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# *Praxis*

**A Peer-Reviewed Journal of  
The Department of English  
University of Rajshahi**

**Editor**

Dr. Md. Sakhawat Hossain

**Associate Editors**

Dr. Mahbuba Hasina

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**VOLUME 15  
December 2025**

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## Editorial Preface

*Praxis: Journal of the Department of English, University of Rajshahi* is committed to maintaining rigorous academic and ethical standards in the publication of scholarly research in the English language, linguistics, and literature. As a double-blind peer-reviewed journal, *Praxis* ensures that all submitted manuscripts undergo an impartial and thorough evaluation process, safeguarding both academic integrity and intellectual merit.

The journal adheres strictly to a policy of originality. Submissions are unpublished and not be under consideration for publication elsewhere. Any form of plagiarism, including self-plagiarism, is considered a serious breach of academic ethics and results in immediate rejection. Authors are responsible for ensuring the authenticity of their work and for properly acknowledging all sources in accordance with recognized citation standards.

To maintain disciplinary coherence while encouraging intellectual diversity, *Praxis* accepts contributions primarily within the fields of English studies, linguistics and English Language Teaching. Interdisciplinary work is welcomed, provided it demonstrates a clear and substantive engagement with these core areas. All manuscripts are written in English and follow either the MLA (9th edition) or the APA (7th edition) style, depending on the disciplinary orientation of the paper.

The journal enforces a structured submission protocol. Manuscripts fall within the prescribed length and include an abstract and a brief author bio-note. Submissions are accepted in both print and digital formats, prepared according to specified formatting guidelines. To ensure equitable representation, each author is permitted to submit only one manuscript per volume. In cases of joint authorship, full disclosure of all contributors and their institutional affiliations is required.

The editorial board reserves the right to make necessary revisions for clarity, coherence, and consistency without altering the substantive argument of the work. Final decisions regarding publication rest solely with the editorial board, based on reviewers' recommendations and the journal's standards. Individual authors, and not the Editorial Board, are responsible for the views expressed in their writing.

Through these policies, *Praxis* seeks to uphold excellence, transparency, and fairness in academic publishing, fostering a scholarly environment that values critical inquiry, methodological rigor, and intellectual responsibility.



## **In Memoriam: Professor Dr. Idris Ahmed Md. Sakhawat Hossain**

I had the privilege of being a direct student of Professor Dr. Idris Ahmed, and the memory of his classroom remains one of the most formative experiences of my intellectual life. He was not a teacher of abundance in number, but of precision and distinction; he took relatively few classes, yet each one bore the mark of rare excellence. His lectures were events that were often animated, lucid, and deeply engaging, without ever obscuring the depth of his scholarship.

What set him apart most strikingly was his method. He had the remarkable ability to render even the most extended and complex texts into something graspable without diminishing their intellectual weight. With a lightness of touch and a finely tuned sense of humour, he guided students into the depths of a text as if it were the most natural of movements. His wit was never ornamental; it was pedagogical and it was an instrument through which difficulty dissolved and insight emerged. Many of his students would testify that his classes were filled with mirth, yet never lost their seriousness of purpose.

In demeanour, he was at once formal and disarmingly intimate. His English was impeccable, measured, and refined, reflecting a deep command of language and tradition. Yet he was not bound by rigidity; at moments, he would slip into Bangla, often to delightful effect, using humour to draw students closer into the discussion. He had a characteristic habit of addressing students as “thou,” a gesture that seemed to collapse distance while invoking an older, almost Shakespearean intimacy. Standing before the class, he maintained an alert and penetrating gaze so that no student could afford inattentiveness, yet none felt excluded or disengaged. His presence commanded attention without coercion.

His intellectual range was formidable. He possessed a sharp and integrated knowledge of English literature, history, philosophy, and the broader Christian and Western intellectual traditions. Yet his scholarly vision was not confined within conventional disciplinary boundaries. His doctoral work on the literary techniques of *Surah Yasin* remains a landmark contribution that demonstrates his courageous attempt to bring Islamic textuality into the sphere of literary criticism. In doing so, he opened a space for dialogue between traditions that are too often kept apart.

Born on 31 December 1938, Professor Dr. Idris Ahmed completed his MA in English from the Department of English, University of Rajshahi, in 1960, and qualified in the then Special East Pakistan Civil Service (EPCS) examination. He joined the Department of English at the University of Rajshahi on 10 March 1973 and served there with distinction until his retirement as Professor on 30 December 2004. He passed away on 16 May 2022, leaving behind a legacy of intellectual brilliance, pedagogical excellence, and humane values.



## ***Dedication***



**Professor Dr. Idris Ahmed**  
(31 December 1938-16 May 2022)

This Volume is dedicated to the cherished memory of Professor Dr. Idris Ahmed—a teacher of rare brilliance, a scholar of profound humanity.



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# **Patriarchal Oppression and Female Resistance in *Desire Under the Elms***

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the portrayal of female characters in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) through feminist literary criticism, addressing an underexplored dimension of the play. Despite the prominence of feminist critique in literary studies, O'Neill's female characters have not been closely analyzed. This study conducts a detailed textual analysis of their roles, language, and resistance to patriarchal dominance. The findings reveal that female characters are portrayed solely in a negative light -- depicted as manipulative, morally corrupt, murderous, and exploiters of their own sexuality. They are denied major roles, their virtues are overlooked, and they are subjected to demeaning language that is often exaggerated beyond proportion. However, the study also explores moments of female resistance, particularly through Maw's haunting presence and Abbie's defiance, which challenge patriarchal authority in significant ways. Despite these acts of rebellion, the women ultimately remain confined within oppressive structures that govern their lives and choices. Ultimately, the study highlights O'Neill's biased and unsympathetic depiction of women, reinforcing gender stereotypes rather than challenging them, while also revealing the limitations of female agency in a male-dominated society.

