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## Timing is everything almost: An analysis of Eugene O'Neill's "Desire Under the Elms" in terms of its success

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TIMING IS EVERYTHING ... ALMOST  
AN ANALYSIS OF EUGENE O'NEILL'S  
DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS  
IN TERMS OF ITS SUCCESS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

**Master of Arts Degree  
Department of Theatre Arts  
College of Fine Arts**

**Graduate College  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
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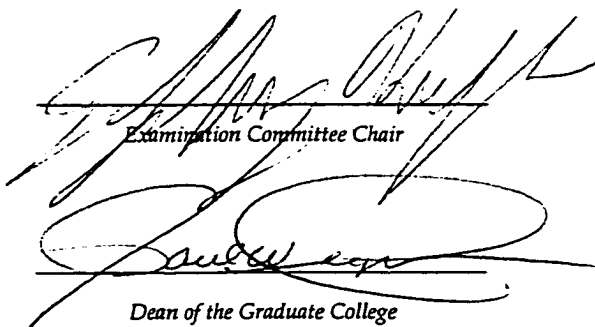
Timing Is Everything...Almost

Analysis of O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms

In Terms of Its Success

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Theatre

  
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ABSTRACT

**Timing Is Everything...Almost  
An Analysis Of Eugene O'Neill's  
Desire Under The Elms  
In Terms Of Its Success**

by

Janet C. Alicesun

Jeffrey Koep, Ph.D. Examination Committee Chair  
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Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms has proven itself a play worthy of praise. This thesis traces the specific elements which illustrate that this theatrical work, having gone beyond the audience for which it was written in 1924, continues to be rightfully considered a success seventy-five years after its creation. Unlike Robert Brustein in Theatre of Revolt and Eric Bentley in Thinking About The Playwright, who classify and compare all of O'Neill's work in their role as professional critics, this thesis examines and reflects on this one work as an individual entity unto itself.

This analysis surveys the prevailing literary, social and moral environment which contributed to Desire Under the Elm's birthing and nurturing to maturity as an American classic. Included is an evaluation of the play in terms of

its "superstructure," structural characteristics, as a dramatic work and with an eye to the author's success in approaching this creation via Aristotle's definition of a tragedy (Ball viii). It concludes with an examination of Desire's place in contemporary theater as the final element defining its success.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE BEGINNING

In examining Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms, this thesis proposes to illustrate the many elements which contributed to its success. It is hoped that this examination will more effectively demonstrate the interweaving of the myriad of threads which comprise the living-tapestry of Desire Under the Elms.

Eugene O'Neill was a gifted writer, but it was also his spectacular good fortune of having developed as a playwright at the particular time in theatre history which contributed to his works' long-lived success. Gratefully, time has granted us the luxury of measuring Desire Under the Elms' success in many more meaningful terms than just the yardstick of box-office receipts. O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms has been published and performed in theatres all over the world for seventy-five years. Translating its earnings into today's equivalent value is nearly meaningless compared to the eloquent testimony given by its universal appeal and longevity.

The major outside factor for Desire Under the Elms' success can best be summed up in the old axiom, "Timing is Everything". At the time of O'Neill's literary ascent, the

early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were many changes in American art patronage. They had become more conscious of what it was to be American.

The expansion to the West by the early settlers was a popular topic for the literate middle-class, which was now joining the intellectual middle-class as patrons of the theatre and reading audience of newly published plays. This expanding market encouraged competition for audiences and "set loose an interplay of influences forming public taste about what was good and bad in art" (Roberts 10). One of these major influences was the "emergence of full-time professional critics such as George Jean Nathan" (Roberts 10).

Trained in Europe and by nature inclined to find what passed for American drama, e.g. the melodramatic form, as naive, dull and insipid, Nathan found himself readily carrying the banner for the fresh, original and inspired works of O'Neill. In his forward to Roberts' book, John R. Finnegan, Jr. writes:

Nathan also revolted against the "unholy alliance" of newspaper editors, critics, and Broadway producers who paid for favorable reviews to tighten their hold on public taste. Nathan and his colleague, Henry L. Menken, were determined to change the taste of the literate middle-class - by far the majority - which heretofore preferred

simple, melodramatic tales...Nathan argued that his training, background and erudition gave him a superior claim to influence public taste over those who produced or favorably reviewed "piffle for the proletariat." Like Menken, Nathan contended that the average playgoer had neither the time nor the inclination to learn enough about drama fully to benefit from it. The critic functioned as a mediator of the aesthetic experience "to provoke a reaction" between playgoer and play. Nathan also believed the native American art flourished in an atmosphere of controversy. Critical ax-swinging as a personal manner thus fit nicely with his acknowledged goal of shattering reigning theatrical idols and enshrining O'Neill and others whom he considered superior.

(Roberts 10-11)

A second aspect of this period which also contributed to Desire Under the Elms' success was the prevailing grossly inhibiting morality. Finnegan tells us:

The full extent of a native American literature was stifled to some extent by the practice of publishing houses that supposed the American market place for arts and literature was



composed primarily of women. Perhaps deferring to romanticized notions about feminine sensibilities, many municipal and self-appointed censors stood ready to suppress works of art that transgressed parochial but vague moral boundaries.

(Roberts 10)

Finnegan describes Eugene O'Neill and George Jean Nathan as "co-conspirators with a common objective: to change the focus of American dramatic taste and criticism from players and performances to plays and playwrights" (Roberts 11). This mutual objective became the focal point of their personal friendship.

While on the subject of Desire Under the Elms' timing, what passed for theatre at that time was by no means drama according to the critic George Jean Nathan. In 1917 Nathan charges:

In the last half dozen years, I doubt if there have been more than five or six plays out of all the many-hundred odd presented in each season that have merited approach by the critic seriously interested in drama. The rest? Trick melodramas, fussy farces, mob mush, leg shows.

(Roberts 26)

Nathan was an ardent supporter of O'Neill's work. Together

he and O'Neill made a formidable effort to re-direct the American theatrical market place. In so doing they succeeded in raising the worthiness of our drama to a more inspired and dignified level of appreciation at home and abroad.

The world had changed since the recent war in Europe and the tastes of the theatre going patrons were changing as well. In their introduction to Nathan's letters, editors Nancy and Arthur Roberts comment on the need for change:

This escapist drama was to be challenged, for Nathan's disgust reflected a growing national mood. The world war had been bloody. One hundred thousand men killed... The savagery and the scale of the war, magnified by 20<sup>th</sup> century technology [poison gas], made many question human kind's values, even its fundamental nature. There grew an audience, hitherto undetected, ready to support serious drama. If art is the reflection of a people's vision, the American mirror was turning inward.

(Roberts 26)

Nathan speaks to the radical difference O'Neill's style of work made in the theatre when he reviews In The Zone in Smart Set, January 1918.

...the American stage knew the sea only as a large piece of canvas painted blue and agitated from underneath by three or four husky members of the Stagehands' Local. [O'Neill] made the stage canvas smell less of paint and more of salt; he made the stage sailor smell less of rouge and more of rum and actuality.

(Roberts 28)

O'Neill's contribution was described by Roberts in his introductory essay to "As Ever, Gene," a compilation of O'Neill's letters:

He emerged foremost among those who, from 1916 to 1924, changed the character and imagination of American drama, giving it previously unglimped depth, vitality, and inventiveness.

(Roberts 28)

George Jean Nathan recognized and supported O'Neill's talent. He treated O'Neill's work fairly and objectively. He offered constructive criticism when warranted. In July 1920's Smart Set, Nathan writes,

His weakness is the weakness of italics and monotony. ... He sees life too often as drama.

The great dramatist is the dramatist who sees  
drama as life.

(Roberts 28)

Yet in that same article "The American Playwright" he offers O'Neill encouragement with his praise, "...of all the playwrights America has produced in the last dozen years, [Eugene O'Neill rises] above the local crowd" (Roberts 28). Nathan's editorial aid confirmed O'Neill's worthiness for consideration as a serious dramatist and opened doors to producers. Nathan's support also meant something to O'Neill on a personal level. It encouraged him to continue to write according to his own style. Then, as today, the professional critic has significant power with respect to a playwright's commercial success. Roberts says of George Jean Nathan's influence with respect to O'Neill's success:

The critic's advocacy resulted in the influential publication of three plays in the brilliant and respected Smart Set. ... Such exposure, his first true recognition, earned the fledgling dramatist a reading audience and boosted his confidence immeasurably. It was Nathan, too, who successfully brought Beyond The Horizon to Broadway producer John D. Williams.

...

By the early 1920's, O'Neill had been noticed by foreign critics, as well; the Viennese [poet & playwright] Hugo von Hofmannsthal in 1923 judged such plays as The Emperor Jones, Anna Christie, and The Hairy Ape to be 'clear-cut and sharp in outline, solidly constructed from beginning to end.'

(Roberts 28)

O'Neill was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1920 for Beyond The Horizon and in 1922 for Anna Christie. This recognition helped in his battles to overcome censorship of his 1924 productions All God's Chillun Got Wings and Desire Under The Elms. The stern moral outrage of some critics, city officials and the general public threatened to knock O'Neill's rising star out of the sky. Desire Under the Elms was banned from being staged in Boston and London for nearly twenty years. Fortunately, this same criticism also provided the extra FREE publicity that kept the lines long and the box office very busy far beyond the general run of a few weeks. Roberts tells us again how Nathan played a role in O'Neill's continuing success:

Nathan eloquently championed O'Neill in the

May 1924 American Mercury before the play was even produced, asserting that it offered "absolutely nothing...that is in the slightest degree offensive to any human being above the mental level of an apple dumpling... To object...because it treats of miscegenation is to object to the drama 'Othello'...or to the opera 'L'Africaine,' or to the Kipling story of 'Georgie Porgie.' Ultimately, All God's Chillun saw production in May 1924 as planned. Most critics were lukewarm, some carping; but the notoriety and doubtless Nathan's words gave the play a long run.

