

***EUGENE O'NEILL'S Desire Under the Elms:  
The Quest for Self-assertion***

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**ملخص**

في هذا البحث، نُحاول فحص الصفات الشخصية للتأكد من تواجد الذات الشخصي. هذه المحاولات تأخذ شكل التوكيد على الخيال المهيمن على صفة الاستجابة نحو الأمان الذي يُقَيِّم في حالات العنف المتوارد. وفي هذا المجال تُحاول الشخصية إثبات وجودها مع صفة الشمو بالمأساة البطولية.

**ABSTRACT:**

This paper seeks to examine the characters' attempts to assert themselves. These attempts take the form of their endeavours to possess the farm which they regard as an imaginative domain within which they feel a sense of security and repose. And it is in terms of their incessant quest for security and repose that we would best appreciate their recourse to violence. It is this quest for security and self-assertion which adds every poignancy to their actions and enables them to attain a heroic tragic stature.

*Desire Under the Elms* is a violent play. One way of approaching it could be conducted by looking at its title. The 'elms', to start with, are best to be seen in terms of their metaphorical associations. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* notes the allusion to the following proverbial saying: 'Every elm has its man' in Rudyard Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, 32 (1906):

Ellum she hateth mankind, and waiteth  
Till every gust be laid  
To drop a limb on the head of him  
That any way trusts her shade.<sup>(1)</sup>

The same dictionary records another incidence of this proverbial expression:

Owing to the frequency with which this tree sheds its branches, or is uprooted in a storm, it has earned for itself a sinister reputation. 'Every elm has its man' is an old country saying.<sup>(2)</sup>

In terms of the 'sinister reputation' of elm trees, we would best appreciate the play's presentation of its elms as follows:

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- 1 - John Simpson, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982, p. 64.
  - 2 - *Ibid*, p. 64. See also *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, compiled by W.G. Smith and edited by F.P. Wilson with an introduction by Joanna Wilson, Oxford University Press, 1970, reprinted in 1980, p. 219.

Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They 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 humaneness.<sup>(3)</sup>

In view of the 'sinister maternity in their aspect', their 'crushing, jealous absorption' and their 'appalling humaneness', the elms emerge as a menace because they are so frightening that they make us think that something unpleasant is going to happen. The presentation of the elms as a menace indicates the play's inversion of a familiar proverb about the elm (usually an emblem of friendship: the vine holds up the tree in its embraces).<sup>(4)</sup>

*The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* notes the allusion to the proverb 'The Vine embraces the elm' in a number of literary works.<sup>(5)</sup> In Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, for example, we read:

Thou art an elm, my husband; I a vine,  
Whose weakness, married to thy stronger state  
Makes me with thy strength to communi-  
cate.<sup>(6)</sup>

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3 - Eugene O'Neill, *Desire Under the Elms*, in *Complete Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, 3 vols, The Library of America, 1988. vol. 2, p. 318. All citations are from this edition.

4 - Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, edited by J.R. Mulryne, in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedies*, introduced by Brian Gibbons, Ernest Ben Limited, Kent, 1984. p. 42.

5 - *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, p. 860.

6 - William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, edited by S. Wells, Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, England, 1972. II. 2. 183 - 5.

In his comment on this proverbial image, Stanley Wells writes:

Vines were trained on elm trees. There are possible sources for this image in the Bible, proverb lore and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which was known to Shakespeare and where it is linked with marriage. Golding's translation (1567) runs: if that the vine which runs upon the elm had not/ the tree to lean unto, it should upon the ground lie flat (XIV. 665 - 6).<sup>(7)</sup>

Thus, instead of presenting its elms as props for the house (and the people therein, by implication), the play states that they

brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles.<sup>(8)</sup>

Adding further vigour to the sinister implications of these stage elms is that they are referred to in connection with adultery and violence. Realising that Abbie is chasing him, Eben says 'with a sneer':

waal - ye hain't so durned purty yerself, be ye?<sup>(9)</sup>

But she persists in her attempts to seduce him as the following stage directions reveal:

7 - *The Comedy of Errors*, II. 2. 183 and below, p. 143.

8 - *Desire Under the Elms*, p. 318.

9 - *Ibid*, II. i. p. 341.

