Desire Under the Elms

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EUGENE O'NEILL

O'Neill was born in the Barrett Hotel in New York City, to Irish immigrant parents. His father was an alcoholic theater actor, and his mother was addicted to morphine. O'Neill's parents sent him to boarding school at a young age, and he reunited with them occasionally at a cottage in Connecticut. His parents and elder brother all died from alcohol-related illness within a few years of each other, and O'Neill himself struggled with alcoholism and depression throughout his life. After attending Princeton University for one year, O'Neill left under ambiguous circumstances. Several rumors circulated about his departure, the wildest being that he was suspended after throwing a beer bottle at a professor. O'Neill later attended Harvard University for a year, before dropping out. In the 1900s, he frequented literary circles in New York's Greenwich Village neighborhood. And after recovering from tuberculosis in a sanitorium in 1913, he decided to devote his life to writing. O'Neill wrote over 50 plays in his lifetime, earning his first Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1920 for his play *Beyond the Horizon*. He won three subsequent Pulitzer Prizes in 1922, 1928, and 1957, and he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936. O'Neill married twice and had two children, Shane and Oona. He disowned Oona after she married 54-year-old Charlie Chaplin at the age of 18, and he never saw his daughter again. His son, Shane, battled a Heroin addiction, and soon after O'Neill disowned him, Shane committed suicide by jumping out a window at the age of 40. Many of O'Neill's plays center on dysfunctional family relationships, likely influenced by his own upbringing and subsequent family life. O'Neill spent his later years in the Loire Valley in France, and continued to write until he developed tremors in his hand that restricted his ability to write. O'Neill died in a hotel room in Boston from declining health related to alcoholism. Considered a great American playwright, O'Neill is particularly celebrated for his dark explorations of American culture, the family unit, and his revival of Ancient Greek tragic theater, transposed into modern American settings.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

O'Neill's play is set in New England in 1850, just before industrialized farm labor takes hold in the United States. In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill explores the hardships of farm labor and the impoverished status of pre-industrialized American farmers. The play also takes place during the California Gold Rush (1848–1855). After a sawmill operator named James W. Marshall discovered gold in California in 1848, countless people from across the United States flocked to California in search of gold, hoping to get rich quickly. The play's characters often compare their hard life on the farm to the prospect of an easier life mining gold in California. Two of the play's character, (Simeon and Peter, leave the farm and head to California in the midst of the Gold Rush, while the central characters remain on the farm to continue their laborious, hard lives.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

O'Neill has written over 50 plays, many of which address similar themes. Both *Desire Under the Elms* and *Beyond the Horizon* (1918) are tragedies that take place in a rural American setting. *Strange Interlude* (1928), like *Desire Under the Elms*, explores dysfunctional relationships and sordid love affairs. O'Neill's play *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) similarly draws on Ancient Greek tragic theater. When writing *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill was inspired by Euripides's *Hippolytus*, in which a stepmother falls in love with her stepson, much like his protagonist Eben and his stepmother, Abbie. O'Neill also pays homage to Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, which centers around a deadly rivalry between father and son their love for a woman who turns out to be Oedipus's mother. In *Desire Under the Elms*, protagonist Eben similarly enters a rivalry with his father over the love of his stepmother Abbie. O'Neill was also influenced by August Strinberg's *The Son of a Servant* (published in four parts between 1886 and 1909). In Strinberg's play, a son grieves his mother's death and grapples with dysfunctional relationships with his father and stepmother, just as O'Neill's protagonist Eben does.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Desire Under the Elms
- **When Written:** 1924
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1924
- **Literary Period:** Modern
- **Genre:** Drama, Tragedy
- **Setting:** A farm in New England in 1850.
- **Climax:** Abbie and Eben turn themselves in for murdering their baby, and they declare their love for each other.
- **Antagonist:** Ephraim Cabot
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Ancient Love Triangles. *Desire Under the Elms* is heavily influenced by Ancient Greek tragedies involving dysfunctional

family relationships and illegitimate love affairs. It most closely mirrors Euripides's *Hippolytus*, which also features an incestuous love triangle. In O'Neill's play, the characters Eben, his stepmother Abbie, and his father Cabot roughly correspond with Hippolytus, his stepmother Phaedra, and his father Theseus.

PLOT SUMMARY

The play opens on the Cabot family's New England farm in 1850. The farmland is incredibly rocky, and oppressive **Elm trees** tower over the farmhouse, leaving it in constant shadow. Ephraim Cabot (who goes by just "Cabot") owns the farm, and his three adult sons—Simeon, Peter, and Eben—all despise him. Simeon and Peter, who are Cabot's sons from his first marriage, hate their father for subjecting them to hard lives of physical labor on the farm, and they dream of running away to California to strike it rich in the Gold Rush. But Eben, Cabot's son from his second marriage to Maw, hates Cabot for subjecting *Maw* to such hard farm labor and literally working her to death. Maw died when Eben was a teenager, and ever since then he's been consumed with the desire to avenge her death and claim back the farm, which he believes rightfully belongs to Maw, not Cabot.

On a visit to town, Eben learns that Cabot, who's been out of town for a few months, has just remarried. Cabot's sons are furious, as this threatens their right to inherit the farm. The next day, Eben hastily decides to buy Simeon's and Peter's shares of the farm—since Eben's the youngest of the brothers, having Simeon and Peter out of the way will help him more easily claim the farm back from Cabot. Simeon and Peter carefully weigh their options and decide to accept, planning to use the money to fund their trip to California. When the ageing Cabot returns to the farm with his young wife Abbie Putnam, Simeon and Peter promptly leave to seek their fortunes, cursing Cabot as they go. Meanwhile, an excited Abbie explores her new home and meets Eben. Though the two are attracted to one another, Eben's angry that she thinks the farm is hers.

Two months later, Abbie is sitting on the porch. She flirts with Eben (much to his frustration), who is on the way to see his sweetheart, Minnie. Feeling jealous, Abbie vengefully tells Cabot that Eben tried to seduce her, but when Cabot vows to kill Eben for this, Abbie regrets saying anything and tries to pass her comment off as a joke. Relieved, Cabot leans in to kiss Abbie, but she pulls away in disgust. Abbie convinces Cabot to leave the farm to her if she has a baby, and he agrees.

That night, Cabot and Abbie are in bed. Her eyes are locked on the wall to the adjoining bedroom, where Eben sits in his bed, similarly fixated on the wall that divides him from Abbie. Oblivious to this, Cabot rambles on to his wife about how he's worked hard for years, relentlessly digging **stones** out of the farm's rocky, unforgiving land, and how he believes God doesn't like easy success. He's also been lonely for years: his first wife and second wife (Maw) both died, and when Maw's parents tried to steal the farm from him, this caused him even more trouble. Realizing that Abbie isn't listening and feeling unsettled by her, Cabot leaves in a huff to sleep in the barn.

With Cabot out of the house, Abbie then goes into Eben's room and attempts to seduce him. Though the desire between them is palpable, Eben forces himself to resist. But when Abbie leaves Even's room for Maw's parlor (which has remained empty since Maw's death), Eben follows her in a confused daze, calling out for Maw. The parlor feels creepy at first to both Eben and Abbie, but the room's energy soon warms. Abbie suggests that this is a sign that Maw wants them to be together, and Eben runs into Abbie's arms, half out of grief for Maw, half out of desire for Abbie. Abbie says that she'll love him just like Maw did—that Eben will be like a son to her—and they kiss passionately and make love. The next morning, Eben is overjoyed that Maw can finally rest in her grave.

One year later, there's a party at the farmhouse. Upstairs is a conflicted-looking Eben and a baby in a cradle. Downstairs, Cabot is partying drunkenly, while Abbie, who looks pale and weak, keeps asking where Eben is. The crowd gleefully mocks Cabot behind his back, clearly sensing that Eben, not Cabot, is the father of Abbie's baby, though Cabot doesn't know this. After Cabot heads to the barn to sleep off his drunkenness, Abbie joins Eben upstairs, and they look lovingly at the baby. Down below, the crowd celebrates the miserly Cabot being fooled.

Later that night, Eben runs into Cabot outside. Cabot mocks his son, saying that Eben will never have the farm with Abbie around—she even plotted to have a child just so that she could claim it for herself. Shocked and enraged, Eben springs up to confront Abbie, but Cabot pins Eben to the wall by his neck, mocking him further. A terrified Abbie rushes to Eben's aid as Cabot releases him and walks away. Eben curses Abbie for manipulating him, and he blurts out that he wishes the baby were dead. Abbie is desperate to prove to Eben that her loyalties lie with him and not the baby or the farm, but Eben doesn't believe her. He vows to leave for California in the morning.

Just before dawn, Abbie is standing over the baby's cradle, when she suddenly lets out a cry and shrinks away in horror. She runs downstairs, flings her arms around Eben, and says that she's killed "him" to prove her love to Eben. Eben assumes that Abbie killed Cabot, and he's thrilled. Laughing shrilly, Abbie admits that would have been smarter. She explains that she killed their baby to prove to Eben that she doesn't want to steal the farm. Eben is horrified, and he immediately leaves to tell the Sheriff, leaving Abbie in tears, helplessly begging Eben to love her again.

Cabot wakes up to find Abbie looking pale and sick, and she

admits that she killed the baby. Shocked and engaged, Cabot grabs Abbie, but she pushes him away furiously and spits that the baby is Eben's. Cabot is shocked. Eben suddenly rushes back in, crying that he told the Sheriff about the murder but was instantly overcome with regret, because he really does love Abbie. They run into each other's arms. Disgusted, Cabot says that both Abbie and Eben should be hanged.

Cabot quickly decides to abandon the farm and leave for California, but when he opens a floorboard to dig out his life savings, he's shocked to find that his money is gone. Eben admits that he used it to pay Simeon and Peter in exchange for their portions of the farm. Suddenly realizing he's going to be lonely again, Cabot murmurs that he would never have turned Abbie in like Eben did. He commits himself to continuing to slave away on the farm and dying alone, thinking it's God's will.

The Sheriff arrives to arrest Abbie for the murder, and Eben turns himself in as well, although Abbie begs him not to. As the Sheriff leads the pair away, they affirm their love for each other. The Sheriff looks around the farm, noting that it's very pretty and that he wishes he owned it.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ephraim Cabot – The antagonist of the play, Ephraim Cabot (who goes by "Cabot") is a 78-year-old man who owns a farm in New England in the 1850s and works there with his three sons, Simeon, Peter, and Eben. Cabot bought the farm when he was young, despite how unforgiving the land is: because it's so **rocky**, it requires constant labor to make the land farmable. Though this backbreaking work initially made Cabot "despairful," he's a religious man who believes that God doesn't like easy work, so he tenaciously continued to farm. Cabot's ability to survive years of difficult labor on the farm has made him tough, hard, egotistical, and cruel. All three of his sons resent Cabot for how hard he makes them work on the farm, and how much he berates them by calling them weak, dumb, unmanly, and sinful for craving easier lives. Eben, in particular, despises Cabot for working Maw (Eben's mother and Cabot's second wife) to death on the farm some years ago. Cabot constantly threatens not to let his sons inherit the farm, because he thinks so little of them. At the start of the play, Cabot marries a much younger woman—his third wife, Abbie Putnam—but he's blind to the fact that she finds him repulsive and is only interested in inheriting the farm. Cabot's pride prevents him from seeing Abbie's true intentions, and she manipulates him easily throughout the play and even has a relationship with Eben behind Cabot's back. Despite his marriages and children, Cabot has been lonely for his whole life, as his belief that God only rewards people who suffer hard lives drives everybody away from him. Even the townsfolk despise him for his mean-spirited attitude. At the end of the play, Cabot convinces himself that it's God's will that he should stay on the farm, remain lonely, and work himself to death.

Eben – The protagonist of the play, Eben is Maw and Ephraim Cabot's son, Simeon and Peter's younger half-brother, and Abbie's love interest. Eben is young and handsome, though he always wears a bitter and resentful expression on his face. He firmly believes that Cabot stole the family's farmhouse from his Maw, who died some years ago. (In truth, the farmhouse is actually Cabot's, but Eben is stubborn in his conviction.) Maw died when Eben was a teenager, after a gruelling life of relentless farm labor. Eben thus believes that Cabot worked Maw to death, and he's obsessed with the idea of avenging her death and taking the farm back for himself. Eben senses that Maw's oppressive, maternal energy haunts the farmhouse, as symbolized the **elm trees** that loom over the home. Eben's desire to let Maw's spirit rest in peace drives all of his actions in the play, but he is so overwhelmed by his feelings of bitterness and resentment that he often acts impulsively and makes bad decisions. He also allows himself to be seduced by Cabot's new (and much younger) wife, Abbie. They fall in love and secretly have a baby boy (whom Cabot believes is his own son), and Eben's guilt over this consumes him. Despite being in love with Abbie, Eben still suspects that Abbie is scheming to take the farm for herself, and when he confronts her about this, he sets off a catastrophic chain of events that leads to both his and Abbie's downfalls, as well as their baby's death. Eben's character arc reflects the play's key idea that desire—like Eben's lust for Abbie and desire to avenge his mother's death—can lead to rash behavior if left unchecked, and that this kind of behavior can lead to tragedy.

