, a mean and avaricious New England farmer, takes a third wife, the young Abbie Putnam. His two elder sons, Simeon and Peter, despair of ever inheriting the farm and depart for California, selling their interest in the inheritance to their half-brother Eben, son of old Ephraim's gentle second wife.

The young Abbie proves to be as avaricious and conniving as the family she has joined; she deliberately seduces Eben in an effort to produce an heir who will inherit the farm for her so that Ephraim's other sons will not get it. After the child is born Ephraim signs over the inheritance rights to it, and Eben, angered, confesses the child's illegitimacy to his father. Meanwhile Abbie has inadvertently and helplessly fallen in love with Eben; she is at the mercy of her passion. When Eben declares that he wishes the child were dead, she strangles it as proof of her devotion. Eben goes for the police. But he is now emotionally involved with Abbie himself, and realizes he cannot live without her; he admits complicity in the crime and is arrested with her.

This drama, originally produced by the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village, was later moved to a Broadway theatre and went on to become a perennial road-show success. From a literary point of view *Desire Under the Elms* is interesting as a predecessor the more important *Mourning Becomes Electra*: Both plays use the same technique of transferring classic myth-situations into a modern quasi-Freudian setting.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 345-46

“Many critics of O’Neill have commented on *Desire Under the Elms* as marking a turning point in his development as a dramatist. Some have seen it as O’Neill’s expression of extreme violence represented in brutal characters who exemplify ‘greed, lechery, incest, adultery, revenge, murder.’ O’Neill ‘...declared them good, and sanctified them.’ This emphasis on all forms of violence and human degradation is the critical counterpart of popular public revulsion which reached its height in Los Angeles where the whole cast of the play was arrested, tried and convicted of giving a public performance of a play that was ‘mere smut, and filth...morbid, lewd and obscene.’

From this psychological approach the critic and the public indicate that in this play O’Neill had made a new departure into the lower depths of the psyche. They find it false, revolting, and since it sets its approval on bestiality, it deserves the moral condemnation it receives. Another critical attack sees the play as centered on overblown pride that balks at no crime to achieve its own ends. In this view Ephraim ‘has dedicated his entire life to God, who is, of course, only an image of his own ego.’ From this it follows that all the characters who come in contact with Ephraim are sacrificed to his lust for power. His God is in the rocks, hard, uncompromising and pitiless. This judgment of the play is based on the Aristotelian theory of tragedy. According to this idea, there must be a ‘flaw’ and the ‘flaw’ must account for the hero’s ‘fall.’

Joseph Wood Krutch also emphasizes *Desire Under the Elms* as a turning point in O’Neill’s development as a dramatist. He regards it as the first play ‘which clearly revealed the kind of artistic problem with which O’Neill’s genius was destined to grapple.’ His conception of the ‘problem’ deals with the manner in which O’Neill succeeded in divorcing the action from the reality of the particular, and thereby concentrating on the interpretation of the abstract, or the idea. By this approach he lifts the play out of the muck of detail to which moralistic criticism is inevitably attached. He considered the play as ‘interested less in New England as such than in an aspect of the eternal tragedy of man and his passions.’ He holds that ‘the events really occur out of place and out of time.’

This, however, is only a prelude to the real difference between *Desire Under the Elms* and the earlier plays. In this play, for the first time, O’Neill begins to see the problem of tragedy in modern drama as opposed to the classical and traditional interpretation. In this play he departs from the traditional interpretation of Aristotle, a departure that made it possible to develop his later and greater tragedies such as *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Iceman Cometh*, and *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. The difference between a modern theory of tragedy as exemplified in drama from Ibsen and Strindberg to O’Neill is that it discards all the superficial requirements of a tragedy set forth by Aristotle....

In *Desire Under the Elms* the tragic hero is a man apart from other men. He does not accept their manner of living, their morality is beneath his contempt, their ideals are to him the petty dreams of weaklings and cowards. He despises his weak and loutish sons, he scorns the morality so valuable to all those who work in the market place for profit, the church and the dogma it represents is not even worthy of mention, the legal system with its special morality he uses, but only to further his own end. As a man he stems from Ibsen’s Brand and the supreme and powerful pride of Strindberg. He is as proud as any man who ever walked onto a stage demanding an answer from the unanswerable. Like Job he wants to know why, with this difference that he knows he must become like the rocks and the hills if he would know God, and then he would be like Him, perhaps even equal to Him.

As a drama every scene in *Desire Under the Elms* is developed with skill to enhance and clarify the nature and meaning of the tragic hero. All other characters are made small in contrast. The two older sons are ignorant and loutish. Eben is a complex of delicate and sentimental love for the memory of his dead

mother. Mixed with this emotion is a passion for the farm which is nothing more than a superficial attitude learned from his father. He will steal in the name of his mother to acquire his brother's rights to the land. He will desecrate her love in the company of a whore; he will commit incest and console himself with the thought that the restless spirit of his mother finds peace at last in the approval of his action. 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.

Within this network of ignorance and doubtful values that form the outer framework of the plot the character of Ephraim stands hard as the rocks that represent God. He knows that God and the rocks are one, that if he would know God he must know the rocks of the field that are the voice and the spirit of God. 'God is hard. He ain't easy' is the all-enveloping idea of the play, and the plot is the arrangement of characters in action to emphasize this truth as the all-enveloping idea of man and his world.