They stare into each other's eyes, his held by hers in spite of himself, hers glowingly possessive. Their physical attraction becomes a palpable force quivering in the hot air.<sup>(10)</sup>

Then Abbie 'softly' says:

Ye don't mean that, Eben. Ye may think ye mean it, mebbe, but ye don't. Ye can't. It's agin nature, Eben. Ye been fightin' Yer nature ever since the day I come - tryin't' tell yerself I hain't purty t' ye.<sup>(11)</sup>

In the light of these stage directions which immediately follow her words (*'She laughs a low humid laugh without taking her eyes from his. A pause - her body squirms desirously - she murmurs languorously'*), the word 'nature' can be properly glossed as meaning Eben's desire for her.<sup>(12)</sup> The notion of taking the word 'nature' in the sense 'desire', that is, physical desire, receives further vigour from Abbie's use of the term 'Nature' in the sense 'the force(s) controlling the phenomena of the physical world'. Therefore, it is in view of the use of the term 'nature' as an uncontrollable force in the world and as an uncontrollable desire in man that we would best appreciate her following address to Eben:

Hain't the sun strong an' hot? Ye kin feel it burnin' into the earth - Nature - makin' thin's grow - bigger 'n' begger - burnin' inside ye - makin' ye want t' grow - into somthin' else - till

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10 - Ibid, II. i. p. 341.]

11 - Ibid, II. i. p. 341 - 2.

12 - Ibid, II. i. p. 342.

ye 're jined with it - an' it's your'n - but it owns  
 ye too - an' makes ye grow begger - like a tree -  
 like them elums.<sup>(13)</sup>

Eben's 'nature' or rather his desire for her has the upper hand as the following stage directions show:

She laughs again softly, holding his eyes. He  
 takes a step toward her, compelled against his  
 will.<sup>(14)</sup>

On his inability to resist further temptation Abbie  
 seductively comments:

Nature'll beat ye, Eben. Ye might's well own  
 up t' it fust's last.<sup>(15)</sup>

Although Eben's desire for Abbie makes him 'grow bigger like an elm', it does not make him her husband because their relationship is mainly a liaison or rather 'a desire', as indicated by the very title of the play.

Cabote also refers to the elms when told by his wife that Eben attempted to make love to her. He 'violently' threatens:

I'll git the shotgun an' blow his soft brains t'  
 the top o' them elums!<sup>(16)</sup>

It is in terms of the sinister implications of these elms that we would note that they emerge as 'emblem of the human spirit, able to live only insofar as it is engaged in oppressing and grinding

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13 - Ibid, II. i. p. 342.

14 - Ibid, II. i. p. 342.

15 - Ibid, II. i. p. 342.

16 - Ibid, II. i. p. 346.

down the lives of others.'<sup>(17)</sup> And, it is in the light of the presentation of these sinister - looking elms as menacing emblems that we would appropriately appreciate the dramatist's efforts at preparing us for a violent play.

One way of accounting for the high incidence of acts of aggression in the play could be conducted by examining them in the light of some views on the recourse to violence. In her discussion of *Rollo May's Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence*, M. K. Grant says:

May repeatedly stresses his conviction that violence arises from powerlessness; when the human person experiences only his own inability to assert or define himself, he resorts to violence as a means to overcome this impotence.<sup>(18)</sup>

J. Bronowski similarly emphasises that violence springs out of feelings of powerlessness. Discussing the cause of violence, Bronowski stresses that 'at the heart of our violence, in act or in feeling, lies our wish to show ourselves men of will.'<sup>(19)</sup> And, according to Hannah Arendt, men have recourse to violence because of the speed with which it can put an immediate end to its provocation. 'To resort to violence when confronted with

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17 - David Morse, 'American Theatre: The Age of O'Neill', in *American Literature Since 1900*, edited by Marcus Cunliffe, Sphere Books Limited, London, 1975, pp. 81 - 2.

18 - M.K. Grant, *The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Oates*, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C., 1978. p. 32.

19 - J. Bronowski, *The Face of Violence: An Essay with a play*, New York, World Publishing, 1967. This quotation is cited by M. K. Grant, pp. 32 - 3.

outrageous events or conditions', she says, 'is enormously tempting because of its inherent immediacy and swiftness'.<sup>(20)</sup>

These views present themselves as an apposite basis for this study because it seeks to argue that the characters' recourse to violence emerges as a personal strategy through which they hope to bolster their sense of security and assert themselves. In fleshing out this thesis, I have chosen to discuss the characters individually in order to enter into their idiosyncratic situations which would help us explore O'Neill's vision of violence in this play.