Abbie Putnam – A beautiful, sensual, and shrewd woman in her mid-30s, Abbie Putnam is Ephraim Cabot's third wife and Eben's love interest. Abbie was orphaned at a young age and had a hard life, so she wants to inherit Cabot's farmhouse to secure her future. Despite the fact that the play's male characters don't think much of women, Abbie easily outwits them all for her own purposes. She convinces Cabot to leave the farm to her if she has a son, and then sets about having a child with Cabot's son Eben (who's much younger, more handsome, and more likely to bear children). Abbie successfully seduces Eben one night by promising to be like a mother and like a partner to him, two things that Eben has craved since losing his own mother, Maw, as a teenager. Despite her scheming, Abbie genuinely falls in love with Eben, and she's desperate to keep him in her life. Like Even, Abbie is also very impulsive, and her emotionally charged decisions often work against her. Early in the play, for instance, she's overcome by rage when Eben rebuffs her initial advances, and she tells Cabot that Eben tried to seduce her. This later prompts Eben to doubt her loyalties. Abbie also impulsively kills her own newborn baby after convincing herself that if her son is dead,

she will be ineligible to inherit the farm, and Eben will know that she really loves him. The baby's death leads both Eben and Abbie to spiral into impulsiveness, guilt, and rage, underscoring the play's key idea that unchecked desire can lead to impulsive—and ultimately tragic—behaviors. At the end of the play, the pair affirms their love for each other as leave the farm in handcuffs, presumably to be hanged

Simeon – Simeon is Ephraim Cabot's oldest son, whom Cabot had with his first wife. Simeon is 39 years old, and he resents Cabot for making him work so hard digging **stones** out of the unforgiving farmland for his whole life. Although Simeon hates Cabot, he's also deeply intimidated by him. Simeon thinks he's earned his share of the farmhouse through his lifelong labor, but he and his brother Peter are able to set that belief aside and think pragmatically about their prospects—something that sets them apart from the rest of the play's characters. Early in the play, Simeon sells his share of the farm to his impulsive half-brother Eben, and Simeon gleefully leaves to seek out his fortune in California's Gold Rush with Peter.

Peter – Peter is Ephraim Cabot's second-oldest son, whom Cabot had with his first wife. Peter is 37 years old, and, like his brother Simeon, he despises Cabot for subjecting the family to a hard life of farm labor. But he's also scared of Cabot, who's aggressive and mean-spirited. Despite having slaved away on the farm for his entire life digging **stones** out of the unforgiving land, Peter chooses to abandon the farm (instead of waiting to inherit it) after carefully weighing his prospects. He and Simeon both sells their share of the farm to their half-brother, Eben, in exchange for funds to travel to California. Peter then leaves to pursue a better life, along with Simeon, feeling free and happy to be rid of the farm and the tough life it demands.

Maw – Maw was Ephraim Cabot's second wife and Eben's mother. She died some years before the play begins, though her presence is still felt on the farm, as an oppressive, almost suffocating maternal energy, symbolized by the **Elm trees** that keep the farmhouse in constant shadow. When she was alive, Maw's parents tried to steal the farm from Cabot, which makes Eben falsely believe that the farm was originally Maw's. Maw died before her time, after a hard life of grueling farm labor, and Eben blames Cabot for her death. Eben's consumed with the idea of avenging Maw for the wrongs that he believes Cabot forced her to endure in her lifetime, which underscores the deep and enduring power that Maw has over her son.

The Baby (Abbie and Eben's Son) – Abbie and Eben conceive a son, known to all as "the baby." Since Abbie and Eben's relationship is a secret, they fool Cabot into thinking the baby is his own. And since Cabot had promised to will the farm to Abbie if she gave him a son, Abbie is now positioned to inherit the property—as was her initial plan in marrying Cabot to begin with. At the end of the play, Abbie suffocates the newborn baby using a pillow in an impulsive moment, as she mistakenly thinks that this will prove to Eben that she won't use the baby as leverage to seize the farm for herself and that she genuinely loves Even.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Minnie – Minnie is an older woman in town whom Eben is dating at the start of the play. Although she's never present in the action of the play, the male characters (including Eben) talk dismissively about treating her like a sexual object.

Fiddler – The Fiddler plays the fiddle at a party at Cabot's farmhouse, and he mischievously hints that it's clear to the whole community that Abbie and Eben conceived the family's new baby, even though Cabot thinks that the baby is his.

Sheriff – The Sheriff appears briefly at the end of the play, and he arrests Abbie and Eben, who both claim to have murdered their baby.

Jenn – Jenn, who died before the play starts, was Simeon's wife. Simeon briefly recalls her long, gold hair at the start of the play, but he does so in a way that reveals his dismissive attitude towards women.

THEMES

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DESIRE, REVENGE, AND TRAGEDY

As its title suggests, *Desire Under the Elms* centers on characters who are consumed by their personal desires. Domineering patriarch Ephraim Cabot (who goes by Cabot); his hardworking sons Simeon, Peter, and Eben; and his manipulative new wife, Abbie, all live on a farm in New England in the 1850s. Peter and Simeon take their time to think carefully about their desires, ultimately prompting them to let go of their longstanding wish to inherit the farm that they've toiled on for years. In letting go of this desire, they're able to pursue freer, happier lives in California. In contrast, Abbie and Eben (who also each want to inherit the farm) frequently bend to their momentary desires, causing them to act impulsively, especially when they feel vengeful. As a result of impulsivity and vengefulness, Abbie and Eben end up having an illicit relationship behind Cabot's back, having a baby (whom Abbie kills), and turning against each other, causing their combined downfall. The juxtaposition between these two pairs of characters suggests that desire—if left unchecked—can prompt rash behavior that ultimately ends in tragedy.

Peter and Simeon prioritize their long-term wishes and don't let their immediate desires consume them and drive their

behavior, which allows the pair to attain freedom and the promise of future happiness. From the beginning of the play, Simeon and Peter feel that they're entitled to inherit their family farm, because Cabot forced them to labor on it for years. Simeon feels that "we've wuked. Give our strength. Give our years," and Peter thinks they've earned the farm "by our sweat." In other words, they believe that they should be given the land that they dedicated years of hard work to. But despite having longed to own the farm for years, Simeon and Peter often mull over the pros and cons of pursuing gold-mining in California instead (the play takes place around the time of the 19th-century California Gold Rush). These mixed aspirations suggest that the brothers aren't so single-mindedly consumed by their desire for the farm that they can't consider practical alternatives to earning a living. When their half-brother brother, Eben, hears that Cabot has remarried (meaning that Cabot's new wife, Abbie, will inherit the farm instead of the three sons), Simeon and Peter decide to wait and see if the rumor is true before giving up on the farm. Their reaction shows that they prioritize patience and deliberation over hasty action, ensuring that they don't end up making a decision they'll regret. Having weighed up their options, Simeon and Peter ultimately decide to leave the farm and pursue gold in California—and they depart feeling free, unburdened, and hopeful. Their ability to carefully consider their options enables them to act in their own best interest in the long term, rather than being embittered and consumed by their desire to own the farm.

In contrast, Abbie and Eben end up destroying their lives because they're blinded and controlled by their desires (especially the desire for revenge), which cause them to act impulsively and make regrettable decisions. Despite being his new stepmother, Abbie is attracted to Eben as soon as she arrives on the farm. When Eben rebuffs her flirtatious advances to visit his lover, Minnie, Abbie is suddenly overcome by a desire for revenge. She impulsively tells Cabot that Eben tried to seduce her, but she immediately regrets her actions when Cabot threatens to kill Eben. Abbie's instantaneous regret shows that she tends to act rashly without thinking—and in this case, her actions threaten the safety of someone she cares about.

Later in the story, Abbie and Eben are overcome by their desire for each other, begin an illicit relationship, and have a son. But in a moment of suspicion, Eben momentarily worries that Abbie bore a son to inherit and steal the farm from him. Overcome with a vengeful desire to hurt Abbie, Eben threatens to leave her, saying that he wishes their son would "die this minute." Consumed by her desire to prove her loyalty to Eben, Abbie smothers their son to death. Neither Abbie nor Eben can see beyond their feelings in the moment, and they both act rashly to satisfy their immediate desires without thinking about the consequences—ultimately causing their son's death. Then, when Eben finds out that Abbie has killed their son, he's fueled by a momentary desire for revenge, and he goes to turn Abbie in to the Sheriff. But as soon as Eben tells the Sheriff about the murder, he's overcome with remorse, because he truly loves Abbie. He regrets letting his desire for revenge take over in the moment, and he turns himself in out of guilt. Eben's immediate remorse shows that he acted without thinking, and his actions end up leaving both himself and Abbie in ruin.

Ultimately, the sharp contrast between Simeon and Peter's happy ending and Eben and Abbie's tragic outcome suggests that people who take time to think things over fare better in life than those who are blindly controlled by their immediate desires. In this way, the play warns against acting impulsively to satisfy momentary passions, urges, or desires—especially for revenge.

FARMING, LABOR, AND POVERTY

Desire Under the Elms, set in 1850 on a farm in New England, captures the profound hardships that 19th-century farm laborers often endured. The farm is built on land comprised mostly of **stones**, and the whole family—including patriarch Ephraim Cabot; his late second wife, Maw; and his three sons Simeon, Peter, and Eben—spend years relentlessly digging up stones to plough the unforgiving land. Maw dies from the physical toll that farm labor takes on her body, and Cabot works his sons so hard that they end up hating him. Despite the family's years of grueling labor, the farm struggles, and the family remains poor. Simeon and Peter eventually leave their years of hard labor on the farm behind them in pursuit of gold-mining in California, and Cabot resigns himself to working himself to death on the farm, thinking it's his destiny. Through the years-long hardships that the family endures, the play highlights the laborious, taxing, and often unfruitful nature of farm life in the 19th-century United States.

While the characters clearly love their farm, their daily lives are laborious and exhausting. Cabot recollects that when he first bought the farm, it was "nothin' but fields o' stones." He's spent years digging up stones and piling them into walls to make the land farmable, frequently noting how hard his life of farm work has been. Simeon and Peter, too, note that they've spent years digging "stones atop o' stones [...] year atop o' year," showing that the physical labor needed to make the land farmable is never-ending. The stage directions note that Peter and Simeon's bodies "stoop a bit from years of farm work," underscoring the physical toll that hard labor takes on farmers' bodies. Cabot's second wife, Maw, even worked herself to death on the farm. Her son Eben thinks that Cabot "was slavin' her to the grave," and his half-brother Peter agrees that the whole family will need to slave away until they die to keep the farm running. This emphasizes how farm life can be relentlessly difficult—years of grueling labor can even kill farm workers. At the same time, Simeon and Peter seem to simply accept that

farming involves a lot of work, suggesting that their almost unbearable workload, while taxing, is typical for farmers.

The tiring nature of farm labor also makes the family members bitter and resentful, suggesting that this lifestyle is emotionally taxing as well as physically exhausting—even to the point that it can strain relationships. In a vulnerable moment, Cabot admits to his third wife, Abbie, that he grew demoralized shortly after taking on the farm, saying that "I got weak—despairful—they was so many stones." He had to change into a tough-minded person to keep up with the work, noting that "It was hard and [God] made me hard fur it," before admitting that his family "hated me 'cause I was hard." Cabot's comments expose how farm life can make people feel hopeless and bitter, force them to become emotionally hardened, and even damage important relationships. Similarly, Eben, Simeon, and Peter actively hate Cabot for the labor he's forced on them over the years. All three sons long for vengeance against their father, and they want Cabot to die so that they can be rid of him. The years of work that Cabot has burdened his sons with has made them hateful toward him and damaged their family bonds beyond repair. This suggests that the hard work of an agrarian lifestyle can be emotionally and interpersonally taxing as well as physically demanding.

The characters struggle financially as well, suggesting that farm labor is often unfruitful, leaving farmers in poverty despite their backbreaking work. Simeon and Peter note that they've spent years slaving away on the farm, whereas if they were in California, "they'd be lumps o' gold in the furrow." The play takes place around the time of the 19th-century California Gold Rush, when people across the United States flocked to the West Coast to mine gold. The brothers' observation hints that late-19th-century society is becoming less agrarian as new opportunities arise—and that it's now possible to have a much wealthier life than farming typically allows. When Simeon and Peter eventually decide to abandon the farm, they plan to walk across the country to California. That they have no means of transportation besides their own feet—and that they're desperate enough for a new life to walk thousands of miles—suggests that farming doesn't necessarily yield a payout that's equal to farmers' efforts. Farm workers like Simeon and Peter are still poor, regardless of how hard they've worked over the years. Likewise, at the play's conclusion, Cabot resigns himself to working laboriously on the farm until he dies, though he expects no "easy gold" from it. This suggests that he'll be able to keep the farm afloat but not achieve too much more, despite having invested a lifetime of labor. Cabot's plight suggests that farm life is often far from lucrative, underscoring the ongoing poverty that many farmers experienced in the 19th-century U.S. Overall, the play exposes the very real struggles of pre-industrialized American farmers—as people who had to grapple with perpetual back-breaking labor, stress, and poverty, causing them to suffer difficult (rather than idyllic) lives.

GENDER

Desire Under the Elms takes place in the 19th-century United States, when women were commonly seen as inferior to men and consequently had fewer rights and opportunities. The play's male characters—Cabot and his sons Simeon, Peter, and Eben—hold sexist attitudes, and they continuously mistreat and objectify the women in their lives. Cabot, for instance, works his second wife, Maw, literally to death on the family farm, treating her more as a laborer than a romantic partner. Maw's spirit, however, is a foreboding presence that haunts and controls the men (symbolized throughout the play by the **elm trees**), suggesting that they underestimated her when she was alive. Moreover, Eben's half-brothers Simeon and Peter openly joke about raping Cabot's new wife, Abbie—yet Abbie reveals herself to be shrewd and capable, easily manipulating the aging Cabot to pursue her own aims. The way the play's female characters are able to outsmart and exert power over the men in their lives suggests that the dismissive attitudes toward women that prevailed in 19th-century society were misguided, and that women are just as strong and capable as men.