(Roberts 29)

This uproar was part of the lingering memory which gave an added boost to O'Neill's notoriety when he brought Desire Under the Elms to the stage six months later. Nathan saw the playwright through the attempted censorship of Desire Under The Elms (1924),

...which treated controversial themes of incest and infanticide. Although he judged it unequal to O'Neill's earlier efforts, Nathan found it "far and away so much better than most of the plays being written by anyone else who hangs

around here that one gratefully passes over even its obvious deficiencies."

(Roberts 29)

In May of 1926, Conrad Seiler, wrote "Los Angeles Must Be Kept Pure" for The Nation. In this article concerning the jailing of the actors and their subsequent trial, he reports the final argument of Frank McGlynn, attorney for the defense and leading actor in the play:

If persons came to see O'Neill's play and smirked and giggled over the poignant lives of Eban, Ehraim Cabot and Abbie - as the prosecutor said they had - it was a reflection upon their morality, not the actors' or the play's.

(Bryfonski 240)

He further informs us:

The play which normally would have had a run of two, or at the most three weeks, is doing capacity business the tenth week, and will soon go to San Francisco...

(Bryfonski 240)

What was truly ironic was that at the conclusion of the

performance for the court on April 15<sup>th</sup>, "four curtain calls were demanded" (Bryfonski 240).

Although playwrights may distance themselves from their work, and Desire Under the Elms was not autobiographical, this play clearly reflected the pent-up emotions of O'Neill. Just prior to writing Desire Under the Elms, within the space of a few years, he sought to deal with the loss of his father (August 1920), his mother (February 1922) and his brother (November 1923). The death of his mother and brother were especially devastating because the tide had seemed to turn for them all. In the early 1920's she'd "broken free of her morphine addiction, and after the death of her husband...she took charge of the problems of James O'Neill's estate" (Bogart 140). His brother Jamie, "who had been in danger of drinking himself to death, gave up alcohol and stayed by her side" (Bogart 140). When she died on a trip to settle some financial matters concerning her husband's estate, Jamie immediately began to drink again. He died as a result. In his book, The Decisive Decade, 1924-1933, Alexander tells us that,

It was grief - grief for his mother - that set off Desire Under the Elms in Eugene O'Neill's mind. After her death, he made a note of it with the title "Under the Elms" and the date "1922."

(Alexander 21)



At the same time O'Neill also laid out the following plot summary:

Play of New England - laid on farm in 1850,  
time of California gold rush - make N.E.  
farmhouse and elm trees almost characters in  
play - elms overhanging house - father, hard  
miser type, killed off wives (2) with work,  
3 sons - all hate him - his possessive pride in  
farm - loves earth it is so hard - in old age in  
a moment of sensual weakness & longing marries  
young woman, brings her back to farm, her arrival  
brings on drama, youngest son falls for her.

(Alexander 215)

O'Neill kept a Work Diary from which we learn that he spent five weeks writing Desire Under the Elms. "January 15-29, February 4-11, and May 24<sup>th</sup> to June 8<sup>th</sup> - and ten days in June and July, 1924 revising it" (Floyd 1985, 270).

Thus it is clear that in the case of the birthing of O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms, Timing had everything to do with its success. With respect to Timing Is Everything... Almost, the "Timing" has now been addressed and it is the "Almost" that will be outlined forthwith and will illuminate the role the other elements play in Desire Under the Elms' continuing to be regarded as a success.

## CHAPTER 2

### ELEMENTS OF DESIRE'S SUCCESS

Having established that part of O'Neill's success with Desire Under the Elms was due to the fortuitous timing of its birth, this thesis will continue to examine the other elements which affirm its validity to be considered such.

It is generally acknowledged that playwrights do not create their masterpieces in a vacuum. They are inspired, often compelled, to express, exorcise, their personal emotions through the medium of dramatic writing. Discussed earlier were the deaths of his father, mother and brother shortly preceding Desire Under the Elms' creation. The art form which emerged from his reaction to these emotional experiences came to life as the result of a refined and disciplined use of the tools of his craft. Just as the finest chefs, or architects follow a recipe or blueprint in constructing their masterpieces, O'Neill followed a dramatic outline he had synthesized from Aristotle's Poetics and the work of other dramatists. This portion of the thesis hopes to make apparent what these elements of are, for the proper utilization of them contributed to Desire Under the Elms' success.

An examination of Eugene O'Neill's background and later

a review of the exact circumstances of his life which contributed to the creation of Desire Under the Elms will be presented. The use of the Greek philosopher Aristotle's Poetics, Backwards & Forwards, the technical manual for reading plays by David Ball, former Professor of playwriting at Carnegie-Mellon University and former Artistic Director of Pittsburgh Metropolitan Stage Company and Playwriting, Quick & Dirty by playwright and Professor of playwriting at University of Nevada Las Vegas, Julie Jensen, will be used as blueprints to analyze the crucial parts of the superstructure, structural characteristics, of O'Neill's play to better appreciate the stageworthiness of Desire Under the Elms. The reviews and analysis of Desire Under the Elms by professional critics from 1924 to the present will be considered. This approach will make evident some of the other elements which comprise the basis for Desire Under the Elms' success.

#### Life Mirrored and Expressed In The Play

It is acknowledged that many, if not the majority of writers and playwrights produce work which reflects or rebels against aspects of their personal lives. To answer "Why was/is Desire Under the Elms a success?", the source of the creation, Eugene O'Neill, should be considered. It was his personal experiences which inspired him to create Desire Under the Elms and afforded him the tools with which to express himself.

O'Neill had the mixed fortune of having been born to parents whose personal and professional lives nurtured the vibrant but tortured perspective of this artist. His father's alcoholism and his mother's drug addiction probably made them introspective and encouraged their son to follow in their footsteps as members of the theatre. O'Neill's father's career as a gifted actor, exposed him to all aspects of theatre and a varied assortment of human behavior since early childhood. He was propelled towards dramatic writing when at 24 years old he was confined to a sanitarium after tubercular signs at the right apex of his lung were discovered. To his credit, O'Neill spent a year with Professor George Pierce Baker at Harvard learning more about the craft of playwriting.

O'Neill was a gifted writer in part because he felt compelled to partake of life with an intense passion. A detailed examination of his life would point to many of the specific people from whom he drew his character composites. However, for the purposes of this thesis, this is unnecessary. Suffice it to say that he astutely observed human behavior and effectively translated it through his characters into compelling drama. Writing from inside the skin of his characters, O'Neill was better able to translate their humanity, powerfully and with intense passion. He was a hearty participant as well as an astute observer of human behavior.

An example of O'Neill's synthesis of his life's

experiences and a element of his craft may be seen in his experiment with dialogue. In Desire Under the Elms, he creates a synthetic dialogue and uses it to lend a sharper definition to his characters and their journey.

#### Modern and Ancient Theories Applied

In Playwriting, Quick & Dirty, Julie Jensen writes, "...dialogue is action" (Jensen 2). Characters interact with one another and through dialogue, a "carefully constructed language created to reveal characterization, advance the plot, evoke mood, heighten tension and provoke thought," they embody the events which, taken as a whole, reveal the tragedy of their lives (Johnson 147).

The carefully constructed language of Desire Under the Elms was not meant to reproduce New England speech literally; O'Neill said he was "trying to write a synthetic dialogue which should be, in a way, the distilled essence of New England" (Alexander 28). New England's speech is very much an American dialect. Dialects include nuances that very much like body language say more than what the denotative meaning of the words can convey. O'Neill chose to use this language so as to convey the earthy, unsophisticated, crude, simplistic and raw essence which makes up the very foundation of this family's existence.

An important aspect of this play is its having been set in New England. New England's pervasive Puritanical moral, ethical and social fabric are the very foundation of

O'Neill's play. It is part of the subtext, message "residing below the surface of the words, signifying the marrow of the tension" (Johnson 151). The effect intended by O'Neill is to elicit a more visceral connection between the audience and his characters. By engaging the audience's stereo-typical images of American Puritanism indicative of the unsophisticated, simple farmers of New England, he skillfully leads them through his examination of this family's behavior resulting from their most basic beliefs.

Ephraim has a blueprint for his life as given him by his interpretation of the Bible and its God: "God is hard" (O'Neill, Desire 443). His life is hard and he teaches his children the same. He is hard on everyone. What are the inevitable consequences of this perception acted upon by Ephraim? According to O'Neill, two wives in an early grave and alienation from his family and neighbors are the outcome of such a belief system.

This synthetic dialogue is a form of naturalistic speech, a "carefully contrived language" meant to establish "the credibility of characters, especially those characters with whom the intended audience might closely identify" (Johnson 153,155). With it O'Neill attempts "to authentically depict "real" people" (Johnson 155). In the staged version of Desire Under the Elms, O'Neill succeeds in meeting the challenge "to write dialogue that won't disengage the viewer from the story by calling attention to itself" (Johnson 177). The synthetic dialect can be

distracting to the uninitiated when silently reading this play. Therefore, it is generally with a suggestion to students and actors to read this play aloud that teachers and directors are often able to prevent this from happening. Reading aloud also imparts the particular qualities and definition that this unfamiliar dialect imparts to the world of the play and its characters.

Clarity and continuity of character and their individual journeys is maintained through O'Neill's dialogue. He "...makes you believe that each character is speaking spontaneously in response to another character's thoughts or actions" (Johnson 151). The audience is thus given "a sense of intimacy," as if "eavesdropping on other people's conversations" (Johnson 151).

Variety in dialogue is important for contrast and underscoring. With stylized dialogue, a more formal type of speech, Ephraim's biblical ranting speeches suggest that he is unpredictable, passionate; they also point to his delusions of grandeur. Ephraim conquered the rocky soil, he bested God in them stones. Shifting from one form of dialogue to another [naturalistic/stylized] is appropriate in the development of story and characterization when "changing factors such as mood and motivation, action and reaction" require a change from informality to formality or from intimacy to distancing (Johnson 171). For example, in Part 2 - Scene 2, Ephraim Cabot expresses to Abbie his need to have a son. Using a naturalistic dialogue, O'Neill shows

Abbie does not really want her husband's attentions and we then see Ephraim's frustration at her lack of response to him:

ABBIE. Ye'd best go to sleep. Ye're gitten thin's all mixed.