But before investigating into the motives which propel the characters to violence, let us explore the meaning which the farm assumes for each of the characters because it is for the farm that the characters clash and it is in the farm that the whole drama is set. It is worth mentioning that it has been suggested that the characters are propelled by a strong avarice for the farm.<sup>(21)</sup> This is true, but this avarice is just a means to an end: It is essentially an expression of their quest for security. It is in this way that we would note that the struggle for the farm becomes a quest for security.

It is this quest for security which confers a tragic dignity on the characters and adds every poignancy to their actions.

Simeon and Peter are introduced in terms of their farmwork. The stage directions read:

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20 - H. Arendt, 'On Violence', in *Crises of the Republic*, New York 1972, p. 160. Quoted in Grant, p. 33.

21 - D. Morse, pp. 81 - 2. See also D. Heiney and L. H. Downs, *Recent American Literature To 1930*, Barrons Educational Series, New York, 1973, pp. 204 - 5.



Simeon and Peter come in from their work in the fields... Their shoulders stoop a bit from years of farmwork. They clump heavily along in their clumsy thick - soled boots caked with earth...<sup>(22)</sup>

Then the play points the camera at their faces in an effort to proceed towards their feelings:

They stand together for a moment in front of the house and, as if with the one impulse, stare dumbly up at the sky, leaning on their hoes. Their faces have a compressed unresigned expression.<sup>(23)</sup>

These gestures, which imply an internal suffering, are soon translated through the use of a style of spontaneous self - disclosure, a style which invests the play with psychological credibility.<sup>(24)</sup> Simeon 'suddenly' (to capitalise upon this telling stage direction) laments:

Eighteen year ago.

Peter. What?

Simeon. Jenn. My woman. She died.<sup>(25)</sup>

This outburst emphasises his agony which stems from his loneliness ('I rec'lect - now an' agin. Makes it lonesome')<sup>(26)</sup>. In addition to this loneliness, Simeon laments that he undergoes another suffering. This suffering features when Simeon and Peter

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22 - Desire Under the Elms, p. 319.

23 - Ibid, p 319.

24 - D. Morse, p. 74.

25 - Desire Under the Elms, I. i. p. 320.

26 - Ibid, I. i. p. 320.

lament their years of farmwork.

'With sardonic bitterness', Peter says:

Here - it's stones atop o' the gound - stones  
atop o'stones - makin' stone walls - year atop  
o' year - him 'n' yew 'n' me 'n' then Eben  
makin' stone walls fur him to fence us in!<sup>(27)</sup>

The use of 'fence' implies the sense of captivity they experience: their physical captivity within the farm. But a deeper sense of captivity emerges in their lamentations over their years of farmwork. Simeon says:

We've wuked. Give our strength. Give our  
years. plowed 'em under the ground - (he  
stamps rebelliously) - rottin' - makin' soil for  
his crops!<sup>(28)</sup>

Beneath this lies their sense of being marginalised because they have to work all the time, something emphasised immediately by their father upon his arrival. 'Exploding', Cabot first says: 'Why hain't ye wukin'?' Then he says commandingly: 'Ye git t' wuk!'<sup>(29)</sup>

Their sense of captivity and marginalisation, however, develops into a growing sense of despair and powerlessness, a sense dramatised by Simeon as follows:

(stamps his foot on the earth and addresses it  
desperately): Waal - ye've thirty year o' me  
buried in ye - spread out over ye - blood an'

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27 - Ibid, I. i. p. 320.

28 - Ibid, I. i. p. 320.

29 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 335 - 6.

bone an' sweat - rotted away - fertilizin' ye -  
 richin' yer soul - prime manure, by God, that's  
 what I been t' ye!<sup>(30)</sup>

This outburst shows Simeon's and Peter's realisation that they have wasted thirty years (i.e. their life and energy) working hard in the farm. It is this realisation which triggers their decision to depart for California, a place where they hope to find a sense of security and freedom:

They's gold in the West - an' freedom, mebbe.  
 We been slaves t' stone walls here.<sup>(31)</sup>

Their decision to depart for California is motivated by their despair of ever inheriting the farm. This despair gathers momentum with the arrival of Abbie whose vehement will to possess the farm - house ('my house') intensifies their feelings of marginalisation, insecurity and powerlessness.<sup>(32)</sup> It is in view of these feelings that we would best appreciate their spitting contemptuously when their father introduces Abbie as their new mother. Also, it is in the light of their powerlessness that we would appropriately appreciate their throwing stones at the parlour window in an attempt to hit abbie. This act of violence is an indication of Peter's and Simeo's awareness that they are fighting a losing battle, a battle for the farm and hence for security and independence. The idea that they beat a retreat when their father rushes furiously towards them threatening ('If I kin lay hands on ye- I'll break yer bones fur ye!') sets the seal on their powerlessness and impotence.<sup>(33)</sup>

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30 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 332.