The play's male characters all objectify and use women, embodying sexist attitudes that were common in 19th-century society. Early in the play, when Eben leaves to visit his lover, Minnie, his brothers Simeon and Peter joke about how they've all had sex with Minnie. The way they casually disrespect Minnie suggests that in the world of the novel, it's socially acceptable to treat women as sexual objects. Similarly, when Simeon mourns his dead wife, Jenn, he focuses on her physical attributes (like her long golden hair) rather than her personality or their love. This further reinforces the idea that men in this society tend to objectify women, placing importance on their beauty and sexual attractiveness rather than their intellect or character. Later on, Eben openly refers to Abbie as "any old other whore" when he suspects that she wants to take over the family farm—and his brothers Simeon and Peter go so far as to joke about raping Abbie as soon as she arrives at the farm. Their willingness to insult Abbie so openly again suggests that they think it's socially acceptable to disrespect women—and their sexualized insults underscore their objectifying, sexist attitudes. Moreover, Cabot refers to his second wife, Maw, as a "dumb fool." He worked her to death several years ago by forcing her to weed and plow in the fields while she was also shouldering all the family's domestic chores. Cabot's attitude toward Maw implies that he undervalued her and thought little of her intelligence, as he treated her more like a servant and laborer than a life partner.

Despite the men's dismissive attitudes toward women, the play's central female characters, Abbie and Maw, have tremendous power over the men. In this way, the male characters' dismissive attitudes towards women—as mere sexual objects or mindless servants—are unjustified. Abbie is

cunning and "shrewd," and she quickly gains emotional control over her domineering husband (whom all the other characters are afraid of). Eben notes that Abbie's made a "damned idjit [idiot]" out of Cabot, and Cabot indeed acts "softened" and "dreamy" around Abbie. Abbie easily manipulates Cabot into promising the farm to her if she bears a son, showing that she can effortlessly outwit Cabot. From this, it's clear that Cabot and his sons gravely underestimate Abbie simply because she's a woman—their view of her as a "whore" whom they can dominate and control doesn't line up with the powerful manipulator Abbie proves herself to be.

Meanwhile, although Maw dies before the play begins, her presence lingers ominously on the farm. Eben is consumed by a desire to appease Maw's spirit, showing that despite Cabot's dismissive comments about her, Maw has a powerful matriarchal hold on the family even after death (symbolized by the foreboding Elm trees that enshroud the farmhouse). The Elm trees keep the house in constant, suffocating shadow. Similarly, Maw's overwhelming presence is felt by all who live in the farmhouse as a chilling, unsettling energy that manipulates them. It frequently drives Cabot to sleep in the barn and makes the others feel fearful of going into Maw's formal parlor. Like the trees that overpower the house, Maw's ominous energy pervades the characters' lives, exposing Maw as a strong, imposing force on the family that controls their behavior.

These depictions of women as formidable forces to be reckoned with challenge the male characters' dismissive attitudes toward women. Female characters like Abbie and Maw are able to use manipulate and intimidate (respectively) the men around them, wielding their power subtly in spite of how they're objectified and mistreated. This more broadly suggests that men in 19th-century U.S. society tended to unfairly underestimate women—and that, in fact, women can be just as intelligent, powerful, and strong as men.

RELIGION, FAITH, AND SUFFERING

Desire Under the Elms shows how faith in God can bring about suffering. Aging patriarch Ephraim Cabot (who goes by Cabot) is a devout Christian man who often calls on God to guide his choices. Yet Cabot routinely makes choices that end up making him unhappy. He believes that he needs to live a grueling and laborious life as a 19th-century farmer in order to please God, and he rejects his sons Peter and Simeon as sinful for seeking easier lives. Cabot also believes that God wants him to remarry for the third time, and he ends up marrying a young woman named Abbie who despises him. She ultimately has an illicit relationship with Cabot's youngest son (Eben) and kills her newborn baby, leaving Cabot lonely and miserable. In the end, Cabot resigns himself to a lonely and miserable fate, believing that this is God will. The play thus shows how religious faith can sometimes misguide people into making themselves needlessly suffer.

Cabot believes that exhausting farm labor is somehow godly. This belief fuels him to keep laboring, despite how unhappy it makes him, suggesting that religious faith can push people to tolerate unnecessary suffering in their lives. Cabot notes that he could have picked more fertile land to farm on, but he believes that "God's hard! Not easy! [...] I made thin's grow out o' nothin'—like the will o' God, like the servant o' His hand." With this, he reveals that he thinks an easy life is somehow sinful and dishonorable, suggesting that his faith pushes him into living a much more difficult life than he needs to. And as a result, he and his family spend decades of their lives toiling on rough terrain, receiving little in return for their backbreaking labor. Eventually, Cabot's sons Simeon and Peter abandon the grueling life on their farm to seek their fortunes in California (the play takes place in the 19th century, around the time of the California Gold Rush). Cabot believes that his sons' "lust for Gold" is "sinful," reinforcing the idea that faith can make people reject more comfortable or enjoyable lifestyles.

Cabot's faith motivates him to make choices that end up causing him great unhappiness, suggesting that his belief in God is more of a hindrance than a help in his life. Despite how lonely Cabot is, he's cruel to his sons because he thinks that they're "soft" for not wanting to abide by God's will and slave away on the farm. His sons end up either abandoning him or turning against him, leaving him utterly alone. Cabot's faith effectively drives him to behave in ways that push people away from him, making him isolated and unhappy. In contrast, Cabot's sons Simeon and Peter—who scorn Cabot's devout attitude—leave the farm with an overwhelming sense of joy, freedom, and hope. Their lightheartedness is a stark contrast to Cabot's misery, suggesting that they are actually better off and more fulfilled than Cabot, despite their lack of faith.

Furthermore, after Cabot's second wife, Maw, dies, he decides to marry a third wife, Abbie. Cabot believes that this is God's will, even though the marriage ends up bringing betrayal and murder into his home when Abbie seduces his son Eben, and bears (and then kills) her newborn child. Simeon notes that Cabot left to find a wife thinking that he was "ridin' out t' learn God's message," yet Abbie's arrival on the farm only brings Cabot unhappiness, suggesting that Cabot's trust in his faith is misplaced because it drives him to choices that make him miserable. It's also clear from the outset that Abbie despises Cabot and is only interested in inheriting the farm. Cabot's belief that it's his religious destiny to have a wife clouds his judgement, making him overlook the fact that Abbie is manipulating him. For Cabot's entire life, he's longed to escape a deep loneliness within himself—yet he resigns himself to dying alone while slaving away on his farm, because he thinks "God's hard an' lonesome" and believes that he must be too. This belief drives Cabot to live out his remaining days miserable and alone, emphasizing how faith can do more harm than good in a person's life, driving them to make choices that leave them

unhappy.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

ELM TREES

In the play, the two elm trees symbolize Maw's and Abbie's oppressive and/or powerful maternal energy, which often goes unseen but nevertheless has a strong influence on the male characters.

Eben's mother, Maw, dies some years before the play begins, but the play's characters can still feel her oppressive, maternal energy looming over them—just like the elm trees that loom over the house, keeping it in perpetual shadow. Cabot, for instance, finds the energy in the house so unnerving and suffocating that he often sleeps out in the barn. (And later, he finds Abbie's intuition so unsettling that it compels him to sleep out in the barn, too.) This is particularly striking given that Cabot is such a macho character: he proudly owns the farmhouse and surrounding farm, he's the one who worked Maw to the death by subjecting her to such hard farm labor (at least according to Eben), he refuses to respect women, and he remembers Maw as a "dumb fool." But Maw's haunting presence is so heavy and palpable, much like the elm trees that "brood oppressively over the house," that it compels Cabot to sleep in the barn like an animal rather than having the dignity of sleeping in his own home.

The stage directions at the beginning of the play read: "[The elm trees] are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles." Given that Maw died after being worn down by a lifetime of grueling farm labor, it's clear that the trees symbolize Maw's exhausted, overworked spirit, which presses down on the house and weighs heavily on all who live inside. And indeed, Eben's longing to appease Maw's spirit and avenge her untimely death is nearly always on his mind and drives most of his behavior in the play. Thus, even in death, Maw has a strong but silent hold over the play's two main male characters.

Cabot's new wife, Abbie, embodies a similarly oppressive, maternal energy. Throughout the play, she works in the shadows to quietly manipulate both Cabot and Eben to achieve her own desires—even though both characters belittle, objectify, and underestimate her. The stage directions note that "There is a sinister maternity in [the elm trees'] aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness." Here, the elm trees mirror Abbie in several ways. First, she "absor[bs]" both Cabot and Eben into her initially "sinister" plot of taking over the farm. And as she develops a genuine romantic relationship with Eben, it's Abbie herself who becomes so "absor[bed]" by Eben, that her love for him is "crushing" and "jealous." Like the elms that keep the farmhouse cloaked in darkness, Abbie's obsession with Eben comes to cloud her judgment.

The stage directions describe how the elm trees that flank the house "bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue." Likewise, both Maw and Abbie exude a maternal energy that both nurtures and "subdue[s]" (i.e., controls, overpowers, or conquers) the men in the house. For instance, when Eben and Abbie are first physically intimate, his grief over Maw's death intermingles with his lust for Abbie, and Abbie promises that Eben will be like a son to her—*and* her lover. And throughout their relationship, Abbie indeed both nurtures and controls Eben with ease, just as Maw's memory both comforts and overpowers him. The "Two enormous elms [that] are on each side of the house" thus symbolize the strength and power that the two women in the play have over the male characters. Like the imposing elm trees, which keep the house in constant, oppressive shadow, the women in the play control the men's environment, and they are often far stronger and more powerful than the men give them credit for.

STONES

In the play, stones have two layers of symbolic significance. On the surface, they represent the hardships of farm labor in 19th-century America. The Cabot family's New England farmland is unforgivingly rocky, and they spend years digging stones out of the ground to make the earth farmable. Despite their relentless efforts to work the land, the family remains poor, revealing that a lot of their labor is unfruitful. The family's eldest two sons, Simeon and Peter, even compare the relentless drudgery of farm work—and the perpetual need to dig stones out of the ground—to imprisonment. It feels to them like they labor endlessly with no rewards. In fact, the only time Simeon and Peter feel free and hopeful is when they abandon the farm to seek their fortunes in California as gold miners. Their father, Cabot, also bitterly describes his tough life of farm labor as a life of digging stones: "I got weak—despairful—they was so many stones." The farm itself is very beautiful, and several characters admire the peaceful pastoral setting, but the reality for those who work on the farm is far from idyllic: it's an unrewarding life of perpetual drudgery that yields little wealth or happiness. The play thus uses stones to represent the difficult—and often unfruitful—reality of farm-based labor to highlight the endless work, few rewards, and ongoing poverty of 19th-century American farmers.

However, that Cabot could have chosen to farm more fertile

land elsewhere but instead tenaciously continued to farm such rocky land—thereby choosing this hard life for himself and his family—symbolizes his firm belief that God doesn't value easy success. Recounting his younger years on the farm to Abbie, Cabot declares proudly, "When ye kin make corn sprout out o' stones, God's livin' in yew!" The idea of corn sprouting up out of stones feels reminiscent of biblical miracles like Jesus turning water into wine or turning five loaves of bread and two fish into enough food to feed five thousand people. This underscores that Cabot believes that suffering on his rocky land is the righteous thing to do, and that he'll be rewarded—in this life or the next—for his extreme efforts.

Cabot even considers stones to be symbolic of God himself. He proclaims to Abbie, "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. [...] Stones. I picked 'em up an' piled 'em into walls." Here, Cabot references Matthew 16:18, when Jesus says to the Apostle Peter, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." Scholars believe that Jesus was speaking metaphorically—the name Peter means "rock," so Jesus was likely suggesting that the Church would be built on Peter's strong faith in Christ just like a physical building rests on a stone foundation. But Cabot takes the verse literally, believing that God himself is suffused in the rocks, which is in part why Cabot sees the rocky farmland as practically sacred and saves the rocks to use for stone walls. Once again, from Cabot's perspective, a life of constant toil is an honorable, godly life.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Three Plays: Desire Under the Elms, Strange Interlude, Mourning Becomes Electra* published in 1995.

Part 1: Scene 1 Quotes

❝ Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. [...] They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles.

Related Characters: Maw , Eben, Ephraim Cabot

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Desire Under the Elms is set on a farm in New England in 1850, and the stage setting here highlights the looming elm trees that overshadow the farmhouse. These two elm trees that flank the house represent the oppressive, powerful, maternal energy of the play's two main women characters: Maw (Cabot's second wife and Eben's mother, who died several years before the play is set) and Abbie (Cabot's third wife and Eben's lover). Like the elms, both women's presence in the men's lives is ominous, and unnerving.

The play's male characters speak very dismissively about women. For instance, Cabot describes Maw as dumb and foolish, and Eben generally speaks about women in a derogatory way. He's quick to label women as sexual objects and has no qualms about threatening them with violence. Such attitudes suggest that the play's male characters think that women are weak, unintelligent, sexual objects. Yet, the play's men consistently find themselves overpowered and controlled by the play's women, sometimes without even knowing it. For instance, Cabot finds Maw's presence so unsettling that it drives him out of the house to sleep in the barn, the only place he can relax. Eben, similarly, is obsessed with a desire to avenge Maw's death. He blames Cabot for working her to death on the farm, and he consistently acts with the aim of appeasing Maw's spirit. Although the men fail to recognize the women's power, they are consistently molded and controlled by it, suggesting that women are much stronger and more powerful than the play's men give them credit for.

❝ Here—it's stones atop o' the ground—stones atop o' stones—makin' stone walls—year atop o' year—him 'n' yew 'n' me 'n' then Eben—makin' stone walls fur him to fence us in!