**Keywords:** Feminist Literary Criticism, Gender Norms, Misogyny, Patriarchy, Societal Power Dynamics.

## **Introduction**

Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* has been a focus of scholarly discussions since its first publication in 1924. Rooted in the complexities of family dynamics and personal ambition, the play has been critically examined from various perspectives, including its depiction of American rural life and its inspiration from classical Greek tragedies. Set in 19th-century rural New England, O'Neill's work explores gender-based power structures through the portrayal of female characters, whose struggles with male dominance and societal expectations reveal the far-reaching implications of patriarchy. However, the critical examination of O'Neill's female characters is limited in comparison to the focus given to his male figures (Barlow). Despite this marginalization, the female characters, who navigate "a golgotha of pain" (Kolin 24), show a degree of agency and cunning in shaping their destinies. This makes a close and rigorous examination of their roles in this oppressive landscape imperative.

This paper employs feminist literary criticism to analyze the layers of female experiences in *Desire Under the Elms*. It examines how the female characters navigate, are constrained by and resist social standards and power dynamics, questioning whether their portrayals are multi-dimensional

or extensional projections of the desires of male characters. Through this lens, the paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of O'Neill's work and its relevance to contemporary feminist discourse.

### **Literature Review & Research Gap**

Critical work on Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* has usually emphasized tragedy, passion, guilt, and formal design rather than the sustained question of how the play imagines women. Earlier criticism often reads the drama as a serious tragic work shaped by haunting, inheritance, and moral conflict. Horst Frenz, for example, compares the play with Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* and argues that both texts stage a struggle with guilt, the power of place, and the search for inner integrity (Frenz). This line of reading is important because it established the play as more than a rural melodrama, yet it also tended to privilege the tragic structure of the work over the gendered conditions inside the Cabot household.

Later studies elaborated the discussion, but most of them still concentrated on a single dominant issue. Safi Mahmoud Mahfouz reads the play through "tragic passion," incestuous desire, romantic rhetoric, and betrayal, focusing especially on the erotic tension between Abbie and Eben and on the language through which that desire is dramatized (Mahfouz). Sarif Syamsu Rizal, in contrast, approaches the play through a structural study of character, conflict, setting, and theme in order to explain the motives behind Abbie's infanticide. Gupta and Mahal place the play within a broader Anglo-American literary history of infanticide and treat it as one example among several texts that explore the social, psychological, and moral pressures surrounding the killing of infants. These studies remain useful, but they keep returning to passion, incest, and infanticide as central explanatory frames.

The most direct feminist intervention comes from Gilda Pacheco, whose essay is especially important for this study. Pacheco argues that criticism has repeatedly condemned, devalued, or even sidelined Abbie by focusing instead on the male characters and their conflicts. More importantly, she shows that O'Neill's female figures are denied a stable identity of their own. Her sharp formulation that "Abbie has never had her true self" (58) captures how the character is repeatedly made to stand for land, desire, maternity, or male fantasy rather than autonomous personhood. Pacheco thus shifts the conversation from plot to representation and makes visible the gender bias embedded in much earlier criticism. Lee adds another important dimension by reading the play through gothic domesticity, arguing that the farmhouse, kitchen, parlor, and walls become oppressive domestic spaces shaped by patriarchal violence and exploitation, while the dead mother's presence unsettles Cabot's authority (Lee). This approach helps explain how gender oppression in the play is built not only through dialogue and action but also through space, property, and atmosphere. Still, even Lee's rich reading is not primarily centered on a full feminist account of female characterization.

The gap, then, is clear. Existing scholarship has examined tragedy, incestuous passion, betrayal, infanticide, and gothic domesticity in detail, but it has not fully brought these strands together to show how the play systematically constructs women as dispossessed, sexualized, and instrumentalized figures within a patriarchal order. This article addresses that gap by offering a feminist reading of Maw, Abbie, and Minnie together, arguing that O'Neill's drama not only exposes women's suffering but also reveals their limited, unstable, and deeply costly forms of resistance.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminist literary theory asserts that literature, primarily authored by men within patriarchal contexts, has systematically marginalized and misrepresented women. It aims to dismantle

patriarchal systems that equate femininity with passivity, inferiority, and self-erasure. Tyson emphasizes that this critical framework “examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (83). Hooks echoes this view, arguing that by “dismantl[ing] a system of oppression” (15) this theoretical approach seeks to make literature a site of resistance against patriarchal ideologies. Similarly, Hesse-Biber et al. assert that “research conducted within a feminist framework is attentive to issues of difference, the questioning of social power, resistance to scientific oppression, and a commitment to political activism and social justice” (3). Collectively, feminist perspectives reclaim women's narratives, challenge their exclusion, and advocate for their inclusion in literary discourse.

The following section of the paper undertakes a comprehensive textual analysis of the portrayal of female characters in relation to their male counterparts within an overarching patriarchal structure in *Desire Under the Elms*, drawing on the key principles of feminist literary criticism outlined earlier. Here, it explores how women are portrayed with many negative attributes such as immorality, greed, manipulation and sexual deviance. These characters are also described using derogatory language, subjected to menial labour, denied ownership of property and sexually objectified—phenomena perpetuated by a deep-seated patriarchal hegemony. Subsequently, the analysis highlights the female resistance, uncovering the layers of their identities beyond oppression.

