

Desire under the
elms: the desire for a
birthright



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Eugene O'Neill's classic American tragedy *Desire Under the Elms* tells the story of characters that are driven by a number of common, and therefore competing, desires. Many believe that O'Neill intended the *Desire Under the Elms* to refer to the desire between Eben and Abbie, and therefore place strong emphasis on the Oedipal themes that are visible as a result. While this incestuous desire is important, the desire for the farmland that is shared by all the characters is another significant dimension of the play's titular desire that needs to be examined. The struggle for the family inheritance depicted in the Cabot family is an age-old story that dates back thousands of years, and is even evident in the Bible. Much like the Biblical character Jacob, *Desire's* Eben is competing for what he believes to be his birthright—the Cabot farm. In *Desire Under the Elms*, much attention is paid to the land that this family is struggling over, from the very first words of the play until the very last. The play opens with a scene that establishes this central conflict over the land, as the three brothers rant about who deserves to inherit the farm. In a revealing exchange during the second scene of the play, Eben, Simeon, and Peter set up this battle for the inheritance of their parents' farm: Eben—...Ye won't never go because ye'll wait here fur yer share o' the farm, thinkin' allus [Cabot]'ll die soon. Simeon—We've a right. Peter—Two thirds belongs t' us (O'Neill 7). Throughout the play this mentality of entitlement is dominant and drives each of the brothers' actions—as Eben correctly points out, it is the only reason that all three brothers are still waiting around and living at the farm. The battle for the farm becomes more complicated when the boys' father Cabot brings home a new wife, Abbie, who also is apparently hungry for the farmland. Although Eben's Oedipal desire for Abbie seems to determine his final actions in the story, a reminder

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of the farm's beauty and desirableness ultimately closes the play. As the Sheriff is about to take Abbie and Eben away, he enviously (and tellingly) proclaims, "It's a jim-dandy farm, no denyin'. Wished I owned it!" (O'Neill 64). O'Neill is sure to intersperse such a reminder in an attempt to reinforce man's primal desire to own land and justify the boys' conflict over the beautiful stone-bound farm. O'Neill is known to include his personal life in his writings, and he surely expresses his own religion vis-à-vis this play's biblical allusions. As aforementioned, the hunger for land is no new phenomenon, and a great deal of the Bible revolves around conflict over land—especially between brothers. The common desire for the land shared by all the characters of the play is what spurs evil amongst them, and O'Neill seems to warn against such a fate. This sinful competition between the males of the family is both for the land and for the maternal love, and brings each of the characters to a seemingly unfortunate fate: Eben and Abbie end up in love but imprisoned, Cabot has the farm but no wife or family, and Simeon and Peter have no rights to the farm but are in search of gold in California. O'Neill's Christian theology is discernable in this play, in which he explores these age-old issues in an almost cautionary manner. More specifically, by portraying Eben as cunning and sly, O'Neill gives an apparent nod to Jacob, the Bible's quintessential trickster. In the Book of Genesis, Jacob takes advantage of his momentarily hungry brother Esau by buying Esau's birthright with a bowl of soup. (It is understood that in the Bible the elder brother—Esau in this case—is to receive the "birthright," which is a larger portion of the family inheritance and essentially the position of family patriarch.) Later Jacob also tricks his father Isaac into giving him the coveted familial "blessing"—which Esau was also supposed to receive—to Isaac's

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dismay. Like Jacob, Eben is the youngest son of the Cabot family and battles his brothers in order to overtake the birthright of the farm. Eben is manipulative and tricks his brothers in order to acquire their portions of the farmland. Knowing that Simeon and Peter were interested in heading out to the Golden West, Eben steals some of his father's stashed money to bribe them into handing over their shares of the land. Eben explains to his brothers "if ye sign this ye kin ride on a boat... It says fur three hundred dollars t' each ye agree yewr shares o' the farm is sold t' me" (O'Neill 12). Although they are hesitant, they do sign over their birthright to Eben, since they do not believe they will get the land anymore. In fact, Simeon mentions to Peter "if Paw's hitched we'd be sellin' Eben somethin' we'd never git nohow!" when considering it (O'Neill 14). This scene is very reminiscent of the biblical passage in which Jacob obtains Esau's birthright: Esau said to Jacob, 'Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!' ...Jacob said, 'First sell me your birthright.' Esau said, 'I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?' Jacob said, 'Swear to me first.' So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob... Thus Esau despised his birthright (Genesis 25: 30-34). In both stories, the manipulative brother takes advantage of his brothers at a time when they are vulnerable due to distractions (such as hunger, gold.) Both Jacob and Eben secure their birthright through similar methods of bribery and trickery, so the character of Eben was undoubtedly influenced by this biblical story. One problem with being a trickster, both for Eben and for Jacob, is that they are always paranoid that they are being deceived as well. In the Bible, Jacob worries—after he has taken Esau's birthright and blessing—that Esau is going to murder him, and flees the town as a result. In Eben's case, he does not have to worry about his brothers,

who have headed out West, but he becomes suspicious of Abbie instead. As a master of deception, Eben knows that Abbie could have ulterior motives in confessing her love for him. Eben's accuses her of having a deceitful plan by frantically yelling, "Ye've made a fool o' me—a sick, dumb fool—a-purpose! Ye've been on'y playin' yer sneakin' stealin' game all along—gittin me t' lie with ye so's ye'd hev a son he'd think was his'n, an' makin' him promise he'd give ye the farm and let me eat dust, if ye did git him a son!" (O'Neill 52).

Eben projects the deceitful methods he has used (sneaking around and stealing) onto Abbie, exemplifying his paranoia. This accusation only leads to more evil, however, as Abbie then kills their baby in order to prove her love and honesty to Eben. Eben does later admit his fundamental role in the mess to the Sheriff, therefore turning himself in. Interestingly, in the Bible Jacob is depicted as a heroic character, and is held in high esteem by the biblical authors and by God Himself. In the Book of Genesis, God provides for Jacob and his family, which seems ironic considering that Jacob was deceitful to his own brother. Regardless, Jacob and his family later become known as the Israelites, and live as "God's people" in the land of Israel. In *Desire Under the Elms*, the audience does seem to identify most closely with Eben, our Jacob character as well. Eben is not blessed with God's divine providence, however, and ultimately does not possess the land for which he so avidly struggled. It is interesting and perhaps significant that the Christian view would make Eben the somewhat heroic character due to his cunningness in securing his birthright. While *Desire Under the Elms* does not draw blatant moral lines between the characters, the audience is swayed towards sympathizing with Eben—who has not been very moral himself—perhaps partially as a result of this underlying biblical allusion. In *Desire Under the*

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Elms, the struggle for the birthright of the farm motivates all the evil that occurs and ultimately is what causes the family's tragedy. While in the end O'Neill's intentions may or may not have been for the eponymous Desire to refer to the characters' desire for the farmland, considering the biblical allusions in the play surely adds an additional dimension to its meaning. Viewing Eben as a parallel to the biblical Jacob is an interesting comparison, and likely changes one's perception of his motives and overall character.