Related Characters: Peter (speaker), Simeon, Eben, Ephraim Cabot

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

The play, which is set in 1850, begins with patriarch Ephraim Cabot's eldest sons, Peter and Simeon, complaining about their years of laborious work on the family farm. Peter and Simeon, like their father, frequently invoke the symbol of stones when they discuss how hard their lives on the farm have been. The farm's land is unforgiving and littered with rocks that they must perpetually dig out just to make the land farmable. This demands an enormous amount of ongoing labor, yet the farm itself, while subsisting, doesn't make anybody rich. The play thus suggests that 19th-century farm life is laborious, relentless, and unrewarding, much like endlessly digging stones out of the ground. In contrast, the image of pastoral bliss—of beautiful farmland and an easy life in the country with abundant farm produce at hand—is a myth.

The stones in the hard ground symbolize how farm life is also imprisoning. The characters build stone walls with all the stones they dig out of the ground, and though this frees up the land for planting crops, it also makes them feel fenced in. Farm life, this suggests, feels more like punishing prison work than a satisfying way of life: it fences the characters in and traps them in a miserable existence of perpetual hard labor.

> 'T would be hard fur me, too, to give up what we've 'arned here by our sweat.

Related Characters: Peter (speaker), Simeon, Eben, Ephraim Cabot, Maw , Abbie Putnam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

The play opens with Ephraim Cabot's eldest sons Peter and Simeon complaining about how hard they work on the family's farm. Every character in the play—Peter and Simon included—feels entitled to the farm. Simeon and Peter have labored in the fields for years, so they feel like they've earned their share of the farm "by our sweat." Their half-brother, Eben, also feels like he's entitled to the farm, because he falsely believes that Cabot stole it from Eben's mother, Maw. Cabot has also just married a woman named Abbie, who believes the farm ought to be hers, because she's married the farm's owner. And Cabot himself doesn't want to give the farm to anybody, because he's built it from the ground through his own years of hard labor. The central characters' rivalry over the farm sets up the play's plot, and most of them spend the majority of the play scheming to seize the farm.

While Abbie, Eben, and Cabot get embroiled in a bitter struggle for the farm, Peter and Simeon abandon the farm early in the play. Here, Peter admits that he feels he and Simeon have a right to the farm, too. The bitterness in Peter's voice—over the years of hard labor he and Simeon have exerted—makes it clear that both really do long for the farm. Yet, the crucial difference in Peter and Simeon's attitude (compared to Abbie, Eben, and Cabot's attitudes), is that they're able to overcome this desire to have the farm, and think realistically about how to enjoy the rest of their lives without the farm. Their ability to relinquish their desire for the farm—despite how attached to it they clearly are—is what sets them free. The other characters, in contrast, end their lives in tragedy, because they can't let go of their desires (whether those desires are for the farm, for each other, or for vengeance against each other). The play shows, through this juxtaposition, that being too overwhelmed by one's desires can ruin a person's life.

Part 1: Scene 2 Quotes

> They was chores t' do, wa'n't they?

Related Characters: Eben (speaker), Maw , Peter, Simeon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

As the sun sets, Peter and Simeon come in to the farmhouse to have dinner with their half-brother, Eben. Eben has just bitterly reflected on his Maw's death. Maw had to work so hard on the farm that it ultimately killed her. Simeon and Peter are sympathetic to Eben's concerns, but they simply reply that they, too, have had endless chores. And when they ask Eben why *he* didn't help Maw more, he admits that he had many chores of his own.

With this exchange, the play draws attention here to the tremendous amount of labor that pre-industrialized farm life requires. Maw worked herself to death (or, as Eben sees it, *Cabot* worked Maw to death), but not because anybody else was being lazy. Peter, Simeon, and Eben have all worked relentlessly for years as well. Farm labor, it seems, simply demands this kind of constant hard work—so much so that it can cripple people's energy and push them into death. The fact that the characters talk so casually about the labor they endure on a day-to-day basis stresses that their situation (and Maw's death) is nothing out of the ordinary for 19th-

century farmers. In fact, Simeon and Peter fully expect that if they stay on the farm, they'll work themselves to death, too. The play uses interactions like this one to highlight the plight of farmers around the time the play is set (1850). The endless labor of farm life is unforgiving and exhausting, despite the fact that the characters largely remain poor for all their efforts.

Part 1: Scene 3 Quotes

Waal—when I seen her, I didn't hit her—nor I didn't kiss her nuther—I begun t' beller like a calf an' cuss at the same time, I was so durn mad—an' she got scared—an' I jest grabbed holt an' tuk her! *(Proudly)* Yes, siree! I tuk her. She may've been his 'n—an' your 'n, too—but she's mine now! [...] What do I care fur her—'ceptin she's round an' wa'm?

Related Characters: Eben (speaker), Minnie, Peter, Simeon, Ephraim Cabot, Abbie Putnam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

While in town to visit his lover, Minnie, Eben hears that his father (who's been out of town for a few months) has just remarried a woman named Abbie. This angers Eben because he wants to inherit the farm—and with Abbie in the picture as Cabot's wife, the farm will legally belong to her before it belongs to Eben or his brothers.

Eben's immediate reaction is to take out his frustration on Minnie. When he says, "I jest grabbed holt an' tuk her!" (meaning, "I just grabbed hold and took her!"), he proudly describes raping Minnie, and he jokes about how his half-brothers (Simeon and Peter) and father have had sex with her, too. Eben's attitude betrays a lack of respect for women that many of the play's male characters share. When Eben says, "What do I care fur her—'ceptin she's round an' wa'm?" (I.e., "What do I care for her? Except that she's round and warm?"), he reveals that he only thinks of Minnie as a sexual object to be used, and he has no conception of her identity beyond this. He's boastful about acts of sexual violence, suggesting that such behavior is normalized in his society. The play's other male characters also embody Eben's dismissive and derogatory attitude towards women. The play thus uses such exchanges to highlight the disrespectful ways in which men often treated women in the United States in the 1800s.

Mebbe it's all a lie 'bout Paw marryin'. We'd best wait an' see the bride.

Related Characters: Simeon (speaker), Peter, Ephraim Cabot, Abbie Putnam, Eben

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Simeon and Peter have just heard the news that their ageing father, Cabot, has married a young woman named Abbie Putnam. Cabot's marriage to Abbie means that she'll have a claim to the farm, which reduces Simeon and Peter's chances of inheriting it. Although the brothers think it would be hard to let go of the farm after all the hard work they've put into it, they've also been mulling over the idea of abandoning the farm to become gold miners in California. They spend the first two scenes patiently collating the facts and weighing their options before acting, as they do here.

Both Simeon and Peter tend to think carefully about their options. Here, they decide that they'll wait and see how the situation unfolds before they plan their next move. Their forethought, moderation, and careful deliberation are ultimately rewarded, as this behavior enables them to make a successful exit off the farm. Their half-brother Eben, in contrast, often acts without thinking, and his tendency to act in the heat of the moment ends up causing him tremendous misery as the play unfolds. The play thus suggests that people who are patient enough to weigh up their options and think things through tend to fare better in life, like Simeon and Peter, who escape the farm to live better lives.

Part 1: Scene 4 Quotes

Lust fur gold—fur the sinful, easy gold o' California! It's made ye mad!

Related Characters: Ephraim Cabot (speaker), Simeon, Peter, Abbie Putnam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

On the second day of the play's action, Cabot returns to his with his new wife, Abbie. It's at this moment that Simeon and Peter finally decide to abandon the farm to become

gold miners in California—a life they believe will be more freeing and lucrative than continuing to toil away on the farm, especially now that Cabot has remarried and the boys' chances at inheriting the farm are lower. The play is set in 1850, during the California Gold Rush, when many Americans flocked to California after people began discovering gold mines there.

As Simeon and Peter depart, Cabot curses them for being "sinful." Cabot firmly believes that God doesn't like easy success, which is why Cabot has remained on the unforgiving farm to struggle and work hard, despite the fact that life on the farm doesn't make him rich or happy. Cabot's belief—that God values people who struggle in life—drives his sons away from him, which makes him feel lonely. The play suggests here that Cabot's faith is misguided: instead of living a happy, easy, love-filled life, Cabot *chooses* to suffer, and he uses his religious faith to validate this choice. In addition to this, Cabot openly rejects those around him who don't want to suffer as he does, which adds to his isolation, and therefore, his misery.

Livin' free! Whoop!

Related Characters: Simeon (speaker), Peter, Ephraim Cabot

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

On the second day of the play's action, Simeon and Peter leave the farm to become gold miners in California. On the first day of the play's action, Simeon and Peter discussed at length the difficulties involved in being a farmer in 19th-century America, which is one of the play's key themes. The men's lives have been characterized by relentless labor—not just the actual farm work, but also the hard labor involved in picking stones out of the rocky terrain to be able to farm in the first place. On Cabot's instructions, they use the rocks to build stone walls around the property, but this echoes the way that Simeon and Peter feel fenced in by this life of perpetual toil. Though Simeon and Peter are attached to the farm in some ways, it nevertheless feels prison-like to them.

Now, as they the leave the farm, they experience a profound feeling of freedom, as if they've escaped prison and can finally begin to enjoy their lives. Their palpable happiness underscores how miserable and grueling life on the farm is, because of the constant labor it demands. Peter and Simeon's happiness at leaving the farm also shows that their ability to let go of their desire to inherit the farm (even though they've slaved on it for years) allows them to achieve happiness. This is a sharp contrast from the play's other characters, who become consumed by their desire for the farm, which destroys their lives.

She cannot control a grimace of aversion and pulls back her head slowly and shuts the window.

Related Characters: Abbie Putnam, Ephraim Cabot

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Ephraim Cabot has just returned to his farm with his young, third wife, Abbie Putnam. She's enthralled with the farm and immediately runs into the farmhouse to look around her new home. But when she fawns over how beautiful her new bedroom is, Cabot reminds her that it's *their* bedroom, and she grimaces involuntarily. Abbie's reaction to Cabot shows that she finds him repulsive. Abbie's excitement about the farm, paired with her clear distaste for Cabot, is the first suggestion in the play that she married Cabot because she wants the farm—not because she loves Cabot. Meanwhile, Cabot is completely oblivious to Abbie's intentions, as he genuinely thinks that Abbie loves him and wants his companionship. Although Cabot speaks dismissively about women throughout the course of the play and tends to assume they're dumb and foolish, it's clear that Cabot is the one being fooled in this marriage. Abbie, in fact, skillfully controls Cabot's behavior throughout the play, underscoring that she—and not Cabot—is the powerful one in the relationship.

Part 2: Scene 1 Quotes

(enraged beyond endurance—wildly vindictive) An' his lust fur me! Kin ye find excuses fur that?

Related Characters: Abbie Putnam (speaker), Eben, Ephraim Cabot, Minnie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, blinded by momentary rage, Abbie vindictively tells Cabot that Eben has been lusting after her. There are a few things motivating Abbie's behavior here. Firstly, Abbie has been trying to seduce her stepson Eben since she arrived on the farm a few months ago, and though Eben is clearly attracted to Abbie, he has just spurned her advances and left the property to visit his lover, Minnie. Besides jealousy, Abbie also feels genuinely threatened by Eben, as Cabot has just told Abbie that he's considering leaving the farm to Eben instead of her when he dies. At this point in the play, it's clear that Abbie married Cabot just for the sake of inheriting the farm, and so Eben is the primary obstacle in her way *and* her primary love interest.

Abbie is a smart and shrewd character, but when she feels wronged or rejected, she becomes consumed with an impulsive desire to seek vengeance. Here, her target is Eben. Despite the fact that Abbie is attracted to Eben and wants him in her life, she's momentarily overrun with a desire to viciously hurt him because he wounded her pride and rejected her advances. This consistent pattern of "vindictive" behavior—which Eben is also susceptible to—ends up causing many problems for Abbie, despite her underlying intelligence.

(frightened now for Eben) No! Don't ye!

Related Characters: Abbie Putnam (speaker), Eben, Ephraim Cabot

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Abbie has just angrily told Cabot that Eben is lusting after her. Cabot is appalled by Abbie's accusation and he vows to kill Eben. Suddenly, Abbie realizes that she's endangered Eben, and she grows terrified.

In truth, Abbie cares for Eben, and she doesn't want him to get hurt. Abbie's immediate fear (captured here) stress that she acted without thinking in the heat of the moment. Whenever Abbie acts impulsively (in moments of rage or desperation), she tends to immediately regret her actions. This tendency underscores that Abbie doesn't think clearly when she's emotionally overwhelmed, causing her to act in ways that she later regrets. This habit causes problems for Abbie—as it does here, when she ends up putting Eben in danger despite caring for him.

O'Neill is inspired by Ancient Greek tragic theater, in which characters typically embody a fatal flaw that ends up destroying their lives. As the play continues, Abbie's regretful behavior—in moments when she's overwhelmed by her desires—escalates, ultimately causing her downfall. O'Neill thus depicts Abbie's tendency to act impulsively and regretfully when she's overwhelmed by a strong desire (typically for lust or revenge) as her fatal character flaw.

He bows his head, mumbling. She pretends to do likewise but gives him a side glance of scorn and triumph.

Related Characters: Abbie Putnam, Ephraim Cabot, The Baby (Abbie and Eben's Son)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Abbie and Cabot are talking on the porch about who he'll leave his farm to when he dies. Although Abbie was riled up at the beginning of the conversation, she takes a moment to collect herself, and she devises a cunning plan to seize the farm for herself. Here, O'Neill highlights Abbie's shrewd intelligence.