### **Women Portrayed as Morally Corrupt**

In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill depicts women as morally compromised and driven by selfish motives. Abbie, the central female character, shows no remorse in pursuing an illicit relationship with Eben, her stepson. Critics describe her as a vamp “with perverse sexual tendencies and confused distorted ideas about love” (Wells 30). Her first meeting with Eben highlights her calculating nature: “Her eyes take him penetratingly with a calculating appraisal of his strength as against hers. But under this her desire is dimly awakened by his youth and good looks” (O'Neill 54). She is portrayed as a femme fatale whose overpowering sexual desire and manipulative tendencies lead her to exploit Eben in order to bear a son and secure the family farm. Eben eventually becomes disillusioned with Abbie's actions, particularly the infanticide, which he interprets as her prioritizing land ownership over the life of her child.

However, while Abbie's moral failings—manipulation, infanticide, and prioritizing property—are deeply disturbing, they reflect her desperation to gain independence and financial security in a patriarchal society. Owning land or marrying into wealth is her only path to stability, forcing her into morally questionable actions. Her frustration is caused by a failed marriage to an older husband who cannot fulfil her physical and emotional needs. Ultimately, her tragic fate can be seen as a direct consequence of the societal restrictions placed on women. As Goldman observes, “Abbie murders her and Eben's child to prove her love for him, to prove she did not want a child to steal the farm Eben has so stolidly (and greedily) maintained was his by right” (48).

Although Abbie initiates the relationship, Eben's complicity in it cannot be overlooked. Critics argue that his motivations are based on lust, greed, and revenge rather than love. Falk claims: “Eben is drawn to Abbie not by love but by lust, greed, and the desire for revenge” (96). His justification for their affair as retribution for his mother shows his own moral failure.

### **Women Painted as Lustful**

In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill delineates women as overtly licentious, fuelled by unrestrained sexual desires. Abbie, the female protagonist, embodies this characterization through her dissatisfaction with her older husband and her pursuit of Eben. O'Neill emphasizes her lustful

nature: “ABBIE stands for a second staring at him [Eben], her eyes burning with desire. Then with a little cry she runs over and throws her arms about his neck, she pulls his head back and covers his mouth with kisses” (O’Neill 78). Abbie’s brazen affair with her stepson reveals her violations of physical norms/boundaries; her willingness to betray her husband mirrors the playwright’s portrayal of the woman who is too lustful to remain faithful to one partner.

This depiction, however, overlooks the role of the men in marital discord. Abbie’s behaviour is due to the lovelessness of her marriage and the gender-based power relations that reduce her to a lifeless puppet in Ephraim’s household. Ephraim’s neglect of marital responsibilities leaves Abbie feeling unloved and unfulfilled, creating an environment that encourages infidelity. O’Neill fixates on Abbie’s culpability, disregarding the male-dominated structures that influence her decisions. Abbie’s desperate efforts to secure Eben’s love and not be abandoned are evident when she pleads for his loyalty and sacrifices everything, including her son, to prove her devotion. The infanticide she commits represents the tragic climax of her lust and misguided affection. Clerk states that in “arousing the repressed passion of Eben, she has forgotten or never known that the sex instinct cannot be easily controlled... she finds herself caught in her own trap” (152).

Through the climactic scene of infanticide, the playwright, like a moralist, condemns female passions and suggests that love born in sin inevitably leads to ruin; he implies that women’s natural passions and desires are inherently dangerous and should remain suppressed. By portraying women’s emotions as defiled and disruptive, O’Neill’s work manifests a patriarchal worldview that circumscribes female subjectivity and prevents the articulation of her impulses and instincts.

### **Victims of Sexual Objectification**

O’Neill’s sexual objectification of women in *Desire Under the Elms* reveals his deep-rooted sexism. Early in the play, Eben visits a prostitute, Minnie, which prompts his brothers to humorously recount their shared sexual encounters with her: “Ay-eh! We air his heirs in everythin’!” (O’Neill 30). Eben’s possessive declaration, “I jest grabbed holt and an’ took her! Yes, sirree! I took her! She may’ve been his’n-an’ your’n too—but she’s mine now!” (O’Neill 35), transforms Minnie into a transactional object bartered among men.

This objectification also extends to Abbie through Ephraim’s hypersexualized language: “Behold, yew air fair; yer eyes air doves; yer lips air like scarlet; yer two breasts air like two fawns; yer belly be like a heap o’ wheat.” (O’Neill 66). By breaking her body down into separate, objectified parts, Ephraim dehumanizes Abbie and reduces her value to physical attributes that serve to satisfy male desires. Such poetic yet demeaning language reinforces the idea that a woman’s worth lies in her ability to gratify men.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, women are reduced to their reproductive and sexual roles, stripping them of agency and individuality. Ephraim’s description of Abbie, “yer belly be like a heap o’ wheat” (O’Neill 66), underscores her worth as a vessel for procreation, particularly for producing a male heir. Eben takes this dehumanization even further by referring to Abbie as “any other old whore” (O’Neill 63), exposing his fear of her potentially taking over of the family farm and his misogynistic disdain. Similarly, Simon and Peter sexually abuse Abbie upon her arrival, reflecting the deep-seated hostility pervasive in the narrative. Hussein aptly labels the male characters as “egocentric manipulative, Machiavellian objectifier[s]” (874), who view women as commodities rather than individuals.

Abbie is described as “buxom” and with “gross sensuality” (O’Neill 47) which demonstrate her eroticization. These descriptions laden with overtly sexual implications deny women their

humanity and legitimize harmful gender stereotypes that equate femininity with sexual availability. Women's portrayal as one-dimensional beings who are used, controlled and abused by men, makes cruelty and exploitation appear justified. Feminist critics strongly condemn this phenomenon, arguing that such depictions reduce women to mere visual spectacles and lead to societal pressures that compel them to conform to false ideals (Szymanski).