31 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 332.

32 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 335..

33 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 337.

Hence, their singing ('Oh! California, / That's the land fur me!') is a celebration of their anticipated security and freedom.<sup>(34)</sup>

Like his half brothers, Eben undergoes a sense of captivity, a sense displayed partly through the 'resentful and defensive' expression on his face, and partly through the following stage directions:

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.<sup>(35)</sup>

This sense of captivity is the result of his inability to possess the farm which he regards as a space where he hopes to stand on his feet or rather to assert himself. His brothers' decision to sell their interest in the inheritance of the farm to him is celebrated as a moment of triumph. Eben relishes the prospect of possessing the farm 'with queer excitement.'

It's Maw's farm agen! It's my farm! Them's my cows! I'll milk my durn fingers off fur cows o' mine.<sup>(36)</sup>

This excitement is revealed and dramatised in the stage directions as follows:

Eben stops by the gate and stares around him with glowing possessive eyes. He takes in the

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34 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 337.

35 - Ibid, I. i. p. 319.

36 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 331.

whole farm with his embracing glance of desire.<sup>(37)</sup>

Thus, it is in terms of his ardent wish to possess the farm, or more precisely, to inhabit that state of anticipated independence that we would best appreciate his struggle against his father who possesses the farm. Also, it is in view of this struggle against his father that we would properly appreciate Eben's threat against Min who was accused of having slept with his father. Eben's threat of violence ('I'll go smash my fist in her face!') materialises when he rapes her.<sup>(38)</sup> This rape is reported as a scene of violence:

When I seen her, I didn't hit her - nor I didn't  
kiss her nuther - I begun t' beller like a calf an'  
cuss at the same time, I was so durn mad - and  
she got scared - an' I jest grabbed holt an' tuk  
her!<sup>(39)</sup>

Eben celebrates this rape as a personal victory: 'The p'int is she was his'n - an' now she belongs t' me!<sup>(40)</sup> This celebration reveals that Eben regards his father's sexual relationship with Min as an encroachment upon his own relationship with her, and hence, an encroachment upon his personal life. It is in terms of this idea that we would see that Eben's recourse to violence (which is witnessed in his rape of Min) shows that he is anxious to score over his father or rather to assert himself.

Cabot's remarriage emerges as a threat to Eben's hopes of possessing the farm, a threat internalised and dramatised as an

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37 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 331.

38 - Ibid, I. ii. p. 326.

39 - Ibid, I. iii. p. 328.

40 - Ibid, I. iii. p. 329.

attack of malaria. This point occurs in his conversation with his brothers.

I got a notion he's gittin' near - I kin feel him  
comin' on like yew kin feel malaria chill afore  
it takes ye<sup>(41)</sup>.

This emphasises his identification of himself with the farm, something which reveals that the farm is his own *raison d'etre*, his own life. It is in view of this idea that we would best appreciate Eben's earlier aggressive attitude to Abbie whose hopes of possessing the farm intensify his own hopes. And in order to nurture these hopes he establishes an incestuous liaison with Abbie. This illicit affair is first intended as another revenge which Eben manages to exact on his father. Eben gleefully asserts this point to his father: 'Yew 'n' me is quits'.<sup>(42)</sup>

Cabot's signing over the farm to Abbie's baby is a traumatic moment for Eben because he feels that all his hopes have been dashed. Eben realises that the baby will inherit the farm for Abbie.

An' the farm's her'n! An' the dust o' the road -  
that's you'rn!<sup>(43)</sup>

The idea of 'the dust o' the road' is revelatory of the state of desolation and homelessness which Eben will experience now that his father has disowned and disinherited him. It is in view of this anticipated fear of desolation and homelessness that we would

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41 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 330.

42 - Ibid, II. iv. p. 356.