Cabot is mean, miserly, and fiercely attached to his farm. He even considers burning it to the ground when he's too old to tend to it himself, instead of leaving it to others. Despite Cabot's miserly attitude, Abbie easily changes Cabot's mind. She convinces Cabot to offer her the farm if she bears him a son. Cabot is deeply moved by this idea, and he bows his head in prayer. Abbie, in contrast, slyly looks at him with "scorn and triumph." Abbie's expression shows that she is manipulating Cabot. It's clear that she is in control of the situation and directing his behavior. Cabot tends to think of women as weak and unintelligent, but his exchanges with Abbie show that she is really the one with the power in their relationship. Her cleverly sly actions show that women are far more intelligent and capable than Cabot believes.

Part 2: Scene 2 Quotes

I got weak—despairful—they was so many stones. They was a party leavin', givin' up, goin' West. I jined 'em. We tracked on 'n' on. We come t' broad medders, plains, whar the soil was black an' rich as gold. Nary a stone. Easy. Ye'd on'y to plow an' sow an' then set an' smoke yer pipe an' watch thin's grow. I could o' been a rich man—but somethin' in me fit me an' fit me—the voice o' God sayin': "This hain't wuth nothin' t' Me. Git ye back t' hum!" I got afeerd o' that voice an' I lit out back t' hum here, leavin' my claim an' crops t' whoever'd a mind t' take 'em. Ay-eh. I actooly give up what was rightful mine! God's hard, not easy!

Related Characters: Ephraim Cabot (speaker), Abbie Putnam

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Abbie and Cabot are sitting in bed while Cabot tells Abbie his life story. O'Neill has already established that farm life is hard, tough, and exhausting. Before Cabot's sons Peter and Simeon abandoned the farm, they mostly talked about how much endless work they had to do. Cabot, who boasts about being a tough, hard man, explains here that he, too, despaired about the tough life ahead of him when he first bought the farm.

As before, O'Neill uses the metaphor of countless stones in the soil to symbolize the endless toil and labor that the farm requires. Before Cabot can earn a living on the farm, he must dig out all the stones to make the land farmable, and it seems to be a never-ending chore, showing that the farmer's work is never done. Despite all these hardships, Cabot also reveals that he could have had an easier life elsewhere. He explains here that he abandoned the farm for more fertile land elsewhere, where there were "broad medders" (meadows) and "the soil was black an' rich as gold" with hardly any stones. Yet, Cabot returned out of religious guilt. Cabot imagines God saying that an easy life on a more fertile farm "hain't wuth nothin' t' Me" (isn't worth anything to God).

Cabot believes that easy success is sinful, and that God wants people to suffer. His faith, thus, pushes him to come back to the farm and struggle on the unforgiving land. Although Cabot believes that this makes him a good man, it also makes him a tired, impoverished man. O'Neill suggests here, as he does throughout the play, that Cabot's faith leads him into an unhappy life. It even causes him to abandon his claim to more farmable land that could have given him an easier and more fruitful life. O'Neill thus encourages the reader to question whether religious faith actually helps or harms one in life, as it seems that Cabot's life has only grown harder because of his religious beliefs.

I lived with the boys. They hated me 'cause I was hard. I hated them 'cause they was soft. They coveted the farm without knowin' what it meant. It made me bitter 'n wormwood. It aged me—them coveting what I'd made fur mine. Then this spring the call come—the voice o' God cryin' in my wilderness, in my lonesomeness—t' go out an' seek an' find! [...] I sought ye an' I found ye! Yew air my Rose o' Sharon!

Related Characters: Ephraim Cabot (speaker), Abbie Putnam, Simeon, Peter, Eben

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Cabot is telling Abbie his life story while they are in bed together. He has just explained that he believes that easy success is sinful, which is why he chose to return to the unforgiving farm, suffer, and work hard, instead of building another farm in more fertile and farmable territory. As Cabot continues talking, he reveals that his tough life on the farm has also damaged his relationships. The farm requires a lot of labor, and Cabot had to push his sons (Simeon, Peter, and Eben) to work relentlessly to keep the farm running. This made his sons hate him. Cabot's hard life on the farm also cost him two wives. They both died after living tough, impoverished lives on the farm. These losses cause Cabot to feel perpetually lonely, emphasizing the emotional toll that hard labor can take on a person's life.

In addition, Cabot emphasizes, as before, that he chose this life because he thinks a hard life is Godlier than an easy life. His belief that suffering is Godly and easy success is sinful, is the reason why he treats his sons so poorly and works his wives to death. Cabot outright rejects his sons for being "soft" and disliking relentless labor, as he thinks this makes them sinful. Cabot also believes that God wanted him to seek a third wife, so he marries Abbie. The marriage ends up being a disaster, as Abbie is only using Cabot to steal the farm for herself. She also falls in love with Cabot's youngest son Eben, leaving Cabot all alone once again. Cabot's faith,

thus, persistently pushes him towards situations that actually make him *more* lonely. This underscores that Cabot's religious beliefs are not helping him in life, but hurting him.

❝ It's cold in this house. It's uneasy. They's thin's pokin' about in the dark—in the corners.

Related Characters: Ephraim Cabot (speaker), Abbie Putnam, Maw

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Cabot and Abbie are in bed, and Cabot has just told Abbie his life story. Suddenly, he feels unnerved by the atmosphere in the house, which he finds "uneasy," and he heads out to sleep in the barn. When mentioning things "pokin' about in the dark," Cabot is referring to his second wife Maw's restless, ghostly presence. Maw died several years before the play starts, but the characters feel that a "sinister maternity" permeates the house, making everybody uncomfortable. Until now, Cabot has only talked about Maw in a derogatory manner. Early in the play, he refers to Maw as a "dumb fool," showing that he thinks she was weak and stupid. Yet, it's clear that in some sense, Cabot's perception of Maw's presence in the house is controlling his behavior. The feeling of Maw's presence makes Cabot so uncomfortable that he usually sleeps in the barn. Even though she's dead, Maw still seem to be controlling life in the farmhouse. This emphasizes that the women in Cabot's life actually have a lot of power over him, though he would never openly admit it.

❝ *But her eyes are fixed on his so burningly that his will seems to wither before hers. He stands swaying toward her helplessly.*

Related Characters: Abbie Putnam, Eben, Ephraim Cabot, Minnie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

After a few months of living in the farmhouse as stepmother and stepson, Abbie and Eben are finally alone in the house at night. They have been attracted to each other since they met. Abbie has been trying to seduce Eben since she arrived, though Eben has so far resisted her advances. Here, Abbie finally gets her way. Eben is mesmerized by Abbie's power over him, and although he knows it's wrong to be attracted to the woman his father Cabot has married, he can't help himself. Eben's desire for Abbie takes over, and he's unable to think clearly any longer.

Earlier in the play, Eben boasted about using women (like his lover Minnie) for sexual gratification. He typically assumes that such women are no match for him, and he can take what he wants from them. It's clear, however, that Eben's not the one in control in this situation. With a mere look, Abbie is able to control Eben's behavior. Abbie's power over Eben shows that the play's female characters have much more control and power than the play's male characters assume. This highlights how misguided the play's male characters are for underestimating the intelligence and power of the women in their lives.

Part 2: Scene 3 Quotes

❝ *(In spite of her overwhelming desire for him, there is a sincere maternal love in her manner and voice—a horribly frank mix of lust and mother love).* Don't cry Eben! I'll take yer Maw's place! I'll be everythin' she was t' ye! Let me kiss ye, Eben! [...] Can't ye see it hain't enuf—lovin' ye like a Maw—can't ye see it's got t' be that an' more—much more—a hundred times more—fur me t' be happy—fur yew t' be happy?

Related Characters: Abbie Putnam (speaker), Eben, Maw , Ephraim Cabot

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Abbie and Eben are alone in the farmhouse at night, and both are struggling to resist their desire for each other, despite the fact that Abbie is married to Eben's ageing father, Cabot (making her Eben's stepmother). The pair are in the parlor, a room that nobody has been into since Eben's mother (Maw) died.

Eben can't separate his grief for Maw from his desire for Abbie. Similarly, as the stage directions show, Abbie can't separate her sexual desire for Eben from her maternal affection for him. Their desire for each other, is thus almost incestuous. Although Abbie and Eben are not blood

relatives, Abbie admits, in saying "it's got t' be that an' more," that she wants to be like a mother *and* a lover to Eben. Eben also switches between calling out for Abbie and Maw in this scene. He almost seems to confuse the two characters, showing that he too, craves both maternal and sexual attention. Their desire for each other is ill-fated, and their inability to resist it will ultimately ruin their lives. O'Neill draws on Ancient Greek tragedy throughout *Desire Under the Elms*, and Abbie and Eben's interaction here echoes Euripides's *Hippolytus*. In *Hippolytus*, a stepmother falls in love with her stepson, and the story ends in tragedy. Abbie and Eben's story, too, will end in tragedy because of their illegitimate desire for each other.

Part 3: Scene 1 Quotes

❝ Ye're all hoofs! Git out o' my road! Give me room! I'll show ye dancin'. Ye're all too soft!

Related Characters: Ephraim Cabot (speaker), Fiddler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

About a year after Abbie and Eben make love, Abbie has a baby, and there's a party going on in the farmhouse. Here, Cabot clears the room to show the townsfolk how to dance properly. When Cabot accuses the group of being "too soft," he reveals that his religious beliefs are negatively affecting how he treats other people. Cabot takes a lot of pride in being "hard" (meaning tough and mean). He's had a grueling life on the farm, and this has made him tough-minded. Cabot thinks this is a good thing, as he believes that God values people who suffer, endure tough lives, and become tough themselves. His religious beliefs fuel his tendency to reject others who are less tough, or "too soft," as he does with the crowd here. Cabot thus reveals that his faith causes him to push people away from him. He's already rejected his sons for being "soft," and now he's rejecting everybody else around him, which adds to his isolation and ongoing sense of loneliness.

❝ Let's celebrate the old skunk gittin' fooled! We kin have some fun now he's went.

Related Characters: Fiddler (speaker), Ephraim Cabot, Abbie Putnam, Eben, The Baby (Abbie and Eben's Son)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Cabot has just belittled the townsfolk at his party for dancing like weaklings, and he's pushed them out of the way for being too "soft." Cabot's tendency to belittle others for being weak or "soft" stems from his religious belief that God likes people who are hardened from enduring tough lives, like himself. This, of course, rubs Cabot's guests the wrong way. As soon as Cabot leaves the room, the whole crowd wants to celebrate Cabot getting "fooled." They suspect that Cabot's son is actually Eben's son, and the idea of Cabot being wronged fills them with glee. This implies that Cabot is detested in his town, and that people find him unlikeable. In fact, they actively wish him ill, and they celebrate times when he suffers, as he unknowingly does here. As before, O'Neill shows that Cabot's tendency to overvalue suffering (motivated by his religious beliefs) causes him more pain than joy, because he berates people who haven't grown tough from living hard lives, which makes them detest him.

Part 3: Scene 2 Quotes

❝ *They grapple in what becomes immediately a murderous struggle. The old man's concentrated strength is too much for Eben. Cabot gets one hand on his throat and presses him back across the stone wall. At the same moment, Abby comes out on the porch. With a stifled cry she runs toward them.*

Related Characters: Ephraim Cabot, Eben, Abbie Putnam, The Baby (Abbie and Eben's Son)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after the party at the farmhouse, Cabot crosses paths with Eben, and he provokes Eben into a fight. Cabot cruelly tells Eben that Abbie plans to steal the farm and kick Eben out, even though that's no longer true. Eben, in response, threatens to kill Abbie. Cabot steps in to intervene and protect Abbie. A violent—almost deadly—fight ensues between Cabot and Eben, captured in the stage directions here.

O'Neill pays homage here to another Ancient Greek tragedy. This time, O'Neill draws on Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*

(first performed around 429 BCE). In Sophocles's play, Oedipus gets into a deadly rivalry with a man over the love of a woman, but it later turns out that the man is his father and the woman is his mother. Eben, too, gets into a "murderous" fight with his father over Abbie. There are still some significant differences between the two stories. Abbie is not Eben's mother, she is technically his stepmother. Eben is also fully aware of how he's embroiled in Abbie and Cabot's relationship. Oedipus, in contrast, is separated from his parents at birth, so he doesn't know until it's too late that the man he kills is his own father, and the woman he falls in love with is his own mother. Despite these differences between the two stories, both O'Neill and Sophocles stress that the mix of father-son rivalry and illegitimate desire within a family are ill-fated. From this point on, Abbie and Eben's story begins to unravel, resulting in both their downfalls. Similarly, all the remaining characters in the play—Abbie, Eben, Cabot, and Abbie's baby—meet tragic ends as a result.

❝ I wish he never was born! I wish he'd die this minit! I wish I'd never set eyes on him! It's him—yew havin' him-a-purpose t' steal—that's changed everythin'!

Related Characters: Eben (speaker), Abbie Putnam, The Baby (Abbie and Eben's Son)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Eben has just fought with Cabot, and he's now arguing with Abbie. Cabot convinced Eben that Abbie had a baby so that she could steal the farm from Eben. This, of course, was Abbie's original intent, but she soon fell in love with Eben and changed her mind. Despite the fact that Abbie and Eben have been in love for over a year at this point and share a child together, Eben's triggered by Cabot's comments, and his rage takes over. Instead of trusting Abbie, he immediately turns on her and their son, without thinking about the consequences. Like Abbie, Eben acts carelessly when he feels wronged, and here, he impulsively tells Abbie that he wished their son was dead, because he thinks Abbie had a child on purpose to steal the farm from him ("yew havin' him-a-purpose t' steal"). Eben's comments make Abbie think that she needs to kill the baby to prove that she no longer has any intention of stealing the farm. Eben's rash and thoughtless comments, thus, contribute to the tragic death of the baby, and the subsequent demise of all the remaining characters.