...

CABOT. ...Will ye ever know me - 'r will any man 'r woman? ... No. I calc'late 't wa'n't 't be.

(O'Neill, Desire 443)

Then, in contrast, Ephraim switches to a stylized form of dialogue. He switches from naturalistic, the reaching out to her with the story of his youthful despair and abandonment of the farm, to stylized for telling her of his belief in a hard God. Reading the following passage aloud allows for the full sense of distancing effect this creates between Abbie and Ephraim Cabot as it was designed to do.

CABOT. ... God's hard, not easy! God's in the stones! Build my church on a rock - out o' stones an I'll be in them! That's what He meant t' Peter!

(O'Neill, Desire 443)

The completion of this scene is illustrated in the power of silence. Abbie hardly responds to her husband.



Distancing is clearly evident over the course of Ephraim's speech to Abbie and dramatically emphasized when Ephraim leaves to seek warmth from the animals in the barn.

... A discussion of dialogue wouldn't be complete without considering the absence of dialogue - silence. Silence always has meaning. When one person abstains from participating in a conversation, silence may represent power, impotence, rage, sadness, or joy. Silence is capable of producing profound tension or calm. Whatever the mood you want to evoke, silence is a powerful tool. If you use it wisely, it will enhance your dialogue and enrich your characters.

(Johnson 189)

O'Neill crafted the last part of this scene as a passionate turning point of the drama with the extensive use of silence. Following Ephraim's exit, Abbie and Eban, inexorably linked through a type of implied telepathy, while physically in two separate rooms, they knowingly follow one another to the desire that will eventually consume them. This unique communication with one another heightens the dramatic effect.

When Eban accepts and then rejects Abbie's kisses, she tells him "I on'y wanted ye fur a purpose o' my own" but, we know this to be a lie (O'Neill, Desire 444).

Dialogue does not exist in isolation; it should have a specific purpose within the context of the story. What immediately precedes a sequence of dialogue may have special significance or impact upon the dialogue.

(Johnson 177)

Although the previous dialogue intimates Abbie's great need to bear a son, O'Neill tells us in the stage directions that she comes to Eban with "her eyes burning with desire" (O'Neill, Desire 433). Abbie is hurt by Eban's rejection of her. She falls back on her original need for a son in an effort to deny her attraction to him.

In order for a play to progress, David Ball tells us that "One event requires a second event, connected" (Ball 10). O'Neill's skillful playwriting is accomplished as he connects the first event (trigger) with the second event (heap) and "crafts a series of actions, ... a play's primary building blocks," throughout the entire dramatic work (Ball 11). Desire Under the Elms' series of events speak well of O'Neill's understanding of this principle. For example, Eban wants to be sole owner of the farm someday. Eban learns of his father's wedding. He pays his brothers for their share of the farm. Ephraim returns with his new bride, Abbie, confirming the loss of their inheritance. Simeon and Peter leave for the promise of gold in

California. Eban sees himself one step closer to fulfilling his dream. David Ball suggests that O'Neill clearly understood all of his characters needs and therefore could write believable and consistent deeds for them to execute in the pursuit of their attainment (Ball 27).

Julie Jensen tells us "Characters should sound different from one another. ...Each must be unique and different" (Jensen 3). As the characters speak their needs, we hear their separate voices, their separate desires. Eban Cabot, the 25 year old son of Ephraim, first appears admiring of God's creation as he looks over the countryside and the golden sunset from the porch of their farmhouse. "God! Purty!" is quickly supplanted by his facial expression which is "resentful and defensive" (O'Neill, Desire 432). His older half-brothers, Simeon and Peter, mirror Eban's "Purty" and quickly enlighten us as to the source of all their dark feelings, their father (O'Neill, Desire 432).

...it's stone's atop o' the ground - stones atop  
o'stones - makin' stone walls - year atop o'year -  
him n' yew n' me 'n' then Eban - makin' stone  
walls fur him to fence us in!

(O'Neill, Desire 432)

Cleverly, this mirroring of awe and resentment more perfectly outlines their separate needs and individual differences when the scene progresses and Simeon and Peter

speak of the promise of gold in California. By not being a part of his brothers day-dreaming, Eban underscores the expression of his single-minded need to own the farm exclusively in later scenes.

Jensen posits these criteria for assessing proper character development:

Characters should want something from a scene.

And what they want should be pretty specific and definable. What's more, those wants should be at least slightly at odds with the wants of others.

(Jensen 3)

In every scene of Desire Under the Elms, O'Neill deftly uses dialogue to clearly define what the characters want moment-to-moment. "This moment-to-moment goal helps move things along and prevents a scene from dangling or floating" (Jensen 4). Thus in each of the characters' attempts to meet their individual needs, which are clearly at cross purposes to one another, conflict arises and we witness the dramatic action which engages us intellectually and emotionally. Though Simeon's and Peter's need is portrayed as one, they are defined as having individual personalities, Peter being the more adventurous leader and Simeon the slightly cautious and practical follower.

In her character checklist, Jensen suggests that characters must have "have a well defined rhythm or tempo.

That helps [to] imagine how they would move..." (Jensen 4). No doubt O'Neill's descriptions implied that the pace of the bovines that populated their farm were just about the speed of Simeon and Peter. O'Neill's descriptions of all his characters emphasized their rhythm. In addition, the actions he describes call forth a sense of their tempo. For example, the repeated references to scripture by Ephraim and his belief that God is hard like the stones was indicative of a staccato type rhythm, abrupt and disconnected. Eban's paying off his brothers and keeping Abbie at bay are indicative of deliberate, careful, patient pacing. The particular New England dialect O'Neill created for them imparted a sense of a rural syncopation, slow.

Another aspect to consider concerning characters is that

...they're off balance in some way. They're excessive in one direction, deficient in another. And they're tenacious; they don't easily give up their imbalance.

(Jensen 4)

As a main character, Eban is obsessed with regaining his birthright, the farm, and avenging his mother's early death. He buys his brothers' shares of the farm knowing that the new step-mother is likely to inherit part if not all of the farm. He then gives in to Abbie's seduction and

sees this as a fitting revenge on his father. Ephraim, brimming with hubris, is obsessed with besting everyone, including God. "God's hard, not easy" (O'Neill, Desire 443). Ephraim determined to see the stones yield up their bounty; he'd not be beaten even by God. He took a young woman to wife and in doing so for all practical purposes, attempted to defy the laws of Nature when he placed her in the immediate proximity of his young son. In terms of Abbie's needs, she is a woman bent on controlling her world though she's barely able to control herself. She married Ephraim, a man in his mid-seventies and more than twice her age, to become the lady of the house and not someone else's servant. In a fit of anger and jealousy, she set Ephraim up to promise her the farm if she bore him a son because Eban would not submit to her will. Abbie sought to control Eban and he fought to keep her at a distance and secure the farm for his own. So we see that "they have blind spots. ...a specific fatal flaw...[i.e.] ...habitual behavior that results from the fatal flaw" (Jensen 4). As a result they are destined to get into more trouble progressively. With these examples in mind, it is easy to see that O'Neill also made clear that his characters

...have always come from somewhere else. And when they were there, they did something.

[So that these]... characters come to any scene with baggage, with an attitude... (Jensen 4-5)

Furthermore, O'Neill's characters "...almost never tell the truth. ...have a nice mix of traits. ...cannot help but be themselves" (Jensen 5). It should be noted that O'Neill uses an odd number of characters - five - five family members, at first and then reduces this to three, the perfect triangle ala Pinter. It seems that dramatic tension has a correlation to this numerological choice. Like a ping-pong ball bouncing back and forth, dialogue between even numbers of characters may have a hypnotic effect, thus it can become less dynamic and engaging. Neighbors and Sheriff appear towards the end of the play to highlight and underscore the original theme of this creation, the fulfillment of Ephraim's belief that God is hard, but otherwise there are three main characters.

O'Neill goes to great lengths to describe the set against which he envisions his characters enacting the drama he means to unfold. His choice to use a single set is in keeping with the three unities. Aristotle believed that a tragedy tries to exist as closely as possible in one place, at one point in time and with one plot. By keeping it a single set, a farm house of four rooms, and a porch, the rock fence and its adjoining country road, overshadowed by "Two enormous elms...on each side of the house," O'Neill allows himself the control of directing the attention to the actions of the characters (O'Neill, *Desire* 431). Indeed, the set subtly, but persistently, says something about the characters. The design of the set contributes to control of

the emotional elements, how it makes one feel. By setting it in the house, he also affects the tempo and rhythm by keeping them measured and unhurried. The single set design of a two story home with four separate rooms available for viewing, proposed by O'Neill and designed by Robert Edmond Jones, permitted the viewing of simultaneous action. This emphasized the conflict as the audience witnessed the characters pursuing their different goals simultaneously. Generally speaking, a single set also contributes to control of the budget. In maintaining longevity in the marketplace over time, this is an important financial consideration.

O'Neill was a great admirer of the Swedish dramatist, August Strindberg. Strindberg's work pointed up the use of symbols in a dramatic work. Images, especially visual ones, could more immediately and powerfully impart a meaning or underscore a theme. O'Neill used the symbol of the "Elms" overhanging the Cabot farmhouse to do this. Visually they point up the nurturing aspect of Mother Nature, they provide beauty and shade. In contrast, O'Neill uses his description of them as sagging and smothering breasts to shade the perception of those who interpret the story to come. Where there should be comfort, there is an intense heaviness. Aristotle also speaks to the value of symbols as found in this example: The story of the New Testament very often points to letting go of the past and getting on with a better life through forgiveness. O'Neill uses New Testament names, Simeon and Peter, together with the symbol of the



gate. Ephraim's older sons break-off the gate and take it with them on their journey to find the gold of California. This becomes part of the image of their new life. In contrast, Eban and Ephraim (Old Testament names) fight to hold onto the past. In them, this dream is proven to be stillborn. The scene is dynamic and powerful. It uses images an audience is intimately familiar with and sensitive to as a means by which to push emotional buttons on a subliminal level.