43 - Ibid, III. ii. p. 365.

appropriately appreciate Eben's threat of violence: 'I'll murder her [i. e. Abbie]'<sup>(44)</sup> And in attempting to carry out his threat he 'springs toward the porch' and tries to throw aside Cabot who gets in between'.<sup>(45)</sup> And 'they grapple in what becomes immediately a murderous struggle'.<sup>(46)</sup> Obviously, Eben resorts to violence because he fears his anticipated homelessness and insecurity. And it is in terms of this anticipated insecurity that he 'torturedly' wishes the baby would die 'this minit'.<sup>(47)</sup>

Like her step-sons, Abbie voices a keen desire to possess the farm-house, a desire created by the sufferings she has already faced. She first lays bare her soul in her colloquy with Eben:

I've had a hard life too- oceans o' trouble an'  
nuthin' but wuk fur reward.<sup>(48)</sup>

And in the same sympathetic tone she tells Eben that she was an 'orphan [who] had t' wuk fur others in other folks' hums'.<sup>(49)</sup>

Also, she did not enjoy her married life because her husband

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

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44 - Ibid, III. ii. p. 365.

45 - Ibid, III. ii. p. 365.

46 - Ibid, III. ii. p. 365.

47 - Ibid, III. ii. p. 367.

48 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 338.

49 - Ibid, I. iv. pp. 338 - 9.

was free fur was t' wuk agen in other folks'  
hums, doin' other folks' wuk till I'd most give  
up hope o' eve' doin' my own wuk in my own  
hum.<sup>(50)</sup>

This moving 'recital of her troubles' gives the play the power of true feeling.<sup>(51)</sup> It is in terms of this moving 'recital of her troubles' that we would properly appreciate her marriage to Cabot at seventy - five, a marriage through which she hopes for security.<sup>(52)</sup> And, it is in view of this desire for security that we would best appreciate her acting out of her possessiveness about the farm - house:

(With lust fur the word): Hum! (Her eyes  
gloating on the house..) It's purty-purty! I can't  
b'lieve it's r'ally mine.<sup>(53)</sup>

But her ecstasy does not materialise because she soon realises that she cannot count on her new husband for security. This point occurs when Cabot asserts that he would rather set the farm afire than bequeath it to any body:

Cabot: 'Ceptin' the cows. Them I'd turn free.  
Abbie: (harshly) An' me?  
Cabot: (with a queer smile) Ye'd be turned  
free, too.  
Abbie: (furiously) So that's the thanks I git fur  
marryin' ye...<sup>(54)</sup>

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50 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 339.

51 - David Morse, p. 74.

52 - Desire Under the Elms, I. iv. p. 339.

53 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 335.

54 - Ibid, II.i.p. 345.



The idea of Abbie being 'turned free' emphasises itself as a threat of homelessness and insecurity. And in order to escape such a situation of homelessness and insecurity she incessantly attempts to seduce Eben in an effort to produce an heir who will inherit the farm for her. Hence, the idea of havin achild emerges as a guarantee of security.

Although she asserts that she mainly seduced Eben in an effort to produce an heir who will inherit the farm for her, Abbie gradually feels a strong attachment to him. Her adulterous love for Eben could be justified in terms of the play's presentation of her as a buxum lady of thirty - five married to a man aged seventy - five. Since Cabot is an old man, Eben, Abbie's lover, becomes, in her own word,

my on'y joy - the on'y joy I've ever knowed -  
like heavent' me - purtier 'n heaven.<sup>(55)</sup>

Thus, her adulterous love for Eben brings her a sense of self-fulfilment and it is in an effort to maintain this sense of personal satisfaction that she expresses a readiness to commit infanticide. This act of violence is intended as a testimony of her strong attachment to Eben, an idea expressed as follows:

I done it, Eben! I told ye I'd do it! I've proved I  
loved ye - better 'n everythin' - so 's ye can't  
never doubt me no more!<sup>(56)</sup>

This stresses the point that her recourse to violence emerges as a scheme to assert herself through persisting in her affair which

55 - Ibid, III. ii. p. 368.

56 - Ibid, III. iii. p. 369.

would bring her happiness. And it is for such happiness that she regrets that she should have murdered Cabot instead.