### **Women Compared to Animals**

In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill portrays women as inferior by equating them with animals. Abbie is bestialized through comparisons to a "cow," "skunk," "snake," and "sow" (O'Neill 36, 50). Similarly, Ephraim uses bovine imagery to mock Eben's perceived softness, likening him to his mother, whom he derides as frail and mediocre. Ephraim declares Eben will "never be more'n half a man!" (O'Neill 58), highlighting the disdain for femininity in his rocky kingdom. Ephraim's comparisons undermine Eben's masculinity and implicate his inherited maternal traits as weaknesses.

This belittling of women also extends to other female characters. He recalls his ex-wife who, he believes, has no intellectual capacity. Jenn, a minor character, is referred to by Simeon as "My woman" and her physical features are likened to those of livestock: "she'd hair long's a hoss' tail—an' yaller like gold!" (O'Neill 18). Even the term "Maw" has a pejorative connotation, symbolizing a predatory, devouring beast. These comparisons reflect a deep-rooted misogyny that reduces women to irrational or domesticated animals with no emotional depth. This view justifies their exploitation, control, and subjugation. Baker (quoted in Dunayer 15) critiques these analogies, arguing that they portray women as "mindless servants" which normalizes contempt for women, and institutionalizes gender-based hierarchies. Such views contradict feminist ideals of empowerment and equality and validate a system that legitimizes male dominance.

### **Women Denied Ownership of Property and Employment**

In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill portrays women as incapable of owning property or participating in paid work, emphasizing the notion that they are the weaker sex, both physically and intellectually. Women are confined to domestic tasks such as bearing children, raising them, and serving their husbands, while economic independence remains unattainable. This lack of agency forces Abbie to marry Cabot, a man twice her age, for survival. O'Neill's depiction reflects a rigid patriarchal order in which women's worth is determined solely by their relationships with men.

Ephraim's patriarchal worldview ensures that his rocky kingdom remains under male control, as he explicitly states:

CABOT: "Ye're on'y a woman."

ABBIE: "I'm yewr wife."

CABOT: "That hain't me. A son is me—my blood—mine. Mine ought to t'git mine. An' then it's still mine—even though I be six foot under." (O'Neill 70)

Cabot's outright rejection of Abbie's identity and autonomy shows his deeply ingrained belief that only a son can carry on his legacy and that women are insignificant beyond their reproductive role.

### **Women Portrayed as Manipulators**

Abbie is portrayed as a cunning and self-serving woman, willing to use any means necessary to secure the farm and her future. Her statement, "I'd most give up hope o' ever doin' my own wuk in my own hum, an' then your Paw come..." (O'Neill 56), underlines her pragmatic approach to marriage. Her union with Cabot, a man more than twice her age with two previous marriages, is not driven by love but by her need for a home and security. Abbie recognizes Eben's outward

hostility as a defence mechanism to mask his unresolved attachment to his deceased mother. With this insight, she slyly manipulates both Eben and Ephraim. Her calculated seduction of Eben serves her ambition to bear a son and thus secure her claim to the family fortune.

O'Neill's stage directions emphasize Abbie's manipulative tendencies, noting that she uses "seductive tones" (O'Neill 54) to gain Eben's trust. She promises to influence Ephraim in Eben's favour, reinforcing her psychological hold over him. When she flatters him by saying, "too big an' too strong," (O'Neill 54), she exploits his ego and creates the illusion that he is the one in control, while she consolidates her own dominance. Her "scornful sense of power" (O'Neill 54) reveals her relentless pursuit of authority and control.

Women are shown to use motherhood as a tool of manipulation. Abbie capitalizes on Eben's longing for his deceased mother by assuming a maternal guise to exploit his feelings. Her plea, "Don't cry, Eben! I will take yer Maw's place! Let me kiss ye, Eben! Don't be affeered! I'll kiss ya pure, Eben, -same's if I was a Maw t' ye-an' ye kiss me back's if ye was my son— my boy" (O'Neill 85), feigns sincerity, but is a calculated move. By positioning herself as a motherly figure, she deepens Eben's emotional dependence and steers their relationship towards seduction. Abbie further manipulates Eben by luring him into his mother's parlour, a space imbued with Maw's spectral presence, creating an environment of emotional vulnerability. She remarks, "They seemed somethin' here...I kin still feel—somethin'," (O'Neill 82), deliberately creating an eerie atmosphere to further entrap him.

O'Neill emphasizes her calculated nature during her seduction of Eben, describing her as a "horrible frank mixture of lust and mother love" (O'Neill 85). By entering Eben's room and "cover[ing] his mouth with kisses" (O'Neill 78), she shows her assertiveness in initiating the incestuous relationship. Chabrowe suggests that Abbie exploits Eben's deep-seated longing for his mother and argues that her seduction of him serves as a substitute for his maternal attachment and ultimately triggers his incestuous desires. However, Wells critiques O'Neill's portrayal of Abbie, stating that he blurs the lines between maternal and romantic love, creating a morally ambiguous figure that departs from traditional depictions of both maternal and romantic figures.

### **Maw's Maternity Misinterpreted as the Cause of Infanticide**

In *Desire Under the Elms*, maternal influence is closely tied to morally reprehensible actions, including infanticide. Maw's lingering presence, despite her death, is interpreted as shaping Abbie's dark desires. Hutchison argues that Maw transcends her role as a deceased character to become a supernatural force responsible for the central tragedy of the play. He suggests that "While Maw represents the past sinister maternity, which haunts the present, Abbie embodies the present sinister maternity whose actions are influenced by Maw's manipulation" (26). This view is echoed by Eben's accusation: "Oh, God A'mighty! A'mighty God! Maw, what was ya, why didn't ya stop her?" (O'Neill 114). The incestuous episode between Abbie and Eben is also framed as unfolding under Maw's spectral influence, as Abbie remarks, "When I fust came in—in the dark—they seemed somethin' here" (O'Neill 82), to which Eben replies, "Maw." This highlights the destructive and manipulative maternal power that pervades the play. The ghostly presence blurs the boundaries between maternal love and forbidden desire, culminating in tragedy.