❝ If I could make it—'s if he'd never come up between us—if I could prove t' ye I wa'n't schemin' t' steal from ye—so's everythin' could be jest the same with us, lovin' each other jest the same, kissin' an' happy the same's we've been happy afore he come—if I could do it—ye'd love me agen, wouldn't ye? Ye'd kiss me agen? Ye wouldn't never leave me, would ye?

Related Characters: Abbie Putnam (speaker), Eben, The Baby (Abbie and Eben's Son)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Eben and Abbie are arguing on the porch. Eben has turned on Abbie in a momentary lapse of judgement, and he wrongly believes that Abbie had a son so that her son would inherit the farm and she could steal it from Eben. Eben just said that he wished their baby were dead. It's obvious, at this point, that Eben isn't thinking clearly, as he loves both his son and Abbie, and would actually wish no them no harm. Yet, he speaks without thinking about the consequences. Abbie's response, captured here, shows that she's not thinking clearly either.

Abbie is terrified of losing Eben, and her desire to keep him clouds her judgment. Despite Abbie's cunning intelligence, she's overwhelmed by her desire for Eben and it takes over, making her act out of impulsive desperation. Abbie convinces herself that she needs to murder their baby, so that Eben will realize that she doesn't want to use the baby as leverage to seize the farm for herself. This is what Abbie means when she says "if I could prove t' ye I wa'nt schemin' t' steal from ye […] ye'd love me agen" (if I could prove to you that I wasn't scheming to steal the farm from you […] you'd love me again). This, of course, is a rash and thoughtless move. Abbie later admits that it would have been much smarter to kill Cabot and keep the people she loves safely together on the farm. In this moment, however, Abbie is so compelled by her desire for Eben that it overwhelms her, and she's unable to think rationally about her options. She's so consumed by her desire for Eben that she's even contemplating murdering her own child, without giving any thought to how this will affect her (or her relationship with Eben) afterwards. O'Neill shows that both Abbie and Eben fail to handle their desires well: when they feel a strong urge for something (here, Abbie's desire is for Eben), they act

without thinking, and this ends up ruining both of their lives.

Part 3: Scene 3 Quotes

But I'll take vengeance now! I'll git the Sheriff! I'll tell him everythin'!

Related Characters: Eben (speaker), Ephraim Cabot, Abbie Putnam, Sheriff, The Baby (Abbie and Eben's Son)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Abbie has just killed her and Eben's newborn baby. Although Abbie mistakenly assumed that Eben would be happy to hear that the baby no longer threatens his claim to inherit the farm, Eben is rightly horrified at losing his son. Yet again, Eben is overcome by rage and an overwhelming desire to seek revenge (or "take vengeance"). He's so blinded by the idea of getting revenge that he wants to turn Abbie in out of pure spite. This is not the first time that Eben has behaved like this. He consistently struggles to control himself when he feels wronged and he threatens to do things that end up causing him more pain than joy.

In bringing up this pattern of Eben's behavior time and time again throughout the play, O'Neill shows that Eben's inability to control himself is like a fatal character flaw. O'Neill is drawing on an idea from Ancient Greek tragic theater, in which a protagonist meets his demise because of one tragic flaw in their character that unravels their life. Eben's consistent impulsive behavior in such moments (when he's consumed by a desire, especially for revenge) is his tragic flaw. Eben was consumed by his desire to avenge Maw's death, which prompted him to have sex with Abbie. Then he was consumed by a desire to seek vengeance on Abbie when he believed that Abbie tricked him into having a child, so he told Abbie that he wished their baby were dead. Now, Abbie has killed the baby and Eben is consumed by his desire to seek vengeance against this act. All these behaviors end up causing Eben to act in ways that he regrets. He ultimately turns himself in for the child's murder too, out of guilt for his rash behavior, and his life ends in ruin.

I kin hear His voice warnin' me agen t' be hard an' stay on my farm. [...] It's agoin' t' be lonesomer now than ever it war afore-an' I'm gittin' old [...] Waal—what d' ye want? God's lonesome, hain't He? God's hard an' lonesome!

Related Characters: Ephraim Cabot (speaker), Eben, Abbie Putnam, The Baby (Abbie and Eben's Son)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

As the play draws to a close, Abbie and Eben turn themselves in for the death of Abbie's baby (whom Abbie killed), and Cabot contemplates his fate. Throughout the play, he's let his faith drive his choices. Specifically, Cabot believes that God likes people who live hard lives and despises easy success. Cabot could abandon the farm, which involves tough, daily labor to maintain. He could also seek out connections with other people, instead of remaining lonely on the farm, as he's been his whole life. Yet, Cabot ends his story as he began: he's compelled to stay lonely on the farm and work himself to death, believing it's God's will. Cabot's consistent tendency to believe that suffering is Godly ends up causing him lifelong unhappiness. As his parting comments suggest here, it will also end up causing his death. Cabot's trust in his faith, thus, is like his tragic flaw: it consistently leads him into a life of loneliness, hard labor, and misery. O'Neill ultimately uses Cabot's story to make the reader question the value of religious beliefs that make a person suffer.

It's a jim-dandy farm, no denyin'. Wished I owned it!

Related Characters: Sheriff (speaker), Eben, Abbie Putnam, The Baby (Abbie and Eben's Son)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

O'Neill ends the play with an ironic joke. The Sheriff, having come in to arrest Eben and Abbie for the baby's murder, notices how beautiful Cabot's farm is, and he says that he wished he owned it. There is an undercurrent of irony in his comment, because it's precisely the lead characters' desire to own the farm that led them to their tragic ends. Abbie and Eben are going to jail, and Cabot condemns himself to working himself to death on the farm. Wanting to own the

farm, thus, doesn't bring the characters happiness (as the Sheriff assumes it would for him), it only brings them pain. The Sheriff's unintended irony also echoes O'Neill's larger comment about the hardships of farm life. On the surface, the farm looks beautiful and idyllic (or "jim-dandy," as the Sheriff says), but in reality, 19th century farm life is a tough, hard slog that hardens people's spirits, weakens their bodies, and ultimately makes them suffer.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1: SCENE 1

It's the beginning of summer 1850 in New England, at a country farmhouse covered with oppressive, looming **Elm trees**. The window shades are always closed. The sun is setting, and Eben comes out onto the porch, ringing a large bell. He looks at the sky, which is ablaze with color, and he says it's pretty. Eben is handsome, but he has defiant eyes and a repressed demeanor. He spits on the ground as his brothers Simeon (39 years old) and Peter (37 years old) emerge from the fields, stomping around in their boots. They stare dumbly at the sky and grudgingly say it's pretty.

The stage directions emphasize the Elm trees' overpowering presence—they represent a suffocating, maternal energy, which unsettles and subtly controls all the characters who dwell in the house. This suggests from the outset that women, much like the Elm trees, are powerful influences on the characters' lives. Simeon and Peter's bodies stoop from years of back-breaking farm labor, exposing the physically exhausting nature of pre-industrialized farm life.

Simeon, speaking in a country drawl, remembers that Jenn, his "woman," died 18 years ago. He remembers her long, golden hair. Peter thinks about the gold sky and gold in California's mines. Peter reflects bitterly about how many years they've worked plowing **stones** when they could be plowing gold, though he thinks it would be hard to leave for California after all the years and work they've put into the farm. They think bitterly about their father, Ephraim Cabot, (known to all as "Cabot") who owns the farm. He left for California two months ago. They wonder if he'll die soon—Eben jokes that he hopes so. Peter and Simeon smell Eben's bacon cooking and clumsily head inside.

Although Simeon is recalling Jenn with love, it's notable that he only recalls her physical attributes—he doesn't speak to her personality, intellect, or anything about the nature of their bond as partners. Simeon's attitude suggests he tends to objectify women, and referring to her as his "woman" underscores this as well. The stones in the unforgiving terrain represent the relentless, often unfruitful nature of 19th-century farm work: no matter how hard the farmers work, they must perpetually dig out worthless stones to make the land farmable, showing that farm life is fraught with obstacles to success. It's clear that Simeon and Peter dislike their father for forcing them into lives of labor. Although they feel like they've invested a lot of labor in the farm, and they're clearly very attached to it, they're still able to envision themselves living different (and likely more lucrative) lives. This passage also reveals that the California Gold Rush is going on in the play's present. Gold symbolizes easy success—the opposite of the valueless stones that the farmers perpetually dig up on the farm for years on end.

PART 1: SCENE 2

It's twilight, Eben, Simeon, and Peter are in the sparse, bare kitchen. There's a poster on the wall of a ship and the word "California." As Eben serves boiled potatoes, Simeon scolds him for wishing that Cabot was dead. Eben angrily retorts that Cabot isn't his father—he's his Maw's (mother's) child through and through. Peter thinks that Maw was a good stepmother. Eben's bitter about Cabot working Maw to death. Peter and Simeon joke about walking to California to mine for gold, but Eben knows they won't go—they're waiting for Cabot to die to claim their share of the farm. Angrily, Eben shouts that the farm is his—it was Maw's, and she was his mother, not theirs. Simeon laughs scornfully.

At this point in the play, it becomes apparent that Cabot married twice. He had Peter and Simeon with his first wife, and Eben with his second wife (known to all as "Maw"). Maw's death shows that farm labor is so taxing that it can drive people into an early death. According to Eben, it was Cabot who pushed Maw too hard, and Eben harbors vengeful feelings towards Cabot for this. He's obsessed with seizing the farm for himself to avenge his mother's death, and this drives all his actions in the play. The fact that Maw's memory motivates his actions suggests that despite being a woman (who were typically undervalued in 19-century American society), Maw has a powerful hold over him, even in death.

Eben thinks that Simeon and Peter should have stopped Cabot from working Maw to death. Simeon and Peter think about Maw's chores—like plowing, building walls, weeding, and milking—and argue that they didn't want to interfere. It angers Eben to think about Maw slaving in the fields and then in the kitchen, though she never complained. Eben vengefully vows to shame Cabot. Indifferently, Simeon and Peter wonder where Cabot went. They recall how, when he left, Cabot hitched up his buggy, grinned madly, and talked about doing God's will—though he warned the boys not to get any funny ideas and told them to get back to plowing.

The characters continue discussing Maw's hard life, emphasizing the relentless, exhausting nature of pre-industrialized farm work. Although Maw's life was laborious, her chores were typical for farmers—stressing that farm life is exhausting, as there's constant work to be done. As before, Eben emphasizes that he's consumed by a desire to seek revenge on Cabot, once again exposing the powerful influence that his memories of Maw have on him. And through Simeon and Peter's memories of Cabot's departure, the reader learns that Cabot is a religious man who lets his faith in God drive his actions.

Eben angrily scolds Simeon and Peter for being scared of Cabot, and he gets up to visit a woman named Minnie. Peter and Simeon joke that Minnie, who is 40, is old. They recall that Cabot had her, and then Simeon and Peter did, long before Eben did. Growing angry, Eben decides to smash Minnie's face in. Simeon and Peter mockingly joke that Eben's more likely to kiss Minnie than punch her. They imagine being in California next year, and they go to bed. Outside, Eben looks up at the sky. He reasons that Minnie is pretty, soft, and warm, and he doesn't mind what she did in the past. He strides off, deciding he's going to kiss her.

Eben, Simeon, and Peter expose their dismissive attitudes about women through the way they talk about Minnie as an object to be passed around between them. Eben also has no qualms about being violent towards Minnie—despite also clearly being fond of her—suggesting that women were often treated with disrespect in this society. Despite having just talked about the years of labor they've invested in the farm, Simeon and Peter are able to think about practical alternatives to earning a living, and they imagine themselves living more happily as gold miners in California.

PART 1: SCENE 3

Just before dawn, Eben returns, cursing loudly that Cabot's the devil. He just found out that Cabot got married to a woman (Abbie) who's younger than they are. Simeon and Peter can't believe it. Dejected, Peter realizes that the woman will inherit the farm before they will. He thinks they may as well go to California now. Simeon agrees. Eben hands Simeon and Peter a contract—he's offering them $300 each for their share of the farm, so that they can afford a boat to California, instead of walking across the country. Maw hid the money for Eben before she died. Peter and Simeon aren't sure if they should accept.

It's clear that all three sons despise their father for the oppressive labor he makes them endure on the farm. Still consumer with revenge, Eben is determined to seize the farm, and he impulsively offers Simeon and Peter money to leave, without considering how he'll tackle the obstacle of another character who's now more entitled to inherit it than the boys are. In contrast, Simeon and Peter are able to see past their immediate desire to inherit the farm, weigh their chances of success, and consider practical alternatives for their future. They also take time to consider their options, rather than acting impulsively upon learning the news about Cabot's new wife.

Eben heard the news about Cabot's marriage as soon as he got to the village, and we was so riled up that he grabbed Minnie and took her. Eben boasts that Minnie may have been theirs, but she's his now. Simeon and Peter joke about Eben and Minnie getting married, and Eben storms out, angrily saying he'd rather kiss a snake than bring Minnie to take over Maw's farm. Wondering if Eben is lying and scheming to take over the farm, Peter and Simeon decide to wait and see if Cabot shows up with some woman (Abbie) who'll be their new mother. They decide that they're not going to work until then—they'll let Eben deal with the farm.

Eben continues exposing his dismissive attitude towards women. He boasts about subjecting Minnie to violence and openly insults her, showing that he has no qualms about disrespecting women. Eben's impulsive violence towards Minnie also shows that he tends to act on his emotions without considering the consequences. Simeon and Peter, meanwhile, continue deliberating more cautiously about how they'll proceed, showing that they approach situations in a more measured way than their half-brother.