Julie Jensen speaks to the unique properties of a staged play and its relationship with the audience:

...plays are heard and seen but once. They must communicate and in real time. No chance to stop and ponder. [NOT LITT-ra-ture] ...plays and works of art in general communicate emotionally;

(Jensen 6)

It is the choice of images and the language used to give them life that engage the audience emotionally from moment-to-moment. Ball defines image as

...something we already know or can easily be told that is used to describe, illuminate, or expand upon something we don't know or cannot easily be told.

(Ball 69)

He describes images as a "more evocative communication" (Ball 68). O'Neill uses the biblical images and symbols to "compress...provide a lot of information in a small space (Ball 70). Images are designed to evoke "emotional responses and associations" which accumulate as the play goes on (Ball 71). "The accumulation of reactions helps the audience to emotionally experience, not merely understand" (Ball 71).

O'Neill does not tell us a story, but instead reveals information through the characters speaking with one another. We are given just enough information to stir our imagination and to peak our curiosity; thus the author builds dramatic tension. Good theatre is based on needs and deeds with sprinkles of exposition designed to propel the action forward. Heavy amounts of exposition weigh the action down. It is imperative that only "crucial exposition directly related to and explaining the shape of action to come" be a part of the dialogue (Ball 41). O'Neill does this effectively. The character Eban tells us his father has worked his mother to death. Through this image our emotional associations and responses to mother and abuse are evoked. Thus we understand and accept Eban's view of her spirit's unrest when it seems he will be cheated of his inheritance. The combined emotional experience and understanding, which come as we witness these characters interacting, is the essence of art. The audience does not

remain untouched. They become an integral part of the total theatre experience. Their responses are a necessary part of making this production live. When the playwright is skillful, such as O'Neill has shown himself to be once more in Desire Under the Elms, his creation lives on "to tell truths about the human condition beyond the time and place and circumstances of their creation" (Roberts 10-11). Each of his characters needs are spelled out. Each character decides the course of action which will best serve the accomplishment of the given need. Even the seemingly minor characters of the towns people who come to *celebrate* the birthing of the newest Cabot, are serving their need to finally gloat at the fall of the man who has "skinned" them and gloated in their being bested for more than thirty years (O'Neill, *Desire* 432).

The power of Desire Under the Elms comes from an underlying religious context, forbidden-taboos being broken, and otherwise minimally explored human passions brought to the light of day for consideration. This alone does not speak for this plays success. O'Neill's skillful composition and attention to detail allow for the opportunity to maintain suspension of disbelief. The theatre acts as a safe environment within which to examine these sinful subjects.

The subject of telepathy is a unique aspect of life explored in this play. It also is a device used to heighten our awareness and more deeply engage our emotions. In his

letter responding to Dr. Winther's critical essay, dated July 7, 1933, O'Neill writes:

Naturally, there are a few points where I don't agree with you - something you say about the danger of mysticism, for example. To me the danger lies more in no mysticism. We tend complacently to regard the unknown as non-existent because it is unknown to us - but drama should keep a place for intuitive vision or it loses an inherent, powerful value.

And what you say about mental telepathy in *Desire* and *Electra*. I hadn't defined it to myself as that, but I certainly believe that under special, stress conditions of extreme passionate tension, where one person is emotionally "tuned in" on another, so to speak, that some sort of super-awareness is possible at a crucial moment. Or call it due to an extraordinary intensification of the functions of the senses - one hears a sound too low for ordinary hearing, etc. That science has not got this in its card index seems to me simply because it is obviously barred from ever sitting in on such rare occasions. But, after all, as I interpret the latest scientific-mystical dogmas, we seem to become more and more merely other electrical plants, and, accepting

that, emotional thought transference strikes me as much less incredible than my radio set!

I mention the above, not by way of criticism, but because the points brought up are extremely interesting to me. I am a great believer in all we don't know about ourselves, but inclined to skepticism about what we think we know.

(Bogard 416)

Lastly, O'Neill recognized that what we appreciate from theatre appears to be a confirmation of those experiences which we as humans share but perhaps cannot comfortably discuss among ourselves. Here outlined we see how he endeavored to combine the elements of a dramatic foundation laid by his predecessors to create with Desire Under the Elms the vehicle by which he and his audience could experience the unspeakable. That O'Neill created the means to examine the power of thoughts and beliefs may be of special interest to the more sophisticated contemporary audience and thus contribute to its greater long life.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE STAGED DESIRE: IMPACT, IMPORTANCE AND SUCCESS

When examining the elements which contribute to Desire Under the Elms' success, the original performance should be considered. As gifted a storyteller as O'Neill was, his writing remains only a part of the formula for success of this play. Plays are ensemble pieces and as such are really brought to life and sustained over time through the efforts of many other artists.

Desire Under The Elms began its life as a production of the Greenwich Village Theatre in New York City on November 11, 1924. The Provincetown Players were able to bring this play to life for the sum of \$6,000.00. Kenneth Macgowan (a former drama critic), Robert Edmond Jones, Eugene O'Neill, and James Light were the originators of this theatrical organization. Their concerted efforts, individual talents and most especially their determination to succeed account for Desire Under the Elms' original staging. Travis Bogard tells us in his essay accompanying O'Neill's letters to Kenneth Macgowan,

The tragedy held on for 208 performances,  
first in the Village and later uptown with the

cooperation of two professional producers, A.L. Jones and Morris Green.

(Bryer 72)

Thus the collaborative process contributing to Desire Under the Elms' initial success included outside producers to extend the original run.

The play as created by O'Neill required a special insight. The detailed and extensive outline of the set leaves the clearest impression that O'Neill believed it was a necessary and integral part of the play -- a character standing silent witness, if you will.

Fortunately, his associate and fellow founder of Provincetown Players, director and set designer for Desire Under the Elms, Robert Edmond Jones, was raised in Milton, New Hampshire, "in a grim and lonely farmhouse not unlike the one that served as the play's setting" (Goodman 421). It was his own experience of New England as "Violent, passionate, sensual, sadistic, lifted, heated, frozen, transcendental, Poesque," that influenced his creation of set and direction of players for this production (Goodman 421). (Appendix I, II, III)

The original reviews were largely positive. Joseph Wood Krutch in The Nation, on November 26, 1924, wrote in The God of The Stumps: "Desire Under The Elms will be, with one exception, the most moving play seen during the current

season" (Bryfonski 239). Stark Young of the New York Times said of Robert Edmond Jones setting,

...profoundly dramatic. The end of a New England farmhouse with its overhanging elms was for all practical purposes built there on the stage, with a wall of actual stone coming down to the footlights; a scene that was realistic but at the same time strangely and powerfully heightened in effect.

(Young 20:7)

He praised the acting but not to the degree he felt compelled to extol the merits of the playwright.

The general performance of the play was usually adequate though not often on a level with the writing. Mary Morris...played the wife in "Desire Under the Elms," with a new and suppressed method that deepened at times into an admirable poignancy and a kind of grim thin poetry that seemed the exact truth of her lines. Charles Ellis, though his work in the earlier scenes was less successful or convincing, played with real poetry the passage where the boy is possessed with love for the woman and for his child. Walter Huston as the old man was everywhere trenchant, gaunt, fervid, harsh, as



he should be in the part. In his ability to cover his gradations, to express the natural and convincing emotion, and to convey the harsh, inarticulate life embodied in this extraordinary portrait that Eugene O'Neill has drawn, Mr. Huston showed his talent and proved to be the best choice possible for the role.

(Young 20:7)

Young evocatively describes the dance-scene wherein the celebration of the child's birth is portrayed,

...the father outside the house, the young wife and her lover in the upstairs room in each other's arms beside the child's cradle,....

(Young 20:7)

He goes on to say of the scene,

[It is] written with such poetry and terrible beauty as we rarely see in the theatre, a scene that for these qualities of poetry, terror and at the same time unflinching realism rises above anything that Mr. O'Neill has written.

(Young 20:7)

The critics came to attention. In Shipley's Guide To Great Plays he tells us,

The New York Herald Tribune declared that "O'Neill again eats his heart out in the bitter torments of despair" - overlooking the fact that the play ends not in a slump of despondency but with a lift of resolution in the midst of disaster. The Times found it "essentially a story of solitude, physical solitude, the solitude of the land, of men's dreams, of love, of life." Gilbert W. Gabriel commented: "Some moments were vivid and great ones. Some sloughed off into maudlin dreariness. Some wrenched the clothes from gnarled, grimy farm folk. Others reclothed them in poetic masquerade and togas of deliberate oratory. It is a story so grim it will sour the spittle in most persons' mouths." Alexander Woollocott remarked: "A strong tide swept through it; it was hewn from the stuff of life itself; and it was marked from first to last with boldness and with imagination." Burns Mantle called it "stark, morbid, forbidding tragedy; a cheerless, fascinating, hopeless, thrilling human document."