Eben's rejection of the maternal and feminine is also linked to his selfish desire to secure ownership of the farm (Aziz and Sarfraz, 2018). His rejection of these aspects reflects his relentless pursuit of control. Yet, his hypocritical cries of "Maw! Maw!" (O'Neill 85) reveal his contradictory longing for the feminine while simultaneously rejecting it. One critic argues that Eben's attraction to Abbie, an older woman, stems from his deep attachment to his mother, whom he

subconsciously seeks to replace (Rizal, 2010). This dynamic highlights the play's complex exploration of maternal influence and its psychological repercussions, with Maw's motherhood ultimately portrayed as a destructive force that reverberates through the characters' lives.

Dawson condemns Abbie as a ruthless monster and labels her act as murder. However, such a judgment fails to consider the social and emotional forces surrounding her actions. While the baby is undeniably the result of an incestuous relationship between stepmother and stepson—a union condemned as immoral—the child itself represents more than an individual. The baby, conceived in a moment of “animal passion” (Poulard 104), symbolizes Eben's vengeful desires against his father and Abbie's struggle for validation and security in a patriarchal society. Poulard elaborates:

The baby died because he was conceived in a moment of animal passion. He was at first a means of gaining possession of the farm and revenge and later on became a possession to Eben. He was not born through the desire to create overhuman...and died in Abbie's attempt to prove all too human love for Eben. (104)

This perspective does not portray Abbie's act as cold-blooded murder, but as a desperate and misguided attempt to secure her place in a world that denies her agency and autonomy. Her actions cannot therefore be dismissed as premeditated or barbaric murder. Her impulsive nature, evident throughout the play, reflects a desperate reaction to economic insecurity; her culpability therefore must be understood in the broader context of her victimhood, shaped by a patriarchal system that links her identity and choices to male desires and conflicts.

### **Women Described Using Harmful Language**

Throughout the play, language is wielded as a weapon to dismantle female agency and negate female personhood. Eben's first interaction with Abbie is characterized by crude insults; he calls her a "whore" to humiliate and devalue her. Even in moments of emotional conflict, he diminishes her identity to her sexuality, shouting, “I do hate ye! Ye're whore—a damn trickin' whore!” (O'Neill 107). His derogatory language reveals his threatened sense of entitlement, particularly in relation to the farm, which he sees as his rightful inheritance. His claim to the farm is rooted in a patriarchal belief system that ties land ownership and legacy to male lineage.

Again, Eben compares his father's new bride to an old prostitute, saying, “And Min isn't such a bad one... Just wait until we see this cow the Old Man's married to!” Moreover, Eben's description of Minnie --“She's like t'night, she's soft 'n' wa'm... she smells like a wa'm plowed field” (O'Neill 31) -- diminishes her personality to a set of sensual qualities, framed entirely by the male gaze. Such a depiction of women as a collection of clichéd, one-dimensional female tropes reduces them to objects to be observed and consumed, rather than portraying them as multifaceted and holistic individuals who encompass both physical and psychological dimensions. The use of foul expressions, Cameron contends, promotes sexism and misogynistic stereotypes.

### **Maw Subjected to Endless Labour**

In the play, O'Neill poignantly illustrates the gruelling domestic responsibilities of women in a bleak patriarchal environment that forces them to live a life of servitude. A woman's identity is reduced to her role as caretakers, as epitomized by the late Maw, who is a victim of relentless, backbreaking labour and emotional exhaustion. Eben reflects on his mother's restless spirit and her inability to find peace even in death:

She'd come back to help—come back to bile potatoes—come back to fry bacon—come back to bake biscuits—come back all cramped up to shake the fire, an' carry ashes, her eyes weepin' an' bloody with smoke an' cinders same's they used t' be. She still comes back—stands by the stove

thar in the evenin'—she can't find it nateral sleepin' en' restin' in peace. She can't git used to bein' free—even in her grave. (O'Neill 26-27)

These images vividly depict Maw's plight, characterized by ceaseless domestic labour. Even in death, her spirit is trapped in the cycle of servitude and cannot "rest in peace" (O'Neill 88). Maw's endless labour, including cooking, cleaning, and farming, underlines her role as an invisible, undervalued entity in Cabot's life, treated as a labourer rather than a partner.

O'Neill's stage directions amplify this dynamic by describing the elms as "exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on [the house's] roof" (O'Neill 16) whose tears rot the shingles when it rains. Prateek rightly observes that the elms embody not only Maw's oppression, but also her selfless love and the unkindness of Cabot and his sons. This resonates with the assertion that "if there is any 'property of women', it is paradoxically her capacity to depropriate unselfishly" (Cixous et al. 889). Maw's sacrifices underscore this notion as she embodies selfless love trapped in an exploitative system.

Cabot's utilitarian view of women is evident when he remarks, "A hum's got t' hev a woman." (O'Neill 48), signalling that Abbie, like Maw, is destined to serve as both a domestic servant and a reproductive vessel. Maw's fate also illustrates the patriarchal obsession with inheritance, as Ephraim is keen to bequeath his land to a male heir. Maw's efforts are devalued, while her children, particularly her sons, inherit the fruits of her labour.

The spectral presence of Eben's mother further emphasizes her oppression. She lingers as a tormented soul, haunting the house even after her death. This preternatural atmosphere encapsulates the prolonged suffering she has endured and Eben's unresolved guilt over her death amplify her ghostly presence:

ABBIE. When I fust come in—in the dark—they seemed somethin' here.

EBEN. (simply) Maw.