PART 1: SCENE 4

Simeon and Peter are finishing breakfast in the kitchen at dawn. Eben hasn't touched his food—he feels it in his gut that Cabot is getting close. When Eben shares this, Simeon and Peter automatically get up to start work but then quickly remember that they've decided not to: if Even wants the farm, he'll have to do all the work. Incredulous, Eben wonders if this means his brothers will sign the papers and hand over the farm to him. Simeon and Peter tease Eben that they might. Eben wanders outside and takes in the farm, thinking to himself it's beautiful, and it's his.

Eben's emotionally charged desire for the farm seems to cloud his judgement, while Simeon and Peter are able to think more practically and carefully about their best course of action. As before, the characters emphasize that farm work involves a lot of perpetual, daily labor.


In the kitchen, Simeon and Peter kick up their feet and pour themselves some whisky. Feeling a little restless, they decide to get some fresh air. They wonder if this is their last day slaving to make **stone** walls before finding freedom and gold in California. They even decide to help Eben milk the cows, as the animals aren't used to Eben tending to them. As the brothers turn to the barn, they see Cabot and his bride, Abbie Putnam, in the distance, riding towards them. Eben runs towards Simeon and Peter, breathlessly asking if they'll sign the deed before leaving. The pair agree to sign, and Eben runs to get his bag of money.

Simeon and Peter are so used to working hard on the farm that they find it hard to relax, which again speaks to the constant labor that a farm requires. Most of the boys' labor (digging up stones) is unfruitful: it doesn't bring them crops and income, but merely traps them on the farm. The stones (and stone walls in particular) symbolize the idea that farm life is like imprisonment—it demands constant back-breaking effort but yields little freedom, happiness, or wealth in return. Eben continues exposing his impulsiveness: he throws all the money he has at Simeon and Peter for their shares of the farm as soon as he sees Cabot and Abbie approaching, even though it's not clear that he will actually be able to inherit the farm now that Cabot has remarried.

Simeon and Peter hand over the signed deed, collect Eben's money, and promise to send Eben a lump of California gold for Christmas. Awkwardly, they all say goodbye. Peter and Simeon decide to wait and see what Cabot's new wife looks like. They grin, feeling free. They gleefully imagine the farm's **stone** walls crumbling as they sail away into the sun. Their faces grow grim as Cabot approaches. Cabot is 75-years-old, with a hard face. He's extremely short sighted and his eyes always look like they're straining. Abbie is a vivacious, curvy, 35-year-old sensual beauty. She looks strong, yet untamed, much like Eben. Abbie's excited that the farm is hers.

The imagery of crumbling stone walls represents Simeon and Peter's freedom: they are finally free of the relentless, exhausting labor that brings them no wealth. This metaphor suggests that farm life (represented by the stones themselves) is overwhelmingly unrewarding. The substantive age and attractiveness differences between Abbie and Cabot, and her immediate excitement about owning the farm, suggest that Abbie married Cabot to secure the farm for herself, implying that she is cleverly manipulating him for her own purposes.

Cabot wonders why Simeon and Peter are just standing there instead of working, and he introduces Abbie to them as their new mother. Abbie goes inside, cooing about her house. Simeon and Peter know that Eben will be unhappy to hear Abbie calling the house hers. Cabot commands Simeon and Peter to get to work. They gleefully tell him they're going to California. They joke about burning down the farm and raping Abbie. Cabot swears, calling them sinful, as they whoop and yell about being free. In a sudden fit of rage, Cabot lunges at them, threatening to have them locked up in an asylum. Simeon and Peter slip away, singing about heading to California.

It's clear that Cabot works his sons very hard: his first reaction upon seeing them for the first time in months is to scold them for not working. But Cabot's tough work-ethic ends up turning his sons against him: Simeon and Peter are visibly happy, suggesting that their ability to plan an alternative future for themselves (despite the years of labor they've dedicated to the farm) is liberating. Their comments about raping Abbie show, as before, that men have derogatory attitudes towards women in this society, and they typically reduce women to sexual objects.

Abbie leans out of a window, gushing about how pretty her bedroom is. Cabot says it's *their* bedroom. She grimaces involuntarily. Abbie enters the kitchen and sees Eben. Noticing how good looking he is, Abbie introduces herself seductively, claiming that she wants to be friends. Sympathetically, Abbie tells Eben that she lost her mother, too, and then married a drunk who also died. Now, she's finally free. Angrily, Eben says the farm is his; with a laugh, Abbie says that it's hers. Mesmerized by her, Eben agrees. Then suddenly, he yells and storms outside. Outside, Cabot is cursing the poor state of the farm, saying that Eben will never be a real man.

Abbie's grimace at the thought of sharing a bedroom with Cabot suggests that she is not attracted to him at all and even finds him repulsive. This, coupled with the brief backstory she gives Even, suggests that Abbie has devised a plan to secure her own future wealth by inhering the farm, after suffering a hard life. It's clear that there's a strong attraction between Abbie and Eben—their desire for each other is immediate and palpable, even though Abbie is now Eben's stepmother. Abbie easily leverages this attraction to trick Eben into agreeing that the farm is hers, showing that she has a powerful hold over him—and likely Cabot, too. Cabot, meanwhile, berates his sons because he thinks they don't work hard, which hints at his belief that people need to suffer and endure difficult labor to be good people.

PART 2: SCENE 1

Two months later, Abbie sits on the porch. Eben furtively leans out of a window. Eagerly, Abbie waits for him to come downstairs. Their eyes meet, and the desire between them is palpable. Abbie seductively teases Eben for being attracted to her. Eben is momentarily mesmerized, but then he defiantly says he's going to do right by his Maw and get her farm back. Abbie murmurs Eben's name seductively, as Eben grows agitated. Vengefully, he says he's going to see Minnie. When Abbie calls Minnie ugly, Eben retorts that at least Minnie doesn't whore herself out to steal other people's farms. Visibly stung, Abbie screams at Eben to get off her porch. Eben strides off.

Abbie continues exposing herself as a powerful force on the farm. Despite how dismissively the male characters treat women, it's clear that women are strong figures in the play. Abbie, for instance, is easily able to manipulate Eben, while Maw inspires feelings of vengefulness in Eben that dictate his behavior and choices. The hostility between Abbie and Eben escalates rapidly despite—or perhaps because of—their obvious desire for each other. Both characters get easily riled up and act impulsively throughout the play, especially when they feel wronged.

Cabot emerges from the barn, wondering what all the fuss is about. Abbie dismissively snaps at Cabot. Cabot looks up at the sky and talks wistfully about getting old. He thinks he's perhaps been too hard on Eben, who's the only one left on the farm now. This angers Abbie, who reminds Cabot that she's lawful wife. Cabot looks at Abbie with lustful eyes and greedily kisses her hand. Jerking her hand away, Abbie asks if Cabot plans to leave the farm to Eben. Cabot suddenly feels irate at the thought of giving up the farm. He'd rather burn it to the ground. Abbie grows agitated, and she screams that Eben will turn her out if he takes over the farm.

Abbie's dismissive behavior towards Cabot underscores how little she cares for him. It's clear that she's only invested in the relationship to seize the farm, showing that she's much shrewder than the male characters think. Despite her intelligence, though, Abbie is unable to think clearly when she's feeling wronged and wants revenge—much like Eben. As soon as she realizes that she might not inherit the farm, she gets agitated and starts attacking Eben's character without thinking.

In a moment of vengeful bitterness, Abbie says that Eben tried to seduce her. With sudden rage, Cabot vows to shoot Eben. Frightened, Abbie says that she was just angry about not inheriting the farm and that she was joking. Then she reasons that Cabot needs Eben's labor on the farm. Calming down, Cabot agrees. Cabot decides that he'd rather leave the farm to someone who's his own blood, unlike Abbie. Abbie looks hateful, then shrewdly thoughtful. She tells Cabot she's praying for her own son. Joyfully, Cabot looks misty eyed, and he says he'll gladly leave her the farm if they have a son. He just wants to make her happy. Abbie looks triumphant.

In this passage, Abbie is momentarily taken over with a powerful desire for revenge. Like Eben, she speaks rashly, without thinking about the consequences of her actions. Abbie's immediate regret at threatening Eben's safety shows that she acts against her best interests in the heat of the moment, as she clearly desires Eben and wants him around. Despite her impulsive outburst, Abbie nonetheless continues demonstrating her intelligence. Once she's able to collect herself, Abbie cleverly manipulates Cabot into promising the farm to her. Cabot is easily swayed by everything Abbie says, showing that he's under her control.

PART 2: SCENE 2

That night, Eben is in his bedroom, looking at the wall. On the other side of the wall, Abbie and Cabot are sitting in bed. Cabot clutches Abbie's knee, but she just looks at the wall, as if she's meeting Eben's gaze through it. Eben instinctively raises his arms, as if to embrace Abbie, before cursing and pacing around the room. Cabot reminisces about his hard youth digging **stones** out of the ground. The work was so punishing that he grew despondent, knowing that he could have farmed on more fertile land elsewhere, but he decided that God doesn't like easy success. He's disappointed that his sons don't see that.

Cabot's memories of his early life reveal that he's been slaving away on the farm for years. As before, the stones represent the exhausting, unfruitful nature of life on a farm—and particularly this farm. Cabot reveals that although he could have picked easier land to farm on, his faith pushed him to keep struggling on the unforgiving land: he believes that God values people who endure hard lives. This shows that Cabot's faith has the power to push him into situations that make him suffer.

Cabot explains that he's always been lonely. He married his first wife and had Simeon and Peter. After she died, he married Maw, and they had Eben. Maw's parents contested Cabot's ownership of the farm, which is why Eben thinks it belongs to Maw. Cabot thinks he's worked harder than all his sons combined, and he believes his children are "soft." Noticing that Abbie isn't really listening to him, Cabot angrily tells her to pay attention. Resentfully drawing her eyes away from the wall, Abbie distractedly foretells that Cabot will get his son.

Cabot reveals that the farm is actually his—despite Eben's stubborn conviction that it originally belonged to Maw's family. Cabot's hard life on the farm has cost him two wives, which speaks to how the exhausting nature of farm life can take a toll on people's relationships. Cabot's faith—specifically his belief that people need to suffer hard lives to be Godly—also pushes him to reject his sons as "soft" for craving easier lives than the one he's chosen. Cabot's beliefs make him push people away from him, leaving him perpetually lonely, while his ongoing misery suggests that his faith is not leading him towards a life that makes him happy.

Suddenly, Cabot feels uncomfortable. Abbie's intuition gives him the chills. He heads out to sleep in the barn, where he feels warm, safe, and comfortable—it doesn't have the ominous cold feeling that permeates the house. After Cabot leaves, Abbie and Eben sigh simultaneously from their respective bedrooms. Suddenly, Abbie gets up and goes into Eben's room. Their eyes burn with desire, and Abbie runs over and kisses Eben. Eben's dumbfounded, but he reciprocates before coming to his senses and throwing her off of him. Abbie leans in saying she that knows Eben wants her.

The ominous feeling in the house is a suffocating maternal energy that has permeated the house since Maw died. Both this oppressive feeling and Abbie's cunning intuition make Cabot feel unsettled—driving him to sleep out in the barn rather than inside the house. This shows that the female characters (Abbie and Maw) are indeed powerful: they control Cabot's behavior, even though he severely underestimates their hold over his life. Despite being so powerful and cunning, Abbie finds herself unable to resist her desire for Eben. But Eben is clearly overwhelmed by Abbie's advances, showing that she has power over him, too.

Eben says he was thinking about Minnie. With a tortured expression, Abbie calls Eben a dog. Eben is adamant he won't be fooled by Abbie's manipulation. Abbie taunts Eben, saying she can sense his lust for her. She tells Eben she's going down to Maw's fancy parlor (where nobody has been since Maw died) to wait for him to court her. Eben is confused, commanding Abbie not to go in there, but he withers under her gaze. Abbie coos at Eben to come find her in the parlor and heads downstairs. Bewildered, Eben mechanically puts on his white shirt, tie, and coat. He heads downstairs barefoot, with a confused expression on his face, calling for his Maw.

Abbie impulsively insults Eben (even though she wants to seduce him) when he brings up Minnie. As before, she feels momentarily vengeful and this clouds her judgement, causing her to act rashly. Once she steps back into her power and cunning, though, she continues controlling the situation and exerting her influence over Eben. Eben's mechanical, confused demeanor shows that he's unable to resist her hold over him. He's also bewildered because his desire for Abbie is intermingled with his deep love and grief for Maw, and so both women are directing his behavior.

PART 2: SCENE 3

Eben walks into the parlor a few minutes later, looking obsessive but confused. The parlor is a tomblike space that frightens Abbie, though the ominous feeling subsides into a softer, warmer energy. Eben's convinced that the strange atmosphere is Maw's spirit. To Abbie, it seems like Maw's spirit has calmed because Maw realizes that Abbie loves Eben. Eben's not sure about this, considering Abbie wants the farm for herself. Lamenting about how poorly Cabot treated Maw, Eben starts sobbing. Abbie wraps her arms around him, saying she'll be everything that Maw was to him, and he can be like her own son. They kiss passionately.

As before, both Eben's desire for Abbie and his grief for Maw control his behavior—he's overpowered by both, emphasizing their hold over him. Abbie's and Eben's desire for each other takes on an incestuous tone in this scene, as she promises to be like a mother and a lover to him. Here, the play draws inspiration from Ancient Greek tragedies such as Euripides's Hippolytus, in which a stepmother falls in love with her stepson, triggering tragic results. Abbie is technically Eben's stepmother, and Eben's feelings for Abbie blend sexual desire with his craving for maternal attention in the wake of his grief over Maw's death.