(Shipley 477)

On January 10, 1925, with excellent reviews, the play was

relocated uptown to Broadway and the Earl Carroll Theatre under the auspices of the commercial producers A.L. Jones and Morris Green. As was mentioned earlier, at its new home, despite those early glowing reviews, it was labeled "obscene" (Goodman 422). The New York District Attorney, Joab Banton, branded it "too thoroughly bad to be purified by a blue pencil" (Goodman 422). The special Actor's Equity-backed "*citizens' play-jury*," outside the customary judicial system, evaluated Desire Under the Elms and acquitted it of indecency. They "found nothing objectionable in the play" (Goodman 422). They did not stand alone in this opinion. "Most of the New York newspapers came to the play's defense editorially; it was also defended by a group of prominent citizens" (Goodman 422). 1925 found Desire Under The Elms moved to two other playhouses, June 1<sup>st</sup> to the George M. Cohen Theatre and later September 28<sup>th</sup> to Daly's Sixty-third Street Theatre. On October 17, 1925, after more than 350 performances, the New York run came to an end. Two road companies toured from coast to coast through 1925 and 1926. Until 1940, the cultural and moral climate here in the United States and around the world was such that repeatedly the play was banned in such cities as Boston and London. On February 18, 1926 the cast was arrested in Los Angeles. "They were accused of having presented a lewd, obscene, and immoral play" (Bryfonski 239). In this instance, dialogue was modified to "suit the sensibilities of the police" - "whore"

was changed to "harlot" and "gone-a-whoring" to "gone to get himself a woman" (Seiler 548). The cast was released on their own recognizance (the original bail of \$850 was returned) and they were permitted to perform pending the final decision of the court. The first trial ended in a hung-jury and by the time a second trial could be convened, the show's run in Los Angeles had ended and the matter was dropped in consideration of the taxpayers.

The play was soon after translated into several languages, including French, German, Japanese, Russian, Turkish and the Scandinavian languages. The following is an accounting of some of the revivals:

♦ 1925: Prague, Czechoslovakia

In the New York Times dated October 5, 1925, a columnist simply designated by the initials P.E.W., tells us:

A crowded house...was held spell-bound last night for something like three hours at the Chez premiere of Eugene O'Neill's "Desire Under the Elms." ...By now it is recognized in Europe that O'Neill is a first rate dramatist of worth and significance...

(P.E.W. VIII:1:3)

◆ 1930: Russia

Kamerny Theatre, Moscow, was the theatre where Desire was staged by Alexander Tairov. O'Neill saw Tairov's production in Paris in 1930 and writes:

...A theatre of creative imagination has always been my ideal! To see my plays given by such a theatre has always been my dream! The Kamerny Theatre has realized this dream for me!

...

What was notable about this production was not only its stylized acting but its set. The setting was designed by an architect, not a scenic designer. The entire stage was turned into a two-story house with the front removed and with the heavy branches of the elms serving as structural beams and making an architectural unit of the whole. Called 'constructivist' and 'abstract,' it was a highly dynamic set and much imitated by later directors, designers, and producers.

(Goodman 423)

◆ 1933: Sweden

In October, Alf Sjöberg directed Lars Hanson & Tora Teja at the Royal Dramatic Theatre at Stockholm. Alma Louise Olson reviewed the production for the New York Times. She writes:

This earlier play has received the same outstanding recognition from the critics who noted the dynamic dramatic power in "Strange Interlude" and "Mourning Becomes Electra."

(Olson IX:1:1)

◆ 1940: British Isles

In January, the London Mask Company at the Westminster Theatre was finally able to bring Desire Under The Elms to the London stage. It later toured the British provinces. The set was similar to Tairov's but the acting was realistic not stylized.

◆ 1951: United States

November 21<sup>st</sup>, an Off-Broadway group, The Craftsman, produced it at the Barbizon Plaza Playhouse. Robert L. Ramsey provided the set and lighting. He chose to construct it with iron piping and then only in skeleton form. Randolph Goodman, in his book *From Script To Stage* comments thus:

It conveyed a very stark, modern, constructivist feeling, suggesting abstractly and symbolically the unyielding natures of the protagonists.

(Goodman 424)

The stage being tiny, and the set completely filling it, made the cramped lives of the characters ever more apparent. "The acting and directing were electrifying in their effect" (Goodman 424). Brooks Atkinson believes this as well and in the New York Times tells us so when he writes:

...the heartening thing about the performance which Edward Ludlum has directed is the fact that it catches the elemental fury of the drama. Carl Low's harsh, braggart, gnarled Ephraim, Priscilla Amidon's passionate, ruthless, defiant Abbie, and Paul Steven's bewildered and boyish Eban are all clearly defined and acted with burning conviction. ... From every point of view it is one of our greatest treasures. As craftsmanship it is vivid and inventive. As a piece of writing it is compact and forceful. As a portrait of greed, lust, hatred, wrath, horror, and the primitive basis of civilization,

it is unerring and remorseless, and it comes out of the convictions of a great dramatist.

(Atkinson Nov. 22, 45:1)

◆ 1952: United States

January 16<sup>th</sup>, the American National Theatre & Academy sponsored Robert Whitehead's production at ANTA Theatre on Broadway for forty-six performances. Harold Clurman directed this production that was highly noted for its set designed by Mordecai Gorelik. Brooks Atkinson writes in his review for the New York Times,

Mordecai Gorelik has provided an austere setting with grimly poetic overtones. Harold Clurman...has organized a tight and tumultuous performance that is not afraid of bold scenes.

...

When final accounts are tallied, "Desire Under the Elms," may turn out to be the greatest play written by an American. ...Mr. O'Neill's harsh tragedy of New England is not something to feel temperate about. For it has the headlong strength of a major creation. It has more size



than the life it literally portrays, and it has also the shattering impact of a thunderbolt.

(Atkinson Jan.17, 23:4)

Atkinson was so impressed by this production, he took the opportunity to speak of it again January 20<sup>th</sup> when he was reviewing O'Neill's Anna Christie.

The characters have significance; they are fiercely at war with forces greater than themselves, and the conclusion of that play has about it the whiplash of complete finality.

(Atkinson Jan.20, II:1:1)

In May, Paul Stevens and Priscilla Amidon appeared in another production at Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In November, Alan Schneider directed it in the round at the Arena Stage, Washington, D.C.

◆ 1953: French

The critical reception of Desire Under the Elms was marked by unflattering reviews. The critics called the play "a rustic melodrama" and a "horrible play" (Farrell II:3:1). However, they were fair and reasonable to attribute this failure to the translation

and adaptation. "...the quality of the language has been imperfectly rendered" (Farrell II:3:1).

◆ 1954: France

Called Le Desir sous les ormes, it was staged at the Comedie des Champs-Elysees in Paris. It was better received for its "impassioned performances" and a more accurate translation.

◆ 1955: United States

Benno D. Frank brought a production to the Cleveland Playhouse. He changed it to a single intermission and thereby destroyed the Greek trilogy effect that O'Neill had created as an integral part of this play.

◆ 1956: Switzerland

Zurich, Switzerland began a two year cycle of O'Neill's plays with Desire Under The Elms.

◆ 1957: United States

Boston University students, beginning August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1957, did six performances in a tent, arena style, entirely surrounded by the audience. "...the play had a greater immediacy and impact than is actually achieved on the 'picture frame' stage" (Goodman 425).

♦ 1958: United States

Don Hartman's Paramount film version, with Sophia Loren and Burl Ives, was neither a financial or artistic success. However, it does clearly mark the great change which had come about in the moral climate of America. Seduction, adultery, incest, and infanticide were portrayed without a peep of outrage from the public or the censors. The Yale Drama School was the recipient of the opening night proceeds of \$5,700 to be used for assisting young playwrights through The Eugene O'Neill Scholarship Fund.

♦ 1963: United States

On January 11<sup>th</sup>, 1963 the New York Times columnist Howard Taubman writes:

If you think that Eugene O'Neill's "Desire Under The Elms" is old-fashioned and creaky, go down to Bleeker Street, in Greenwich Village. The revival unveiled last night by the Circle In The Square has a tension and passion rarely found in our frequently attenuated theatre. Jose Quintero ...has directed this revival as if the play had never been done before. Sharing the honors with Mr. Quintero are Colleen

Dewhurst and George C. Scott. Both have the technical range as actors, and the inner resources of intensity to make their roles ring with truth.

...

The Circle In The Square reminds us once again how cavalier the American theatre has been with its own accumulated wealth.

(Taubman 5:6)

The 380 performances, which ended December 8, 1963, set a record for the play. That year's Obie Awards (Off-Broadway) were deservedly given to Miss Dewhurst and Mr. Scott for the Best Actress and Best Actor.

◆ 1987: United States

Desire Under the Elms was part of The Greenwich Theatre, Connecticut repertoire for the month of May.

◆ 1998: United States

The Rosebriar Shakespeare Company, as part of their season, performed Desire Under the Elms in September for more than two weeks.

◆ 1999: United States

The San Jose Repertory Theatre's Twentieth Anniversary bulletin on line proudly presents Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms as a distinguished part of their coming season.

◆ 1999: Belgrade

The National Theatre Belgrade will bring the directorial talents of A. Djundjerovic's to the American classic, Desire Under the Elms.

◆ 1999: Russia

The Maly Drama Theatre presented this American classic in Russian this past June.

The success of Desire Under the Elms is attested to by the numerous world-wide productions over the past seventy five years. Since the mid-fifties college and community theaters throughout the United States have produced a variety of productions. American regional theaters have often staged O'Neill's tragedy. The common thread which binds them all is the testament of the strong emotional response they evoke.

In reading these reviews and the details of other productions beyond the original, it may be noted that the diversity of audience and interpretation by all associated

in its production contributed to its success and longevity,  
but the heart and soul of its fruitful existence remains in  
the play itself.

## CHAPTER 4

### A POET'S EFFORTS EXAMINED

O'Neill, the poet, like other great builders throughout history, sought inspiration from a Greek blueprint, in this case the tragedy, and as he himself says, proceeded to "evolve original rhythms of beauty, where beauty apparently isn't,...in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives" (Barnet 455). O'Neill was a believer in man's noble struggle against fate as defined through heredity and environment. He chose to design this play along the lines of the Greek tragedy as suggested by Aristotle's Poetics, to better portray this struggle. In his letter to Thomas Hobson Quinn, O'Neill speaks of himself and his aspirations.