This man is a giant in comparison with the human beings who surround him. There is never any suggestion in the play that anyone, man or woman, understood him. In his presence they can conceal neither their fear nor their awe. He was larger, stronger, older, more daring than other men. He encompassed in his being an understanding of life that embraced all living things. He was a part of the stony hills, the blue sky, the changing seasons; age did not weaken him, and the laws and the morality that are necessary to the essential weakness of most human beings were nonexistent for him. The sense of guilt, sin, and the fear of the law before which other characters of the play cringe, never crossed the threshold of his mind or touched him with either sorrow or regret. He lived in the presence of God as manifested in the stones on his farm. He read the lessons of those stones as the true symbol of God's reality: cold, impersonal, strong, powerful, everlasting; a God untouched and unmoved by the petty, sensuous needs of men. Their pitiful cries for help, their intermittent faith, their identification with the soft and the sentimental was scorned by Ephraim as the God he understood so well also scorned them....

Ephraim knew that possession of the farm was equal to the knowledge of God.... As Part II develops, the battle of love and greed between Abbie and Eben controls the action. It seems to have turned away from Ephraim. He is lost once more in the wilderness of his lonesome world. While Abbie is plotting to deceive him, he makes a last effort to enlist her sympathy and understanding.... He gives up trying... In the blank ignorance of her expression Ephraim realizes that she, like his other wives, like his sons, does not understand his vision of God, his desire to become like God, hard as stone....

As the play moves to its conclusion in Part III all the action seems to center on the fearful clash between Eben and Abbie. Hate, fear, greed and love dominate their thoughts, feelings and action. It seems for a time as though they had finally taken over the play and the tragedy belonged to them. Then once more the shadow of the rock which is Ephraim looms over them like the ominous shadows of the elms that cover the house of Cabot. The lovers in their attempt to destroy Ephraim destroy themselves. Their end is ignominious defeat. Their actions are ignorant and cowardly. Their cringing acceptance of their fate deserves the towering contempt of Ephraim.

The Sheriff comes to take away the sin-sick, contrite lovers. Ephraim is to be left alone with the farm, the stones and God. He is seventy-five years old, he has had three wives and three sons. They have all, each in his own way, betrayed him. Through their weakness, their inability to understand that Nature has no special concern for their well-being, they deserted him.... Ephraim has a sense of the ultimate realities, the forces that relate man to the physical world. He senses the need for a living force in the inanimate earth, and he knows that it is hard as stone and as impersonal as the wind. He listens to the voice of nature, he is exalted by her beauty, and he identifies himself with the quality of lonesomeness which must be the character of power divorced from purpose.... In his futile battle to know God's way and be like God he is doomed to defeat; in his determination never to submit or yield, he is heroic. In this struggle that has dominated his life he can never win. At the age of seventy-five, he walks out into the stony fields, into the beauty of dawn."

S. K. Winther
Modern Drama III (1960) 326-32

“*Desire Under the Elms* is a better play [than *The Hairy Ape*] because it springs more directly from O’Neill’s needs and preoccupations. So central is this play that Dr. Weissman has been able to take it as a sort of first draft of *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. In other words, it deals with O’Neill’s relations with father and mother. Directly incestuous relationships are avoided, in fiction as in other fantasy, by making the mother-figure only a stepmother. The device is at least as old as Euripides, and is familiar to many of us from Schiller’s *Don Carlos*. A modern touch is added by O’Neill, who brings the story *nearer* to overt incest by stressing that Eben Cabot has a ‘fixation’ on his dead mother—as well as an affair with his live stepmother. That Eben loves both his mothers and hates his father is perhaps not so remarkable in modern writing as that the stepmother murders their child to prove she loves Eben. In the context, there is some logic in this act, because Eben has been told she only bore the child in order to get an inheritance. The murder does disprove the allegation.

The question that arises is whether, even so, it is credible. Infanticide is a crime that has often been committed. Nonetheless, few women will kill their child just to prove a point. Each reader can decide for himself whether he finds O’Neill’s story credible. What is beyond debate is that O’Neill’s fantasy gave birth to a woman who commits an atrocity that is not only inhuman but quite rare because it is quite unfeminine. O’Neill’s plays are full of items like this, which are chiefly of interest in relation to their author’s life and make-up. Psychoanalysts to the contrary notwithstanding, this is a grave limitation.

Though it perhaps has a flaw near its center, *Desire Under the Elms* remains a superior play because most of the time O’Neill stays well within his emotional range, within the kind of world that is truly *his* world. The landscape is neither pretty nor varied. The father is an Old Testament tyrant—but recreated with something of the appropriate majesty. If in many later plays O’Neill tends toward the over-abstract, here the father is not derived from a bare idea. He seems to grow from the soil. The soil is given a reality, not, to be sure, through true local color, or sensitivity to the life around him, but by a curiously vivid sense of the bovine which O’Neill found, surely, in some marshy tract, not of New England, but of his soul. It is a nauseating play. But nausea is at least a thing of the senses, and one must grant that O’Neill at his best could communicate strong emotions, particularly negative ones. I am not even convinced that the negative emotions he most readily commanded are those he has been praised for commanding, such as terror. Are they not, rather, the mean and masochistic feelings? One many admire *Desire Under the Elms*, but one would look askance at anyone who positively relished it.”

Eric Bentley
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 562-63

“Set in New England, the play deals with an elderly farmer and his three sons. The two elder brothers decide to leave home for California just as Ephraim, the father, returns home with Abbie, a woman of 35, his new wife. Abbie seduces Eben, the youngest son, hoping she can bear a son by him and claim that the child is Ephraim’s. When it appears to Eben that Abbie has used him only for her own ends, he threatens to expose her infidelity, and to prove her love for him she smothers the child. The play exemplifies O’Neill’s deep interest in Freudian psychology, and is considered one of his best works.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)