

**ETHICS IN MODERN DRAMA: A STUDY OF RIGHT AND WRONG IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S 'DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS'**

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**ABSTRACT:** *What is right and what is wrong for men or women has been the intriguing question for the societies all over the world in all ages. Desire under the Elms (1924) is one of the most famous Plays of eminent American playwright of the twentieth century, Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953). In this play, O'Neill chalks out a series of notable themes like- **an obsessive love of property, an illicit passion, and an acute father-son conflict**, interwoven together with the finest thread of desire and emotion.*

**KEYWORDS:** Eugene O'Neill, desire, elms, stove, gold quest, California, American drama

**INTRODUCTION**

*Desire under the Elms* (1924) is one of the most famous Plays of eminent American playwright of the twentieth century, Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953). In this play, O'Neill chalks out a series of notable themes like- **an obsessive love of property, an illicit passion, and an acute father-son conflict**, interwoven together with the finest thread of desire and emotion.

Among the characters in *Desire under the Elms* there is an aged father, Ephraim Cabot (75), who has lost his two wives, his two sons Simeon (39) and Peter (37) are the sons of his first wife, Eben (25) is his third son from his second wife, Abbie (35) is the third pretty-faced, buxom and obstinate wife of Mr. Cabot.

The story rotates around a remote, shabby farm-house around the time of 1850 in New England, built under the two enormous Elm trees, where pastoral outlook mingles with natural phenomena.

The title of the play *Desire under the Elms* has various connotations. If we analyze the title, we get two significant segments: "Desire" and "Elms".

The most important meaning of desire here is the illicit, sensual desire of Abbie for Eben, a carnal desire to which he too responds fully after a time.

After coming to the farm house as old Cabot's wife, Abbie starts feeling erotic passion for the young Eben. Abbie cunningly desires to have an illegitimate son by Eben to acquire the farm and property of Mr. Cabot. Eben, however, reproaches her initially for trying to steal his 'Maw's farm' but falls prey to her persistent beckons. Later, this carnal desire turns into heart-felt consummate passion of both Abbie and Eben, although ultimately their love-affair turns out as a tragedy when Abbie in a fit of passion suffocates their new-born baby to prove

her love for Eben and Eben criticises her for not taking the life of the old Cabot instead which she regrets.

The word 'Desire' also means Abbie's longing to possess the farm and Eben's equally intense longing to become the sole owner of the farm. 'Desire' also suggests the long cherished dream of Eben to take the revenge of his mother's untimely death, which was caused by his father having her overwork in the farmhouse. Mr. Ephraim Cabot desires not only to live up to the age of a hundred years but also for peace and rest which he gets only near the barn and in the company of his cows. He desires to have mental support and sexual gratification from his buxom wife, Abbie.

Finally, 'desire' also suggests Simeon and Peter's longing to have the whole property. They desire to be rich by making a quest for gold, as they leave for California. Furthermore, it denotes the longing of Simeon's and Peter's getting rid of the drudgeries imposed by their cruel father.

Although the elm trees are not mentioned often in the course of the play, yet they serve a certain purpose and have certain significance. The term '**elm**' also represents a symbolic connotation. Two mammoth elms are on each side of the Cabot house. These elms bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue the house.

There is a sinister maternity in their aspect. They brood oppressively over the house; they can be compared to 'exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof. When it rains, their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the pebbles'.

Here, the elms do not mean merely trees. They symbolize the maternal forces in the life of some characters and they are to be contrasted with the stone-walls which symbolize the paternal forces. The sickly grayish stone-colour stands for somber, hard Puritanism while the green hue of elms stands for the vegetative, life-affirming forces denied in Cabot's home since the death of Eben's mother.

The elms in fact signify not only the dead mother of Eben, but the wrongs done to her. They signify the dead woman's unselfish love and the love-lessness of Cabot and Cabot's two sons.

Abbie's seduction of Eben indicates how nature triumphs over Puritanism. This seduction is purely a retributive act. When Abbie compares sexual desire to the growth of the elm trees, she draws attention to them as symbols of nature, the nature that was suppressed by Cabots.

Here, the elms represent the nature thwarted by Puritanism (strictness in beliefs and practices). Nature can be suppressed, but not for long. It takes revenge upon its oppressors. Hence, the elms come to represent the brooding and ultimately triumphant fate.

The word ethics is related to the Greek 'ethos' meaning habit or custom. Of the many senses and applications we are here concerned with *normative* ethics, which is a rational enquiry

into the standards of right and wrong, good and bad, in respect of character and conduct, which ought to be accepted by a class of individuals. (Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy)

The main aim of *normative* ethics is to formulate valid norms of conduct and of evaluation of character.

### **IMPLICATION**

This play is an example of a modern realistic drama in which the problems of real life situations have been presented with an emotional insight into the character's minds and behaviours. It is interesting and touching to observe the actions of the characters in the play and think of what they did and why?

Who decides what is right or wrong? Is it us? Is it society? Or is it our belief in a supernatural entity that decides what is right and what is wrong? Are we not bound by the customs and manners of the so called society framed by the class of people who do not follow it themselves?

Is ethics only for intellectuals? Who are these intellectuals? Whether they are the rich gentry, the poor or the middle class? Do they really act on ethical principles? Do WE really act on ethical principles? Or are we ALL biased in some or the other way towards something that we care about at the cost of something that we don't?

In the play was Abbie right in seducing Eben while keeping the status of his mother? Were Simeon and Peter right in leaving for California? Was Ephraim Cabot right in marrying for the third time and overworking his two wives to death? Was Abbie wrong in murdering the new-born baby? Was it Eben's fault in loving Abbie to avenge his 'maw's' death from old Cabot and then loving her unconditionally?

### **CONCLUSION**

Such is the fate of life. What our society thinks right is really right. We do not have the freedom to live our lives our own way. The question that this play belligerently puts to its readers is: Are we not responsible for our own lives and decisions? O'Neill leaves it to the readers to make their own minds with a suggestion that our actions are often selfishly governed in accordance with the equally selfish society.

Abbie leaves the pillow at the baby's mouth and watches it suffocate itself. Why did she do it? Was it for love? Did society accept her love for Eben? Will it be acceptable after what she did? Did she prove she was worthy of Eben's love? Was it right? Was it wrong? Was it not for the pressure of society that she did what she did? Who should be held responsible for the death of the child? Why could they not live happily if they chose to? These are some ethical questions that the play doesn't answer but leaves the readers and audience to ponder over.

### **REFERENCES**

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