[I see myself]...as a bit of a poet, who has labored with the spoken word to evolve original rhythms of beauty, where beauty apparently isn't - Jones, Ape, God's Chillun, Desire, etc. - and to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives. And just here is where I am a most confirmed mystic too, for I'm always, always trying to interpret

Life in terms of lives, never just lives in terms of character. I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind - Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it - Mystery certainly - and of the one eternal tragedy of man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about & that it's possible - or can be - to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage. Of course, this is very much of a dream, but where theatre is concerned, one must have a dream and the Greek dream in tragedy is the noblest ever!

(Bentley 241)

O'Neill did not limit himself to the traditional notion that tragedy could not be properly portrayed with only ordinary people's struggles against fate. O'Neill set the action of Desire Under the Elms in the mid-1900's in New England. Randolph Goodman in his text From Script To Stage, offers this analysis:



The former age would lend a mythic quality to the story, and the hard and unyielding earth of New England reminded him of the rocky soil of Greece. The people who attempt to wrest a living from such recalcitrant land were bound to have many characteristics in common; they were stern, hard-working, and stubborn, and in-grown; their passions like their minds, were held in check by the terrifying image of a wrathful, thunder-hurling God.

(Goodman 418)

In his own way, O'Neill also followed the structure of a Greek play. Goodman tells us:

It is a trilogy in that it consists of three parts. Each part consumes but a single day, from the afternoon or evening until dawn. The playwright was apparently attempting to observe the neoclassical unities: unity of place - the farmhouse; unity of time - the single day; unity of action - the single plot line involving the three protagonists; and in addition, an overwhelming unity of mood.

(Goodman 419)

In his letter to Grace Dupre Hills, dated March 21, 1925, O'Neill tells us his vision of Desire is a tragedy.

Desire, briefly, is a tragedy of the possessive - the pitiful longing of man to build his own heaven here on earth by glutting his sense of power with ownership of land, people, money - but principally the land and other people's lives. It is the creative yearning of the uncreative spirit which never achieves anything but a momentary clutch of failing fingers on the equally temporal tangible.

(Bogard 194)

In looking to the elements which contribute to Desire Under the Elms success, examining O'Neill's efforts with respect to the major criteria for a tragedy as laid out in Aristotle's Poetics seems logical.

Aristotle speaks of imitating "people better...than the average" when defining tragedy (Aristotle 18). Obviously, Ephraim Cabot sees himself as better than the average and looks to the flourishing farm as proof of this.

When speaking of comedy Aristotle says it "causes no pain or destruction" (Aristotle 23). These tragic characters, filled with lust, anger and hate, are seldom out of pain and destruction seems to be their legacy.

Aristotle tells us, "Tragedy tries as hard as it can to

exist during a single daylight period, or to vary but little... " (Aristotle 25). O'Neill keeps this unity of a single time by using the transition point between night and day, dawn and twilight.

O'Neill observed in Desire Under the Elms another critical point made in the Poetics:

A poetic imitation...ought to be unified...  
the component events ought to be so firmly  
compacted that if any of them is shifted to  
another place, or removed, the whole is loosened  
up and dislocated; for an element whose addition  
or subtraction makes no perceptible extra  
difference is not really a part of the whole.

(Aristotle 32)

In the failure of the 1958 film version of Desire Under the Elms, we see the evidence of Aristotle's maxim. Eban's mother was powerful when portrayed through expository dialogue. When she was given form in the film, and we see her instructing Eban, she became less of a force. The mystic element was dispelled. In the staged version, Peter & Simeon go off to California, their fate an unknown quantity. The choice to bring them back as rich and successful married men in the film added nothing to the drama. Their presence detracted from the powerful tension

building in the christening scene and destroyed the original characterization of them as "dumb bovines."

According to Aristotle, with respect to the choice of characters names:

...in tragedy they still cling to historically given names. The reason is that what is possible is persuasive...what has happened is, we feel, obviously possible: for it would not have happened if it were impossible.

(Aristotle 33)

O'Neill uses biblical names. Together with the use of symbols, this allows O'Neill to reinforce the epic superstructure he wants for Desire Under the Elms; all the while his characters unobtrusively establish an emotional rapport with the audience as they unfold the storyline or plot.

"Tragedy, then, is a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete and possesses magnitude" (Aristotle 25). Ephraim's attempts to best everyone, especially challenging the laws of God through the sins of lust and pride, have "serious implications." But more importantly, all of his behavior based on a belief that God is harsh, alienates him from everyone. He incurs their hate and resentment; this behavior culminates in death and total destruction. Such a structuring of the events

permits the emotional catharsis which Aristotle points to as also being integral to a tragedy. When observed by the audience and reflected upon, this outcome could have serious implications for the audience. They could possibly conclude the true power of belief.

Desire Under the Elms is not a narrative. Its language is "sensuously attractive," having rhythm and melody and it uses both spoken verses, dialogue, and song, the dance scene at the christening, to carry the plot, build dramatic tension, evoke emotion and ultimately elicit pity and fear.

Aristotle tells us tragedy has "just six constituent elements...plot, characters, thought, verbal expression, visual adornment, and song-composition (Aristotle 26)." O'Neill has constructed Desire Under the Elms to include them all quite effectively.

The "structure of events, the plot, is the goal of tragedy, and the goal is the greatest thing of all," according to Aristotle (Aristotle 27). In the footnotes written by the Gerald F. Else, the translator of Poetics, the following clarification on plot merits consideration:

...a single course of action laid on by a particular will to achieve a particular goal...  
The reversal of a focused, unitary intention, in which the whole life of a man may be concentrated, is the very heart of tragedy as Aristotle conceives it. (Else 91)

O'Neill achieves these elements in Ephraim. He learns the baby is Eban's and that Abbie has murdered the innocent child. "The finest recognition is one that happens at the same time as a peripety. That kind of peripety will excite pity or fear" (Aristotle 36). "Recognition" is ... a shift from ignorance to awareness, pointing in the direction either of close blood ties ... of people who have been previously been in clearly marked state of happiness (Aristotle 37). Ephraim awakens happy in the joy of his fatherhood. Recognition comes as Abbie tells him the child was really Eban's and she has smothered the baby. The third element of plot, pathos, a destructive act, is evident in the murder of the newborn. Fear, horror at the murder of an innocent, and pity are the result. O'Neill continues to fulfill the criteria necessary for a tragedy.

Ephraim recognizes and acknowledges he went against God's natural laws by bringing Abbie back to be his wife. He tells Eban and Abbie as they wait for the Sheriff to arrive and arrest them for murdering the baby:

CABOT ... Ye'd ought t' be both hung on the same limb an' left thar t' swing in the breeze an' rot - a warnin' t' old fools like me t' b'ar their lonesomeness alone - an fur young fools like ye t' hobble their lust. ... T' hell with the farm! I'm leavin' it. I've turned the cows and other stock loose! ... By freein' em, I'm

freein' myself! ... I'll be a-goin' to  
 Californi-a -t' jine Simeon an' Peter - true  
 sons o' mine if they be dumb fools - an' the  
 Cabots'll find Solomon's Mines t'gether!

(O'Neill 453-454)

Ephraim recognizes he has lost everything because he should not have brought such a temptation into his home. In the end, Ephraim's "God's hard, not easy!" becomes his inheritance as well as his legacy (O'Neill 454). He learns Eban gave the boys his money and Ephraim takes this as God's omen to stay on the farm.

In his letter to George Jean Nathan, written a few months into production, O'Neill gives more insight into dreams for Desire Under the Elms.

What I think everyone missed in *Desire* is the quality in it I set most store by - the attempt to give an epic tinge to New England's inhibited life-lust, to make its inexpressive poetical expressive, to release it. It's just that - the poetical (in the broadest and deepest sense) vision illuminating even the most sordid and mean blind alleys of life - which I'm convinced is, and is to be, my concern and justification as a dramatist.

(Roberts 54)

O'Neill often spoke of his desire to examine man's relationship to God. In the light of this decision, all of O'Neill's characters and their choices are more readily appreciated. The plot is complex. The star-crossed lovers have lost everything in the end but each other. They have what Eban's Mom prized, God's gift to them, love. Ephraim has his God's harsh lonesomeness.

In the course of discussing Desire Under the Elms, very often Hippolytus is acknowledged to be very similar to O'Neill's tragedy. In Euripides drama, Hippolytus, and in O'Neill's play, Desire Under The Elms, we see a hard-hearted man, married three times, who loses his much younger new bride to her unbridled passion with his son who hates and resents him. The third wife becomes the instrument of revenge and destruction. The many journeys of mankind have been chronicled in one form or another throughout the ages. Originality comes to Desire Under the Elms because O'Neill goes beyond the boundaries previously expressed by other dramatists. Aristotle aligned tragedy with the concerns of kings. O'Neill took this notion one step further, to the concerns of the King of Kings, God. While the plays resemble one another, O'Neill succeeded in writing this play such that it seems indigenous to New England. Thus, the connection between Hippolytus and Desire Under the Elms seems to point up the underlying aspects of our humanity which connects us throughout time.

An examination of O'Neill's personal correspondence



provides some insight into his perspective on the nature of his creative technique.

Letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn, April 3, 1925

...it's not in me to pose much as a misunderstood one," but it does seem discouragingly (that is, if one lacked a sense of ironic humor!) evident to me that most of my critics don't want to see what I'm trying to do or how I'm trying to do it, although I flatter myself that end and means are characteristic, individual, and positive enough not to be mistaken for anyone else's, or for those of any "modern" school. To be called a "sordid realist" one day, a "grim, pessimistic Naturalist" the next, a "lying Moral Romanticist" the next, etc. is quite perplexing - not to add the Times editorial that settled Desire once and for all by calling it a "Neo-Primitive," a Matisse of the drama, as it were! So I'm really longing to explain and try and convince some sympathetic ear that I've tried to make myself a melting pot for all these methods, seeing some virtues for my ends in each of them, and thereby, if there is enough real fire in me, boil down to my own technique.

(O'Neill, Letters 455)

Brooks Atkinson in the New York Times review of Desire Under the Elms on January 20 1952 tells us:

He was striving genuinely after something great and original in the theatre. His vision of a powerful, epic drama was so exalted...