ABBIE. I kin still feel—somethin'.

EBEN. It's Maw.

ABBIE. At fust I was feered o' it. I wanted t' yell an' run. Now—since yew come—seems like it's growin' soft an' kind t' me. (Addressing the air—queerly) Thank yew.

EBEN. Maw allus loved me. (O'Neill 82-83)

Even in death, Maw's spirit is burdened by the roles imposed on her. Her inability to rest symbolizes the inescapable legacy of maternal labour, extending her oppression even beyond the grave. Burr succinctly captures this tragedy: "Even death does not provide [Maw] peace or freedom. Trained to be a slave to her husband, she remains in perpetual bondage as a relentless ghost" (40).

Despite the bleakness of her portrayal, Maw is occasionally described as "kind to everyone" (Gupta & Mahal 199) and a "woman of loving nature" (Xie 21), who embodies "altruistic love and benevolence" (Xie 21). However, Xie notes, this praise only comes posthumously, as O'Neill seems to have reserved admiration solely for the deceased women.

### **Women Treated as Property**

In *Desire Under the Elms*, the male characters often treat women as mere possessions, which is reflected in Cabot's assertion that Abbie is "my Rose o' Sharon" (O'Neill 66). The metaphor of Abbie's belly as a "heap o' wheat" (O'Neill 66) further emphasizes this objectification by portraying her as an extension of Cabot's property. Ephraim also indirectly insults his deceased wife, disparagingly referring to her as a "dumb fool" (O'Neill 49). In a conversation with Abbie, Cabot reveals his condescending attitude:

CABOT. It's warm down the barn—nice smellin' an' warm—with the cows. [A pause.] Cows are queer.

ABBIE. Like you?

CABOT. Like Eben. [A pause.] I am getting to feel resigned to Eben—just as I got to feel 'bout his Maw. I'm gettin' to learn b'ar his softness—jest like her. I calculate I'd almost take t' him—if he wasn't such a dumb fool! (O'Neill 65-66)

This dialogue shows that Ephraim views women as inferior or worthless beings; his pejorative comparisons belittle women and their feminine qualities and strip them of their dignity. Feminists argue that such insults are not just casual remarks but part of a continuum that can lead to more serious acts of violence against women (Cervone et al.). However, this ironically shows that there is no room for compassion or emotional sensitivity in Ephraim's character.

### **Women Shown to Engage in Debasing Professions**

In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill portrays women through a reductive lens, often defining them by their usefulness to men. The presence of prostitutes in the play highlights this, suggesting that women's value lies in their ability to satisfy men's sexual desires. Minnie, the "Scarlet Woman" (O'Neill 29) of the village, epitomizes this trope as her identity is restricted to her sexual availability to the Cabot men and others. Reduced to physical descriptions like "purty—but soft" and a "plowed field" (O'Neill 76), Minnie exemplifies the role of women as instruments of male desire or as commodities in sex markets, bought and sold to satisfy men. The appropriation of their bodies positions men as consumers and women as consumables, erasing women's inherent humanity. Such depictions emphasize a patriarchal hierarchy in which women's worth is contingent on their ability to gratify men's lust. Feminist critics strongly condemn this portrayal as an affront to women's dignity and a violation of their human rights, as it perpetuates male domination and intensify misogyny.

### **Women Portrayed as Greedy**

Abbie's first appearance paints her as motivated by greed rather than love. Upon seeing the farmhouse, she exclaims, "Purty— Purty! I can't believe it's r'ally mine" (O'Neill 48), exposing her materialistic intentions. She considers Eben, the rightful heir, a rival and tries to usurp his inheritance. O'Neill shows Abbie as a disruptive force, driven by self-interest, creating family discord and promoting the stereotype of women as greedy manipulators.

However, Abbie's apparent greed for the farm is rooted in her tragic backstory, which reveals the struggles she faced as an orphan and destitute woman. She explains, "...my maw died afore I'd growed. I don't remember her none... I kin tell that by lookin' at ye. Waal — I've had a hard life, too...I was an orphan early an' had t' wuk fur others in other folks' hums." (O'Neill 55). After marrying a drunken man who abandoned her, she endured a life of hardship and menial labour. For Abbie, the farm stands for a stable, independent life -- something she has always longed for. Owning a farm is her only means of attaining autonomy and identity in a society that denies women these opportunities.

The precariousness of her position becomes clear when she learns that Ephraim plans to bequeath the farm to Eben, despite his animosity toward him. Motherhood becomes the only way for Abbie to secure her future. In O'Neill's puritanical world, women's worth is tied to their ability to bear male heirs, which reduces motherhood to a survival strategy rather than a natural expression of love. Abbie's shrewdness and ambition, a desperate reaction to societal constraints, are not expressions of greed but necessary adaptations in a world that values women for their sexual desirability. This contrasts sharply with Simone and Peter's pursuit of wealth in California,

which is depicted without the same moral scrutiny, highlighting the gender bias in the judgement of ambition.

### **Women Painted Negatively through Symbols**

In *Desire Under the Elms*, women are portrayed negatively from the outset, symbolized by the “sinister maternity” (O’Neill 16) and the “crushing, jealous absorption” (O’Neill 16) of the giant elms. These elms evoke a suffocating maternal influence, primarily associated with Eben’s deceased mother “Maw”. They also embody the oppressive maternal energy of both Maw and Abbie, which is invisible but exerts a strong influence on the male characters. Alternatively, the elms also can be interpreted as representing Cabot’s two deceased wives, driven into graves early by his tyranny (Lee 73). The elms serve as a foreboding symbol of dysfunction and oppression, undermining the traditional idealized image of motherhood. Not only do they highlight the dark and destructive maternal force, but they also metaphorically reflect Maw’s prolonged suffering under her oppressive husband, making her appear both a victim and a source of discord. Regardless of interpretation, the depiction of Maw through the elms remains negative.

