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Julianne Mandara Due: 10/19/10 Desire Under the Elms Essay DSTP- Nan Withers Symbolism In Desire Under the Elms The drama Desire Under the Elms by Eugene O'Neill is a tragedy that is full of symbolism. The themes of the drama are brought about through the use of symbols that exist within various elements of the play, especially in the setting and the plot. Such themes include a power struggle among the major characters, human greed, and humanity being controlled by the fates. Ultimately, however, symbols such as the elm trees, the farm, the parlor, and the baby help characterize the protagonists, provide tone, explain the conflict and expose the characters' weakness as humans who fall to their emotions. The first major symbols, described in the introduction of the setting, are the two massive elm trees. These trees are symbolic of the two dead wives of Cabot. Their omnipresent location looms over the house, signifying that the deaths of the two women still affect the lives of those living in the house. O'Neill himself describes the elms as, "[brooding] oppressively over the house...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. " [i] Aside from establishing a conflict for the characters of dealing with accepting the loss of the wives, the elm trees establish a gloomy tone right from the play's commencement. Eben mourns his mother throughout the play, and is sour towards Cabot for working her to death. His objective of inheriting his mother's farm, and his internal struggle of whether to be with Abbie are influenced by whether he feels his mother's presence in the house. His primary objective is to win back his mother's farm, and he becomes blinded by his ambitions; so much that he is quick to accuse Abbie, the

woman he loves, of plotting to steal his mother's farm. Similarly, Cabot is affected by the memory of his dead wives. A central theme of the drama is being powerless to the fates, and for Cabot, his fate is the product of killing his first two wives. There is an element of karma in the conclusion of the drama, in which Cabot reflects on his loneliness; however, it was his own doing that caused him his loneliness. Aside from the elms, the farm itself is a symbol of security and possession. The struggle over ownership of the farm is the most prominent conflict in the play. For Cabot, the farm symbolizes his supremacy and life's purpose. It is very significant that he controls the farm, for it means that he controls the lives of those who live on it. To Cabot, as long as he is in possession of the farm, there will be people around working on it, and waiting to inherit it. It is also symbolic of his legacy, and what he worked in his life for. The farm symbolizes his sense of ignorance, for never changing his way of life. It reflects his primitiveness, or his lack of wanting change, and for making his life and the lives of those working on the farm stagnant. His control of the farm is significant, as it means no one else, like Abbie and Eben, has control of their own fate. For Eben, the farm is symbolic of the love of his mother, and of getting what is rightfully theirs. Therefore, it is ultimately a symbol of Eben's pride and independence. By inheriting the farm, Eben is avenging his mother's memory and establishing himself as an individual with property rights. His possession would show that he is a man good for the word he gave his mother, and a good son to his father; in spite of the fact that Cabot himself never showed Eben affection. For Abbie, the farm is security, and something she can call her own. Because she had never had control of anything that was hers, the farm is a tangible representation

of herself. It is also a manipulation tool for Abbie to get her way with Eben and Cabot, and is physically something she controls. Her need to control something that is hers, whether it is the farm or Eben, is the objective for Abbie throughout the play. Similarly to both the trees and the farm itself, the parlor is also a symbol. Where the elms symbolize the presence of the dead wives, and the farm symbolizes possession, the parlor is symbolic of Eben's mother and her control over the farm. Because it was where she was laid after her death, the room had been considered her room, as Eben himself describes, " it [hadn't] been opened since Maw died and was laid out thar. "

[ii] Therefore, the room itself is characterized with a mood of fear, vulnerability, and gloom, as it is a room that is filled with the presence of Eben's mother. The scene in the parlor is the climax, as it is symbolic of a power struggle between Abbie and the mother. Abbie uses the parlor as a manipulation tool to control the entire house, as she herself states, " I'm a goin' t' make all o' this hum my hum! They's one room hain't mine yet, but it's a goin' to' be tonight. " [iii] Eben himself struggles to let Abbie into his life, because he does not want to upset his mother by having Abbie replace her. In the scene, Eben continually pleads to his mother and asks her if he should submit to Abbie's seduction. Therefore, when Abbie successfully seduces Eben in the parlor, she achieves her objective in controlling Eben. At the climax, the room changes from being the mother's room to being Abbie and Eben's room. During the falling action, Eben no longer strives to fulfill his mother's dying wish, as even in the resolution of the play, Eben goes with Abbie to jail and does not stay to inherit the farm. The last major symbol in the drama is Abbie and Eben's baby. It is symbolic of the love of Eben and

Abbie. Theirs was a love that could never live; a love that was doomed to end. The baby is a tangible representation of what was theirs. Just as their love could not grow in the traditional sense of a relationship: for example, no courting, no marriage, or no public affection, the baby could not grow to its full potential. The baby is also a representation of the battle over property between Cabot, Eben, and Abbie. Such a power struggle is evident in the lack of O'Neill providing it with an identity: the baby remains nameless throughout the duration of the part three. Therefore, the baby was merely an object to the three characters. The baby, for Cabot, represents his heir and the means by which his legacy and name would carry on after his death. For Abbie, the baby was symbolic of her hold over Eben. Because it was Eben's child, she had a physical way to prove that Eben did love her. However, for Eben, the baby was just a tool to get back at Cabot for his mistreatment of Eben through the years. It was his revenge for Cabot stealing his mother's land and for Cabot working her to death. The symbols in the drama *Desire Under the Elms* serve many purposes; most prominently, to bring about themes, characterization, conflicts, and tone. The symbols of the two elm trees, the farm, the parlor, and the baby all help to establish that Abbie, Cabot, and Eben strive to have ownership and control of the things and people in their lives. However, their lives are ultimately controlled by their fate, and their power struggles are deemed futile. Endnotes -----

- 1) [i] O'Neill, Eugene. *Desire Under the Elms* in *The Bedford Introduction to Drama*. 6th ed. Ed. Lee A. Jacobus. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009, p. 595. 2) [ii] O'Neill, p. 608 3) [iii] O'Neill, p. 608