...

The people in "Desire Under the Elms" are elementary, also. They are New England farmers of 1850. Most of them are strong. They fight not only the soil but each other and the world. But strong and ruthless as most of them are, they are still the victims of terrific forces that enslave mankind - greed, lust, hatred, age. As a realistic play with an illuminating plot, "Desire Under the Elms" is remorseless and exciting. But it has a dimension beyond realism. In its bleak story of a hard-worked New England farm it catches some of the wildness and fury of the universe. The passion that consumes it is of epic proportions.

(Atkinson II:1:1)

O'Neill was influenced by many other poets, as well as Euripides and Aristotle. His concern and justification for

being a dramatist seems to have been vindicated when he used the synthesis of what he'd learned from them to create his own dramas.

## CHAPTER 5

### MEASURES AND MEANING OF SUCCESS

What is extraordinary about Desire Under the Elms is that time does not diminish the power of O'Neill's pen. In the reading of Desire Under the Elms, what is undeniable is an "experience of extraordinary intensity" (Bryfonski 238). Aristotle tells us "the force of tragedy can be felt even without benefit of public performance and actors" (Aristotle 29). The plot of Desire Under the Elms is so structured, that even without benefit of any visual effect, "one who is hearing the events unroll shudders with fear and feels pity at what happens..." (Aristotle 40).

This thesis critically examined the text using the theories et al Aristotle, Ball and Jensen and did not find it lacking. What is evident after the extensive examination of Desire Under the Elms, is the enormity of the task to fashion this tale so as to maximize its dramatic effect. Aristotle's Poetics and the plays of other poets appear to have been an effective road map.

When speaking of theatre being a collaborative art form, the creation of the play as text is generally excluded. Often the playwright is said to work alone. However, the outline, tools and inspiration of other poets'

work does offer a form of guidance, and makes the fashioning of a play appear less isolating and daunting a task. In laying out extensive stage-directions as a guide to their understanding of his play, O'Neill apparently looked to the needs of the collaborators who would stage Desire Under the Elms. This thesis acknowledges this collaborative element with respect to O'Neill's work as contributing to its success.

The reviews and critical analysis of other professional writers are an integral part of the process which maintains the legacy of Desire Under the Elms' success. The insight to be derived from examining the numerous essays, articles and books, illuminating the faults as well as triumphs of Desire Under the Elms, assures the longevity of this play as a guide and inspiration to other playwrights, actors, directors, scenic, costume, lighting designers and the many other artists which comprise the collaborative art form called theatre.

O'Neill's letters and workbooks insure that further investigation and debate have plenty of fuel from which to glean insight and understanding of the man and his contribution to theatre arts. They offer to struggling dramatists inspiration and insight into the process of creation and a form of assurance that they are not alone.

O'Neill once said of himself, "...an author is not always conscious of the deeper implications of his writings while he is actually at work on them, and perhaps never

fully becomes aware of all he has revealed" (Broussard 11). Desire Under the Elms after seventy-five years continues to reveal itself as the audiences mature in a rapidly changing world and are more readily able to identify the truths contained therein. An example of the relevance of Desire Under the Elms in the coming millennium may also be the lesson that we humans are determined by the thoughts and beliefs we chose to lend credence to. The more educated and sophisticated audiences of today could more readily come to Desire Under the Elms with the ability to tune into this Brechtian influence. Brecht wanted the audience to think about the social and moral implications of the play they'd witnessed. In his craft as playwright, O'Neill "yielded to many influences" (Broussard 12). Robert Brustein in his book, The Theatre of Revolt, tells us,

...O'Neill developed ambitions which were not only large, they were monstrous; ...Trying to compress within his own career the whole development of dramatic literature since the Greeks, he set himself to imitate the most ambitious writers who ever lived -

(Brustein 322)

The Expressionist influence of August Strindberg is quiet evident in The Hairy Ape and The Emperor Jones. But by the time he came to Desire Under the Elms, O'Neill had

concluded, "I personally do not believe that an idea can be put over to an audience except through character" (Broussard 14). It would appear that this assessment was illustrated and supported by the form he chose to use when creating Desire Under the Elms.

In the last analysis, the fulfillment of the dramatist's conscious and subconscious objectives should be among the elements considered. Desire Under the Elms is a part of the legacy which had relevance to O'Neill. He had watched with deep regret his extremely gifted actor-father, James O'Neill, be trapped by fame and fortune to portray almost exclusively a single role in Monte Cristo. Eugene O'Neill was able to explore the varied dimensions of humanity and his universe through a large variety of dramas.

On January 12, 1928 in an interview for the New York Sun, O'Neill was asked "whether he felt his plays had been the subject of much stupid criticism and if the critics knew what he was driving at?" (Estrin 83). He replied:

"My answer is - what do you mean by critics? They can be divided into three classes: Play Reporters, Professional Funny Men and the men with proper background or real knowledge of the theatre of all time to entitle them to be critics. The play reporters just happen to be people who have the job of reporting what happens during the evening, the story of the play and who played the

parts. I have always found that these people reported the stories of my plays fairly accurately. The Professional Funny Men are beneath contempt. What they say is only of importance to their own strutting vanities. From the real critics I have always had a feeling that they saw what I was trying to do and whether they praised or blamed, they caught the point."

(Estrin 83)

With this assertion, O'Neill points to a more realistic criteria by which to measure the success of his work, do we "...get the point."

Within the scope of eternity all is dust, but in the moments of these past seventy-five years Desire Under the Elms remains an integral part of the living-theatre fabric. That millions of people throughout the world know it in a myriad of ways testifies to its success. This American classic deservedly claims the attention of us all, be it as reader, student, audience or theatre artist. We do "get the point."



APPENDIX I

ORIGINAL PLAYBILL

*The Original Playbill*

**DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS**

A Play in Three Parts

by Eugene O'Neill

Directed by Robert Edmond Jones

Settings by Mr. Jones

**Eben Cabot**  
**Simeon Cabot**  
**Peter Cabot**  
**Ephraim Cabot, their father**  
**Abbie Putnam**  
**A Young Girl**  
**Farmers**

**A Fiddler**  
**An Old Woman**  
**A Sheriff**  
**Deputies**

Other folks from the surrounding farms—  
**Albert Brush, Lucy Mustard, Donald**  
**Oenslager, Alma O'Neill, Lucy Shreve,**  
**Ruza Wenclawska**

**Charles Ellis**  
**Allen Nagle**  
**Perry Ivins**  
**Walter Huston**  
**Mary Morris**  
**Hume Derr**  
**Harold Bates, R. B. Eaton,**  
**William Stahl, Clement Wilenchick**  
**Arthur Mack**  
**Mary True**  
**William Stahl**  
**Harold Bates, Clement Wilenchick**

*The action of the entire play takes place in and immediately outside the Cabot farmhouse in New England, in the year 1850.*

**Part 1**—The beginning of summer. Sunset. Twilight.  
 Just before dawn. Sunrise.

**Part 2**—A Sunday two months later. Afternoon. Evening.  
 A little later. Dawn the next day.

**Part 3**—Late spring of the following year. Evening.  
 Half an hour later. Just before dawn. Sunrise.

**General Stage Manager: Harold McGee**

**Stage Manager: Arthur Mack**

(Goodman 427)

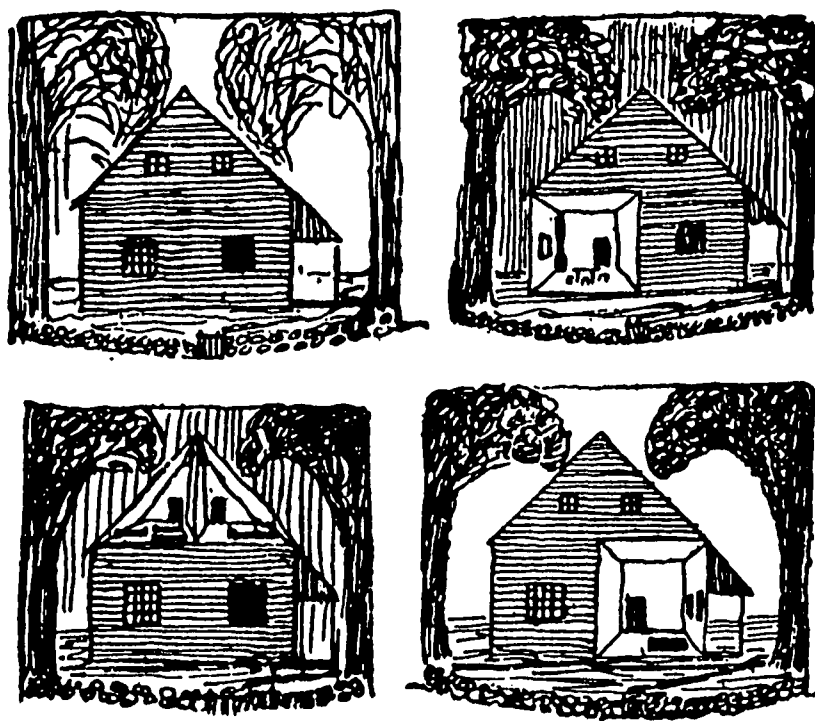
## APPENDIX II

### STAGE SETS SKETCHES



Mordecai Gorelik's design for the revival of the play at the ANTA Playhouse, New York, 1952. The dominant image, according to the designer, is "under the elms," expressed by a house overshadowed by two great trees, all in silhouette. "While the design has a superficial air of naturalism," said Gorelik, "it is in fact basically theatricalist in style. The silhouette of the house is established by means of a roof line and chimney, plus the eaves and porch; its interior is influenced by cubism in the relationship of the rooms and by constructivism in the partly curved cross-sectioning of the floors. In general the "house" is merely an elaborate screen enclosing a lower and an upper ledge.