Although Maw passed away years before the play begins, her oppressive maternal energy permeates the household, much like the brooding elms that cast an eternal gloom over the farm. This stifling atmosphere drives Ephraim to seek refuge in the barn, symbolizing his rejection of domesticity and Maw’s spectral influence. The farmhouse is transformed into a gothic prison, imbued with the weight of her enduring legacy, as her insatiable soul seeks to resist the formidable male authority. Furthermore, the parlour, associated with to Abbie’s pregnancy, serves as a symbolic “conflated womb” (Lee 81) which embodies both maternal influence and the inescapable control of patriarchal power.

### **Kitchen: A Symbol of Patriarchal Control and Gendered Labor**

In the play, O’Neill describes the kitchen as “a men’s camp kitchen rather than that of a home” (O’Neill 22), emphasizing its untidiness and neglect due to the absence of women. This description implies that the maintenance of domestic spaces is inherently the responsibility of women and reinforces outdated stereotypes that associate femininity with domestic space in which men do not belong. Despite being a modern playwright, O’Neill perpetuates the notion that men are apathetic to or incapable of domestic chores. The implicit expectation is that women should confine themselves to the private world of domesticity, while men should engage in the public sphere of professional and political activities. This dichotomy underscores a gendered division of work that diminishes the value of women’s contribution to the household. This concept echoes the 19th-century ideology known as the “Cult of Domesticity” or “Separate Spheres”, which envisaged distinct roles for men and women.

Ironically, even the kitchen, an archetypal feminine space often idealized as a sanctuary, is depicted as a site of oppression and suffering. Lee notes that the kitchen, “which should be a place of comfort, sustenance, and familial community, instead... resonates with traumatic memories of oppression” (77), conjuring the ghost of Eben’s mother. This haunted space reveals the devastating psychological toll of patriarchal control, transforming the kitchen from a place of solace into a symbol of relentless labour and suffering.

### **Resistance of the Female Characters**

Although Eben’s mother dies long before the events of *Desire Under the Elms*, her powerful maternal presence continues to influence the characters, signifying resistance to patriarchal oppression. Her ghostly influence mirrors the elms that “brood oppressively over the house” (O’Neill 16) and haunt Ephraim with feelings of guilt and unease. Ephraim confesses his discomfort

in the house to Abbie, saying, “The house got so lonesome—and cold—drivin’ me down t’ the barn—t’ beasts o’ the field... Ay-eh. I must’ve suspicioned somethin’” (O’Neill 121). His retreat to the barn reveals his inability to confront the ghostly presence that reminds him of his emotional and spiritual betrayal of his wife.

Maw’s baleful influence transforms the farmhouse into a repressive space where patriarchal authority is undermined. The “grim, repressed room” (O’Neill 82), characterised by her spectral presence, becomes a place where androcentric patriarchal authority is symbolically challenged. Lee suggests that Ephraim’s vengeful wife aims to subvert patriarchal power and create a woman-centered domestic set-up, even a social order, by turning Ephraim into a cuckold through “incest-by-proxy” (81). Her ghostly enactment “serves the dual aim of exacting vengeance on the fallen father and consummating a type of surrogate incest with Abbie in the maternal role” (Lee 82), leading to Abbie’s empowered declaration: “I’m goin’ t’ leave the shutters open and let in the sun ‘n’ air...Now it’s goin’ t’ be my room!” (O’Neill 88). Subsequently, the “festivity” (O’Neill 91) intended to celebrate Ephraim’s fatherhood turns into “the old skunk gettin’ fooled” publicly (O’Neill 101) as his guests are cognizant of his inability to be the child’s father, which is made clear by fiddler’s mocking compliment: “Ye’re the spryest seventy-six ever I sees, Ephraim! Now if ye’d on’y good eyesight . . .!” (O’Neill 96).

Again, one of the most direct confrontations with patriarchal dominance occurs in the following conversation between Eben and Abbie:

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 ever a stinkin’ weed on it’ll belong t’ ye!... Git out o’ my sight! (O’Neill 63)

This exchange highlights Abbie’s resistance to male dominance, as she challenges the deeply entrenched gender hierarchy within the Cabot family by claiming ownership of the farm. Her refusal to be reduced to a mere “whore” is a powerful act of defiance against the systemic oppression that aims to erase her individuality and rights.

Abbie emerges as a character who defies gender expectations and embodies a progressive challenge to the existing power structure. Her “scornful sense of power” (O’Neill 54) allows her to navigate male-dominated spaces with confidence; her willingness to sacrifice her newborn to prove her love for Eben, a subversion of traditional maternal ideals, shows her gradually assuming a dominant position, albeit at a devastating cost. Through this act, she claims power over life and death, granting her a “god-like quality” (Wells 30). Her strength becomes even more apparent when she responds to Eben’s insults -- being called a harlot and accused of marrying Ephraim for material gain -- by retorting: “Waal...What else’d I marry an old man like him fur?” (O’Neill 56). This candid acknowledgment of her pragmatic motives underscores her rejection of traditional notions of female submissiveness dictated by social expectations.

Abbie’s psychological dominance over Eben becomes clear as she fills the void left by his mother. Eben’s remark, “Maw’s gone back t’ her grave. She kin sleep now” (O’Neill 88), reflects Abbie’s ability to replace the maternal figure in his psyche through a combination of sensuality and emotional manipulation. Her assertion “I’ll take yer Maw’s place!” (O’Neill 85), terrifies Eben, who fears the wrath of the maternal soul when Abbie assumes her role. By embodying both maternal and seductive qualities, Abbie exerts a complex agency and defies male supremacy in unconventional ways.