Cabot, the last dramatic figure in this study, makes his appearance in his 'dismal black Sunday suit'.<sup>(57)</sup> His dismal suit is highly emblematic of his somber attitude towards people and life. This sombreness, as he later bares his heart, lies in his inability to communicate his religious experience to his sons and his wives. This religious experience centres upon his conception of the farm. Indeed, the farm holds a special meaning for him. He feels that there is something divine about it because when he departed for California (where he 'could o' been a rich man') he heard the voice of God saying: 'This hain't wuth nothin' t' Me. Get ye back t' hum!<sup>(58)</sup> It is in response to this divine call that Cabot came back to his farm and 'actooly [gave] up what was rightful {his}'.<sup>(59)</sup> From this we would note that he looks at the farm (which was 'nothin' but fields of stones') with a strong sense of achievement.<sup>(60)</sup> It is everything for him: it is his very life and history:

Ye kin read the years o' my life in them walls,  
every day a hefted stone, climbin' over the hills  
up and down, fencin' in the fields that was  
mine, whar I'd made thin's grow out o' nuthin'  
- like the will o' God, like the servant o' His  
hand.<sup>(61)</sup>

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57 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 335.

58 - Ibid, II. ii. p. 349.

59 - Ibid, I. iv. p. 332.

60 - Ibid, II. ii. p. 348.

61 - Ibid, II. ii. p. 349.

The farm is also a source of inner peace and solace for him in time of difficulty. When he realises that Abbie cannot understand or love him, Cabot 'shivers' and says:

It's cold in this house. It's oneasy. They's thin'  
pokin' about in the dark - the conrnners.<sup>(62)</sup>

Then he escapes into the barn which emerges as an imaginative space where he can console himself:

Abbie (Surpriesd): Whar air ye goin'?

Cabot (Queerly): Down whar it's restful -  
whar it's warm - down t' the barn.

(Bitterly): I kin talk t' the cows. They know.  
the farm an' me. They'll give me peace.<sup>(63)</sup>

Hence, it is in terms of this strong attachment to the farm that we would appropriately appreciate his aggressive attitudes to his sons who 'coveted the farm without knowin' what it meant'.<sup>(64)</sup> It is also in view of this attachment to the farm that we would best appreciate Cabot's earlier 'murderous struggle' with Eben.<sup>(65)</sup> Thus, Cabot's recourse to violence is an attempt to maintain his farm which emerges as a source of comfort for him. And any attempt to usurp the farm is a personal attack because it is a threat to his inner peace and a threat to his imaginative space into which he serenely retreats at the end of the play.

Having looked at the experiences of these characters, let us proceed to explore O'Neill's tragic vision in this play. Careful

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62 - Ibid, II. ii. p. 350.

63 - Ibid, II. ii. p. 350.

64 - Ibid, II. ii. p. 349.

65 - Ibid, III. ii. p. 365.

scrutiny reveals that the playwright does not present violence in a favourable light. This idea could be powerfully seen in that the two major acts of violence (that is, Eben's rape of Min and Abbie's strangling of her babe) are reported, and not, enacted onstage. But a stronger indication of the dramatist's hostility to violent deeds could be subtly seen in his presentation of the characters' reactions to infanticide. These reactions seem to be summed up in the dramatisation of Abbie's situation in the wake of her somthing of her child. The stage directions read:

Abbie is bending over the cradle.... her face full of terror yet with an undercurrent of desperate triumph.<sup>(66)</sup>

This 'undercurrent of desperate triumph' is an assertion of her strong attachment to Eben:

I've proved I love ye - better 'n everythin'.<sup>(67)</sup>

The presentation of her 'face' as 'full of terror' exteriorises Abbie's hesitancy and initial refusal to kill her baby as she 'slowly and brokenly' confesses:

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....<sup>(68)</sup>

This indicates her revulsion against such a violent deed, a revulsion dramatised in that she confesses 'slowly and brokenly'.

66 - Ibid, III. iii. p. 369.

67 - Ibid, III. iii. p. 369.

68 - Ibid, III. iii. p. 370.

It is in terms of this revulsion that she courageously accepts the consequences of murder ('I got t' take my punishment - t' pay fur my sin'.)<sup>(69)</sup> But she does not repent her adulterous love for Eben.

Abbie (lifting her head as if defying God): I  
don't repent that sin! I hain't askin' God t'  
furgive that!<sup>(70)</sup>

This glorying in her violation of God's edict is an act of self-assertion because it is part and parcel of her strong love for Eben, a love which has been the source of her happiness and self-fulfilment.