(Goodman 441)



LOS ANGELES MUST BE KEPT PURE 435

O'Neill's sketches for the New England farm house inside and outside of which the action of his play was to take place. From the *Provincetown Playbill*. New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

(Goodman 435)

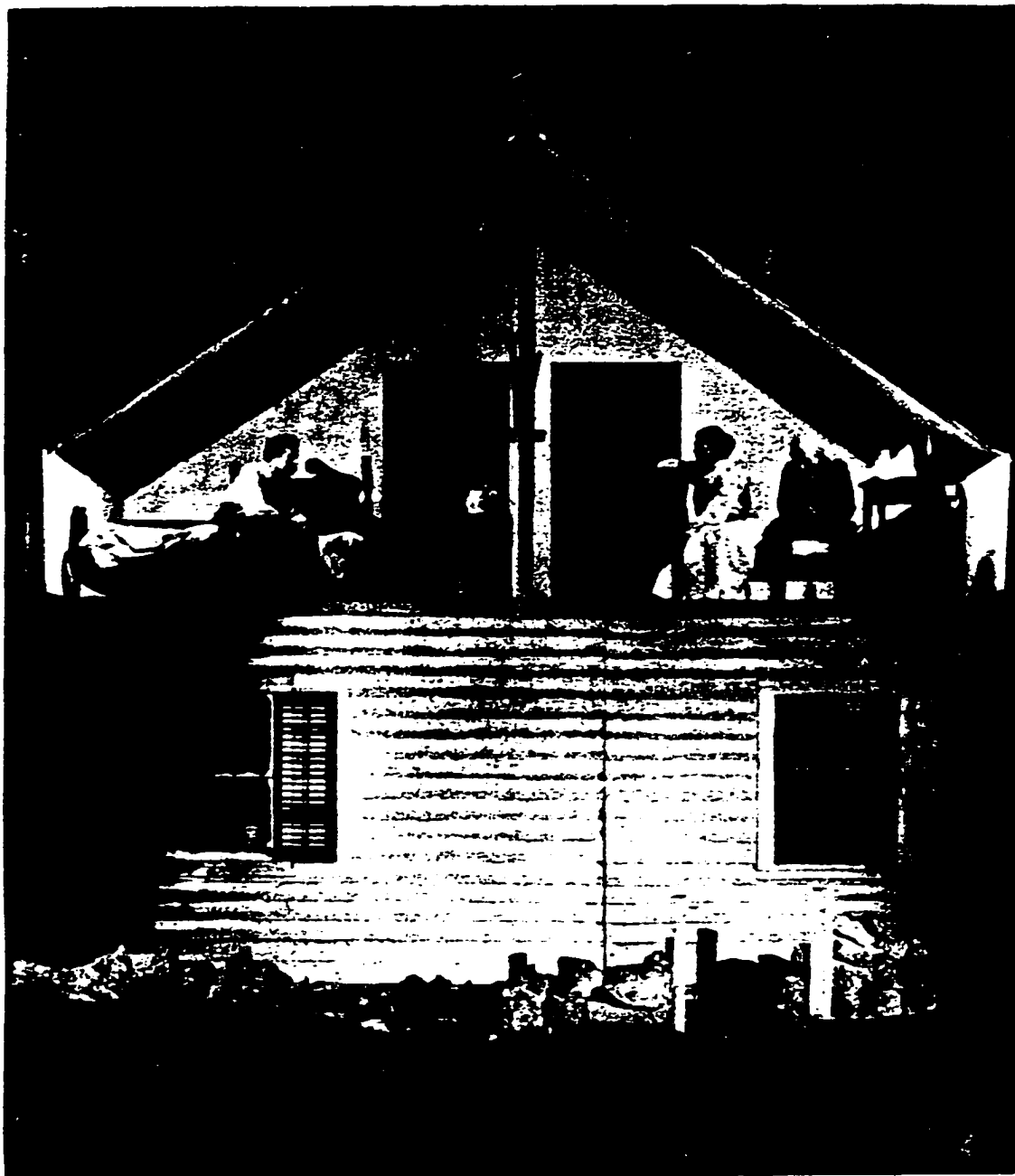
From O'Neill's sketches, Robert Edmond Jones developed this drawing of the exterior of the house when he directed the play in 1924. From the *Greenwich Village Theatre Playbill*. New York Public Library Theatre Collection.



(Goodman 429)

APPENDIX III

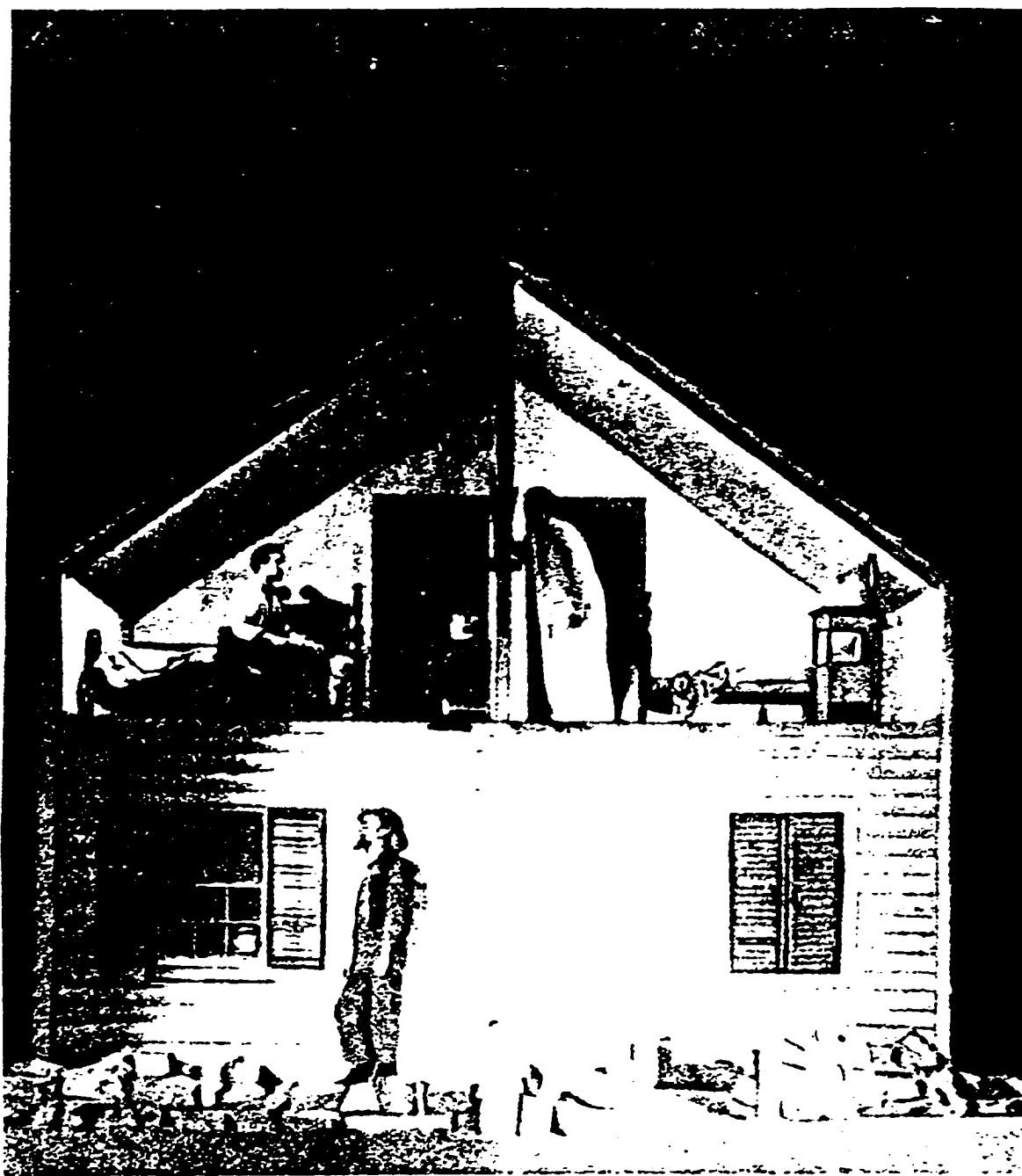
PHOTOGRAPHED STAGE SETS



*Desire under the Elms* at the Greenwich Village Theatre, 1924.  
(Museum of the City of New York; The Theater Collection.)

(Barnet 430)





Set for the original production of *Desire Under the Elms* showing simultaneous action in exterior and interior portions. Ephraim Cabot (Walter Huston) leans against the house, below; Eben (Charles Ellis) and Abbie Putnam (Mary Morris) in their bedrooms, yearn for each other but are separated by a wall. Greenwich Village Theatre, New York 1924. Museum of the City of New York.

(Goodman 410)

Set for *Desire Under the Elms* lighted for the first and third acts, Norwegian production, Oslo 1962. Photograph: Sturlason.



(Goodman 421)



Alexander Tairov's production at the Kamerny Theatre in Moscow c. 1929. O'Neill saw it in Paris in 1930 and praised it highly. Tairov turned the stage into a house with the elm trees as beams, thus making an architectural unit of the whole. Alice Koonen, Tairov's wife and star of the Kamerny, played Abbie. She is seen center. Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

(Goodman 422)



Anders Henrikson as Eben  
and Tora Teje as Abbie in  
the Royal Dramatic Theatre  
production directed by Alf  
Sjöberg, Stockholm 1933.  
Photograph: Almberg and  
Preinitz. Courtesy Royal Dra-  
matic Theatre.

(Goodman 424)

Abbie (Carol Stone) seated extreme left; Eben (Douglas Watson) seated center; and Ephraim (Karl Malden) in shirtsleeves, standing. ANTA Playhouse production, 1952. Photograph: Vic Shifreen. ANTA Collection, The Players.



(Goodman 425)



Abbie (Sophia Loren) and Ephraim (Burl Ives) in a scene from the film version of *Desire Under the Elms* produced by Paramount Pictures and released in 1958. Courtesy Paramount Pictures Corporation.

(Goodman 426)

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