Although Abbie displays remarkable agency, her resistance is constrained by the pervasive patriarchy in the play. Her pursuit of the Cabot farm proves unattainable due to the legal and social restrictions of the 1850s, the period in which the play is set. Shammas explains that women at the time had no marital property rights which makes Abbie's aspirations to an illusory dream. Behind her confident assertions lies a fragile façade enforced by the systemic restrictions of a male-dominated society. What is more, Abbie's defiance comes at a high price. Her manipulation of Eben and her willingness to commit infanticide show the tragic consequences of her struggle for power in an oppressive system. Although she momentarily disrupts the male-controlled order of the Cabot family, her rebellion ends in her ruin, demonstrating the futility of female resistance. O'Neill's portrayal therefore offers no real escape from androcentric oppression, as both Abbie and Maw remain trapped within its confines, literally and symbolically.

Maw's haunting influence challenges Ephraim's authority, while Abbie's bold actions assert her agency in the face of systemic oppression. However, both characters ultimately remain constrained by social norms, reflecting the limited scope of female resistance within a rigidly patriarchal order.

### **Conclusion**

A feminist reading of O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* reveals the profound realities of patriarchal oppression that shape the lives of the female characters: Maw, Abbie, and Minnie. These women endure relentless suffering, largely stemming from societal expectations that require them to sacrifice their identity and individuality to family obligations. However, the playwright refrains from questioning the patriarchal structures responsible for this; instead, he normalizes women's oppression and portrays their sacrifice as inevitable and unworthy of recognition. This narrative choice reflects his complicity in the perpetuation of anti-feminist/gendered ideologies and ultimately constructs a male-centered vision that diminishes female subjectivity.

O'Neill portrays women as confined to roles defined by reproductive function and domestic labour, reducing their existence to servitude and self-denial. The character of Maw illustrates how women, despite their multiple roles such as housewives, mothers, menial labourers and above all as sex workers find no recognition and their identity is thus obliterated. Fuelled by deep-rooted chauvinism, the male characters in the play treat women as disposable commodities as they measure women's worth by their sexual desirability. Their vitriolic insults reveal a toxic environment and the normalization of women's ordeals and gender discrimination. Marriage, which should provide women with security and companionship, becomes a prison that forces them into a life of despair and exploitation. This depiction validates the notion that their lives are inherently subordinate to those of men's.

Nelson and Pacheco critique O'Neill for constructing women without psychological depth, stressing that their existence is largely defined by their relationships with men. Maw is never granted a name or identity beyond her role as wife and mother, while Minnie functions as a symbol of promiscuity and embodies a stereotype rather than a character. Even Abbie, who exhibits moments of agency, ultimately becomes an instrument in male-centred conflicts. Pacheco aptly remarks, "Abbie has never had her true self; she is the farm, the elms, and finally Eben's mother, never herself" (58). The playwright's vision thus is limited in that it does not acknowledge women as independent individuals with complex feelings and aspirations.

From a feminist standpoint, *Desire Under the Elms* adheres to stereotypes that undermines the moral standing of women by portraying them as murderers, betrayers, deceivers, and exploiters of

their own sexuality. O'Neill frames Abbie as a femme fatale and Maw as a ghostly martyr, thus stressing the extremes of female representation, which oscillates between moral depravity and sacrificial victimhood. The paucity of wholesome images of women in the play points to a critical underrepresentation, compounded by instances of misrepresentation. Such characterizations reflect a misogynistic worldview that negates women's intrinsic worth and reinforces their subjugation.

While the female characters occasionally challenge male hegemony, they ultimately remain subservient to pervasive patriarchal authority, demonstrating their ultimate ineffectiveness. Abbie outwits her stepson with cunning and wits, and Maw's intimidating presence suggests defiance, but these actions are futile against the inescapable nature of patriarchal power which is designed to disempower them. The female characters are cast as victims of circumstance, as labourers, and recipients of violence which paints a regressive and pessimistic picture of womanhood and indicates that their suffering is inevitable. Their tragic destinies serve as a chilling reminder that any quest for autonomy within oppressive structures is doomed to failure. O'Neill's dramaturgy, therefore, does not foreground female empowerment, but its illusion, since the measure of vengeance these wronged characters seek is "incomplete and unsatisfactory" (Lee 73).

In *Desire Under the Elms*, the playwright offers not a critique of patriarchy but a male-centric narrative. Far from challenging the enduring legacy of gender inequality, the play clearly reproduces it. O'Neill attempted to modernize Greek tragedy, but his vision remains entrenched in outdated gender roles and phallogocentric values and offers no positive change in the representation of women. The following insight from one study confirms the persistence of the playwright's antiquated ideal and his inability to envision genuine female autonomy:

Although O'Neill wanted to imbue modern American theater with the poignancy of Greek drama and...substituted the role of fate and Gods with modern psychological theories to make his tragedies resonate with contemporary milieu, yet the portrayal of women did not change much...while much has changed in over two millennia, yet virginity, motherhood and self-efficacy are the qualities that men seek in women. Men feel betrayed when women do not conform to the stereotypical gender roles of mother, wife or daughter. Inability of women to meet the criteria of self-denial, sacrifice and chastity as per the expectations of the male protagonists has been a major cause of tragedy in Greek drama as well as in [*Desire Under the Elms*]. Just like [the] Greek period, O'Neill cannot conceptualize women as mentally and socially independent human beings. ("The Role of Women")

O'Neill's attempt to modernize the tragic essence of Greek drama for modern audiences continues to reflect archaic stereotypes and the enduring patriarchal order. The play's inability to embody a truly progressive representation of women consequently reveals a critical gap between contemporary feminist theory and its practical application in the creation of female characters.

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