Like Abbie, Eben expresses a revulsion against her murder of the baby. He says to her:

How coul ye - t' murder a pore little critter - ye  
must've swapped yer soul t' hell!<sup>(71)</sup>

This repugnance against that crime emerges as apart of the inner change which Eben gradually experiences. This change takes place after having informed the Sheriff of the crime. In his colloquy with Abbie, Eben says:

I wuk him [the Sheriff] up I told him. He says,  
wait 'til I git dressed I was waiting. I got to  
thinin' o' yew. I got to thinkin' how I'd loved  
ye. It hurt like somethin' was bustin' in my  
chest an' head. I got t' cryin'. I knowed sudden  
I loved yet, an' allus would love ye!<sup>(72)</sup>

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69 - Ibid, III. iv. p. 375.

70 - Ibid, III. iv. p. 375.

71 - Ibid, III. iii. p. 371.

72 - Ibid, III. iv. p. 375.

And in terms of this love Eben admits complicity in the murder and shows a heroic readiness to face punishment. This heroic readiness to face punishment is celebrated in the play. Cabot, the stage directions indicat, 'stares at Eben with a trace of grudging admiration'.<sup>(73)</sup>

Cabot also expresses a revulsion against Abbie's crime. This revulsion culminates in his following description of Abbie and Eben, a description which amounts to a moralistic epilogue to the play. Like a choric commentator, Cabot says:

Ye make a slick pair o' murderin' turtle doves!  
Ye'd ought t' be both hung on the same limb  
an' left thar t' swing in the breeze an' rot - a  
warning t' old fools like me t' b' ar their  
lonesomeness alone - an' fur young fools like  
ye t' hobble their just.<sup>(74)</sup>

In terms of his emblematisation of Abbie and Eben as murderers, we would best appreciate Cabot's condemnation of murder and adulterous love. This condemnation asserts itself as indicative of his inner change. And in view of this internal chang, Cabot dismisses the idea of remarrying aand decides to accept his loneliness alone. He solaces himself as follow:

It's a - goin' t' be lonesomer now than ever it  
was afore - an' I'm gettin' old, Lord - ripe on  
the bough... God's lonesome, hain't He? God's  
hard an' lonesome!<sup>(75)</sup>

Cabot's stoic attitude, which is revelatory of his change from

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73 - Ibid, III. iv. p. 377.

74 - Ibid, III. iv. p. 376.

75 - Ibid, III. iv. p. 377.

within, ennobles him greatly and gives him a heroic and tragic dignity. It also emphasises his internal triumph over his circumstances.

Cabot's ability to triumph over the loneliness around him, like Abbie's and Eben's heroic readiness to face punishment, involves a strength and a knowledge or rather a self - knowledge. This self - knowledge brings these figures a tragic stature akin to that of the traditional heroic figures of Greece and the Renaissance.<sup>(76)</sup> The knowledge which these characters acquire shows that the play ends with a note of hope, a notion powerfully suggested by the reference to the sunrise just before the curtains fall. Before making his last exit, Eben points to 'the sunrise sky':

Sun's rizin' purty, hain't it?<sup>(77)</sup>

The sunrise is symbolic of the rebirth and the regeneration which the characters experience.

In view of the element of hope with which the play closes, we would note that O'Neill's tragic practice in this drama fits in with Joseph W. Krutch's conception of tragedy as 'essentially an expression, not of despair, but of the triumph over despair and of confidence in the value of human life'.<sup>(78)</sup> One last point has to be stressed here. O'Neill's use of a style of extempore self - disclosure has enabled him to create dramatic situations that are both

76 - Eight Great Tragedies, edited by S. Barnet, M. Berman, and W. Burto, New American Library, New York, 1957, p. 352.

77 - Desire Under the Elms, III. iv. p. 377.

78 - Joseph W. Krutch, 'The Tragic Fallacy', from The Modern Temper, 1929. In Eight Great Tragedies, pp. 433 - 6. p. 434.

powerful and complex. This extempore style tallies well with his incessant attempts at entering into the recesses of the human soul in an effort to dramatise its cares and anxieties.<sup>(79)</sup> And in view of his ability to tackle these matters in dramatic form O'Neill won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936. This dramatist was honoured because (to quote from the official statement) 'he has been successful in interpreting universal human experiences in terms of the drama'.<sup>(80)</sup>

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79 - Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill, Dell publishing Co., New York 1965, p. 314.

80 - The Reader's Companion to World Literature, edited by L. H. Hornstein, The Dryden Press, 1956, reprinted 1973, p. 378.