Suddenly, Eben pushes Abbie away in a sudden fit of terror. He doesn't know what Maw wants him to do. Abbie thinks that their romance can be the vengeance that Maw wanted against Cabot. Eben's face lights up at the thought of Maw finally resting in her grave. The pair declare their love to each other and kiss, in a fierce embrace that releases months of pent-up passion.

Eben is clearly morally conflicted by his illicit attraction to Abbie. However, when Abbie suggests that their lovemaking will give Eben the revenge he craves over Cabot and avenge Maw, Eben is eager to pursue the relationship. Like Abbie, when Eben's consumed by a desire for revenge, he acts impulsively without weighing up the potential consequences. Eben continues to be driven by a desire to avenge Maw's suffering, showing that she has a powerful hold over him, even in death. Similarly, Abbie is easily able to guide Eben into complying with her desires, emphasizing her power over him, too.

PART 2: SCENE 4

Eben wakes at dawn with a broad grin on his face. Abbie kisses him passionately, and she anxiously wonders if Eben really loves her. Eben confesses that he does, though he'd better get to the barn so that Cabot doesn't get suspicious. Abbie laughs dismissively, knowing she can easily fool Cabot. Abbie's excited to air out the parlor and use it for herself. Eben heads to the barn and greets Cabot warmly, saying their disagreement is over because Maw's finally gone to rest in her grave. Cabot is confused and suspicious. Eben looks around the farm with a possessive expression as he starts working. Cabot looks on with pity, thinking that Eben is a fool.

Although Abbie originally wanted to conceive a son to inherit the farm, her newly anxious demeanor shows that she really does love Eben, as she worries about losing him. In contrast, Abbie is highly dismissive about Cabot. She doesn't care for him at all, and she knows that she's smart enough to easily outwit him and keep pursuing her own desires. Eben is happy because he feels like he has somehow done what Maw would have wanted. As before, her influence continues to guide his feelings and behavior.

PART 3: SCENE 1

It's a year later, on a warm spring night. Eben is in his bedroom, wrestling with his conflicting emotion. There's a baby in a cradle in the other bedroom. Downstairs, there is a festive party going on. Cabot is drunk and boisterous, but Abbie sits in a chair, looking strained. She keeps asking where Eben is, as the crowd watches with knowing looks. Cabot asks people to dance, and they reply that they're waiting for Eben, before bursting into howls of laughter. Someone jokes about being surprised that Cabot had it in him to produce a son at his old age. The crowd laughs again.

Abbie and Eben's illicit affair causes Abbie to get pregnant and give birth to Eben's son (simply known as the baby). Eben's conflicted emotions imply that the baby is indeed his, and he's wrestling with his feelings about this. Abbie's desire for Eben has begun to cloud her judgement, and she is growing more obsessive about him. The whole town (except for Cabot) appears to know what has really happened—and they think it's hilarious, which suggests that they are happy to see Cabot being manipulated.


Cabot scolds the fiddler to start playing, and a group starts square dancing. Suddenly, Cabot interrupts the dance, saying they're all too soft and he's going to show them how to really dance. He starts dancing grotesquely while boasting about how strong and tough he is. Upstairs, Eben walks to the cradle and looks at the baby. At the same time, Abbie gets up to check on the baby. Cabot affectionately pats Abbie on the back and she shrinks away. Feeling drunk and dizzy, Cabot steps out for some fresh air. Somebody loudly declares that it's obvious what's happened in this house, and the crowd mockingly asks where Eben is, as more laughing ensues.

Cabot belittles the townsfolk for being too soft, just as he does with his sons, disgusted by their desire to pursue a life other than hard farm labor. Cabot sees himself as the only hardworking person in town, and this makes him feel superior. Throughout the play, Cabot is often boastful about how tough and hardened he is because he thinks God doesn't like easy success and favors people who can endure laborious, difficult lives (like Cabot's taxing life on the unforgiving farm). Given all the laughter and jeering in the crowd, it seems that Cabot's beliefs have caused the whole to town to dislike him.

Upstairs, Abbie and Eben kiss, before looking lovingly at the baby. It bothers Eben that Cabot's taking the baby away from him, like everything that's Eben's. Abbie soothes Eben, telling him to be patient. Meanwhile, outside, a grumbling Cabot heads to the barn to sleep off his drunken state. The fiddler gears up to start playing again, so that the crowd can celebrate Cabot getting fooled. The music starts up, and the crowd dances with glee.

The crowd's cheerful glee shows that the townsfolk are delighted that Cabot's been fooled, underscoring how much they hate Cabot for being such a mean-spirited man. Although Cabot acts tough and strong, he's driven out of the house and into the barn, yet again. It's clear that the women—first Maw's lingering spiritual presence, and now Abbie—are the ones who really control what's going on in the farmhouse.

PART 3: SCENE 2

Half an hour later, Eben is outside, staring up into the sky with a pained expression. Cabot walks up, looking sleepy. With a mocking expression, Cabot asks Eben why he isn't inside dancing with the girls and picking out a wife. Angrily, Eben bursts out that he's not marrying anyone. Cabot makes fun of Eben for thinking that the farm was Maw's when it's actually Cabot's. He cruelly jokes that Eben will never get the farm from Abbie's clutches. Cabot explains that Abbie had a plan to have a son so that she could cut Eben off and take the farm for herself. With a dumbfounded expression of grief and anger, Eben says he'll murder Abbie.

Although Eben loves Abbie, his desire for the farm clouds his judgment in his encounter with Cabot. Eben immediately takes Cabot's bait and is overwhelmed with an impulsive urge for revenge against Abbie. Instead of trusting her, or thinking through the information that Cabot taunts him with, Eben's mind goes straight to the idea of killing her, without giving any thought to how the repercussions of such actions.

Cabot angrily jumps in Eben's way and an ugly fight ensues, until Cabot pins Eben to the wall by his throat. Abbie emerges and runs towards them in a panic, begging Cabot to let go of Eben's throat. Triumphantly, Cabot releases Eben and dances off, saying he'll raise his new son to be stronger than Eben is. Abbie runs to Eben, but Eben pushes her off with rage, saying that Abbie's made a fool of him and their lovemaking was just part of her devious plan to seize the farm. Frantically, Abbie denies it, begging Eben to believe she loves him. She's terrified that Eben will leave her.

Cabot and Eben's rivalry over Abbie echoes another Ancient Greek tragedy. This time, O'Neill draws on Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, in which Oedipus fights with an older male rival (who turns out to be his father) over a woman (who turns out to be his mother). Like Oedipus's story, Eben's story begins to take a tragic turn after a quasi-incestuous love triangle triggers a conflict between rivals who are father and son. Eben's blind rage and desire for revenge causes him to say vicious things to Abbie, and he sets off a chain of events with his rage-filled threats that will end up causing his own demise.

Eben isn't listening. He's angrily planning to leave for California in the morning, as he curses Abbie and the baby. He wishes that the baby—who's now to inherit the farm—would die this minute. Dumbfounded, Abbie desperately says she'd kill the baby before letting Eben leave, just to prove that her loyalties lie with Eben, not the baby and the farm. Eben coldly says it's no use lying. Abbie flings herself at Eben in anguish, begging him to believe that she can fix this. Suddenly moved, Eben admits that he would love Abbie again if she could really fix it, before pushing her off him. Abbie looks on as he walks away, vowing to prove her love for Eben.

Despite Abbie's pleading, Eben is convinced that Abbie had the baby so that she (and her son) could inherit the farm and cut Eben out. Eben feels wronged, and this fuels him to rashly say things that he will later regret—a pattern he repeats throughout the play. Here, for instance, he blurts out that he wishes the baby were dead, without really meaning it. This somehow convinces Abbie that if she kills the baby, she'll prove to Eben that she's ineligible to inherit the farm, and that her loyalty lies with Eben. Abbie is also thinking impulsively because her desire for Eben is clouding her judgement. Neither character is thinking about the consequences of the things they are threatening to do.

PART 3: SCENE 3

It's just before dawn, and Abbie bends over the baby's cradle in the dim light, with a look of terror and triumph on her face. Suddenly, she backs away from the cradle with horror, and runs to the kitchen, passionately kissing Eben, who ignores her. Hysterically, Abbie says she's proved her love for him. Noticing Abbie's hysterical state, Eben asks what she's done. Abbie says she killed him. Eben's astonished, but he recovers quickly, saying they have to make it look like Cabot killed himself. Abbie laughs wildly, saying that she didn't kill Cabot—though perhaps that would have been a better idea. Suddenly, it dawns on Eben that Abbie killed their baby.

Abbie—who's blinded by her desire for Eben—decides to suffocate their baby. Her expression of horror shows that she immediately regrets her actions, underscoring that she was acting impulsively. As Eben notes, it would have been much smarter to kill Cabot (whom they both despise and stands in the way of their relationship) and keep her bourgeoning family unit intact to inherit the farm.

Eben falls to his knees, trembling, as Abbie explains that she suffocated the baby with a pillow. She did it to prove that she loves Eben, because he wished the baby was dead. With horror, Eben says he'd have killed himself before harming so much as the baby's finger. Abbie sinks pitifully to her knees, begging Eben not to hate her. Furiously, Eben says that Abbie is poison. Eben even suspects that Abbie wants to blame *him* for the murder, so that she can take the farm. Shaking and sobbing incoherently, Eben rushes for the door tell the Sheriff. Abbie runs after him, begging Eben to love her, before swaying and fainting in the doorway.

The tragic weight of Abbie's actions starts to dawn on both characters—it's clear that their lives are forever altered by Eben's rash threats and Abbie's impulsive murder of their child. Despite this, Eben continues to act impulsively—he's characteristically overwhelmed with a desire to seek revenge on Abbie—and he runs to tell the Sheriff about her crime without thinking about the consequences of his *actions. Eben and Abbie's consistently impulsive behavior (when they're blinded by desire or want to seek vengeance) is the tragic flaw in their characters that derails their lives.*

PART 3: SCENE 4

An hour later, Cabot wakes up and heads to the kitchen. Abbie sits there, looking blank. She blurts out that the baby's dead—she smothered him with a pillow. Trembling, Cabot asks why. Abbie furiously bursts out that the baby wasn't even his, it was Eben's. Dully, Cabot wipes a tear from his eye and Abbie starts sobbing. Cabot's expression hardens, and he decides that if the baby was Eben's, he's glad it's dead. Cruelly, Cabot jeers that he wasn't fooled, and he'll live to see Abbie hung. Abbie blankly responds that Eben's already gone to tell the Sheriff. Cabot murmurs that he would have never turned Abbie in. Despairingly, Cabot realizes that he's going to be lonely again.

The tragic repercussions of Abbie's actions continue to unfold in Scene Four. Even the mean-spirited Cabot is momentarily moved by the baby's death when he cries for it. Cabot also realizes that he's going to be lonely yet again—though he believed he was doing God's will when he sought out Abbie as a wife, his choices, as before, only bring him more loneliness. The play suggests here that Cabot's faith has led him astray, as it causes him to make decisions that consistently make him unhappy.

Eben runs in, crazed with guilt, begging Abbie to forgive him for telling the Sheriff. Abbie clings to Eben, joyfully saying that she forgives Eben, as long as he loves her again. Eben admits that as soon as he told the Sheriff, his heart burst with grief and he realized he truly loves Abbie. Abbie strokes Eben's hair, tenderly calling Eben her boy. Eben wants to share in Abbie's punishment because he feels so guilty. Abbie sobs, saying she doesn't want Eben to suffer. Eben says it's no use—he's turning himself in.

As before, Eben regrets his rash, emotionally charged behavior. Eben immediately regrets his decision to turn Abbie in because he's now likely condemned Abbie—whom he truly loves—to be hanged. Eben's guilt at betraying Abbie makes him want to turn himself in too. In the end, both characters meet their demise because they act impulsively in the heat of the moment.

Cabot stares at the pair, deciding they both ought to be hung for their sinful lust. With a crazed look on his face, he rants about burning the farm to the ground and dancing all the way to California. He eagerly runs to a floorboard to dig out his life savings, before realizing they're not there. Blankly, Eben admits that he gave the money to Peter and Simeon in exchange for their share of the farm. Cabot looks nauseous, but then a strange expression comes over him. Cabot decides that God doesn't want him to earn easy gold in California: God wants him to struggle and be lonely on the farm, so that's what he'll do, until the day he dies.

Cabot's fate is also tragic. He's spent his whole life enduring hard labor and loneliness, and he concludes that he must live out his remaining days in the same way. Cabot believes it's godly to suffer such hardships and sinful to enjoy an easy life, despite how unhappy this makes him. Cabot's faith, thus, is his tragic character flaw: it consistently drives him to act in ways that are not good for him, and he ends up miserable and alone as a consequence.

The Sheriff bursts in to arrest Abbie. Eben turns himself in as well, as Abbie brokenly screams that it was her doing alone. Cabot tells the Sheriff to take them both. Eben and Abbie turn to each other and say they love each other as they're being led away. The Sheriff looks around the farm, saying that it really is a beautiful place, and he wishes he owned it.

Abbie and Eben's fates present a stark contrast to Simeon and Peter's fates. Simeon and Peter were able to think about their options and carefully plan an exit to a happier life, which also freed them from getting roped into the rest of the events of the play. Abbie and Eben, meanwhile, let their desires control them, and they acted hastily in the heat of the moment, causing their lives to implode.

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O'Neill, Eugene. Desire Under the Elms. Vintage. 1995.

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O'Neill, Eugene. Desire Under the Elms. New York: Vintage. 1995.